

Late to Class: Social Class and Schooling in the New Economy

by Jane Van Galen

Nowhere is there a more intense silence about the realities of class differences than in educational settings.

—bell hooks

What does it mean to speak of social class in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century? How can formal schooling level playing fields in a rapidly changing economic landscape where the social gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” is ever widening?

It is relatively rare to ask such questions about the relationships between social class and education in the United States, in large measure because Americans have often not known how to think about social class. The deep American faith in education's promise of opportunity represents the contradictions that characterize American beliefs about opportunity and constraint. On the one hand, we believe that school can enable all motivated young people to attain the American dream of self-directed success. On the other hand, we tend to avoid questioning why so many hard-working families have found success elusive in the first place. As we work to prepare students for a new and as-yet unpredictable global economy, it is also time for a renewed interest in how social class shapes the education of young people.

Education's promise of opportunity does contain a kernel of truth. For several generations in the twentieth century, most parents performed manual labor to enable their children to aspire to *more*, and at the same historical moment the economy was creating more white-collar jobs attainable only through educational credentials (Goldin 1998). During this time, many students who did less well in school could still find high-wage jobs in industries and in trades.

In today's economy, however, poor and working-class parents are more likely to work multiple low-wage service-sector jobs, and many now

find themselves unable to navigate the ever-rising expectations of an increasingly competitive educational system. At a time when many families struggle to balance multiple jobs and parenting, doing well in school is more important than ever: wages have stagnated for those with only a high school education (Day and Newberger 2002), while intense competition among escalating numbers of applicants has transformed the ground rules of college admissions (Golden 2006; *Princeton Review* n.d.).

In this new economy, schools must do much more than promise students that hard work will be rewarded: they must provide the knowledge, support, advocacy, and access that will be needed as more students from marginalized groups aspire to higher educational attainment. In short, educators would be well served by understanding more about how social class shapes educational access, aspiration, and achievement.

Background: Understanding Social Class in New Economic Times

Social class is about not just income (as often suggested in the popular press) but also the degree of one's personal power and the extent to which one's work creates dignity and respect (Zweig 2000). According to Zweig, 62 percent of the workforce is working class, exercising little control over working conditions or other workers.

Yet beyond hierarchies of income, power, and status, recent research on class also has also revealed ways in which class is "implicit in everyday social processes and interactions," including classroom life (Reay 2005, p. 912). Sayer (2005, p. 1) elaborates:

Class matters to us not only because of differences in material wealth and economic security, but also because it affects our access to things, relationships, experiences, and practices which we have reason to value, and hence our chances of living a fulfilling life. . . . Condescension, deference, shame, guilt, envy, resentment, arrogance, contempt, fear and mistrust, or simply mutual incomprehension and avoidance typify relations between people of different classes.



Diane Reay (2005, p. 924) adds: “[C]lass is deeply embedded in everyday interactions, in institutional processes, in struggles over identity, validity, self-worth and integrity even when it is not acknowledged.” What may be most insidious, however, is that within our culture’s unquestioning trust in the power of individuals to make their own way in the American economy, young people are likely to interpret their parents’ and their personal struggles in a shifting economy as evidence of their relative worth and ability. In the complex process of becoming educated within social contexts of limited resources, public silence regarding class issues, complex family dynamics, and peer exclusion, some children come to believe very early that they deserve relatively little recognition or status (Jones 2006b).

Yet aspiring to “more” may be essential for survival in the new economy. The most rapid job growth is not among high-tech, high-wage sectors of the economy, but rather among low-wage service-sector jobs, few of which require high levels of education or skill and few of which pay wages sufficient to support a family (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2000). Recent volatility in technology sectors and the stock market, outsourcing, and the rise of contract work have even highly educated workers experiencing an unprecedented sense of economic vulnerability (Ehrenreich 1989, 2005; Berhnhardt et al. 2001; Perucci and Wysong 1999). As Reay (2006, p. 290) has observed, “[C]lass is . . . everywhere and nowhere, denied yet continually enacted.”

The denial of class—and the need to teach more systematically about it—is fueled at least in part by media misrepresentations of social and economic stratification. To many politicians and reporters, the “middle class” includes everyone independent of public assistance or trust funds, even if families vary widely in educational backgrounds, economic security, and personal power. Further, popular representations of poverty and privilege stereotypically conflate race with class (hooks 2000; Jones 2006a; Moss 2003), yet most children in struggling homes in the United States are white. As Kirby Moss has observed, poor whites are rarely mentioned in public discourse about opportunity and the constraints upon it.

