

Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap

By Paul C. Gorski
@pgorski (Twitter)
gorski@edchange.org

EdChange
informing ourselves
reforming our schools
transforming our world
www.EdChange.org

REFLECTION

Why are poor people poor? Why are people who are in poverty in poverty?

Why do students experiencing poverty not do as well in school on average as their wealthier peers?

2

High-Stakes Standardized Assessment

3

QUIZ

A majority of people experiencing poverty in the U.S. live in:

- urban areas
- suburban areas
- rural areas

4

QUIZ

A majority of people experiencing poverty in the U.S. live in:

- urban areas
- suburban areas
- rural areas

5

QUIZ

A Princeton study of elite universities found that legacy applicants—people, usually white and wealthy, with a parent or grandparent who attended the institution—are far more privileged by legacy status than applicants of color are by affirmative action policies. The study determined that legacy status was equivalent to how much of a boost to an applicant's SAT score?

- 20 points
- 90 points
- 160 points

6

QUIZ

A Princeton study of elite universities found that legacy applicants—people, usually white and wealthy, with a parent or grandparent who attended the institution—are far more privileged by legacy status than applicants of color are by affirmative action policies. The study determined that legacy status was equivalent to how much of a boost to an applicant's SAT score?

- 20 points
- 90 points
- **160 points**

7

QUIZ

"We have deluded ourselves into believing the myth that capitalism grew and prospered out of the Protestant ethic of hard work and sacrifices. Capitalism was built on the exploitation of black slaves and continues to thrive on the exploitation of the poor, both black and white, both here and abroad."

- Bernie Sanders
- Michael Moore
- **Martin Luther King, Jr.**

8

QUIZ

"We have deluded ourselves into believing the myth that capitalism grew and prospered out of the Protestant ethic of hard work and sacrifices. Capitalism was built on the exploitation of black slaves and continues to thrive on the exploitation of the poor, both black and white, both here and abroad."

- Bernie Sanders
- Michael Moore
- **Martin Luther King, Jr.**

9

QUIZ

According to a study sponsored by the Pew Research Center, the median wealth of white households in the U.S. is how many times larger than that of African American households?

- 2 times
- 8 times
- **14 times**

10

QUIZ

According to a study sponsored by the Pew Research Center, the median wealth of white households in the U.S. is how many times larger than that of African American households?

- 2 times
- 8 times
- **14 times**

11

QUIZ

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, what proportion of homeless men in the U.S. are military veterans?

- Two in ten
- **Four in ten**
- Six in ten

12

QUIZ

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, what proportion of homeless men in the U.S. are military veterans?

- Two in ten
- **Four in ten**
- Six in ten

13

QUIZ

The three richest people in the world have as much wealth as:

- the 8 poorest countries
- the 48 poorest countries
- the 308 poorest countries

14

QUIZ

The three richest people in the world have as much wealth as:

- the 8 poorest countries
- **the 48 poorest countries**
- the 308 poorest countries

...

15

OUR OBJECTIVE

What are the knowledge and skills I need to become a *threat to the existence of inequity* in my spheres of influence?

Do I have the *will* to be that threat?

It's a lens, not just a list of practical actions.

Where We're Going

1. High-stakes standardized quiz (done)
2. Introductory Blabber (in progress)
3. Story Time
4. The Race and Class Equity Frame
5. Leadership Commitments
6. Discussion

17

A BIT ABOUT MY WORK

- Largely focused on equity practice in educational institutions
 - Gaps between philosophy and practice
 - Gaps between "best practice" and actual practice
 - Common "pitfalls" (or how schools operationalize "diversity" in ways that create *more inequity*)

**HOW I KNOW "THE POOR"
ARE NOT "THE PROBLEM"**



**EDUCATORS = CHANGEMAKERS
(NOBODY CAN DO IT BETTER)**



20

Starting Assumptions

- All students deserve access to the best possible education we can provide, regardless of race, class, gender, and so on

21

Starting Assumptions

- A combination of bias and inequity means this access is not equally distributed to all students

22

Starting Assumptions

- Everybody in the room has good intentions and the power to help change this reality, but good intentions are not enough

23

Starting Assumptions

- We don't have the power to change everything, but we have the power to change some things

24

THE TEN CHAIRS

- “The war against the poor” (Herbert Gans)
- Worst wealth and income gaps in the industrialized world
- And more...



25

STEREOTYPERS ARE US

Brainstorm all the stereotypes you know about low-income people

- Also, if you can, note how any particular stereotype might misguide educational policy and practice

26

STEREOTYPERS ARE US

Stereotype: Laziness

Ah, but: A vast majority of poor people do work. According to the Economic Policy Institute, poor working adults *spend more hours working per week on average* than their wealthier counterparts.

