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Social Inequality, Social Mobility, and Education

BY LORNA RIVERA

My history teacher, Mr. Sambo, had been teaching at my Chicago public high school for over thirty years. Because of him I developed a critical eye toward all my teachers, my education and the world. Mr. Sambo often reminisced aloud about my high school's glory days—the days when the school only admitted young white men. He also liked to invent nicknames for minority students. I dreaded going to his class because I knew that he was going to pick on me. Usually, Mr. Sambo would say sarcastically, "Oh, here comes the Rocky Horror Picture Show Girl!" or sometimes he would say, "Here comes the Grim Reaper!" In a way I was used to hearing negative comments about my appearance; it was the early 1980's and I was a wannabe punk rocker (much to the dismay of my Catholic, Puerto Rican parents). However, Mr. Sambo's comments kept getting worse and he began calling me "Spanish Harlem" and "Spic and Span." I recall vividly how the few African-American students in our class would sit alongside the black chalkboard in the back of the classroom and when Mr. Sambo took attendance he would yell at them: "Smile back there, so I can see you!" Of course, they did not respect him (why should they have?) so Mr. Sambo struggled to quiet the classroom everyday. Even with my headphones on, I could still hear him complaining about how the "natives are getting restless back there," and referring to the back of the classroom as "the Southside."

Mr. Sambo was not the only teacher I encountered who had low expectations of girls, students of color and the poor. Another abusive teacher I had was Mr. Bono, my wood shop teacher. He always gave me low marks and once, when I asked him why, he told me, "Because you're a girl." I was the only Puerto Rican student in gifted classes at my public elementary school (grades K-8) and my teachers often told me that I was special or "different" from the other kids. One teacher told me, "You're pretty smart, for a Puerto Rican." Instead of inspiring me, these comments actually fostered in me a sense of shame about my culture and for many years I believed most Puerto Ricans were stupid. Although I graduated at the top of my class in elementary school, when I went to high school I was assigned to classes in a vocational track. The majority of classes I took in high school were shop and drafting classes such as electric shop, wood shop, print shop, drafting I & II, and auto shop. And not surprisingly, my classmates were primarily minorities. I wondered how I changed from being "gifted" in elementary school to soldering wires and making cabinets in high school? During my junior year in high school, I learned that my white friends were taking their ACT's (college entrance exams) and I wondered why my teachers hadn't told me about the ACT tests. Why weren't they encouraging me to go to college?

Mr. Sambo often reminisced aloud about my high school's glory days—the days when the school only admitted young white men. He also liked to invent nicknames for minority students. I dreaded going to his class because I knew that he was going to pick on me.

Social class distinctions in my high school were also striking, although more subtle than racism and sexism. Although my high school was a Chicago public school, suburban students (who falsified their addresses) also attended the school. They were more likely to be enrolled in the college track. All students were required to wear their student I.D. badges around their necks in order to be admitted to the school cafeteria for lunch and study hall periods. However, I tended to avoid the cafeteria because I was ashamed to wear my I.D. In my mind, the I.D. was a public announcement that my family was poor. Students like me, who received free lunch, had a hole punched in the corner of our picture—an obvious marker of our social class background. I felt ashamed about my family, and angry because I felt there was nothing I could do to change how people treated me.

Meanwhile, my neighborhood friends and family were not very supportive of my educational aspirations. I was often teased by the boys in my neighborhood, or physically threatened by girls who equated my efforts to do well in school with trying to be "white." When I told my mother that I wanted to go to college, she said, "Para que? Ya tu tienes un buen trabajo" (What for? You already have a good job). During high school I was working with my mother for 25 to 30 hours a week as a teller at a check-cashing agency. My older sister had dropped out of school and was also

working with my mother. I did not want to disrespect my mother because she had worked at the check-cashing agency since she was eighteen years old, but I saw how hard she worked for very low pay. My family could not afford to pay for college expenses, nor could they provide the support I needed to complete the overwhelming college application process. I was fortunate to receive help from my best friend's older sister, who helped me complete financial aid forms, write the personal statements, and register for the ACT college entrance examinations.

