

The Culture of Poverty

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At the dawn of the American welfare state, in his 1935 State of the Union message, President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1938: 19-20) proposed social security, unemployment insurance, and (what was then called) aid to dependent children to help the deserving poor, but he added an ominous warning:

The lessons of history, confirmed by evidence immediately before me, show conclusively that continued dependence on relief induces a spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fiber. To dole out relief in this way is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit. It is inimical to the dictates of sound policy. It is a violation of the traditions of America.

More than 60 years later, it should be clear that the narcotic of “continued dependence on relief” is less subtle and more destructive than Roosevelt feared.

Why are poor people poor? For years, many scholars blamed it on a culture of poverty- the idea that behavior and attitudes played a key role. Then, the concept was blasted as blaming the victim, and almost universally shunned. But a new understanding of the “culture of poverty” has recently emerged.

For more than 40 years, scholars and activists have argued over a phrase that became both incendiary and, in some circles, taboo: The culture of poverty- a shortcut to describe urban blacks trapped in a cycle of single mothers and welfare dependents? Or an insult that blames the victims of institutional racism?

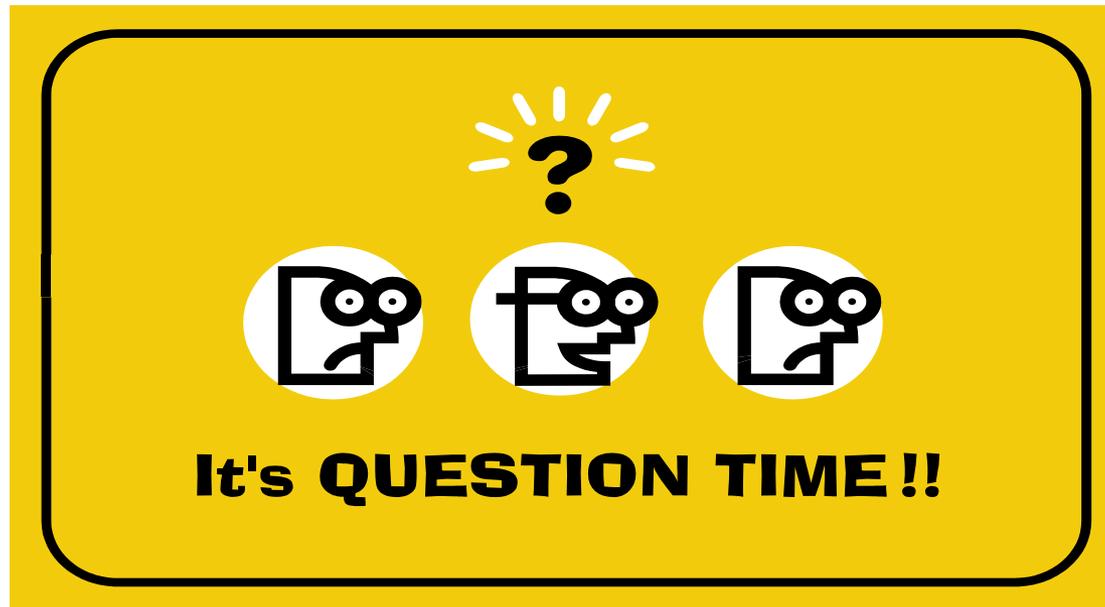
And it's more than an academic argument. It's a discussion about why poor people tend to stay poor and what people who haven't experienced poverty don't understand about a culture that includes positive aspects, like survival and resilience.

“Talk Of The Nation, NPR Radio, Neal Conan”

THE MYTH OF THE CULTURE OF POVERTY



See handout 1



- Do you agree with the way Janet defines her challenge?

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.

Roots of the Culture of Poverty Concept (cont.)

- 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”

Roots of the Culture of Poverty Concept (cont.)

- Lewis ignited a debate about the nature of poverty that continues today. 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 (Billing, 1974; Carmon, 1985; Jones & Luo 1999). Others analyzed the overall body of evidence regarding the culture of poverty paradigm (Abell & Lyon, 1979; Ortiz & Briggs, 2003; Rodman, 1977.)

