Building a pedagogy of engagement for students in poverty

The only surefire way to eliminate the achievement gap is to eradicate poverty. Since that's not going to happen anytime soon, educators can still take many research-proven steps to foster equality of opportunity in education.

By Paul C. Gorski

I started kindergarten in 1976, a decade before personal computers were in vogue for people who could afford them. The image of largesse I remember from elementary school was the 64-count box of crayons — the one with the built-in sharpener. I didn't have language for it then, but I knew that box denoted privilege.

I also remember when poster board was the hot commodity. I watched some students tremble when teachers assigned projects requiring it. Russell, a classmate, was shamed into outing himself as poor when the teacher asked the class, "Who needs help getting poster board?" The teachers I most admired were subtler, dumping everybody's crayons into community bins and keeping a few sheets of poster board tucked behind a filing cabinet, distributing it discreetly to students whose families couldn't afford it. My family fell in-between. We could afford poster board, but I settled for boxes of 16-count crayons.

During a recent visit to a high-poverty school, I asked 8th graders how many of them had a working computer and Internet access at home; only a few of the 40 students raised their hands. Then I asked how many of them had been assigned homework that required access to computers and the Internet since the last grading period ended; everybody raised their hands.

Even before the e-revolution, Russell and other students who had no say in their families' financial conditions were at a disadvantage. That's when poster board was the commodity. Now it's computers. And the Internet. And printers.

It can be difficult to remember that many poor families simply cannot afford these technologies. It can be even more difficult to remember that the same families have reduced access to a bunch of other resources that influence learning, such as health care, recreational opportunities, and even clean air. And given shifting demographics and the recent recession, their numbers are growing, especially in suburban schools where many of us are unaccustomed to teaching low-income students.

That's important because, as David Berliner (2009) reminds us, the only sure path to educational equity is eliminating poverty itself. As long as inequality abounds, so will those pesky achievement gaps. Unfortunately education practitioners can't eliminate poverty on their own. And we can't afford to wait, and poor families can't afford to wait, for poverty to be eliminated. Even as I work toward that bigger change, I have to commit to doing what

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Low-income youth learn best when pedagogy is driven by high academic expectations for all students — where standards aren't lowered based on socioeconomic status.

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A study of 400 teachers in low-income schools found that those who rejected a deficit view of their students were happier with their jobs.

I can to address the inequities that students are experiencing right now.

This is why I've spent much of the past five years reading every bit of research I can find on what works when it comes to mitigating the effects of economic inequality in schools. This is the question guiding my research: What can teachers and administrators do today, not to raise low-income students' test scores — as that obsession, itself, is a symptom of one of those bigger societal things that needs to change — but to improve educational opportunity?

Promising practices and a couple caveats

Before considering my suggestions, remember that low-income people are infinitely diverse. No researcher knows your students better than you know them. So, no matter how tempting the easy solution may seem, there simply is no silver bullet, no nicely wrapped bundle of strategies that work for all low-income students everywhere. Aside from advocating for the social change necessary to eliminate poverty, the best thing we can do in the name of educational equity is honor the expertise of people in poor communities by teaming with them as partners in educational equity.

Second, more important than any strategy are the dispositions with which we relate to low-income families. Any strategy will be ineffective if I believe poverty is a marker of intellectual deficiency (Robinson, 2007). So I need to check my own biases even as I enact these strategies.

Classroom strategies

Express high expectations through higher-order, engaging pedagogies. According to Lee and Burkam (2003), students labeled "at-risk" who attend schools that combine rigorous curricula with learner-centered teaching achieve at higher levels and are less likely to drop out than their peers who experience lower-order instruction. Like everyone else, low-income youth learn best at schools in which pedagogy is driven by high academic expectations for all students — where standards aren't lowered based on socioeconomic status (Ramalho, Garza, & Merchant, 2010), and in classrooms where they have access to dialogic, inquiry-driven, collaborative pedagogies (Georges, 2009; Wenglinsky, 2002). Critical pedagogies and the development of critical literacies can be particularly helpful when it comes to school engagement among low-income students. Provide them with opportunities to tell stories about themselves that challenge the deficit-laden portrayals they often hear.