Although my experiences in high school were largely negative, I knew that compared to my childhood friends and my family that I was very lucky and quite privileged. Because I was a good student in elementary school I was able to attend the "best" public high school in the city and this provided me with access to college, via my social network at the school and the school's excellent reputation. In addition, I had increased access to social mobility through my involvement in mentoring programs for urban Latino youth at my church and scholarship opportunities through my father's labor union. Yet, many of my friends and family did not have the same opportunities I had.

College was a real challenge and culture shock for me. I applied and was accepted to DePaul University, a Catholic university that was only a fifteen-minute ride from my family's home. During my freshman year I had to take remedial math and writing courses before I could enroll in courses towards my major. Once again, I saw that my classmates were other minority students who also needed to "catch up" with the rest of the student body. Fortunately, I received additional academic and emotional support from two Latino professors who were engaged in efforts to increase the retention rates of Latino students at DePaul University. Because of their influence on me, I decided to become a teacher and became the first person to graduate from college in my family.

It was my studies in sociology that provided me with a framework for analyzing my experiences as a working-class Puerto Rican woman in the public schools, as well as understanding how some of my students have had similar negative experiences in school.

After I graduated, I wanted to teach and work with Latino children because I imagined that I could serve as a positive role model. I naively believed that as an individual, I would be able to transform the racism, sexism, and other social injustices in the world via my classroom teaching. But the reality I faced was that there were still a lot of teachers like Mr. Sambo working in inner-city schools. As I met many cold-hearted teachers I wondered how teacher expectations were influenced by negative stereotypes about poor and minority students. My teacher training classes had primarily focused on developing lesson plans and classroom management practices, but we rarely discussed the politics of education, or social inequalities in schools. I wanted to know why so many poor and minority students dropped out of school? How does the curriculum in schools produce different outcomes for privileged and under-privileged students? How do schools limit the potential of women and low-income people of color? How are schools a mirror of society? These questions and many others influenced my decision to study sociology in graduate school.

It was my studies in sociology that provided me with a framework for analyzing my experiences as a working-class Puerto Rican woman in the public schools, as well as understanding how some of my students have had similar negative experiences in school. In 1991, while working with Mexican children I became interested in the relationship between a parent's educational level and their child's academic achievements. I learned that many of my students' parents lacked Native Language Literacy. Their absences during parent and teacher conferences were not due to a lack of interest in their children's education, or their values about education (as most of my colleagues believed); there were a host of factors that explained their absence. For example, many of the parents did not speak English, most worked 2nd or 3rd shifts in manufacturing plants, and still others were intimidated by the school and teachers. I know from my own experience how language barriers in schools make it difficult for teachers to communicate with parents whose first language is not English.

In addition, I observed how many of my students' immigrant parents, just like my own immigrant parents, placed a high value on paid work. When my older sister was failing in school, my parents signed discharge papers so she could go to work. I do not believe that my parents, or my students' parents valued education less than white middle-class parents. They simply believed that the purpose of education was to find a good job. Also, many of my students' families were struggling to make ends meet and if their child was not doing well in school, then he or she could help the family by working. Indeed, this was the rationale that influenced my mother's decision to discharge my sister from school.

I have experienced how schools play a major role in perpetuating gender role expectations through the ideology of the school curriculum and in the everyday interactions among students and teachers. As a high school student enrolled in shop and drafting classes that were dominated by males, I was assigned lower grades because I was "a girl." I was not allowed to use certain power tools in my

shop classes because they were "too dangerous" for girls. I was not allowed to work on projects with outside contractors because these were deemed "too important." When I became a teacher I observed how cultural expectations about gender roles often prevented many young Latinas from participating in after-school activities because they were expected to stay indoors or to be caretakers of their siblings. I too, learned as a young Latina that more was expected of me in terms of familial responsibilities, but less was expected of me (or allowed) outside of the home.

The purpose of my early vocational education was to prepare me to be a productive member of the working-class or working-poor. As a high school student assigned to the vocational track, college was not supposed to be an option for me. Historically, tracking systems in U.S. schools were developed in response to the influx of immigrants who were unskilled, and were grounded on the belief that one's position in a group was based on one's ability. (Katz, 1995). Today, school-tracking systems are still in place and standardized testing scores support the sorting of students into tracks. According to critics, tracking "fosters the illusion of meritocratic competition while in reality functioning as a 'ranking' system that legitimates differences based on race, gender, and social power and locks students into positions of limited opportunity." (McLaren, 1998, p. 10).