How then might schools prepare young people for adult lives in such economic and social conditions? Current reform efforts focus almost entirely on raising academic achievement, yet troubling evidence suggests that higher test scores alone won’t open opportunities for young people from poor and working-class backgrounds. Even after achievement gaps have narrowed, attainment gaps remain: high-achieving students whose parents did not complete college remain much less likely than the children of college-educated parents to enroll in four-year colleges after high school (Choy 2001, 2002; NCES 2005); once there, they are nearly twice as likely to leave college without completing a degree (Choy 2001, 2002; NCES 2005).

Even those who succeed in school face uncertainty. Although they have stayed in school longer, the odds of “moving up” to jobs that pay more than one’s parents’ have declined in the past thirty years (Aaronson and Mazumder 2005). In spite of doing well enough in school to attain good jobs, middle-income families have experienced increasingly sharp declines in household income in the past decade (Hertz 2006). Young people in Canada and many northern European countries have better chances of upward mobility from family origins than do young people in the United States (Hertz 2006). Clearly, the relationships between education and adult success are complex.

Yet current school reform invariably holds teachers accountable for equalizing opportunity for all (Aronowitz 2003, p. 25), even as the economy produces jobs that generate ever-widening gaps in salary, security, and opportunity. This essay will outline several ways in which educators might better prepare young people of all backgrounds to understand, enter, and eventually act upon the changing economic landscape.

Becoming Educated within the Shifting Landscape of Class

How can young people make sense of the purposes of schooling in volatile economic times? Specifically, how can the children of parents on the margins of the new economy make sense of promises that they can succeed in life through hard work while they watch their hard-working parents struggle?

This is clearly a complex challenge. The research collected for *Late to Class* (Van Galen and Noblit 2007) reveals poor and working-class students tallying the relative costs of loyal identification with their economically vulnerable families against the untested hope that schooling can and will serve their interests. Meanwhile, we also see academically successful, middle-class students come to realize that they have precious little idea of how to navigate the rules of a game that are no longer stable or clear.

These contributions show young people living the central questions of class as they negotiate access to school resources, form peer relationships, or try to make sense of the place of schooling in shaping their futures. Yet rarely are they able to name the myriad ways in which social and economic influences shape their lives beyond their own agency. Instead, the research suggests, poor and working-class students most often learn to “settle” for what “people like us” deserve. For example, Julie Bettie (2003, p. 190) observes of girls at the center of these sorts of social confluences:

Girls sorted through all of this and began drawing conclusions about what is or is not “for the likes of me and my kind” as

friendships were increasingly organized by race/ethnicity and class [and] as girls began to formulate identities based on the possible futures they imagined for themselves.

Although academic work certainly contributes to how students can reasonably imagine their possible futures, the complex social fabric of life in schools and communities also affects those images. As Kaufman (2003) notes, one cannot merely work one's way into a higher social status; one's membership must be affirmed by those already present, and school can provide powerful indicators about the likelihood of realizing such ambitions. Children coming of age in declining industrial towns, isolated rural communities, or inner-city areas encounter daily reminders of the social distance between themselves and their more-privileged peers. Much more than higher test scores would seem necessary to invigorate the imagination of such young people.

Educators can find it difficult to envision what "more" might entail, for their imagination can be constrained by the seeming inevitability of current conditions. Sayer (2005, p. 1) poignantly argues that class is not simply a matter of some individuals earning more than others, but instead encompasses "condescension, deference, shame, guilt, envy, resentment, arrogance, contempt, fear and mistrust." How then might we prepare young people to cross formidable class boundaries? The contributors to *Late to Class* suggest that we might learn some lessons from the examples of those who have already made the journey.

Social Mobility: Understanding the Success Stories. We have long held deep-seated cultural beliefs about the power of schools to level playing fields, yet as Michelle Fine and April Burns (2003, p. 850) have observed, we lack good research or theory on the processes of social mobility through school.

An emerging body of writing by professionals from poor or working-class backgrounds (e.g., Dews and Law 1995; Muzatti and Samarco 2006; Welsch 2005) suggests that they feel out of place in their new social worlds as well as their old. Research on upwardly mobile women (Lucey, Melody, and Walkerdine 2003, p. 293) reveals that mobility entails loss as well as gain: individuals assume "hybrid" identities through which they navigate their disparate social worlds. This complicated work is part of the "human costs of class mobility" of which bell hooks (2000, p. 156) writes. As Fine and Burns (2003, p. 850) observe, "So-called opportunities for mobility are rarely clean."

