

Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty

**Strategies for Erasing
the Opportunity Gap**

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Introduction

Education is the great equalizer. That's what I heard growing up, the son of a mother from poor Appalachian stock and a father from middle class Detroit. *If you work hard, do well in school, and follow the rules, you can be anything you want to be.* It's a fantastic idea. How remarkable it would be if only it were true.

I've been working with and around educators for the better part of 20 years now, and this I know for certain: A vast majority of us *want* it to be true. We desire an education system that works for every student—not only one that gives everybody a fair shake, but also one that helps make up for the challenges faced by some of our most vulnerable students. Many of us celebrate the Horatio Alger education stories: the low-income young woman who becomes valedictorian, the homeless student who wins a scholarship to college, the janitor who works his way through Harvard. We want to believe that schools, of all places, give all people an equal shot, even when the odds are stacked against them.

Unfortunately, schools as they are constituted today are not the equalizers they are cracked up to be. Not for most students, at least (Neuman, 2009). This, too, I know for certain: Students from poor families continue to be subject, on average, to what Jonathan Kozol (1992) has called the *savage inequalities* of schooling. The examples of these inequalities are numerous. Poor students are assigned disproportionately to the most inadequately funded schools (Strange, 2011) with the largest class sizes (Barton, 2004) and lowest paid teachers (Palardy, 2008). They are more likely than their wealthier peers to be bullied (von Rueden, Gosch, Rajmil, Bisegger, & Ravens-Sieberer, 2006) and to attend school in poorly maintained buildings (National Commission on Teaching & America's Future [NCTAF], 2004). They are denied access to the sorts of school resources and opportunities other children take for granted, such as dedicated school nurses (Berliner, 2009), well-stocked school libraries (Constantino, 2005), and engaging pedagogies (Tivnan & Hemphill, 2005). In fact, by these and almost every other possible measure, students from poor families, the ones most desperate to find truth in the “great equalizer” promise, appear to pay a great price for

their poverty, even at school. Of course, these conditions are not the fault of teachers, who often are blamed unjustly for their effects. In fact, teachers who teach at high-poverty schools, as well as an increasing number of their colleagues at *all* public schools, too often are themselves denied access to adequate resources.

Complicating matters, students in poverty, in Sue Books's (2004) words, "bear the brunt of almost every imaginable social ill" (p. 34), many of which have direct or indirect effects on their abilities to do well in school. Starting at birth, poor youth have less access than their wealthier peers to quality preschool (Freeman, 2010), preventive medical attention (Pampel, Krueger, & Denney, 2010), healthy food (Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2010), and living spaces that are safe from environmental hazards (Evans, 2004). As I was gathering materials for this book, what stood out most to me about these inequalities was that none of them, *not a single one*, has anything to do with students' intellectual capabilities or their desires to learn. These conditions do not reflect or result from low-income families' "cultures" or attitudes about education. If anything, they reflect just the opposite: the level of society's commitment—*our* commitment—to fulfill the promise of equal educational opportunity.

If you are a teacher or school administrator you might be thinking, "That's awfully sad, but it's a little outside my purview. It is not my job to ensure that every student has healthcare and high-quality preschool."

Fair enough. In fact, in today's world of hyperaccountability in education, where high-stakes testing is used to assess not only student learning, but also teacher and administrator performance, teachers often are held accountable for not doing what is more or less impossible to do: making up for all of the inequalities poor youth begin to experience at birth, or even prior to birth if we consider who has access to prenatal care. As schools decrease children's access to nurses, to art and music education, to recess and physical education, and to all manner of other resources and opportunities that improve school performance (particularly for low-income youth, who are most likely not to have access to them outside of school), they also limit teachers' abilities to do their jobs in the most effective and rewarding ways.

This, I believe, is a bit of a setup and a dangerous shift of attention. The testing regimens and test score obsession have shifted our attention away from the savage inequalities of schooling as well as bigger societal disparities that affect student learning. And they have shifted that attention onto teachers and their unions, administrators, and other educators. Imagine, for instance, how patterns of family involvement might change if every parent or guardian had access to a job that paid a living wage, or how patterns of student attendance and engagement might change if every student had access to preventive healthcare.

I initially intended to write a book about that very problem: about how we ultimately cannot eliminate educational outcome disparities, such as graduation rates, without addressing these larger societal and socioeconomic disparities. *However*—and this is a big fat “however”—all of us, whether we are teachers, school counselors, school social workers, administrators, or anybody who plays any role at all in the educational lives of students, do have a substantial amount of power to mitigate these inequalities. We have the power and, of course, the responsibility to ensure that we are not reproducing inequitable conditions in our own classrooms and schools.