Many years later, my sister who had dropped out of school, enrolled in an adult education center and obtained her General Education Diploma (GED). I was inspired by her positive experience and started working as a GED teacher in a shelter-based popular education program for homeless women. Many of the homeless women I met had also dropped out of school and some had no formal schooling experiences at all. I wondered what forces had limited their potential. An overwhelming majority of the women said that their children were the primary motivating factor in their decision to return to school. For example, one of my students, Renata, said that she wanted to be a "role model" for her kids: "I decided to go back to school so I could be a good role model for my kids. And I say that because how can I teach them something or tell them something I don't know? How can I tell my kids to go to or finish school if I didn't? They'll be looking at me sayin', why should I go to school? You didn't finish!" The women also returned to school because they believed that once they obtained their high school diplomas they would have increased access to decent jobs, get off of welfare, and/or be accepted into a good job training program or college.

I also wanted to understand the impact of the popular education classes on the women's everyday lives. Popular education is a methodology of teaching and learning through dialogue that directly links curriculum content to people's lived experience and inspires political action. (Benmayor, 1991; Freire, 1990; Shor, 1992; Williams, 1996; Young & Padilla, 1990). Although I had prior knowledge about "learner-centered" teaching approaches, I did not know about popular education. As part of my training in the Family Shelter, I observed how the classes were based on the problems or "generative themes" in the lives of the homeless women. I learned how classroom activities involved problem-posing and dialogue that raised the consciousness of the women regarding their relationship to one another and to the world around them. I also observed how the women were encouraged to apply what they learned by taking action individually and collectively. After interviewing adult learners and teachers I found that popular education approaches were better suited to help homeless mothers because their personal, academic, and community goals were addressed simultaneously. The mothers described increased self-esteem, they became stronger advocates for their basic rights related to welfare, housing, health, and education, and they became more involved with their children's education. Because they had weak social networks outside of the program, they developed a community of support within the context of their popular education classes. I was convinced that learning is more empowering when there is a direct link to people's lived experiences. (Rivera, 2003).

In 1996, as debates about welfare reform dominated the popular media many of my homeless adult learners were upset with the media's negative depiction of welfare recipients. They wanted to convince people that they were hard-working, loving mothers who valued education and had goals for the future. Since I was also teaching an undergraduate sociology course, "Class, Power, & Social Change" at Northeastern University, I asked the women at The Family Shelter if they would like to teach a class about the "realities" of welfare. My college students were studying about welfare reform and many of them were rather unempathetic toward the plight of poor people. The American students in the class believed wholeheartedly that the United States is a meritocracy; if an individual works hard he or she will achieve great success. There were major differences regarding the college students' and the homeless women's perceptions of the world.

Eight of my adult learners from the Family Shelter, Florence, Yvette, Leticia, Cynthia, Delila, Susan, Georgia, and Tashawna, came to meet with my class at Northeastern. In their introductory remarks the women talked about their hopes for achieving their GED's, the obstacles they faced as they attempted to finish school, why they ended up on welfare, why they wanted to get off of welfare, and what they hoped their children would accomplish. After the women told their stories, a couple of students asked them questions that were quite critical and insensitive. For example, one student asked the women why they didn't

consider becoming roommates and renting an apartment together, after all, "Wouldn't that be better than living in a shelter?" Another student explained that the women impressed him because they seemed to be more motivated than "other welfare recipients." Some students viewed the women as exceptions and not "normal" welfare recipients because they seemed to be hard-working and loved to go to school. For example, in reflection papers, one white male student wrote:

> I admit that at one time I would think that this [welfare reform] is a good idea. Now I hear these stories of these women getting their education but being forced to put it aside, it's crazy. On the other hand, there are people who are not self-motivated and do nothing all day. I think this would be put down as a stereotype in our class if someone had said it. Or it would be defended by someone saying that they have no choice that they're stuck on that couch by society.

Another white female student suggested that welfare was "not fair," but "sometimes you have to make sacrifices." She wrote:

> I don't think that anyone should have to give up going to school, but if it comes down to that, they should try to do both school and Community Service. When I asked the question [to the women] yesterday, 'Why can't you go to school and do Community service?', I did not mean to offend anyone, I just felt that even though [welfare reform is] not fair, sometimes you have to make sacrifices that will pay off in the end.

