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Social Inequality, Social Mobility, & Education

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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?

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 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
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 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
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..."

yet 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?

REFERENCES

Lorna Rivera, Ph.D, is an assistant professor in the college of Public and Community Service at the University of Massachusetts-Boston where she teaches courses in adult education, sociology, and community planning. Dr. Rivera’s work examines the impact of adult literacy education on low-income women of color.