



## #2 Classism: *Challenging Class-Based Assumptions, Deficit Thinking and Structural Inequities as a Place to Start*

*As Educators we must begin by working within our Sphere of Influence and Become Allies to Low-Income Students*

### Who We Are:

- Social Planning Network of Ontario (SPNO) Host of the Knowledge Network for Student Well-Being (KNSWB) Equity and Inclusion Community of Practice with a focus on Low-Income Students and Families.

### Objectives

- To bring knowledge and awareness on the inequitable and exclusionary experiences of students from low income families to educators at the local level in our communities (teachers, principals, superintendents, trustees).
- To build a base of awareness and commitment among educators, parents and students in our communities that could advocate for systemic change in the education system to end/reduce inequitable and exclusionary treatment for low income students and families.
- To interrupt biases, assumptions and commonly held misconceptions of low-income students and parents which serve to undermine student achievement, well-being and meaningful parent engagement.

### Classism Remains Elusive

- We like to believe that we live in a class-less society where everyone has the same opportunities no matter where they start out.
- However we do exist in a capitalistic society which values ownership and wealth, assigning less value to those with less. Emphasis is on the individual and what they attain/achieve.
- Meritocracy, not structural inequities, is falsely offered as the explanation of why some succeed and others don't. We accept this worldview as "the way things are."

### If Poverty is the Injury, then Classism is the Insult heaped on top of that Injury

*"Being Poor is one thing, and that's hard enough. Being judged for being poor, being blamed, shamed and scrutinized for everything you do, is something else."*

#### Greg Carbis, Former YRDSB Student

Most of us have appreciation of how poverty impacts students and presents them with fewer opportunities than their higher-income peers. We have less understanding of the ways in which our perceptions and treatment of low-income students/families, impacts their social and emotional well-being, engagement, achievement and potential.

### Poverty:

Poverty is a construct of our society – not an individual problem. *"Poverty is not an accident. Like slavery and apartheid it is man-made and can be removed by the actions of human beings."*

#### Nelson Mandela

### Classism:

Classism is a form of discrimination based on one's socio-economic status. It attaches stigma and threatens the well-being and potential of our students and their families.

### Classism is also Structural:

Structural or Systemic Practices and Policies maintain poverty at all levels: Federal, Provincial, Municipal, School Boards and Schools.

### Examining assumptions, bias and beliefs of School Staff re: Low-income students

Instead of blaming the students, their families, and *"their poverty"* as the cause for *"their own failure,"* educators must identify and challenge the classist institutional practices and power relations within our schools that maintain these historical inequities (Portelli et al., 2007).

### Meritocracy and the Culture of Poverty go Hand in Hand

The Myth of Meritocracy would have us believe that people get what they deserve. Those who work hard will succeed - The great American Dream.

The "Culture of Poverty" Paradigm, although de-bunked several times over, maintains a strong-hold on the minds of educators working with low-income students. It asserts that individual and cultural characteristics/deficiencies explain the gaps in achievement of lower-income students. No attention is paid to structural inequities which put and keep lower-income families on the margins and the ways in which these are replicated in our schools. (Gorski, 2008) The solutions are therefore individualistic in nature recommending the mentoring of the poor, by the middle class. This narrative not only ignores the root causes of economic inequality it goes further to reinforce shame/blame on those in poverty, additional layers of oppression for students/families to endure.

### What is Classism? “Poor Bashing - The Politics of Exclusion” by Jean Swanson

- ◆ **MICRO:** When “poor” people are stereotyped, ignored, blamed, patronized, pitied, falsely accused of being drunk, having large families and not looking for work
- ◆ **MEZZO:** Institutionally through low welfare rates and low wages, the poor are kept down.
- ◆ **MACRO:** The existence of poverty in a world where it is possible to eliminate it (fueled by societal attitudes that hail charity as the best option we have for addressing the worst case scenarios of poverty—hunger and homelessness)

### What are common Classist beliefs about people who are poor?

1. **There is a “culture of poverty” in which poor people share beliefs, values, and behaviors.**
  - People are poor because of their own bad life choices and laziness
  - Poor parents can’t help their children learn without outside help or instruction
  - Poor parents don’t value education and aren’t involved in their children’s schooling
2. **These beliefs are NOT supported by academic research, yet they are pervasive in schools.** (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Flessa, 2010; Grenfell & James, 1998; Howard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2009).
3. The Culture of Poverty puts the responsibility for poverty on the backs of people experiencing poverty, legitimizes the presence of poverty and opens the door to “quick fix” solutions aimed at fixing people and not addressing the root causes of poverty and income inequality
4. The Culture of Poverty distracts us from **the culture of Classism** and diverts attention from what people in poverty *do* have in common, **inequitable access to basic human rights**. Accepting a culture of poverty as an excuse for students’ failure emanates from a *culture of classism*, which creates barriers to access, opportunity, and outcome (Gorski, 2008).