27

STEREOTYPERS ARE US

Stereotype: Don't Value Education

Ah, but: Low-income parents have the exact same attitudes about education as wealthy parents (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Li, 2010; Leichter, 1978; Varenne & McDermott, 1986).

(More on this later...)

28

STEREOTYPERS ARE US

Stereotype: Substance Abuse

Ah, but: Alcohol abuse is far more prevalent among wealthy people than poor people (Humensky, 2010). And drug use equally distributed across poor, middle class, and wealthy communities.

29

STEREOTYPERS ARE US

Stereotype: Crime and Violence

Ah, but: Poor people do not commit *more crime* than wealthy people—they only commit *more visible crime*. Furthermore, white collar crime results in much greater economic (and life) losses than so-called “violent” crime.

30

STEREOTYPERS ARE US

Stereotype: Language-Deficient

Ah, but: Linguists have known for decades that all varieties of English (such as “Black English vernacular” or Appalachian varieties) are equally complex in structure and grammar.

31

STEREOTYPERS ARE US

Stereotype: Bad Parents

Ah, but: Research has continued to show that low-income parents care just as much about their children, and work just as hard—or harder—to advocate for their children, as wealthier parents.

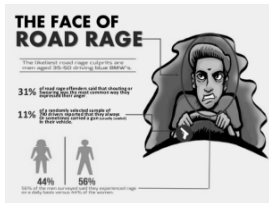
32

STEREOTYPERS ARE US

The nature of stereotyping

- Selective evidence-gathering
- In-group favor

My dad and road rage



33

Story Time

Privilege and Oppression in Diversity and Inclusion Work:

The Birth of Equity Literacy

34

BIRTH OF EQUITY LITERACY

The focus group and the diversity tie: Advantaged view vs. disadvantaged view

The problem with the problem—harder to change ideology than practice, but no real way to change practice without changing ideology



35

BIRTH OF EQUITY LITERACY

John and the “race” problem story

- Not (usually) about evil oppressive educators
- About learning to see what we’re socialized not to see



36

BIRTH OF EQUITY LITERACY

The provost and accessible buildings

- The erasure of people with (dis)abilities

37

BIRTH OF EQUITY LITERACY

Essay on Hurricane Katrina by famous "poverty" trainer

- [Click here](#)

38

THE CULT OF CULTURE

cultural competence
 cultural proficiency
 intercultural education
 intercultural communication
 multicultural education
 cultural relevance
 cultural responsiveness
 culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD)
 "culture" or "mindset" of poverty

39

AN ILLUSTRATION

Moyer & Clymer (2009), two school administrators write about cultural proficiency.

- They (1) name the issue of racism in education, and then
- They (2) offer solutions that have nothing to do with racism: "a multicultural fair that featured music, dance, food, and customs and traditions representing different cultures..." (p. 16)

40

MY ARGUMENT

There is no path toward racial and economic *equity* that does not include a direct confrontation with racial and economic *inequity*.

41

THE CRITICAL SHIFT: FROM "CULTURE OF POVERTY" TO EQUITY LITERACY

Outcome inequalities **do not result** from cultural defects, mindset defects, or grit deficiencies in low-income families

Outcome inequalities **do result** from inequitable access to resources and experiences in and out of school

Our job as educators is to refuse to replicate that inequitable access in our spheres of influence—a matter of *equity*, not a matter of *culture*

42

THE WORST KIND OF TROUBLE

The problem is *NOT*:

- A lack of people who value “diversity”
- A lack of well-intentioned educators
- A lack of practical strategies and programs and initiatives for educational equity

The problem is largely about ideology and will.

43

INSTITUTIONAL ASSESSMENT

- Something your institution is doing well when it comes to equity.
- Something your institution needs to do better when it comes to equity.
- What keeps your institution from doing better?

44

Building Our Equity Literacy

>Concepts and Distinctions<

45

EQUITY LITERACY

Four Abilities

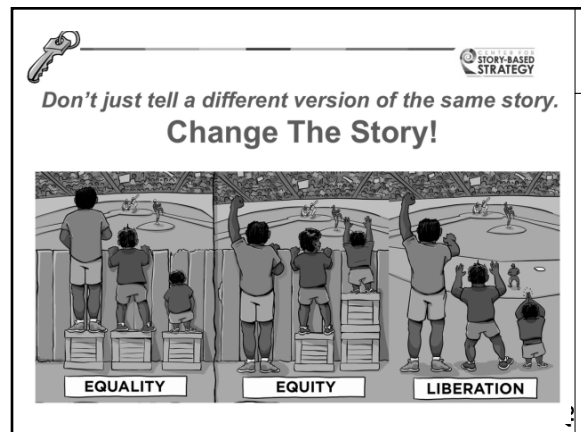
1. Ability to recognize inequity
2. Ability to respond to inequity
3. Ability to redress inequity
4. Ability to sustain equity

46

Step One: Recognize

Examples:

1. Compliments
2. Informal interaction



WHAT IS EQUITY?


