

Learning Class Identity and Supporting our Teachers and Students

By: Andy Jordan, Ed.S.

Over the course of my administrative career and research into equality, I have come to the realization that I have belonged to two different social classes in the past and the present. The class I grew up in during my childhood was low-income or the working class. I was part of the free lunch program and can remember going into the office each Monday to receive my “pink” (free) lunch tickets each week and quickly recognized that all my friends had “red” (paid) lunch tickets. When I was fifteen years of age I had two jobs in the summer and worked fifty hours a week to save up for the purchase of my first car and car insurance. I did not wear high end brand clothing as other teenagers such as American Eagle, Abercrombie and Fitch, or Hollister. I was low-income but that was not how I perceived myself growing up. I had food, shelter, and a family that loved me which I believed all I needed to be successful. I also had a great inner circle of friends that I surrounded myself with which were a majority middle class people with no divorced parents.

I am currently in the (upper) middle class category and I hope to stay there and eventually move to the next class if I am fortunate enough, but I know that is statistically not likely to happen. “If you were born into a family in the top 10% of income-earners, you are 23 times more likely to end up with an income in that top decile than somebody born into a family in the bottom decile.” (p. 16). High class people or the owning class people are typically born into that class. I have recently made the jump from towards the bottom decile to the middle class. The ways that I dress, act, and speak have changed greatly. I am very cognizant of every conversation I have and the implications it might have if I miscommunicate and the perception of the community. “According to the Economic Mobility Project (2012), upward mobility is

especially rare amongst the poorest 20% of Americans.” (p. 16). I also believe it is hard to move to the next class, but it is tremendously easy to move down a class if you don’t keep moving forward and doing your best each and every day!

I was intrigued by a Gorski quote that read, “It is, in part, why many teachers and administrators don’t tend to stick around very long in the most under resourced schools and why they choose, instead, to seek work in wealthier schools or districts.” (p.16). I agree that many teachers and principals want to work in wealthier districts. I work in a poor district (below the ISBE level of adequacy for appropriate funding) that has now had multiple leadership changes which makes it tough for low income schools to succeed when there is a high turnover rate with the principal and teaching staff. To be honest if administrators had an opportunity to have less students, adequate number of teachers, improved test scores, increased supports, and an increase in salary per year I think most would probably take that job opportunity.

As the principal of a low income school it is important to recognize that our families are low income and to realize that our families do want to help out with the school, but maybe past practices or other circumstances have prohibited their ability to do so. “You’re committed to being involved in every possible way, so you hope that finally, this year, the school will be a little more flexible when scheduling parent-teacher conferences and other events.” (p. 104). I agree with the mindset that parents want to volunteer and be a part of their child’s school. I think it is the responsibility of the school principal to create as many opportunities or avenues possible to get the community involved. Scheduling is key when we talk about P/T conferences or other events. I also think it is key to create a low threat and welcoming atmosphere for parents to want to be a part of the school. When I look at some of my schools the first year when I took over; the data on test scores were low, graduation rates were low, and poverty was above the state average.

I needed to change my approach when communicating with parents and keep in mind that probably a lot of parents had a negative experience when they were in school and I need to shift them to my circle and pull them back in.

Over and over again in research I see making the curriculum relevant and meaningful to the students you are teaching. “All students learn better when the curriculum is made relevant to their lives, when we build teaching and learning experiences around the strengths, cultures, and resources in local communities.” (p. 126). Students need to be engaged and interested in the curriculum you are teaching them and being able to connect with the low income students is key to their success. I’ve started “Genius Hour” in my building. Genius hour is a movement that allows students to explore their own passions and encourages creativity in the classroom. It provides students a choice in what they learn during a set period of time during school. Our engagement and student interest in what they are learning has gone through the roof. Not only that, students are excited about genius hour and they are able to build relationships with teachers they currently don’t have. This is another reason that when students have a choice in what they are learning engagement goes up along with student achievement. The last point I would like to make is the ability of teachers to connect with our students but to see them for their strengths and their potential rather than what their background is. “Teachers who understood the societal challenges faced by low-income families were more effective at responding to the needs of students whose families were in poverty.” (p. 134). Being able to educate our teachers on how to teach our students and provide more strategies for students of poverty is important. Being able to teach our teachers that plus those teachers that have lived through those experiences will be the most impactful with those students. That is why I believe the hiring of teachers and knowing

their background is an important factor maybe not the deciding factor but principals need to take that into account.

I think the bigger issue is the state's inequitable funding model that is currently in place. The idea of getting schools to 100% adequate funding is a good concept; however, we must realize that we still have schools that are over 400% of adequate funding. So, even if my underfunded school reaches 100% we don't have the same resources as some schools with higher EAV based off of their property taxes. We as school principals need to do as much as we can by being equitable and part of that is communicating that message to our state representatives about the inequity of the state's funding of public schools. Another role of the principal is being able to identify this in our own schools. The most important thing we can do as leaders is to act on our beliefs. It is easy to identify problems and needs of a school, but by taking ownership and acting is the only way we are going to create the change needed.

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Gorski, Paul C. (2013). *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.