

**Experiences With Classism: A Look at Social Class in a Rural High School**

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### **Abstract**

The American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) National Model (2012) stated school counselors serve as advocates for equity in access and success in educational opportunities for all students; however, Lott (2002) suggested classism now affects more students than in previous generations. Most research has focused on college students and little research has addressed the experiences with classism for high school students. The researchers addressed this gap through an ethnographic qualitative study on experiences with classism of a rural high school in Illinois. The researchers concluded with implications for school counselors and future research on the area of classism in high schools.

*Keywords:* classism, social class, rural high school

## **Experiences With Classism: A Look at Social Class in a Rural High School**

Despite the high poverty rate of U.S. schoolchildren, there is little research on the experiences with classism in high schools. Between 2001 and 2004, the U.S. Census Bureau (2011) reported the percentage of chronically poor children in the U.S. increased from 35.6% to 44.9%. In 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated about 19.4% of the total school-aged population lives in poverty. Yet, many regard the U.S. as a “classless society” (Borrego, 2008; Spencer & Castano, 2007). Researchers have found the US has three distinct social classes: (a) lower, (b) middle, and (c) upper (Borrego, 2008; Duyme, 1988; McLaughlin, Costello, Leblanc, Sampson, & Kessler, 2012; Smith, Foley, & Chaney, 2008) each corresponding primarily with family income level (McLaughlin et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2008b).

Classism is one form of oppression that is commonplace in schools and is gaining interest (Langhout, Rosselli, & Feinstein, 2007). U.S. Census data suggested that classism affects a larger number of school-aged children than in years past (Lott, 2002). Much like other forms of oppression, classism is a type of discrimination (Langhout et al., 2007). Lott (2002) and Smith (2008) defined classism as a combination of stereotypes (i.e., beliefs) and prejudice (i.e., attitude) that results in discriminatory type behaviors such as ignoring or isolating a group based solely on perceived social class. Classism is typically directed at those of low social class/socioeconomic status (SES) also referred to as poor (Liu, 2011; Liu Soleck, Hopps, Dunston, & Pickett, 2004; Lott, 2002). Therefore, chronically poor children in schools may experience classism from their peers or school faculty and staff because of their low SES. School-aged children may hear and/or see classist messages in many different contexts in their day

such as discussions about family vacations or show and tell (Liu, 2011; Spencer & Castano, 2007). Family, friends, classmates, and the school environment might communicate directly or indirectly such classist messages to low SES students (Langhout et al., 2007; Liu, 2011).

Previous research has found a significant achievement gap exists between low and high SES students (Duyme, 1988; Langhout, Drake, & Rosselli, 2009; Langhout et al., 2007; Spencer & Castano, 2007; Walpole, 2003). Spencer and Castano (2007) concluded that classism has a negative impact on confidence and performance levels of low SES groups. Walpole (2003) found similar results to Spence and Castano (2007) such that low SES students are less likely to complete a college degree program than their high SES peers. Moreover, low SES students are less likely to have positive college experiences (Walpole, 2003), feel less connected to their university (Langhout et al., 2009), and receive less support from family and friends than their high SES peers (Langhout et al., 2009; Walpole, 2003). A lack of social support may have a negative impact on academic performance and outcomes (Walpole, 2003), which may increase university dropout rates due to a lack of belonging (Langhout et al., 2009; Langhout et al., 2007).

Previous research suggested classism has many negative influences on student development (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). Therefore, school counselors need to be aware of such classist type behaviors in the school and their effects. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model (2012) was developed to address achievement and success for all students through implementation of programs and services designed to mitigate the achievement gap. Addressing the achievement gap

for low SES students requires school counselors to work at three levels of advocacy set forth by Ratts, DeKruffy, and Chen-Hayes (2007): (a) student advocacy, (b) school/community advocacy, and (c) public arena level of advocacy. As Ratts et al. (2007) noted students of low SES and generational poverty may benefit from a school counselor's advocacy because students may become aware of options they did not know existed. Through preparation and advocacy, school counselors can have a major influence on closing the achievement gap (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). This study presents qualitative data on the experiences with classism for high school seniors in a rural high school in Illinois.

### **Research Question**

The researchers aimed to understand how students in a rural high school experience classism. Previous research has suggested that students who experience classism feel less connected to the school environment and subsequently might have a negative view of school (Langhout et al., 2009; Langhout et al., 2007). A lack of school belongingness is associated with low academic performance (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Gaenzle, Kim, Lin, & Na, 2012), might lead to school dropout (Langhout et al., 2009), and a limited opportunity for low SES students to succeed both in and out of school (Spencer & Castano, 2007; Walpole, 2003).

Our research question is as follows: how do high school students in a rural high school in Illinois experience classism and social class within the school environment? College students who experience classism because of their perceived social class tend to exhibit more negative effects of school belongingness and school connection than do students who do not experience such negative behaviors (Langhout et al., 2009;

Langhout et al., 2007). Our research question will examine the relationship with high school students and compare findings to previous research (see Langhout et al., 2009; Langhout et al., 2007) that suggested a negative relationship between college students experiencing classism and school belongingness.