In their response papers, the college students overwhelmingly felt that the women's stories were powerful, but that

I thought it was interesting the way my classmates looked while these women were speaking. It was almost as if you could see people thinking—"Yeah, that's too bad, but maybe if you tried a little harder, if you weren't so lazy, then maybe . . ."

they did not represent the "norm." For some of them, the women's attempts to "better themselves" supported their beliefs about personal responsibility—for these homeless women were more "responsible" than most welfare recipients. The next day, when I spoke with the women in the Family Shelter, they were disappointed and surprised at the level of prejudice they encountered. Delila said, "Not all of the students believed what we said, but a lot of them did try to understand and asked questions. We just gave them a piece of information about our lives. That piece of information is not enough to believe in and to accept it as real." Similarly, Florence said, "A lot of the kids in the class didn't think that it was real, what we were sayin'...about what we go through as adult learners." Another adult learner, Yvette said:

> Going to Northeastern was quite an experience because not everybody there had the same perspective. We was thinking different about them and they was thinking different about us. I never been in a room where I thought that those people up there were better than me and that was the situation that I was kind of feeling when I was there. You know, they're in college, they're more than us, they know more than us. But it wasn't even like that. They didn't even have a slight idea of what real life was all about . . . College is a dream to them. We're not having a dream. We live in real life. We out there struggling everyday for our kids, for ourselves. People looking at us like "If we could do it, you could do it." It seemed to me that they thought our life was an excuse, because we kept saying, "Well, we have kids . . ."

The women felt the college students did not know what "real life" was about and I found myself agreeing with them. The discussion between my adult learners and college students reminded me of my own struggles to relate to my middle-class classmates when I was in college. Like them, I always felt I had to defend my experiences, as well as those of other people of color, when ignorant remarks were made in my college classes. When I shared some of my college students' reaction papers with the women at the Family Shelter the paper they liked most was written by the only African-American male student who wrote:

> I think it is so important for us as students who are "studying" people, analyzing and trying to explain why people are the way they are, to not forget to ask those people themselves. How can we say that we are learning about a group of people if we cannot even talk to them and see their perspective? I thought it was interesting the way my classmates looked while these women were speaking. It was almost as if you could see people thinking—"Yeah, that's too bad, but maybe if you tried a little harder, if you weren't so lazy, then maybe . . ." I hope these women's stories had an effect on the class, on their views and their feelings about change.

Although the homeless women faced

many barriers to participating in adult education classes (such as family violence), welfare reform created additional barriers. Many of my students at The Family Shelter dropped out of school when welfare reform passed in Massachusetts. Before welfare reform, Massachusetts welfare recipients could participate in educational activities and these counted toward the work requirement. However, under the new "work-first" law, access to education was severely restricted as welfare recipients were forced to forgo their education and find employment as soon as possible.(Kates, 1999; Reuys, 1997; Sparks, 1999). Those who had the greatest need for education, like the women at the Family Shelter, were no longer allowed to go to school. The women wanted to find "good jobs," jobs that pay above minimum wage, and they knew they needed to have at least a high school diploma to access better paying jobs. For me, the welfare reform legislation posed a great American contradiction: education is supposed to be the primary means for social mobility, but those who lack a high school diploma should just work in dead-end jobs that will never lift them out of poverty. In the United States we live in a society that has the means to provide quality education to everyone who wants it, so why do we restrict access to education instead?

The late educator Paulo Freire argued: "It's not education that shapes society, but on the contrary, it is society that shapes education according to the interests of those in power." I often think about my homeless student, Yvette, who said she was not having a "dream" about college. Students like her, and teachers like Mr. Sambo, continue to inspire me to teach and work for social justice. Because I am the first person in my family to graduate from college, I am critically conscious of the opportunities that have been available to me because of my education. With increasing economic inequality in the United States, I believe teachers need to better understand how social inequalities influence what happens inside of schools, especially in schools that primarily serve poor students. We must take a critical look into the mirrors of our society: our schools. What is our collective responsibility as teachers to address the disparate images that are reflected in our schools? What can we do to shape a better society for our students?

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