Roots of the Culture of Poverty Concept (cont.)

- 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 things as a culture of poverty.* Differences in values and behaviors among poor people are just as great as those between poor and wealthy people.
- In actuality, the culture of poverty concept is constructed from a collection of smaller stereotypes which, however false, seem to have crept into mainstream thing as unquestioned FACT.

Examples of Myths and Realities..

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 most 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."

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, 200). 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

see handout

What are the current poverty and unemployment rates for Americans?

- The ongoing economic crisis has negatively affected the livelihoods of millions of Americans
- As of September 2009, unemployment has spiked dramatically to 9.8%, having doubled since the beginning of the recession in December 2007.
- The national poverty rate is the highest it has been for the last 11 years, growing to 13.2% in 2008 from 12.5% in 2007.
- Poverty rates for 2009 are not yet available, but will likely mimic this year's dramatic growth in unemployment.

What are the current poverty and unemployment rates for Americans? (cont.)

- While non-Hispanic Whites still constitute the largest single group of Americans living in poverty, ethnic minority groups are overrepresented (24.7% African American, 24.3% American Indian and Alaskan Native, 23.2% Hispanic, and 11.8% Asian and Pacific Islander compared with 8.6% non-Hispanic White).
- These disparities are associated with the historical marginalization of ethnic minority groups and entrenched barriers to good education and jobs.

Where is child poverty concentrated?

- The child poverty rate has gone up from 18% in 2007 to 19% in 2008 continued the upward trend in child poverty rates dating back to 2000 (16.2%)
- Racial and ethnic disparities in poverty rates persist, particularly among children. In 2007, African American and Hispanic children were twice as likely to live in poverty as non-Hispanic White and Asian children.
- Having immigrant parents increases children's likelihood of living in poverty. An estimated 58% of children with immigrant parents live in a low-income family
- Children with single mothers were more than five times as likely to live in poverty as children living with married parents (42.9% ca. 8.5%)
- Single-mother headed households are also more prevalent among African American and Hispanic families contributing to ethnic disparities in poverty

What are the effects of child poverty?

- Psychological research has demonstrated that living in poverty has a wide range of negative effects on the physical and mental health and wellbeing of our nation's children.
- Poverty impacts children within their various contexts at home, in school, and in their neighborhoods and communities
- Poverty is linked with negative conditions such as substandard housing, homelessness, inadequate nutrition and food insecurity, inadequate child care, lack of access to health care, unsafe neighborhoods, and under resourced schools which adversely impact our nation's children

What are the effects of child poverty? (cont.)

- Poorer children and teens are also at greater risk for several negative outcomes such as poor academic achievement, school dropout, abuse and neglect, behavioral and socioemotional problems, physical health problems, and developmental delays
- These effects are compounded by the barriers children and their families encounter when trying to access physical and mental health care
- Economists estimate that child poverty costs the U.S. \$500 billion a year in lost productivity in the work force and spending on health care and the criminal justice system.

Poverty and academic achievement

- Poverty has a particularly adverse effect on the academic outcomes of children, especially during early childhood.
- Chronic stress associated with living in poverty has been shown to adversely affect children's concentration and memory which may impact their ability to learn
- School drop out rates are significantly higher for teens residing in poorer communities. In 2007, the dropout rate of students living in low-income families was about 10 times greater than the rate of their peers from high-income families (8.8% vs. 0.9%)
- The academic achievement gap for poorer youth is particularly pronounced for low-income African American and Hispanic children compared with their more affluent White peers
- Under resourced schools in poorer communities struggle to meet the learning needs of their students and aid them in fulfilling their potential
- Inadequate education contributes to the cycle of poverty by making it more difficult for low-income children to lift themselves and future generations out of poverty

Poverty and psychosocial outcomes

- Children living in poverty are at greater risk of behavioral and emotional problems
- Some behavioral problems may include impulsiveness, difficulty getting along with peers, aggression, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and conduct disorder.
- Poverty and economic hardship is particularly difficult for parents who may experience chronic stress, depression, marital distress and exhibit harsher parenting behaviors. These are all linked to poor social and emotional outcomes for children.
- Unsafe neighborhoods may expose low-income children to violence which can cause a number of psychosocial difficulties. Violence exposure can also predict future violent behavior in youth which places them at greater risk of injury and mortality and entry into the juvenile justice system

Poverty and Physical Health

- Children and teens living in poorer communities are at increased risk for a wide range of physical health problems
 - Low Birth Weight
 - Poor nutrition which is manifested in the following ways:
 - Inadequate food which can lead to food insecurity/hunger
 - Lack of access to healthy foods and areas for play or sports which can lead to childhood overweight or obesity

Poverty and Physical Health (cont.)