### How do these beliefs impact poor students?

- **Class impacts the educational system in a myriad of ways, one of which is through teacher perception.** When educational institutions, administrators, or teachers’ beliefs and expectations separate the poor, middle class, and rich into distinct groups of capable and incapable (Gilbert, 2008), social injustice occurs.
- As students became more aware of their teacher’s lowered standards for them, their perception of their own ability decreased as well. Thus, **perceived teacher expectations are a significant predictor of academic engagement** (Tyler & Boelter, 2008)
- All teachers expressed the belief that parents were instrumental in determining their child’s academic success. **Teachers had also not recognized that their perceptions contributed to student learning.** Perceptions were based on teacher’s upbringing, belief system, gender, race, and class. Students at high socioeconomic schools were perceived to be leaders, well-dressed, supported by families, and in constant need of enrichment. In contrast, students at low socioeconomic schools were perceived to need discipline and structure, opportunities to gather background knowledge, and support from parents. (Norman, 2016)
- **Shame, internalized oppression and social isolation:** “Poverty-induced shame can have several negative consequences, including low self-esteem and withdrawal from society, often perpetuating the vicious cycle of poverty even more.” (Bilo, 2017)

### What are the outcomes for Low-Income Students that Result from Systemic Classism?

- ◆ **Disproportionate identification of low-income students for Special Education**

“Children from working-class and some minority families continue to be pejoratively labelled with exceptionalities and special needs in elementary school, streamed into dead-end programs that encourage many of them to drop out of secondary school, and excluded from post-secondary education.” (Clandfield, et al 2014)
- ◆ **Disproportionate streaming of low-income students into Applied and Locally Developed Courses**

“Low-income students, students whose parents lack university education, and students in special education have less access to socially valued educational programs. The research found a significant overrepresentation of low-income students receiving special education services and in other programs that offer few options for post-secondary education. Work-oriented programs were found to be most prominently available in the lowest-income neighbourhoods in Toronto. (Parekh, et al, 2011, p. 249)

### *What are the outcomes for Low-Income Students that Result from Systemic Classism?*

#### ◆ **Streaming is Double Jeopardy for Low-Income Students**

*“Kids in applied have a much lower chance of graduating, of succeeding, of getting all their credits,”* said Annie Kidder, exec. director of the research and advocacy group. Nor are those students likely to go on to college or university. *“It’s doubly problematic. ... Are we further disadvantaging students who are already disadvantaged?”* Kidder asked. (Rushowy, 2013)

#### ◆ **Higher Drop-out Rates / Push-Out Rates (TDSB 2006 Census Data)**

*“A Human Resource Development Canada study titled “The Cost of Dropping Out of High School” reported that lower income students were more likely to leave school without graduating, which agrees with international data. In a nonrandom sample for a qualitative study, Ferguson, et al reported that one-half of Ontario students leaving high school before graduating were raised in homes with annual incomes lower than \$30,000.”* (Ferguson, et al, 2007)

#### ◆ **Poor outcomes at Post-Secondary**

*“In Canada, only 31% of youth from the bottom income quartile attended postsecondary education compared with 50.2% in the top income quartile. Once again, the evidence indicates that students from low-income families are disadvantaged right through the education system to postsecondary training.”* (Ferguson et al, 2007)

#### ◆ **Poorer Financial Outcomes for Lower-Income Students**

The postsecondary and career choices available to students in non-academic pathways are limited, there by reinforcing disadvantage and perpetuating inequalities. (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training. (1997). Learning opportunities grant: Panel report to minister of education and training.)

### *Intersectionality of Poverty and Class with other “ISMS”*

- ◆ Class and poverty needs to be discussed in relation to how it intersects to create multiple layers of oppression for various persons, groups and often entire cultures of people: People of color, Indigenous People, Women, Children, Single Parents, People with Disabilities, Homeless Youth a large percentage of which are LGBTQ.
- ◆ Class, Classism and Class Oppression also needs to be parsed out and assessed for how it contributes to shielding us from a real and authentic analysis of an unjust economic system.
- ◆ In [Where We Stand Class Matters](#) Bell Hooks clearly articulates the need to interrogate and understand the interplay between class and race written from the perspective of a woman of color who grew up in poverty. She also underscores warnings about our failure to attend to matters of class with the same vigor as matters of race and gender. (Hooks, 2000)

### *Best Way Forward for Educators, Schools, Systems*

- ◆ One of the first steps in working towards equity and inclusion for all students is critical reflection and an interrogation of class privilege. In addition, educators can engage students in an analysis of controversial and sensitive issues to provide them with opportunities to develop critical sociopolitical consciousness about how to address inequities they and others face. (Portelli, Shields, & Vibert, 2007).
- ◆ Make every effort to understand the economic realities outside of our own individual economic or class experience.
- ◆ As the disparities between rich and poor within society continue to grow, educators must stop trying to “fix” students from low-income backgrounds and instead challenge classism and deficit thinking that perpetuate the socioeconomic gaps (Gorski, 2008, p. 35).
- ◆ Focus *conversations about poverty, not just on people in poverty, but about the ways power and privilege operate at the top of the economic hierarchy*—that’s what needs to be fixed, ultimately. (Gorski, 2012)
- ◆ Instead of blaming the students, their families, and “*their poverty*” as the cause for “*their own failure*,” educators must identify and challenge the classist institutional practices and power relations within our schools that maintain these historical inequities. (Portelli et al., 2007).

### *Best Way Forward for Educators, Schools, Systems*

- ◆ "A key to making schools more effective at raising the performance of low SES students is to keep schools heterogeneous with regard to the SES of their students (ie, all types of streaming result in markedly poor outcomes for disadvantaged children and youth." (Ferguson, et al, 2017)
- ◆ To redress the barriers to access, opportunity, and outcome for students from low-income and working families, there needs to be an explicit transformation of curriculum, pedagogy, and schooling towards equitable and inclusive practice (Ast, 2011)
- ◆ Encourage school teams to engage in site-based, collaborative inquiry to explore preconceived assumptions and stereotypes associated with families living in poverty as well as to reflect on their practices in classrooms and schools. (Parker, 2015)
- ◆ "Educational reform without also addressing socioeconomic conditions is described as "profoundly counterproductive", creating the false perception "on the one hand, that schools can do nothing, and on the other hand that schools can do everything. The challenge is to tell a consistent story about the importance of school initiatives in the context of other mutually supportive social policies". (Flessa, 2007)
- ◆ Speak out. To be silent on these issues, allows for the maintenance of systems that perpetuate poverty and class-based discrimination.

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