Enhance family involvement. Make sure opportunities for family involvement are accessible to parents and guardians who are likely to work multiple jobs, including evening jobs, who may not have access to paid leave, who may struggle to afford child care, and who may rely on public transportation. Start by providing transportation and on-site child care (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; Van Galen, 2007).

Incorporate arts into instruction. Among the most instructionally illogical responses to the test score obsession is the elimination of arts programs — most commonly in lower-income schools — to carve out additional time for reading, writing, and math. Exposure to art, theater, and music education bolsters learning, engagement, and retention for all students and especially for low-income youth, whose families generally can't afford music lessons or art camp (Catterall, Chapleau, & Iwanaga, 1999; Pogrow, 2006). Take advantage of local artists and musicians, who might consider working with your students or helping you think about the arts in discipline-specific ways.

Incorporate movement into instruction. Low-income students also are losing access to recess and physical education. The lack of recreational facilities and green space in poor communities, costs associated with recreational sports, and work and family obligations, often means that recess or P.E. is the only opportunity for low-income youth to exercise. Students who are physically fit fare better in school, and childhood physical fitness is an indicator of how healthy a person will be as an adult (Fahlman, Hall, & Lock, 2006). Anything you can do to incorporate movement into learning will help mitigate these disparities.

Focus intently on student and family strengths. Having high expectations is not pretention. When teachers adopt a deficit view of students, performance

declines. The opposite happens when teachers focus on student strengths (Haberman, 1995; Johns, Schmader, & Martens, 2005). It will be better for you, too. Robinson (2007) found in a study of 400 teachers in low-income schools that those who rejected a deficit view were happier with their jobs.

Analyze materials for class bias. Poor families often are depicted in stereotypical ways in picture books and other learning materials (Jones, 2008). A variety of useful tools exist to help us uncover these sorts of biases, such as the checklist of the National Association for the Teaching of English Working Party on Social Class and English Teaching (1982). Engage students in an analysis of the biases you uncover. And please retire that obnoxious picture of the "hobo" from your vocabulary wall. It's 2013.

Promote literacy enjoyment. According to Mary Kellett, "If we . . . acknowledge that literacy proficiency can be a route out of poverty . . . the most powerful strategy is to . . . promote reading enjoyment. This is likely to make the biggest impact on literacy proficiency" (2009, p. 399). This means literacy instruction should not focus solely on mechanics and should avoid practices that give students negative associations with literacy, such as forcing them to perform literacy skills publicly.

Reach out to families early and often. Many low-income parents and guardians experienced school as a hostile environment when they were students (Gorski, 2012). Any hesitance we experience when we reach out is not necessarily ambivalence about school. It might reflect reasonable distrust for the system we represent. It might be about long work hours or a lack of access to a telephone. Be persistent. Build trust. Most importantly, demonstrate trust by nurturing positive relationships. We can do this by facilitating ongoing communication rather than reaching out only when something is wrong, creating an equitable classroom environment across all dimensions of diversity, and refusing to invalidate concerns about inequalities that are raised by low-income families (Hamovitch, 1996).

A few higher-level strategies

As we grow our spheres of influence, we might consider taking on some bigger battles for class equity.

Advocate universal preschool. Investment in early childhood education might be the most critical educational advocacy we can do, as disparities in access to early educational interventions compound throughout children's lifetimes (Bhattacharya, 2010).

Nurture relationships with community agencies, including health clinics and farms (for fresh food). Susan Neuman (2009) found that of all types of educational interventions for poor families, those based on coordinated efforts among educational, social, and health services were most effective.

Reduce class sizes. Despite the illusion of a debate, research shows that class size matters (Rouse & Barrow, 2006).