### **Methods**

The purpose of this section is to describe the steps taken to ensure rigor and trustworthiness for this study. By explaining research methodology, the researchers create a framework of understanding the uniqueness of a group of students' experiences with classism in a rural high school in Illinois. Through the stories of students about how they experience classism and social class in a rural high school in Illinois, the researchers hope that school counselors may begin to conceptualize how classism and social class relate to their schools. Consequently, school counselors may then create programs and interventions specifically aimed at addressing the issues germane to their schools. Furthermore, the researchers believe this study will shed light on the social class culture of a specific school.

The researchers used a constructivist paradigm for conceptualizing this study. Rubin and Rubin (2012) noted that constructionism is concerned with understanding the unique perspectives of individuals who together as a group create a shared meaning of experiences. The use of this paradigm helped the researchers to effectively develop and answer the research question: how do high school students in a rural high school in Illinois experience classism and social class within the school environment?

## Research Design

The researchers used an ethnographic study to collect data, which is a qualitative methodology used to understand the experiences of individuals (Schutt, 2011). Schutt (2011) noted that ethnographers strive to understand the social world of a group of individuals. Moreover, the researchers used a consensus model of ethnography. The consensus model of ethnography is a systematic approach to data collection from various data sources such as participant observations, participant interviews, and other forms of documentation (Manning, 2009). Manning (2009) described the consensus model as an acceptance of symbolic interactionism principles, data based on observations, and the ethnographer serves as an outsider with information about the studied group. Symbolic interactionism is a theory of group interactions based on common understanding of symbols (Manning, 2009). Manning (2009) noted symbolic interactionism, "...produces cooperative behavior and symbolic understanding" (p. 759). The theory assumes the following principles, (a) individuals understand symbols based on meanings, (b) symbolic meaning are developed from social interactions, and (c) individuals interact with symbols based on their interpretation of the symbol's significance (Manning, 2009).

The researchers decided to use ethnography because they were interested in the experiences of participants within a rural school and wanted the participants to tell their stories, as the participants understood them. Through understanding the students' reality, the researchers could begin to examine the data for themes and understand how the participants make meaning of the messages and symbols conveyed throughout the school environment.

## **Researcher as Instrument**

The purpose of this study was to understand the cultural experiences of a group of students in a rural high school and the researchers had to remain reflexive throughout this process. Reflexivity is the process by which the researchers were continuous, adaptive, and flexible with their design (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Rubin and Rubin (2012) defined continuous as one's ability to redesign a study throughout the process while being adaptive allows one to address the unexpected that might arise in the data collection. In addition, they noted that flexibility is one's opportunity to "...explore new information and insights offered by your conversational partner and test new ideas as they emerge" (p. 42). It was the principal researcher's responsibility to collect data for this study. As a reflexive researcher, he met monthly with the other researchers as a team to discuss the data collection process and adjust for changes, check for research assumptions and biases, and to agree on emerging themes.

The principal and secondary researchers of the team had no previous experience with the studied site before conducting this study; however, the third researcher had counseling experience working within the school as a practicum student, but she did not have access to nor knowledge of the study's participants. The third author served as a transcriber and informant. She offered insights into the school's environment from her perspective.

## **Participants**

Rural Illinois High School (RIHS; the name of the school was changed to protect its identity and the identity of its students) is a grade nine through twelve high school located in a rural community in Illinois. RIHS is predominately Caucasian (about 56%)

with African American/Black composing the second largest racial/ethnic group (about 30%). Hispanics (about 8%) and Asians (about 4%) make up smaller racial/ethnic groups. Less than 1% of students at RIHS are Native American. RIHS has 4% of its students that are multiracial/ethnic. Of the various racial/ethnic groups that make up the RIHS student body, over half (about 52%) receive and/or are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

In an attempt to recruit participants for the study, the school counselor handed out flyers to prospective students. The criterion for participation in the study was advanced class status (i.e., juniors or seniors) because the researchers wanted to get the perspectives of students who had completed at least two years of high school. Fifteen students responded to the research flyers, but only 11 were eligible to participate due to class standing. Instead of recruiting more participants, the researchers determined 11 participants would adequately provide context to the subjective reality of students who experience classism and social class at RIHS.

Participating students consisted of eight females and three males (Mode = 18, age range 18-19 years). Four of the participants identified as Caucasian/White (36%), two identified as Hispanic/Latino/a (18%), two participants identified as African American/Black (18%), and three participants identified as Biracial/Mixed (27%). Biracial/Mixed students ranged from Hispanic/Latino/a and Caucasian to African American and Caucasian. Ten participants were at senior status and one at junior status. Participants identified as coming from only two social class backgrounds, low social class (36%) and middle social class (64%), but all participants were eligible for free or reduced rate lunches. Participants were not compensated for their time;

however, participants served as a reference point for all transcribed interviews, participant observations, and quotes used throughout this study.