Inequity is unequal distribution of access and opportunity, including access and opportunity to material and non-material resources

So *Equity* requires a redistribution—not a mitigation, not an add-on program, but a structural *redistribution of access and opportunity*

49

IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

1. Equity ideologies
2. Mitigative & Transformative Action



50

EQUITY IDEOLOGIES

- Deficit ideology
- Grit ideology
- Structural ideology

51

EQUITY IDEOLOGIES

The importance of ideology:

- Ideology drives interpretation
- Interpretation drives how we define what the problem is
- How we define the problem drives solutions we can imagine
- Solutions we can imagine drive the extent to which we're a threat to inequity or threat to possibility of equity

52

EQUITY IDEOLOGIES

Deficit ideology

- look down the power continuum
- ignore structural barriers
- fix marginalized people
- best way to foster distrust among marginalized students and families
- Examples?

53

EQUITY IDEOLOGIES

Grit Ideology

- a form of deficit ideology
- recognize structural barriers, but focus on building resiliency so marginalized communities can “overcome” barriers
- bill on sexual assault in schools (Ex)
- Other examples?

54

EQUITY IDEOLOGIES

Structural Ideology

- removing structural barriers

TRUTH: *There's no other way to do this. If we're stuck at the deficit or grit view, we cannot create equity because we are not responding to inequity.*

55

ILLUSTRATION

Hidden rules of class handout – Ruby Payne

Reflections on Hurricane Katrina – Ruby Payne

56

EQUITY LITERACY EXERCISE

Name a policy, practice, or initiative in your school or district that reflects a deficit ideology—that focuses on fixing People of Color or economically marginalized people instead of the fixing the conditions that racially or economically marginalize people.

How can you rethink this policy, practice, or initiative through a structural lens?

57

MITIGATIVE/TRANSFORMATIVE

- Starfish story
- Babies in the river story

The *critical* shift from mitigating to eliminating inequity. *We cannot mitigate our way to equity. We cannot multicultural arts fair our way to racial justice in schools.*

58

MLK:

“I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action'; ...

MLK:

... who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; ...who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season.' Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”



Learning to See

1. Policies that punish economically marginalized students (inflexible tardy and absentee policies)
2. Practices that humiliate economically marginalized students (educational activities that cost extra \$)
3. "Diversity" programs or curricula that force marginalized students to "teach" about their experiences with no guarantee of their marginalization being addressed

How do these pop up at your institution?

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR US

Our first step is examining our own beliefs. Beliefs guide interpretations, interpretations guide actions.



FOCUSING ON BARRIERS

What are the barriers that might make doing the following more difficult for students experiencing poverty than for other students?

Completing homework

Participating in extra-curricular activities

Maintaining a perfect attendance record

63

CASE STUDY: FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Fact: low-income families show up less often than wealthier families for in-school opportunities for family engagement

The question for us: Why? How is this fact interpreted?

Once we interpret correctly, we can respond correctly.

64

STRATEGIES

PRINCIPLES TO REMEMBER

People experiencing poverty are diverse—they do not share a culture

- They don't share a mindset or learning style or communication style or world view or behaviors or attitudes or...

66

PRINCIPLES TO REMEMBER

What we believe about people experiencing poverty, including our biases and prejudices, informs how we teach and relate to people experiencing poverty

- So we must begin by shifting our views about poverty and people experiencing poverty

67

PRINCIPLES TO REMEMBER

People experiencing poverty are the experts of their own experience

- So our initiatives must include and be driven by their voices and experiences

68

PRINCIPLES TO REMEMBER

Educational outcome disparities are the result of the unequal distribution of access and opportunity, not the result of deficiencies in people experiencing poverty

- So we cannot address those disparities without redistributing access and opportunities within our spheres of influence

69

PRINCIPLES TO REMEMBER

Strategies for making our classrooms and schools more equitable must be based on evidence for what works

- ...and not on strategies that “sound right” because sometimes they sound right due to our prejudices rather than being right for equity

70

PRINCIPLES TO REMEMBER

Instructional strategies help, but by themselves they are no threat to inequity

- ...especially when those strategies demonstrate low expectations

71

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

Incorporate music, art, and theater across the curriculum whenever possible.

- Less likely to have access out of school
- Improves engagement and performance across subjects

73

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

Incorporate movement and exercise into teaching and learning (Basch, 2011).

PE and recess being cut at high-poverty schools
Fit students perform better at school and—*bonus!*—are better behaved

74

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

Teach *about* poverty and class (Kelley & Darragh, 2011; Streib, 2011).