Increase health services in schools. Start by broadening vision screenings to include farsightedness, which relates to up close (book) reading (Gould & Gould, 2003). Other services and screenings should focus on risks that are elevated in low-income communities, such as asthma (Davis, Gordon, & Burns, 2011). Fight to keep nurses in low-income schools, where

Even as I work toward eliminating poverty, I have to commit to doing what I can do now to address the inequalities facing the people right in front of me.

Literacy instruction should not focus solely on mechanics but should promote the enjoyment of reading.

they are needed desperately (Telljohann, Dake, & Price, 2004).

Conclusion

It bears repeating that teachers are not trained and schools are not equipped to make up for societal inequalities. This is why we should commit to doing all that we can in our spheres of influence toward class equity. And once we have done that, we can expand those spheres.

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The Myth of the

Instead of accepting myths that harm low-income students, we need to eradicate the systemwide inequities that stand in their way.

Paul Gorski

As the students file out of Janet's classroom, I sit in the back corner, scribbling a few final notes. Defeat in her eyes, Janet drops into a seat next to me with a sigh.

"I *love* these kids," she declares, as if trying to convince me. "I adore them. But my hope is fading."

"Why's that?" I ask, stuffing my notes into a folder.

"They're smart. I know they're smart, but . . ."

And then the deficit floodgates open: "They don't care about school. They're unmotivated. And their parents—I'm lucky if two or three of them show up for conferences. No wonder the kids are unprepared to learn."

At Janet's invitation, I spent dozens of hours in her classroom, meeting her students, observing her teaching, helping her navigate the complexities of an urban midwestern elementary classroom with a growing percentage of students in poverty. I observed powerful moments of teaching and learning, caring and support. And I witnessed moments of internal conflict in Janet, when what she wanted to believe about her students collided with her prejudices.

Like most educators, Janet is determined to create an environment in which each student reaches his or her full potential. And like many of us, despite overflowing with good intentions, Janet has bought into the most common and dangerous myths about poverty.

Chief among these is the "culture of poverty" myth—the idea that poor people share more or less monolithic and predictable beliefs, values, and behaviors. For educators like Janet to be the best teachers they can be for all students, they need to challenge this myth and reach a deeper understanding of class and poverty.

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Roots of the Culture of Poverty Concept

Oscar Lewis coined the term *culture of poverty* in his 1961 book *The Children of Sanchez*. Lewis based his thesis on his ethnographic studies of small Mexican communities. His studies uncovered approximately 50 attributes shared within these communities: frequent violence, a lack of a sense of history, a neglect of planning for the future, and so on. Despite studying very small communities, Lewis extrapolated his findings to suggest a universal culture of poverty. More than 45 years later, the premise of the culture of poverty paradigm remains the same: that people in poverty share a consistent and observable "culture."

Lewis ignited a debate about the nature of poverty that continues today.

"Culture of Poverty"

But just as important—especially in the age of data-driven decision making—he inspired a flood of research. Researchers around the world tested the culture of poverty concept empirically (see Billings, 1974; Carmon, 1985; Jones & Luo, 1999). Others analyzed the overall body of evidence regarding the culture of poverty paradigm (see Abell & Lyon, 1979; Ortiz & Briggs, 2003; Rodman, 1977).

These studies raise a variety of questions and come to a variety of conclusions about poverty. But on this they all agree: *There is no such thing as a culture of poverty*. Differences in values and behaviors among poor people are just as great as those between poor and wealthy people.

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In actuality, the culture of poverty concept is constructed from a collection of smaller stereotypes which, however false, seem to have crept into mainstream thinking as unquestioned fact. Let's look at some examples.

MYTH: Poor people are unmotivated and have weak work ethics.