## **Procedures**

The procedures used for this study included participant interviews and participant observations. Both elements offer a different perspective of classism and social class at RIHS. Interviews provide participants an opportunity to present their individual stories about experiences with classism and social class, while participant observations provide an opportunity to observe how social class is communicated verbally and nonverbally between peer groups and between faculty and students within the school.

***Participant observations.*** The principal researcher was responsible for collecting participant observation data. Participant observations allow the researchers to observe how peer groups, faculty, and students interact with each other in terms of perceived social class. These observations allow the principal researcher to observe how participants interact within social groups and between social groups. These observed interactions would offer an opportunity for the principal researcher to note the types of interactions and his perception of the interactions.

Prior to the participant observations, the principal researcher developed a checklist of potential classist messages to understand better about the issues of classism and social class within the environment of RIHS. After the first observation, the principal researcher reviewed his observation notes, disregarded the checklist, and began to focus on the interactions between groups. This allowed the principal researcher greater flexibility to observe social interactions.

From January 2014 to May 2014, the principal researcher conducted participant observation research at RIHS before school, during lunch, and after school. The principal researcher conducted participant observations in the school's cafeteria or in the main hallway outside of the principal's office. The principal researcher did not interact with participants during observations and tried to remain as unobtrusive as possible. To appear unobtrusive, the principal researcher would make observations from an area farthest from students or the principal researcher would observe next to familiar adults in the school such as teachers, administration, counselors, or school security. The principal researcher did complete field notes during observations, but tried to make notes quickly and out of sight of the students. The attempt at concealing field notes from students was to limit the sense of being recorded and to encourage natural behaviors.

***Participant interviews.*** The principal researcher was responsible for conducting individual interviews to ensure continuity among participants. For interviews, the principal researcher used semi-structured interviews to represent each student's unique experiences with classism. Semi-structured interviews relate to the study's research question because it allows the participant to offer insights that might be overlooked by the interviewer. Moreover, a semi-structured interview offered a framework for the interviews without controlling the flow of the conversation. The semi-structured interview method provided uniqueness and insight into the world of classism from high school students' perspectives.

Prior to the interviews, the principal researcher developed a list of four question topics to help guide the interviews to understand better about the issues of classism and

social class at RIHS. The research team then discussed the topics, developed appropriate follow up questions for each topic, and structured the questions in a logical order. The principal researcher presented participants with a copy of the semi-structured interview guide, talked with participants about the structure of the guide, and made adjustments as necessary before the interviews began. See the Appendix for a copy of the interview guide.

In March 2014 and April 2014, the researchers conducted 11 semi-structured interviews. The principal researcher completed each semi-structured interview during school hours, typically during the participants' study hall hour. He conducted all interviews in the counseling office. During all of the interviews, the principal researcher individually debriefed each participant about the study and each agreed to participate. At that time, participants had the opportunity to agree to be audiotaped and quoted for the purposes of this study. All 11 participants agreed to be audiotaped and quoted.

### **Data Analysis**

Ethnographic data analysis is a multiple step approach. After the principal researcher collected all participant observations and participant interview data, the researchers transcribed all observation notes and interviews to aid in the data analysis. The researchers used a framework analysis for analyzing the collected data. The framework analysis for this study used five stages, (a) data immersion, (b) identification of theoretical framework for conceptualizing data themes, (c) charted emerging themes, (d) summarized data within the identified theoretical framework, and (e) synthesized data by interpreting themes (Ward, Furber, Tierney, & Swallow, 2013). All the researchers immersed themselves in the data through data transcription. The

researchers used the social class worldview model (SCWM) developed by Liu et al., (2004) as the theoretical framework for conceptualizing data themes. The principal researcher took the lead on identifying and charting emerging themes through the NVIVO software package.

From April 2014 to June 2014, the researchers met four times and discussed emerging themes, agreed on the emerging themes, summarized the data within the SCWM, and interpreted the themes to ensure consistency and agreement of the themes and results. The principal researcher who conducted all participant observations and interviews identified several ways that his presence might have influenced the data.

### **Power, Inequality, and Biases**

Power, inequality, and biases are all threats to an accurate representation of the subjective reality of participants. The principal researcher has several unique privileges and power that, if left unchecked, might influence the type of data that was able to be collected. The following sections will discuss the potential influence of each of the aforementioned threats to obtaining an accurate representation of the subjective reality of the study's participants.

#### **Power**

Power can come in the form of gender power, social class power, race power, and age power (Johnson, 2006). As a heterosexual, white male, the principal researcher is automatically given a certain amount of power in the US mainstream culture. Given that he is also a doctoral student, several of the study's participants might assume a certain level of social class standing, which might add to obtained power. This

obtained power might have made it difficult for participants to feel connected with and trusting of the principal researcher.