- Provides students an opportunity to challenge stereotypes people have about them
- Demonstrates our recognition of challenges students in poverty face outside of school
- Use MLK, Helen Keller, Mark Twain, etc.

75

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

Have and communicate high expectations for economically disadvantaged students.

- Pedagogically, especially

76

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

Adopt higher-order, learner-centered, rigorous pedagogies.

- Collaborative and cooperative learning
- Interactive and dialogic teaching

77

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

Make curricula “culturally relevant” to the lives of low-income students.

Increases student engagement
“Portage”

78

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

Promote literacy *enjoyment* (Vera, 2011).

- Use literature circles in which students choose a common book to read
- Use a variety of media, including multimedia programs
- Incorporate drama into literacy instruction

79

RELATIONAL STRATEGIES

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

Reflect on how to “develop effective relationships” with low-income students. This means:

- Addressing bias when it happens.
- Adopting a structural view, not a deficit view.
- Never demeaning people’s families, purposefully or not. (Example: language.)

81

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

Never force students to “perform” their poverty publicly.

- *Let’s go around and share we did on our summer vacations...*

82

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

Analyze learning materials for bias.

83

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

Engage in *persistent* family outreach efforts.

- Remember that low-income parents often have experienced schools as hostile environments
- Reach out consistently, not just when there’s bad news
- Never assume you know what a lack of responsiveness means; remember evening work, etc.

84

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

Build trusting relationships with students.

- Remember that low-income youth regularly experience authority figures in negative ways
- Address bias and bullying

85

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

Train staff to treat low-income families with respect and dignity.

One primary reason low-income families avoid coming to schools for events is the implicit hostility they have experienced in the past.

86

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

Make opportunities for family engagement accessible to low-income families

Remember challenges: time (multiple and evening jobs), paid leave, transportation, child care, hostile environment

87

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

Recognize that students have different levels of access to material resources

- Do not assign homework that requires access to resources some students don't have
- Be mindful about who has access to technology, in particular

88

LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES

STOP HUMILIATING STUDENTS

Identify and eliminate policies, programs, and initiatives that punish students experiencing poverty for their poverty or that humiliate students experiencing poverty

- How we weigh homework in grades
- How we respond to tardies and absences
- How we raise money (selling stuff)
- The Book Fair example

96

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

Wrap a commitment to equity into every conversation, every practice, every policy. If the “purpose” of a framework is not applied equitably, then it only contributes to inequity.

- Is policy and practice based on the needs of the most marginalized families?

91

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

Preserve school nurse, counselor, social worker, and other support positions at high-poverty schools

92

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

Never charge a fee for somebody to participate in a school-sponsored event

- Make sure extra-curriculars are accessible to low-income students

93

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

“Outlaw” student money-raising competitions as ways to raise money for *public school* activities

These activities—selling chocolate bars, for example—can be humiliating for low-income students and families

94

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

Hire people with a demonstrated equity lens; don’t hire people who have a deficit view of people in poverty (or of anybody, for that matter)

Sample interview question: “In your view, why do low-income students on average do not do as well as their wealthier peers in school?”

95

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

Insist on PD for *equity literacy* – build equity competencies, not just cultural competency

96

STRATEGIES AND EQUITABLE PRACTICE

Review district and school-level policies for subtle inequity

97

**PRACTICE
“SEEING”**

Recognizing inequity

1. Policies that punish economically marginalized students (absenteeism, homework)
2. Practices that humiliate low-income students (fundraisers)
3. One thing you can do or for which you can advocate to create more equity for low-income students and families

**ASSESSING
PROGRAMS AND
INITIATIVES**

Question 1

Where are you locating the problem?

Are your efforts designed to fix people experiencing poverty or to fix the conditions that marginalize people experiencing poverty?

If it's the former, start over.

Question 2

Are you mitigating or transforming?

Are your efforts designed root out inequitable policy and practice or leave inequity in place and help low-income families “survive” it?

If it's the latter, start over.

Question 3

Is it real change or the illusion of change?

Are your efforts resulting in the *permanent redistribution of access and opportunity* or in minor adjustments?

If it's the latter, start over.

Question 4

What is your priority?

Are your efforts prioritizing test scores over learning and engagement or are they prioritizing equitable access and opportunity?

If it's the former, start over.

Question 5

Who are the experts?

Are your efforts based on a recognition that people are the experts of their own experience? Are you working *on* economically marginalized people or working *with* economically marginalized people, acknowledging their expertise?

If it's the former, start over.

A Few Final Reflections

What is one thing you will commit to doing or to doing better in order to foster racial and economic equity in your sphere of influence?



“I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the ... Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice.”

Thank you.

Paul C. Gorski

gorski@edchange.org

Twitter: @pgorski

<http://www.edchange.org>