The Reality: Poor people do not have weaker work ethics or lower levels of motivation than wealthier people (Iversen & Farber, 1996; Wilson, 1997). Although poor people are often stereotyped as lazy, 83 percent of children from low-income families have at least one employed parent; close to 60 percent have at least one parent who works full-time and year-round (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2004). In fact, the severe shortage of living-wage jobs means that many poor adults must work two, three, or four jobs. According to the Economic Policy Institute (2002), poor working adults spend more hours working each week than their wealthier counterparts.

MYTH: Poor parents are uninvolved in their children's learning, largely because they do not value education.

The Reality: Low-income parents hold the same attitudes about education that wealthy parents do (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Leichter, 1978). Low-income parents are less likely to attend school functions or volunteer in their children's classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005)—not because they care less about education, but because they have less *access* to school involvement than their wealthier peers. They are more likely to work multiple jobs, to work evenings, to have jobs without paid leave, and to be unable to afford child care and public transportation. It might be said more accurately that schools that fail to take these considerations into account do not value the involvement of poor families as much as they value the involvement of other families.

MYTH: Poor people are linguistically deficient.

The Reality: All people, regardless of the languages and language varieties they speak, use a full continuum of language registers (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008). What's more, linguists have known for decades that all language varieties are highly structured with complex grammatical rules (Gee, 2004; Hess, 1974; Miller, Cho, & Bracey, 2005). What often are assumed to be *deficient* varieties of English—Appalachian varieties, perhaps, or what some refer to as Black English Vernacular—are no less sophisticated than so-called "standard English."

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MYTH: Poor people tend to abuse drugs and alcohol.

The Reality: Poor people are no more likely than their wealthier counterparts to abuse alcohol or drugs. Although drug sales are more visible in poor neighborhoods, drug use is equally distributed across poor, middle class, and wealthy communities (Saxe, Kadushin, Tighe, Rindskopf, & Beveridge, 2001). Chen, Sheth, Krejci, and Wallace (2003) found that alcohol consumption is *significantly higher* among upper middle class white high school students than among poor black high school students. Their finding supports a history of research showing that alcohol abuse is far more prevalent among wealthy people than among poor people (Diala, Muntaner, & Walrath, 2004; Galea, Ahern, Tracy, & Vlahov, 2007). In other words, considering alcohol and illicit drugs together, wealthy people are more likely than poor people to be substance abusers.

The Culture of Classism

The myth of a "culture of poverty" distracts us from a dangerous culture that does exist—the culture of classism. This culture continues to harden in our schools today. It leads the most well intentioned of us, like my friend Janet, into low expectations for low-income students. It makes teachers fear their most powerless pupils. And, worst of all, it diverts attention from what people in poverty *do* have in common: inequitable access to basic human rights.

The most destructive tool of the culture of classism is deficit theory. In education, we often talk about the deficit perspective—defining students by their weaknesses rather than their strengths. Deficit theory takes this attitude a step further, suggesting that poor people are poor because of their own moral and intellectual deficiencies (Collins, 1988). Deficit theorists use two strategies for propagating this world view: (1) drawing on well-established stereotypes, and (2) ignoring systemic conditions, such as inequitable access to high-quality schooling, that support the cycle of poverty.

The implications of deficit theory reach far beyond individual bias. If we convince ourselves that poverty results not from gross inequities (in which we might be complicit) but from poor people's own deficiencies, we are much less likely to support authentic antipoverty policy and programs. Further, if we believe, however wrongly, that poor people don't value education, then we dodge any responsibility to redress the gross education inequities with which they contend. This application of deficit theory establishes the idea of what Gans (1995) calls the *undeserving poor*—a segment of our society that simply does not deserve a fair shake.

If the goal of deficit theory is to justify a system that privileges economically advantaged students at the expense of working-class and poor students, then it appears to be working marvelously. In our determination to "fix" the mythical culture of poor students, we ignore the ways in which our society cheats them out of opportu-

nities that their wealthier peers take for granted. We ignore the fact that poor people suffer disproportionately the effects of nearly every major social ill. They lack access to health care, living-wage jobs, safe and affordable housing, clean air and water, and so on (Books, 2004)—conditions that limit their abilities to achieve to their full potential.

