

# 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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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, Schmäder, & 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 Kellest, “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 hos-

tile 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**

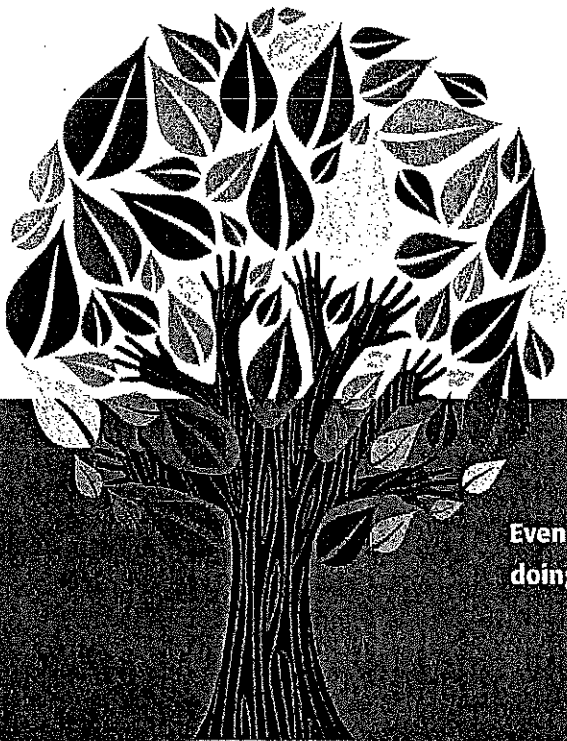
As we grow our spheres of influence, we might consider taking on some bigger battles for class equity.

*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.**

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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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