Ethnic power may have made the principal researcher appear as an authority figure to the participants, which may have reduced the authenticity of their responses. The principal researcher's gender power might have also attributed to his perception as an authority figure. Moreover, perceived social class, which might have ranged from middle class to upper class, might had a larger influence on responses than the principal researcher's race or gender power. His perceived social class could have potentially influenced how much detail students were willing to share about their personal experiences with social class and classism. This sense of holding back information might not have clearly painted the experiences of classism at RIHS accurately. A censored version of the subjective reality of participants might perpetuate inequalities at RIHS.

### **Inequality**

Similar to power, inequality can take many forms. Power is given to those of privilege while inequality is the result for those who lack privilege (Johnson, 2006). The principal researcher's perceived social class power might have produced a censored version of the subjective reality of participants. This censored version might not allow the researchers to record the actual experiences of the students and might influence the coding of the interviews and observations because it influences how the researchers view and report about classism at RIHS.

A disproportionate number of social class representations in this project might lead to an over- or under-representation of classist type issues. An over- or under-

representation of classism will subsequently influence how materials are analyzed and reported in this study. How material is observed, analyzed, and reported relates directly with the principal researcher's personal biases about the issues of social class and classism.

### **Biases**

As a former elementary school counselor, the principal researcher witnessed several displays of classism in his former school. Such displays of classism came primarily from teachers directed towards low social class students. Entering this project, the principal researcher was biased in how he thought about classists' messages are being communicated by teachers. Furthermore, he was aware of a bias that classism could only be directed at students of low social class.

In an attempt to address such biases, the researchers made sure to write an interview guide to incorporate other members of the school environment (i.e., administration, staff, and peers). By asking questions that address all members of the school environment, the principal researcher would reduce the potential to be leading and biased during questioning of students about their experiences with teachers. To address bias that classism is only directed at low social class students, the principal researcher made an attempt to interview different social classes instead of just low social class.

Although, the researchers could not control for all issues of power, inequality, and biases, they made an effort to address the issues as they become aware of them. The researchers are aware that power, inequality, and biases were present during the

data collection. They will address those issues in the following sections when necessary.

## **Results**

### **Emerging Themes**

When reviewing the data from the interviews and participant observations, multiple themes emerged. Although the data offered multiple themes, for the purposes of this study the researchers will focus only on the four most common themes (a) identity, (b) status symbols, (c) seeking acceptance, and (d) isolation. The researchers decided to focus only on these emerging themes because they seemed to arise most often throughout the interviews and observations. These four emerging themes tend to capture how the participants think about and feel towards social class and classism at RIHS.

During the interviews, the principal researcher asked participants four broad questions (see Appendix) trying (a) to gain an understanding of their knowledge about classism, (b) to understand their experiences with classism, (c) to understand their connection with the school environment, and (d) to gather information about their attitude related to the school environment based on their experiences with social class and classism. At the beginning of the project, the researchers were looking for examples of classism separate from social class, but it became very apparent from participant responses that social class was important. For the remainder of this article, the researchers adopted the term *clique*, which the participants themselves associated as social classes within RIHS, when referring to and identifying with a social class.

## Identity

The identification of a clique as an important sense of identity relates to the SCWM's referent group. According to the SCWM (Liu et al., 2004), one's referent group are individuals "...to whom the person is likely to pay attention when integrating social class socialization messages and to whom they may want to "be similar" (p. 104). The important people in their clique or lack of a clique shaped how these participants saw themselves. While half of the participants suggested that RIHS is not an overly cliquish school, it is interesting that all 11 of the participants identified themselves in terms of their clique. For example, when James, an African American male was asked about feeling connected with the people at school, he stated, "I feel connected with people but to a limit like I do, I'm a three – I was a three sport athlete, now I'm just a two sport athlete." It seemed he was quick to relate his identity to what he does and to his clique. Sil, a Latina, added, "I'm in the band which is a special group onto its self. We really don't interact outside of it." Michelle, a Caucasian female, echoed Sil's claims, "...the group I choose to hang out with is primarily the band and 'Speechies' (i.e., students involved in the RIHS speech team) of the school." These participants were quick to identify themselves based on their clique and made it seem the clique was very important to them for social reasons. Identity seemed to be important to them because it gave them a sense of belonging to others and the school environment.

Other participants identified themselves as outsiders because they did not easily identify with any one particular clique. Erin, a bi-racial female identifying as African American, said about her clique, "My clique right now is very diverse, like I don't even know how to explain it – it's just there's-there's just different people from different

cliques....so everyone that doesn't fit with their people come to our group and it makes this weird diverse group." It seemed as if Erin identified her group as outsiders because they do not connect or fit with any particular clique. An outsider can also be one that is a loner, as Beatrice, a bi-racial female identifying as Latina, accounted, "...I don't know I'm just kind of like almost...almost like I guess you'd say a loner....I'd say I wouldn't want to hang out with these people just because that's not my type..."