Perhaps most of us, as educators, feel powerless to address these bigger issues. But the question is this: Are we willing, at the very least, to tackle the classism in our own schools and classrooms?

This classism is plentiful and well documented (Kozol, 1992). For example, compared with their wealthier peers, poor students are more likely to attend schools that have less funding (Carey, 2005); lower teacher salaries (Karoly, 2001); more limited computer and Internet access (Gorski, 2003); larger class sizes; higher student-to-teacher ratios; a less-rigorous curriculum; and fewer experienced teachers (Barton, 2004). The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2004) also found that low-income schools were more likely to suffer from cockroach or rat infestation, dirty or inoperative student bathrooms, large numbers of teacher vacancies and substitute teachers, more teachers who are not licensed in their subject areas, insufficient or outdated classroom materials, and inadequate or nonexistent learning facilities, such as science labs.

Here in Minnesota, several school districts offer universal half-day kindergarten but allow those families that can afford to do so to pay for full-day services. Our poor students scarcely make it out of early childhood without paying the price for our culture of classism. Deficit theory requires us to ignore these inequities—or worse, to see them as normal and justified.

What does this mean? Regardless of how much students in poverty value education, they must overcome tremendous inequities to learn. Perhaps the greatest myth of all is the one that dubs education the "great equalizer." Without considerable change, it cannot be anything of the sort.

The myth of a "culture of poverty" distracts us from a dangerous culture that does exist—the culture of classism.

What Can We Do?

The socioeconomic opportunity gap can be eliminated only when we stop trying to "fix" poor students and start addressing the ways in which our schools perpetuate classism. This includes destroying the inequities listed above as well as abolishing such practices as tracking and ability grouping, segregational redistricting, and the privatization of public schools. We must demand the best possible education for all students—higher-order pedagogies, innovative learning materials, and holistic teaching and learning. But first, we must demand basic human rights for all people: adequate housing and health care, living-wage jobs, and so on.

Of course, we ought not tell students who suffer today that, if they can wait for this education revolution, everything will fall into place. So as we prepare ourselves for bigger changes, we must

- Educate ourselves about class and poverty.
- Reject deficit theory and help students and colleagues unlearn misperceptions about poverty.
- Make school involvement accessible to all families.
- Follow Janet's lead, inviting colleagues to observe our teaching for signs of class bias.
- Continue reaching out to low-income families even when they appear unresponsive (and without assuming, if they are unresponsive, that we know why).
- Respond when colleagues stereotype poor students or parents.
- Never assume that all students have equitable access to such learning resources as computers and the Internet, and never assign work requiring this access without providing in-school time to complete it.
- Ensure that learning materials do not stereotype poor people.
- Fight to keep low-income students from being assigned unjustly to special education or low academic tracks.
- Make curriculum relevant to poor students, drawing on and validating their experiences and intelligences.
- Teach about issues related to class and poverty—including consumer culture, the dissolution of labor unions, and environmental injustice—and about movements for class equity.
- Teach about the antipoverty work of Martin Luther King Jr., Helen Keller, the Black Panthers, César Chávez, and other U.S. icons—and about why this dimension of their legacies has been erased from our national consciousness.
- Fight to ensure that school meal programs offer healthy options.
- Examine proposed corporate-school partnerships, rejecting those that require the adoption of specific curriculums or pedagogies.

Most important, we must consider how our own class biases affect our interactions with and expectations of our students. And then we must ask ourselves, Where, in reality, does the deficit lie? Does it lie in poor people, the most disenfranchised people among us? Does it lie in the education system itself—in, as Jonathan Kozol says, the savage inequalities of our schools? Or does it lie in us—educators with unquestionably good intentions who too often fall to the temptation of the quick fix, the easily digestible framework that never requires us to consider how we comply with the culture of classism. EL

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Re-examining Beliefs About Students in Poverty

The greatest need, author says, is to strengthen equity literacy

BY PAUL C. GORSKI

This is a fact: Students whose families are living in poverty do not perform on average as well in school as wealthier students. Perhaps it's unpopular to say, but if we're committed to educational equity for low-income families, we must acknowledge this reality.