- Chronic conditions such as asthma, anemia, and pneumonia
- Risky behaviors such as smoking or engaging in early sexual activity
- Exposure to environmental contaminants, e.g., lead paint and toxic waste dumps
- Exposure to violence in their communities which can lead to trauma, injury, disability, and mortality

Poverty and Brain Development in Early Childhood

- Researchers have gathered new evidence on the importance of the first years of life for children's emotional and intellectual development. Unfortunately, millions of American children are poor during these crucial years. Almost one in four (24 percent) of America's children under age three lived in poverty in 1995. These 2.8 million poor children face a greater risk of impaired brain development due to their exposure to a number of risk factors associated with poverty
- Many poor young children are resilient and able to overcome tremendous obstacles but poverty poses serious threats to children's brain development. Recent advances in the study of brain development show a sensitive period when the brain is most able to respond to and grow from exposure to environmental stimulation. This window of optimal brain development is from the prenatal period to the first years of a child's life. While all children are potentially vulnerable to a number of risk factors which can impede brain development during this sensitive period, a disproportionate number of children in poverty are actually exposed to such risk factors...

.. National Center for Children in Poverty

Hunger



What is the prevalence of child hunger in America?

- In 2007, 36.2 million Americans (23.8 million adults and 12.4 million children) lived in food insecure households. Overall, 11.1% of households were food insecure
 - Food insecure means that at some point during the year, the household had limited access to an adequate supply of food due to lack of money or other resources

The prevalence of child hunger in America (cont.)

- In eight states and the District of Columbia, over 20 percent of the child population lives in food insecure households. Texas and Mississippi have the highest rates of children living in households without consistent access to food.
- Use of food stamps increased by 13% in 2009 to nearly 9.8 million households. This was led by Louisiana, Maine, & Kentucky

The prevalence of child hunger in America (cont.)

- About 20% of Americans utilize at least one of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) nutrition assistance programs each year.
- About 50% of infants born in the United States receive support for the Women, Infants & Children (WIC) program
- 55% of schoolchildren participated in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs in 2007. Of the meals served in 2008, 50% of lunches and 71% of breakfasts were free.

What are the effects of hunger and under-nutrition on child development?



Prenatally

- Maternal undernutrition during pregnancy increases the risk of negative birth outcomes, including premature birth, low birth weight, smaller head size, and lower brain weight
- Babies born prematurely are vulnerable to health problems and are at increased risk for developing learning problems when they reach school-age



In Infancy and early childhood

- The first three years of a child's life are a period of rapid brain development. Too little energy, protein, and nutrients during this sensitive period can lead to lasting deficits in cognitive, social, and emotional development
- Protein-energy malnutrition, iron deficiency anemia, iodine, zinc, and other vitamin deficiencies in early childhood can cause brain impairment.
- Failure to thrive, the failure to grow and reach major developmental milestones as the result of undernutrition, affects 5-10% of American children under the age of three
- Hunger reduces a child's motor skills, activity level, and motivation to explore the environment. Movement and exploration are important to cognitive development, and more active children elicit more stimulation and attention from their caregivers, which promotes social and emotional development.