### **Status Symbols**

Status symbols were discussed frequently and observed often. Status symbols were typically associated with money. Status symbols relate directly to the SCWM's property relationships. Participants described each of these status symbols as signs of power and wealth. As Beatrice indicated when talking about rich kids, "...it's really obvious, like, they all have money in common and they all wear certain brands....like Hollister, um, Abercrombie and Fitch or like anything designer." According to the SCWM (Liu et al., 2004), people will want to shop at businesses (i.e., obtain products emblematic of certain brands) that help to address interpersonal needs. This might cause undue stress on families that are unable to meet the price demands of such high priced luxury items. This might lead to those students feeling disconnected from peers, as James indicated by saying, "...unless you really try to fit in with people like the guys that have more money, like, you don't really fit in because like they have cars and like they can drive anywhere and they're not worried about gas."

It appears clothes and cars are a few of the main status symbols at RIHS. The principal researcher noticed the first day at RIHS that even cars, as a status symbol, have differences, "in the parking lot, there appeared to be a separation of brands and

external wear between the locations of cars. The cars closest to the school appeared newer while the cars farthest from the school appeared older with years of wear on the exterior.”

The principal researcher observed students displaying electronic devices all throughout the school building. The most popular device, and one that seemed to be a prized possession for many, was the iPhone. Before school, during lunch, and after school, those with an iPhone would appear to proudly display it close to their chests.

In addition to electronic devices, another seemingly status symbol was coffee in either a white Starbucks cup or a traveler’s mug. Although the electronic devices seemed to be displayed mostly by students, coffee was a proud status symbol for school faculty, staff, and students alike. For example, the principal researcher observed as the school counselor was going to show him to an identified interview room, “as we get ready to leave her office, she grabs a large white cup branding the Starbucks logo and carries it high and tight to her chest.”

Another status symbol that emerged from the data was the idea of cliques as status symbols (i.e., your “identity” becomes a “status symbol”). It became apparent that those in honors classes were considered a status symbol. Candice, a Caucasian female, noted the people in her group (“Speechies”), “...are like in honors classes so like top ten so I guess we’re also smart....I guess, a lot of people want to be like hanging out with them, but then they’re also like mean.” Michelle, a Caucasian female, clarified that although the ‘Speechies’ might be one of the top groups in the school not everyone likes them, “...it really depends who you talk to. The scholar bowl kids don’t really like either (slight giggle)....They prefer band kids over speech kids, but ...I think

it's because the band and speech kids make up about 10% of the school, if everyone votes for that nominee or...[a] thing to go on then usually it happens....I'm just not sure that there's a lot we really use it for. It's just kind of like a 'hold it over your head' type of power."

### **Seeking Acceptance**

Identity and status symbols relate directly to how each of these students talked about wanting to be accepted. The sense of seeking acceptance relates to the SCWM's framework component of consciousness, attitudes, and salience. According to the SCWM (Liu et al., 2004), one's consciousness, attitudes, and salience relates to one's awareness of belonging to a social class, one's understanding (i.e., feelings, beliefs, and values) about her/his perceived social class, and the meaning one places on her/his social class. The participants seem to be aware of the salience of their identity and knowing they long to be accepted, but might not because of status symbols. In seeking acceptance from others, Erin stated, "I can change how I look and how I dress and it's fine." In addition, James clarified his need for acceptance by stating, "I think like people should be more...friendly or like have different attitudes towards like people like me who have less money cause like, I don't know, I don't want to feel different."

Clair, a Caucasian female, claimed "I feel like you know, if you're not near the center of the group, you're not actively invited..." Jordyn, an African American female, tried to rationalize the behaviors of others by stating, "...I guess they feel like when there's other people around they just don't want to say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing so they just kind of stay to themselves, but when it's just like us they're a totally different person....like trying to fit in make sure you like don't do the same-or do the

wrong thing.” Both these students noted the pressures of being accepted and doing what is right to “fit in” with their cliques or with other groups.

The commonality of participants seeking acceptance was they simply wanted people to like the participant for who he or she is as a person. They seem to understand the significance of status symbols, but as James stated, “I don’t want to have it [status symbols] just to impress somebody.”

### **Isolation**

Lacking status symbols and the presence of others with status symbols leaves an individual seeking acceptance. If one does not feel accepted, he or she might experience a sense of isolation. This sense of feeling isolated from others relates to the behavior component of the SCWM. According to the SCWM (Liu et al., 2004), behaviors are significant to one’s environmental “norms.” Their sense of perceived social class might manifest its self in behaviors of isolation from the school environment. According to Bryan et al. (2012), these students might experience a weak connection with peers because of the gap in status symbols. In addition, McLaughlin et al.’s (2012) findings may suggest those student could be at greater risk for developing negative mental health issues.