The next step is to consider how we interpret it. We might ask ourselves how we would answer this question: Why do students whose families are experiencing poverty not do as well in school on average as their wealthier peers? Obviously, the answer is complex, many factors are in play. But if we get to the root of it, what factors do you believe best explain the disparities in educational outcomes for low-income students?

Equity Literacy

I have spent the past dozen years cultivating in teachers and administrators the skills and knowledge for building equitable learning environments for students in poverty — the knowledge and skills necessary to make every educator a threat to the existence of inequities in their classrooms, schools and districts. Along with my colleague Katy Swalwell, I have come to call this combination of knowledge and skills *equity literacy*. It begins with analyzing our belief systems, our responses to the question I posed above. More on that below.

Briefly, equity literacy consists of four abilities essential to creating equitable schools. When we equip ourselves with these abilities, we become a threat to the existence of inequities in our spheres of influence — our classrooms, schools or districts.

The first is the ability to *recognize* inequity. Do I understand the challenges students experiencing poverty face outside school well enough that I recognize even the subtlest ways in which those challenges are reproduced within schools? Am I capable of recognizing stereotypical depictions of people experiencing poverty when I flip through a textbook under consideration for adoption in my school or district?

The second is the ability to *respond* to inequity in the immediate term. Am I able, for example, to skillfully explain to colleagues why adopting a policy requiring electronic communication with parents could exacerbate gaps in family engagement? Do I know how to respond to colleagues openly and effectively when they stereotype families experiencing poverty? Do I have the ability and the will to challenge increases in extracurricular fees, the under-representation of low-

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Our 'Month in Poverty' Inspires Action

BY KYM LEBLANC-ESPARZA

The realities of poverty are clashing with the middle-class culture that governs schools in the small Oregon community where I serve as superintendent.

As recently as 2003, only one in four students was identified as living in poverty. That percentage has grown ever since. Today, 47 percent of our 5,200 students fall below the poverty line, and we are seeing the achievement gap widen.

What this reveals is the uncomfortable fact that students of poverty in Newberg, about a half-hour southwest of Portland, are much less successful than their peers who are not economically disadvantaged.

I was well aware that changing attitudes about learning for all students, especially those in poverty, needed to start with greater awareness and understanding by our educators. Applying that understanding to affect change in instruction for students would need to come from the ground up, not the top down.

There was no time to waste. It was time for us to make the numbers real.

Six high school students describe the effects of poverty on their lives in a video, "All Means All," shown to staff in Oregon's Newberg School District.

IMAGE COURTESY OF NEWBERG SCHOOL DISTRICT, NEWBERG, ORE.

Students' Stories

At the school year kickoff last September, we launched the school district's All Means All initiative. The school district produced a short documentary video, shown to the entire district staff, highlighting the hopes, dreams and struggles faced by students affected by homelessness, family issues and poverty.

The message really hit home by incorporating the stories and images of six local high school students describing the effects of poverty. None were on track to graduate, but each shared the importance of finishing school.

Their stories delivered a powerful, emotional hook for the new initiative. Principals picked up the discussion in their buildings, connecting it to their school population. Conversations about the impact of poverty on students in their school expanded to parent groups. Meanwhile, I carried the All Means All message to the broader Newberg community. The conversation was starting to change.

But it was something else that really chal-

income students in upper-level courses and other practices that disproportionately marginalize the most economically disadvantaged students?