In Childhood

- Families often work to keep their food-insecurity hidden, and some parents may feel shame or embarrassment that they are not able to feed their children adequately. Children may also feel stigmatized, isolated, ashamed, or embarrassed by their lack of food.
- A community sample that classified low-income children ages six to twelve as “hungry”, “at-risk for hunger”, or “not hungry” found that hungry children were significantly more likely to receive special education services, to have repeated a grade in school, and to have received mental health counseling than at-risk-for-hunger or not-hungry children
- In this same study, children exhibited 7 to 12 times as many symptoms of conduct disorder (such as fighting, blaming others or problems, having trouble with a teacher, not listening to rules, stealing) than their at-risk or not-hungry peers
- Among low-income children, those classified as “hungry” show increased anxious, irritable, aggressive, and oppositional behavior in comparison to peers
- Additionally, the multiple stressors associated with poverty result in significantly increased risk for developing psychiatric and functional problems

School-age children who experience severe hunger are at increased risk for the following negative outcomes:

- Homelessness
- Chronic Health Conditions
- Stressful life conditions
- Psychiatric distress
- Behavioral problems
- Internalizing behavior, including depression, anxiety, withdrawal, and poor self-esteem

The effects of undernutrition depend on the length and severity of the period of hunger and may be mediated by other factors

- Improved nutrition, increased environmental stimulation, emotional support, and secure attachment to parents/caregivers can compensate for early undernutrition
- Babies who receive enough nutrition while in the womb appear to show higher cognitive performance in later childhood
- The human brain is flexible and can recover from early deficits, but this also means that brain structures remain vulnerable to further negative experiences throughout childhood
- Breastfeeding, attentive caretaking, and attention to environmental factors, such as sleep cycles and noise, can also promote healthy development

Who are homeless children and youth in America?



- An estimated 2.3 to 3.5 million Americans experience homelessness at least once a year. Homelessness affects people of all ages, geographic areas, occupations, and ethnicities, but occurs disproportionately among people of color
- Access to permanent and adequate shelter is a basic human need; however, the ongoing economic downturn (composed of the foreclosure crisis, spiking unemployment, worsening poverty rates, and inadequate low-cost housing)
- A survey of school districts in fall 2008 reported increases in the number of homeless students in the classroom, largely due to the economic downturn and foreclosure crisis; this increase builds on previous increases in homeless students in 2006 and 2007.
- People experiencing homelessness are comprised of three groups; single adults, unaccompanied youth, and families with children

- Unaccompanied youth (sometimes referred to as runaway youth) may number between 575,000 to 1.6 million annually and typically range from ages 16 to 22. Family conflict is the primary cause of their homelessness with 46% having experienced abuse and an estimated 20-40% identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered (GLBT)
- Families with children comprise a third of the homeless population and are typically comprised of a single mother in her late twenties with two young children. It is estimated that 1 in 50 (1.5 million) of America's children fall within this category and that approximately 65,000 are below age 6

- African American (47%) and Native American (2%) children are disproportionately represented demographically among homeless children compared with White (38%) and Hispanic (13%) children
- Homeless single mothers often have histories of violent victimization with over one third having post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and over half experiencing major depression while homeless. An estimated 41 percent have developed dependency on alcohol and drugs and are often in poor physical health. Maternal depression and parental substance abuse has a series of negative outcomes for children.

What are the risk factors for homelessness in children and youth?

- Extreme poverty is the strongest predictor of homelessness for families. These families are often forced to choose between housing and other necessities for their survival. 11% of American children living in poverty are homeless
- Female-headed households (particularly by women with limited education and job skills) are also particularly vulnerable. The current economic climate has made the labor market even less hospitable as many of them do not have more than high school diploma or GED
- Teen parents are also particularly at risk of homelessness as they often lack the education and income of adults who become parents
- Lack of affordable housing is also a risk factor for homelessness, particularly for families who devote more than 50% of household income to paying rent or those who experience a foreclosure. Foreclosures affect vulnerable tenants as well as homeowners who are delinquent in their mortgage payments
- Substance abusing of physically violent parent and stepparents are the major drivers of homelessness in runaway youth, particularly for those who identify as GLBT

What are the outcomes of homelessness for children and youth?