In this study, the data suggested that isolation could come in many forms: (a) feeling less than because of isolation, (b) feeling isolated from peers, (c) feeling isolated from their clique, (d) feeling isolated from the school environment, or (e) feeling isolated from their teachers. As Beatrice noted about her experiences, “I’ve just never been the really popular type and I used to be...poor, so I did not have the money for all this

clothes and stuff, and I don't think they necessarily exclude you, but because you don't look like they do, it-they don't just automatically associate with you."

Sil, much like Beatrice, stated similar feelings, "I...got really sensitive to the feeling of not being a part of or being different than everyone else. Anytime someone said anything negative to me I started wondering if they saw me as something or in a negative light..." Beatrice seemed to externalize the sense of feeling isolated while Sil internalized the isolation. They both described themselves as loners. The two, although with a different locus of control, might display similar behaviors.

### **Interpretations**

The emerging themes of this study provide information about the unique experiences of the participants. The themes offered insight into potential areas of classism at RIHS. These interpretations attempted to explain classism at RIHS. From the data, there appeared to be three major results for this study: (a) separation of environments, (b) relationships, and (c) standard of tolerance.

### **Separation of Environments**

The principal researcher completed several observations during lunch in order to see how students interacted with each other. The researchers quickly learned that there are two distinct lunchtime environments. In going from the cafeteria to the hallway, "I enter the hallway back into what seems to be an opposite world from what I just observed in the cafeteria. The hallway, although full of tables and students, seems to be quieter and calmer than the cafeteria."

Although the cafeteria is a little more closed off than the hallway tables, the hallway tables are still closed off by a set of double storm doors from the classrooms.

The location might explain the volume, but the researchers believe there is more to the environment. For starters, the cafeteria serves lunch that is primarily consumed by those on free or reduced rate lunches while the hallway offers meals for purchase from local businesses. There is a seemingly large divide between the racial makeup of the patrons. “The makeup of the hallway seems to be pretty much Caucasian, which is different than the cafeteria. The cafeteria seems to be made up mostly of African Americans and Latinos/Latinas.”

It seems the cafeteria door is a barrier between the environments with little mixing. In other words, the hallway students do not often come into the cafeteria and vice-versa. It seemed the cliques, as Beatrice claimed, “I don’t think they necessarily exclude you, but because you don’t look like they do, it-they don’t just automatically associate with you.” Clair agreed with Beatrice’s claim, “...you know at lunch you want to sit with the people that you’re closest to.” Candice did mention her envy of popular kids as a sophomore she, “...would like look at them and see them laughing and I was like, ‘Oh, I wish I was joining their table ‘cause they seem like a really awesome group of people.” This limited interaction between cliques might further perpetuate the lifestyle of the individuals.

Samantha, a Caucasian female, stated, “...they’re like honestly like a separation I think of the different races a little bit, you know like even we sit in like different sections of the cafeteria.” Although there did not seem to be any racial tension between the groups, there did seem to be some sense of status tension or fear. For example, it seems status symbols such as iPhones and bottled water are prominently displayed in the hallway, but as the hallway students “...become mixed with students of the cafeteria

the once proud symbols are quickly dropped to their sides as if denouncing their membership. The former hallway members seem to be moving quicker to their lockers and classrooms than do former cafeteria members.”

### **Relationships**

Numerous times in the interviews and observations, participants consistently talked about seeking acceptance and feeling isolated when they are not accepted. Beatrice and Sil both highlighted the desire for acceptance and the result of isolation when they did not feel accepted. Understanding the significance of relationships at RIHS helps to understand why students seek acceptance and feel isolated when rejected.

When talking about experiences with others, James noted he used to have a car (status symbol), but “now I don’t have that privilege any more. I feel like I have less friends and so I feel like definitely that is...umm, that I’ve been treated differently.” He felt isolated from his friends because he was seeking acceptance and was rejected because he no longer had what something they needed. This sense of relationships was common in observations, primarily in the hallway during lunch. “As I walk down the hallway, I see iPhones lining the tables with a few students wearing white headphones as if they are listening music.” It seemed as if the more status symbols one had or one displayed, the more likely he or she is going to be accepted and feel less isolated. James summarized the importance of relationships, “...like most of the time by how they are dressed because that’s the first thing someone sees, and like, or the way they communicate or the things they do...”

Candice detailed the importance of relationships, “because she was friends with them, I became friends with them and then that expanded from there...so I made those friends through her I guess.” As mentioned in the seeking acceptance, the closer you are to the center of the clique the more likely you are to be accepted by them. If you know someone that is close to the center of the clique then you are more likely to become a part of the clique through some type of association. Samantha brought the relationship notion into the context of social class by stating, “um, you know if you’re from a higher class you’re going to treat somebody, I guess, with more respect and if you’re from a lower class some people treat you with less respect.” How students at RIHS view other students depends on their perceptions and relationships with the student. The more influence, power, and connections one has the easier and better the relationship might be.