Next is the ability to *redress* inequity in the long term by tending to the conditions that underlie immediate concerns. For example, am I willing to develop policy, however unpopular it might be among wealthier families, to disallow practices that humiliate and disadvantage students experiencing poverty? Can I skillfully exert my influence to lead a reconsideration of fundraising activities that rely on sales competitions among students, book fairs full of resources low-income families could never afford, homework assignments requiring the use of technology to which many economically disadvantaged students do not have access, or first-day-of-school share-outs about what students did on their summer "vacations."

(Of course, if I don't recognize how these practices and activities can be humiliating, it would never occur to me to redress them.)

The final ability involves *sustaining* equity. Do I know how to sustain equity efforts and do I have the will to withstand the criticism that occurs when I start to redistribute educational opportunity?

Genuine Intentions

The reason I love doing equity literacy work with schools, collaborating with people who have invested their lives in the success of other people's children, is that I know I can assume good intentions among my collaborators. I can't remember ever visiting a school where administrators didn't genuinely want all students to thrive. Only rarely have I visited a school district where leadership wasn't pouring resources into initiatives they believed would improve learning outcomes of low-income students.

lenged our long-held assumptions about the value of education to economically disadvantaged students and their families. It was an opportunity for educators in Newberg to "spend a month in poverty" on a professional development day last November.

Kym LeBlanc-Esparza

Realistic Experience

Using the Missouri Community Action Network poverty simulation, more than 400 Newberg educators, including central-office administrators, experienced what it is like to live without enough money to meet their basic needs. Each participant took on the identity of a family member. Family groups had to provide basic necessities and shelter during four 15-minute "weeks."

Families faced realistic problems — low wage jobs, unemployment, high utility bills, unreliable transportation, unaffordable medication and incarcerated parents. As participants accessed community resources and services stationed around the room, they faced language barriers, paperwork, frustrating delays and unfamiliar systems.

"It put us through the struggles our families are facing," said one teacher. "I had no idea."

Each school community debriefed their month in poverty. Did they manage to pay the rent? Keep the utilities on? Make loan payments? Look for work? Improve their situation?

"I was so immersed in meeting basic needs, I never even asked about how my child is doing in school," commented an educator playing the role of a parent.

One of the greatest benefits of the simulation was the involvement of more than 70 local community leaders who volunteered to staff the simulated businesses and resource centers.

Having the mayor, school board and city council members, university professors, business and civic leaders involved in the experience further expands the awareness and understanding across the community.

Re-examining Barriers

In the months since the poverty simulation, the All Means All initiative has been taking hold throughout the district. The firsthand experience has resonated loudly, and staff are modifying behavior. Some changes are subtle, such as tuning in more carefully to their students' needs, acting to connect families to resources, lending a hand or simply thinking differently about the support of at-risk kids.

Newberg's teachers and administrators are examining barriers, such as technology access or connectivity at home, and homework assignments that require adult participation or costly materials to complete that prevent students from learning. Community leaders who participated in the simulation are discussing ways their organizations can support students and their families.

Other changes are much more visible. Schools are partnering with parents, local businesses and organizations to provide resources to support families with basic necessities such as food, clothing, personal hygiene items and school supplies. A grant to provide kindergarten students with iPads loaded with literacy and numeracy apps during the summer will continue to give low-income students access to learning outside of school.

A new priority in the district's strategic plan explicitly addresses the needs of students in poverty to eliminate the achievement gap.

I know we have a long way to go to improve outcomes for all students, but the most important stride we have made is openly acknowledging the impact of poverty on our students and realizing we have to do things differently.

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Unfortunately, absent a commitment to equity literacy, good intentions and a willingness to expend resources pose no real threat to inequities. And this, in my experience, is the biggest barrier when it comes to matters of poverty and education: Too many popularly embraced strategies are not based on deep understandings of equity. They are based, instead, on well-meaning misunderstandings and understandably desperate grasps for the kinds of quick fixes that simply do not exist.