- Homelessness has particularly adverse effects on children and youth including hunger, poor physical and mental health, and missed educational opportunities
- Homeless children lack stability in their lives with 97% having moved at least once on an annual basis, which leads to disruptions in schooling and negatively impacts academic achievement
- Schooling for homeless children is often interrupted and delayed, with homeless children twice as likely to have a learning disability, repeat a grade, or to be suspended from school
- Homelessness and hunger are closely intertwined. Homeless children are twice as likely to experience hunger as their non-homeless peers. Hunger has a series of negative effects on the physical, social, emotional and cognitive development of children
- A quarter of homeless children have witnessed violence and 22% have been separated from their families. Exposure to violence can cause a number of psychosocial difficulties for children both emotionally (depression, anxiety, withdrawal) and behaviorally (aggression, acting out)

What are the outcomes of homelessness for children and youth? (cont.)

- Half of school age children experience problems with depression and anxiety and one in five homeless preschoolers have emotional problems that require professional care
- Homelessness is linked to poor physical health for children including low birth weight, malnutrition, ear infections, exposure to environmental toxins, and chronic illness (e.g. asthma). Homeless children are also less likely to have adequate access to medical and dental care
- Unaccompanied youth are often more likely to grapple with mental health (depression, anxiety, and PTSD) and substance abuse problems
- Many runaway youth engage in sexually risky behaviors (sometimes for their own survival) which places them at risk of HIV, other STDs, and unintended pregnancies. Also, emerging research has shown that GLVT homeless youth are 7 times more likely to be victims of violent crime.

The Culture of Poverty

- Central premise – The poor remain poor because they are part of a unique culture with twisted, pathological values and practices.
- Material circumstances and hardships of poverty:
 - Low income
 - Few job prospects
 - Substandard living conditions

The Culture of Poverty

- Supportive Atmosphere
- Litigate code of conduct
 - Violence
 - Illegal behavior
 - Single parenthood
 - Generation to generation
 - Through childhood socialization

Anti-Culture of Poverty

- Structural economic inequities.
- Blame the victims.
- No evidence that inner city condition operate to culturing reproduce poverty over generation.
- Cultural demonetization of the poor.
- Is there a culture of poverty?
- How many cultural patterns does one find among the poor?
- What forms do they take?

Cultures or Non Main Stream Beliefs and Practices

Burger Barn Syndrome

Women who participate in a cultural orientation that legitimizes the use of welfare as a subsidy for stay-at-home single motherhood. This group is characterized by a relative sense of hopelessness about job prospects and little hope of love, and social inclusion promised by raising a child.

Cultures or Non Main Stream Beliefs and Practices

The Candy Store Syndrome

Welfare mothers involved in a pattern of narcissistic consumption that includes the illegal consumption of drugs, and a sexually promiscuous partying lifestyle. This pleasure seeking behavior is legitimized as a way to dull the pain of a bleak future with no hope of acquiring greater resources for sustaining life.

Cultures or Non Main Stream Beliefs and Practices

The System Screwed Me Syndrome

A culture configuration that rationalizes the use and abuse of welfare for those women who see the government like big corporations, a systems that cares nothing for the poor and therefore deserves neither respect or compliance. In short, work the system.

Social Emotional Development

- Estimates are between one-quarter and one-third of young children are perceived as not being ready to succeed in school. For a significant number of these children, concerns center around emotional development.
- Early brain research tells us that not only do early experiences relate to later cognitive development, but they seem to be especially related to children's emotional development and their ability to manage emotions and behaviors. This, in turn, is related to school readiness.

Social Emotional Development

- Children for whom early relationships have been inconsistent or harsh or who have been exposed to violence are particularly vulnerable to compromised emotional development and poor school performance.
- Practice wisdom, although not yet rigorous evaluation, suggests that more intensive family and child focused interventions explicitly designed to repair damaged relationships can help young children exposed to multiple risk factors.

Social Emotional Development

- Nurturing, caring and stimulating early childhood programs that include both family support and developmentally appropriate practices can help mitigate risks to development and promote school readiness.
- Early care and education experiences are often of poor quality, especially for infants and toddlers, yet this is just when the importance of nurturing language-enriched relationships are so vital.

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 school perpetuate classism. This includes destroying the inequities as well as abolishing such practices as tracking and ability grouping, segregational redistricting, and the privatization of public school.

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.

What Can We Do? (cont.)

- 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

What Can We Do? (cont.)

- 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

What Can We Do? (cont.)

- 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.