In the end, I decided to write a book about *that* responsibility, about how best to prepare ourselves, as people working in schools and school systems, to create and sustain equitable learning environments for poor and working class students. But I decided to do so by making a connection that I find sorely lacking in most conversations about poverty and schooling today: I simply cannot understand the experiences of economically disadvantaged students and their families, or how they relate to school, or how best to engage them, if I do not consider what it means to be poor in contemporary society and its schools. I made this decision for two reasons. First, many of the best minds in education recently have written books and essays that detail with impressive precision the relationships between larger economic inequalities and educational disparities. I find John Marsh’s (2011) book, *Class Dismissed*, and David Berliner’s (2006) essay, “Our Impoverished View of Education Reform,” particularly helpful in this regard. The limitation of these exposés, as poignant as they are, is that they never quite manage to describe how on-the-ground educators can help create the change for which the authors advocate. Yes, of course, all youth ought to have access to healthcare. Yes, of course, we should confront economic inequality. I have spent much of my own scholarly and activist energies on these issues. But what shall teachers and principals and counselors and others who walk into classrooms and schools full of students every day do in the meantime?

The other reason I chose to write a book about teaching for class equity in schools and school systems is that among the many recent books that do introduce practical blueprints for teachers and school leaders (such as Jensen, 2009; Payne, 2005; Templeton, 2011), few even acknowledge the larger inequalities described by John Marsh, David Berliner, and others. Absent this acknowledgment, so much of the literature on which educators have leaned in order to develop deeper understandings of poverty have tended, even if implicitly, to interpret educational outcome disparities almost exclusively as reflections of what they deem to be the deficient or diminished cultures, values, intellectual capabilities, and attitudes of poor families. If we want to fix educational outcome disparities, this argument goes, we must begin by fixing poor students and families rather than by fixing the inequities experienced by poor students and families. The result, unfortunately,

tends to be lists of ubersimplistic practical solutions to super complex and misunderstood problems—solutions based more on stereotypes than reality. So I decided to write a book from a practitioner point of view, but one that takes an “open systems” or “relational” approach. This approach nudges us to see what happens in school at least partially in the context of conditions that exist outside school walls (Flessa, 2007). After all, these external conditions—experience with class bias, for example, or experience with economic inequality—influence teachers’ and students’ perceptions of school, of teaching and learning, and of one another (Knapp, 1995; Weiner, 2003).

Consider the example of family involvement, often assumed by educators and policy wonks alike to be the panacea for school success among poor and working class students (Hill & Craft, 2003). It is all too common for those of us who have not experienced sustained poverty to assume that, if parents or guardians do not participate in on-site opportunities for school involvement, they simply do not care about their children’s education. How often have you heard those sentiments in a faculty meeting or teachers’ lounge? How often have you thought them yourself? “*Those* parents never show up for anything. No wonder kids are failing when their parents don’t care about their education.” Unfortunately, many educators seem to have bought into this stereotype—this false stereotype, as it turns out (Lee & Bowen, 2006). (More on this in a moment.) Given a limited understanding, though, it can be easy to interpret lower rates of on-site school involvement among poor and working class parents as indicative of a “culture of poverty” that devalues education. We might respond, as many schools do, by offering parenting workshops or by circulating memos about the importance of family involvement.

How might our perspective change, though, if we step back for a moment and attempt to understand on-site family involvement patterns in relation to the social conditions described by Marsh (2011) and Berliner (2006)? What if we loosen our grip on the deficit lens so that a fuller picture can come into focus, even if there are parts of that picture we don’t feel empowered to change? What if we take into account the fact that low-income parents and guardians are more likely than their wealthier peers to work multiple jobs and to work evening jobs? They are less likely to have paid leave from work and, as stands to reason, less likely to be able to afford to take unpaid leave. Finding and affording childcare is more difficult for economically disadvantaged parents than for wealthier parents, and they are less likely to have convenient transportation options (Gorski, 2008a; Li, 2010; Newman & Chin, 2003; Votruba-Drzal, 2003). And, of course, parents in low-income families are more likely than wealthier parents to have experienced school as unwelcoming or even hostile when they were students (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

Then there is this: Several studies from the past 5 years have shown that parents of economically disadvantaged families are as involved, or even *more* involved, in their children's educational lives when compared with their wealthier peers when we take into account not just on-site involvement, but also at-home involvement (Cooper, Crosnoe, Suizzo, & Pituch, 2010; Li, 2010). Similarly, decades of research has shown that, in fact, poor families and communities of all races and ethnicities, whether they are from rural or urban regions, care deeply about their children's education—that they have the exact same attitudes about the value of schooling as their more economically solvent counterparts (Compton-Lilly, 2000; Jennings, 2004; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; West-Olantunji, Sanders, Mehta, & Behar-Horenstein, 2010). The issue, these studies suggest, is not that low-income families don't care about education, but that without understanding a fuller picture of inequality and the challenges faced by poor families, it can be easy for teachers to *assume* a lack of interest on the parts of parents and other caretakers. If I consider, for instance, how family involvement patterns might be different if every working adult had access to a living wage job—even if I don't feel that I have the power to make that level of societal change—I might, at the very least, understand what families in poverty are up against rather than relying on stereotypes to make sense out of unfortunate circumstances.

I wrote this book, in part, to nudge educators, including myself, past those assumptions and toward a deeper, more empathetic, and more holistic understanding of the effects of poverty and class bias on the school experiences of poor and working class students. I wrote it to nudge us past the simplifications and stereotypes that I believe hamper our abilities to be the teachers and leaders we want to be for all of our students.