### **Standard of Tolerance**

One of the major contributors to the sense of tolerance of behaviors appears to be set by teachers. Several times during the interviews, participants indicated that students likely would tolerate other student behaviors as the teacher sees fit. For example, Beatrice recounts how a teacher reacted when a student took something from her without asking, “It’s not so much that he’s a bully or anything, it’s just obvious and like annoying that he can just do whatever he wants and my teacher didn’t really say anything. She knew about them drinking my water last time and she was like, well say something...” Beatrice described the student as being in the highest clique in school, which led the researchers to believe the student behavior was tolerated because of his perceived status.

Sil described a similar situation to Beatrice about her experience with her section leader (a fellow student) who wants to promote his friends over her. She described her interaction with her teacher as, "I've talked to him some stuff about it after that one time and I've gotten the picture he won't really listen to me, from what he said it feels like he can't really do much for me so I don't see the point in talking to him." In both instances, the subtle messages communicated by the teachers indicated the tolerance of inappropriate and/or hurtful behaviors.

James summarized how teachers set the standard of tolerance by describing his observation in a classroom. He said, "...this one class where he had two kids from [local town] but it just seems like they could just do whatever they want. Like they could throw things in class, they could throw things at the teacher and he'd just be like 'Hey, get to work' or, but it seems like we can't do anything like that. Like he's more strict with us, but if they were-wanted to do something it's just like a joke. It's just like hehe...haha."

Clair, an honors student, disagreed with the following examples by noting, "...but, you know, honors teachers they're like your friends....so I feel like, you know, as far as teachers go they'll give you back what the class gives them....but when you're in a normal kind of class, like, because they have to fight with that class every single step of the way you can't really get that close relationship with a teacher unless you go up and, you know, show them that you're interested." Candice, also an honors student, resonated with Clair's statement, "...yeah that like initial relationship is-is always good 'cause I'm...pretty much a good student. I do my work, participate in class..."

Students in honor classes appear to be the students who set the standards that teachers tolerate both academically and behaviorally. It would appear at RIHS that one

of the criteria for tolerated behaviors among teachers are status symbols. In other words, teachers believe that honors students can be trusted more than non-honors students can so they are able to give more flexibility with the types of behaviors they tolerate. This standard of tolerance, or perhaps a double standard of tolerance, might appear unfair and frustrating to those who do not meet the standard.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Classism in education has gained interest in literature over the last decade (Langhout et al., 2009). Research on the topic has focused on the experiences of college students. Langhout et al. suggested that students who experience classism in college are less likely to feel connected with their institution; however, few studies have explored the individual experiences with classism. Furthermore, little research has looked at the experiences with classism in high school populations.

The researchers explored and attempted to understand more about the experiences with classism for high school seniors in a rural high school in Illinois. The data from this study suggested that the school climate at RIHS is a complex and intricate environment. In other words, there are many ways that students feel disconnected from peers and faculty. The perceptions and behaviors perpetuated by the studied group seem to be connected with the reference groups that they believe most accurately represents them. For those students who reported being in cliques that are directly connected with academics they reported being treated positively by faculty and peers. On the other hand, those students that reported being in cliques that are not connected with academics reported being isolated and having a greater likelihood of negative interactions with faculty and peers.

In addition to teachers' standards of tolerance of behaviors, the students noted the significance of cliques as status symbols. The main clique that continued to come up in interviews was the "Speechies" who appeared to be an exclusive group that was the envy of half of the interviewed students. Of the students who were not a part of the "Speechies", they appeared to have an identity that focused on their strengths, but noted the importance of certain status symbols as a way to be accepted by those in the "in-crowd." It is not clear who set the standard for such status symbols, but students seemed to notice quickly other students who met the standards. It would appear the interviewed students knew the nuances of status and its importance in seeking acceptance from peers. Although not all participating students were concerned with status, as Pablo, an Hispanic male, noted, "I am that kind of person that I'm not gonna be always in that one particular group. I'm always...everywhere around saying hi to everyone, being friends with this group, or...being friends with that group."

### **Limitations and Future Considerations**

One major limitation of this study was the timing of the study. We conducted the study during the second half of the school semester, which was full of standardized testing, prom, and graduation ceremonies. Future research such consider if these factors play a role in student experiences. Furthermore, future research should consider conducting a yearlong analysis to see how experiences might have changed over the course of the academic year. Another limitation of this study was the online access. In other words, the researchers did not look at nor have access to online messages via social media that might have been communicated by the school. With the growing interest and use of social media for schools to communicate with students, future

research should consider completing an online ethnography as a supplemental method. Finally, future research should look at experiences of classism in urban schools to note that differences that might exist between locations. In other words, the messages about social class and classism might be different based on the needs of urban education.

### **Implications for School Counselors**

In addition to focusing on the domains of students' academic, career, and personal/social success, the ASCA National Model incorporates the themes of leadership, advocacy, systemic change, and collaboration (ASCA, 2012). By utilizing these skills, school counselors play a critical role in closing achievement, opportunity, and attainment gaps (Dahir & Stone, 2009; Martin & House, 2002). Although all four of these themes are essential and intertwined for effective school counseling practice, the following implications will focus on how school counselors can use the skill of advocacy for students on micro- and macro-levels.