This brings me back to my original question: Why do students in poverty not perform as well in school on average as their wealthier peers? The first step toward equity literacy is assessing our existing perceptions. Any time I work with education leaders, helping them evaluate their abilities to lead equity efforts, I begin with this question. Responses cluster around three basic views of poverty, or three poverty ideologies. We start here because the ideology we embrace determines the way we interpret the problem we're trying to resolve. The way we interpret the problem drives the solutions we're capable of imagining to resolve it. I'll show you what I mean.

A Deficit Ideology

The most common and most dangerous poverty ideology is *deficit* ideology, often perpetuated by training programs that focus on the mythical "culture" or "mindset" of poverty. If I embrace a deficit ideology, my impulse upon reading our question is to point to supposed deficiencies in the values or cultures of families in poverty. *The students are unmotivated,* I might think, or *the parents are irresponsible.* Perhaps, I reason, *poor* people don't value education.

Here's a dose of equity literacy. As it turns out, all of these presumptions are false — they are stereotyped misinterpretations that render us a

threat to equity, not to inequity. For example, researchers have found no discernible differences between how people in poverty and wealthier people value education.

When I misinterpret in this way, despite good intentions, I risk investing resources in initiatives designed to solve problems that don't exist. Consider initiatives designed to persuade low-income parents to care more about education. They already care. So now I've wasted resources and alienated the most marginalized families. That's the inverse of equity.

Paul Gorski

Grit Ideology

The second poverty view is *grit* ideology. If I embrace grit ideology, I might respond to our question lamenting a perceived lack of resilience in low-income students. Perhaps I would acknowledge the barriers they face, such as the lack of access to preventive health care. But rather than developing strategies that are responsive to these barriers, I sidestep equity and opt for initiatives designed to cultivate their grit so they can overcome them.

With equity literacy I understand that, contrary to popular belief, the most marginalized individuals generally already are the grittiest individuals. They are parents who, due to the scarcity of living wage work, juggle two or three jobs and still get their children to school. They are youth who persist despite school practices that sometimes humiliate them.

I understand, as well, that ignoring inequity, instead cultivating grit in students experiencing inequity, leaves us at inequity.

Structural Ideology

When I embrace *structural* ideology, I recognize that there simply is no way to eliminate educational outcome disparities without removing the barriers — the inequities — with which people experiencing poverty contend.

Research consistently shows that these barriers explain the largest portion of outcome disparities. Imagine, for example, how we would shrink disparities if every parent had one living wage job and could spend evenings helping their kids with homework and attending school events instead of working a second job. Imagine the change if every child had the best possible preventive health care. These two changes likely would have the biggest impact on low-income students' performance.

I realize, of course, that these barriers fall outside my sphere of influence. I'm not in a position to promise every family living wage work, preventive healthcare, or a functioning automobile. But I am in a position to shape policy and practice to be responsive to these structural barriers.

Consider family involvement. We know that generally, low-income parents attend family involvement events at their children's schools less often than wealthier parents. With troubling consistency, I come across well-meaning teachers and administrators who misinterpret this reality through a deficit lens. *If only those parents cared more.* When we misinterpret in this way, we render ourselves equity-illiterate. Equity cannot arise from bias.

A structural view allows me to consider the problem with deeper understanding. I start by wondering about my own complicity. Do I design opportunities for family engagement that are accessible to parents who work multiple jobs often including evening jobs, who don't have paid leave, who may not have transportation, who might struggle to afford child care? Do the policies and practices I support mitigate or exacerbate these inequities? Do they redistribute access or punish people for their lack of access?

Positioning Ourselves

In the end, there is no path to equity not grounded in this structural view. When we strengthen our equity literacy, when we understand that educational outcome disparities can be traced almost entirely to structural barriers in and out of schools rather than to moral deficiencies or grit shortages in families experiencing poverty, we position ourselves to create equitable policy and practice.

Further, we position ourselves, as all education leaders should be positioned, to become a threat to the existence of inequity in our schools and districts. ■

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