I wrote it, too, because I believe in the transformative power of teachers, perhaps not in the fight to end global poverty (at least not on their own), but in the commitment to walk into classrooms and schools full of students, dedicated, despite all the challenges, to do right by each of them. I believe that we want a more complex conversation about poverty and that we're capable of digging deeper into questions about what we can do to better facilitate educational opportunity for every family. I believe we can, and that we must, begin by dropping the deficit views and stereotypes and ideas about fixing low-income kids and by equipping ourselves with a broader, more detailed view of what it means to be a poor or working class student in today's schools. We begin there and then, with that view, start gathering tools and strategies based on what works. That, in a nutshell, is what this book is about.

In pursuit of these goals I use in this book an approach, co-developed by my super genius colleague, Katy Swalwell (2011), called *Equity Literacy*. I dedicate all of Chapter 2 to describing the Equity Literacy Approach and

how it builds upon and differs from other popular frameworks for discussing poverty and schooling, from cultural proficiency to funds of knowledge. The gist, for now, is this: Equity Literacy is comprised of the skills and dispositions that enable us to recognize, respond to, and redress conditions that deny some students access to the educational opportunities enjoyed by their peers (Gorski, in press). Whereas many of the existing approaches ask us to focus on culture—the *culture* of poverty, *cultural* competence, *culturally* relevant pedagogy—Equity Literacy asks us to focus on *equity*, on how to create and sustain equitable learning environments free of even the subtlest biases. This requires different, although in some ways complementary, kinds of knowledge and skills. After all, simply knowing something about a student’s culture, or having the skills to interact cross-culturally, is not the same as knowing how to spot subtle class biases in learning materials or school policies.

Parts of the picture I paint are uplifting and full of hope, partially due to the amazing resiliency of low-income communities and partially because of the equally inspirational capacities of teachers to advocate for their students. Other parts are, admittedly, bleak. The odds are stacked, and heavily so, against the poorest students and families, despite all of the skills and gifts and determination they bring to the table. But there is something we can do about it, and we all have a role in that something, whether we are classroom teachers or community activists or building- or district-level administrators or parents or students or just concerned citizens.

DEFINITIONS AND DISTINCTIONS

Let’s start at the beginning, with terminology. Already I’ve been using words like “poverty” and “low-income” and “working class” and, admittedly, it can be difficult to find two people willing to agree on what any one of these words means. My intention here is not to provide economics-textbook definitions for these terms or to debate the widely variable semantic arguments for this or that definition. Rather, my intention is to describe how I use terminology related to class and poverty, both in this book and more broadly. I acknowledge, of course, that there is no “correct” definition for any of these terms. However, our understandings of poverty and class can be influenced by the ways we’ve been taught to imagine what they mean.

Socioeconomic Status

When I ask people what it means to live in poverty, they usually mention the financial component first. “Poverty,” they might say, “means not having adequate financial resources.” Almost inevitably, though, they turn

quickly to other sorts of resources: everything from *life attitudes* to *family strength* to *association with religion*. Certainly students' life circumstances are affected by more than their families' access to money. Support networks, whether through extended family, religious organizations, or community organizations, can be critically important for low-income families, as they can be for *all* families.

I worry, however, that such a broad conception of socioeconomic status clouds an important distinction. In the end, in a capitalistic society, the only commodities that *guarantee* somebody consistent access to basic human necessities like food, clothing, lodging, and healthcare are *financial* commodities. Sure, associating with a mosque or synagogue or church or some other religious organization may provide a person in poverty with a network of people willing to lend a helping hand. It might even help her feel spiritually fulfilled. In other words, it might help a poor person feel a little more comfortable or secure or happy *within a state of poverty*. But without greater access to financial resources, she is still in poverty and, as a result, without guaranteed access to the most basic life resources.

This is why, when I talk about socioeconomic status, I am referring explicitly to students' or families' access to financial resources. I am referring to resources they can exchange for food, clothing, lodging, and healthcare. In my view, and in this book, socioeconomic status refers to an individual's or family's financial condition relative to other individuals and families. More wealth means more choices, more opportunity, more access (Hout, 2008). This, to me, is the essence of socioeconomic status.

I describe below the somewhat imperfect terms I use to describe people and families who occupy various points along the continuum of socioeconomic status. That word, *continuum*, is important here in the sense that there is tremendous diversity, or what Katherine Turpin (2009) describes as "plentiful variation," within each of these groups. I use these terms as approximations and reject the notion, popularized by all the talk in education circles about what turns out (as I'll explain in more detail later) to be a fictitious idea called the "culture of poverty," that I or anyone else can attribute a shared set of values, beliefs, dispositions, or behaviors to any of these groups. In fact, as I learned growing up among my Appalachian grandma's relatively poor people, there is as much diversity of values and dispositions among poor people as there is between poor and wealthy people.

This is why many people, including me, who write about class and poverty struggle with the limitations of class categories. Any system of categorizing humans is, in some ways, arbitrary. Consider, for instance, how conversations about racial categories tend to render multiracial people invisible.