In an effort to eliminate issues of social class and classism on the achievement gap and in the school environment, school counselors can use advocacy on three different levels: (a) student advocacy, (b) school/community advocacy, and (c) public arena advocacy (Ratts et al., 2007). As Ratts et al. noted, "simply noticing numbers of students dealing with similar issues can provide school counselors with leverage to impact the school environment for positive change" (p. 93). Once school counselors become aware of the issues of social class and classism within their school then they can begin to make changes to address the environment.

Ratts et al. (2007) defined student advocacy as advocacy with the student and on her or his behalf. On the student advocacy level, school counselors can work directly

with the student to “...see beyond the limited horizon they have grown up with...” (p. 92). Some students who experience classism might feel a lack of social support and consequently might feel hopeless about the future. As social justice advocates at RIHS working on the student advocacy level, school counselors may work with a student to help her or him recognize support and advocate for the student to help address the issue of isolation. This is an example of advocacy that will directly benefit one student; however, school counselors do not only advocate on a student-by-student basis. School counselors can also advocate at the school/community level.

The school/community advocacy level is when school counselors work individually or collaboratively with a team to systematically change the environmental barriers that might impede student success (Ratts et al., 2007). Based upon some of the data gathered in this study, it would appear that several of the interviewed students feel there is an environmental barrier that impedes their social success. As social justice advocates at RIHS working on the school/community level, school counselors could decide to present data to faculty and administration about the social isolation of students. Through analyzing the data, school counselors can advocate to reduce social barriers that limit interactions. In other words, at RIHS the school counselors could conduct an in-service training for faculty and staff focused on understanding the social and emotional needs of low SES and poverty students (Ratts et al., 2007). If the issue is not resolved, school counselors should consider the public arena level.

Public arena advocacy typically comes from a school counselor's work within the other advocacy areas (i.e., student level and school/community level) (Ratts et al., 2007). Ratts et al. noted that the public arena could consist of educating school board

members about how combating poverty can help align the school board with the school counselor's mission to reduce social class and classism issues. School counselors "recruiting school board and other community members to mentor economically disadvantaged students is yet another way of..." (Ratts et al., 2007, p. 93) can address issues of social class and classism at the macro-level.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion we suggest that school counselors should be aware of the culture of social class that exists among students. The culture can be perpetuated by the school environment or by the students. The culture might manifest its self in interactions that leave some students feeling isolated and less than their peers. These interactions might put undue stress on the student and potential financial strain on the family. Furthermore, such interactions might use power and privilege over peers in a way that might belittle or demean others.

School counselors, faculty, and staff should also be aware of the types of verbal and non-verbal messages they send to students. Such messages might set the standard for tolerance of certain behaviors and interactions that might be unfair or one-sided. School faculty and staff might perpetuate an environment that is unwelcoming to lower social class or SES students. Students that feel less connected to the school or feel a lack of belonging might have less positive interactions in school and feel isolated from school faculty, staff, and/or peers (Bryan et al., 2012). School counselors specifically should be aware of and design their school counseling program and curriculum around ways that create a positive, supportive learning environment; so that **all** students have an opportunity to achieve at the highest possible levels.

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*Appendix*  
Interview Guide

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**Study: Experiences with Classism**

*Experiences with Classism Background:*

- Tell me what you know about classism.
  - ❖ Have you experienced such behaviors at this school?
    - ✓ Have you experienced such behaviors at your previous school?
  - ❖ Where in school do you experience such behaviors?
  - ❖ When do you experience such behaviors?
  - ❖ Who in your school engages in such behaviors?
- Have you ever told anyone (i.e., inside or outside of school) about such behaviors?
  - ❖ If inside school, how did the person you told handle the behaviors?
    - ✓ What was the result?
  - ❖ If outside school, how did the person you told handle the behaviors?
    - ✓ What was the result?
  - ❖ What have you done to deal with such behaviors?

*School environment:*

- Tell me about your school environment.
    - ❖ Do you feel connected to teachers, administration, counselors, and staff?
      - ✓ How do your experiences relate to this feeling of connection?
    - ❖ Do you feel connected to peers and classmates?
      - ✓ How do your experiences relate to this feeling of connection?
    - ❖ Do you feel connected to the overall school environment?
      - ✓ How do your behaviors relate to this feeling of connection?
- Tell me about your attitude about school?

### **Biographical Statements**

Zachary Pietrantonio is a former elementary school counselor and currently a third year doctoral candidate at Southern Illinois University. As a school counselor, he has worked with ethnically diverse and economically disadvantaged students in rural and urban schools in Kansas. Zachary's interest in school counseling is related to multicultural self-efficacy development and social justice advocacy.

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