We do know that social mobility through school is the exception rather than the norm; yet I believe that we can understand more about the constraints that young people face as they set out to cross class boundaries if we also understand more about the limitations upon them.

These contributions suggest that stories of success against the odds are often grounded in much more than hard work in school. In fact, we meet these academically engaged young people circumventing the limits of their lives and their schooling most often outside the traditional classroom. Richard Beach (2007) and his colleagues write of a rare and rigorous college-prep program created for students in a working-class high school. In other schools, staff members set up support systems to enable low-income students to construct positive school identities. Without such programs, identities may be constructed primarily from daily interactions with higher-status peers, many of whom assume that their superior academic and social accomplishments entitle them to exclude lower-status peers from their social circles (Bullock 1995, p. 125). Luis Urrieta (2007) documents the processes by which caring teachers recruit poor and working-class Chicana/o students into educational structures that will support their educational ambitions. Urrieta shows how the synchronized advocacy of community activists, teachers, and parents enabled students to imagine new possibilities for themselves. An after-school literacy program created by Hicks and Jones (2007) encouraged young girls to work closely with peers and with university staff to immerse themselves in books and poetry so that they might better interpret the circumstances of their lives in an impoverished neighborhood.

These stories collectively reveal the complexity of upward mobility. For example, it's clear that the resources available to successful students in these schools are simply not available to all who might benefit. With the students introduced to us by Urrieta, for example, teachers often identified particular young women as smarter and otherwise "different," complicating their development of a healthy ethnic identity. The literacy program for girls started by Hicks and Jones was staffed by volunteers, a model clearly not sustainable beyond small programs.

However, even given those limitations, the examples suggest that much of what goes on "beneath the radar" in schools warrants our collective curiosity. We see here the potential of extra-institutional structures, of student-support groups that help form positive identities, of community members who can name the obstacles they have faced in pursuing possibilities that schooling itself did not afford. We need to understand the potential of all these support strategies, both to prepare young people to compete within existing economic conditions and to expand opportunities for others in their communities.

Poor and Working-Class Pedagogy. For all the potential of out-of-classroom supports, it is still within classrooms that the most powerful messages of possibility will be conveyed. Although we have envisioned varieties of gender-sensitive pedagogy and imagined various forms of multicultural education, we are harder pressed to imagine particular

forms of curriculum and pedagogy that honor the aspirations of poor and working-class students. Scholars such as Renny Christopher (1999) and Sherry Linkon (1999) have begun to write to broader audiences about teaching working-class students; ironically, however, that work is confined mainly to college classrooms, where relatively few poor and working-class students are found.

Our confused discourse about class hampers such efforts. MacKenzie (1998, p. 100) posits that class identity, unlike race, ethnicity, and gender, is assumed to hold little academic value. He explains:

. . . life for many poor and working class students is erosively perplexed by the clinging, deep-rooted suggestion that their class identity is a badge of cognitive failure, an identity that an individual of sufficient merit can and should leave behind—and that one's parents, if clever and enterprising enough, and unless they're first-generation immigrants, should have already left behind. The message is this: Working class students must remediate their identities, and most of them will receive little or no respect until they do.

It is difficult to imagine curriculum and pedagogy that enable young people living on the margins of society to embrace both the security their families provide and school norms, in which “success” may imply disparagement of friends and family who are less educated or who work with their hands. Julie Lindquist (2004, p. 193), however, argues that effective pedagogy for poor and working-class students should be located exactly within these tensions; pedagogy for those on the threshold between embracing and merely tolerating school, she writes, must be aimed at “that experiential space where memory and ambition collide in the most potentially damaging, and potentially transformative, ways.”

Imagining Transformative Schooling

There is much to be learned about the circumstances within which poor and working-class students might open themselves to transformation and in turn transform an economy so that everyone might attain dignity and security.

We know little, for example, about how strong relationships between teachers and students might serve as a bridge for children wary of their place in formal schooling. Following Noddings (1984, 1992), there is evidently much more to be learned about schooling that helps poor and working-class children sense that they will be received, recognized, and responded to in school while they explore new ways of being (Noddings 1992).

Nor do we know much about how teachers might connect the curriculum to the lives of these students. Stephanie Jones (2006b) offers a rich and rare example of literacy work that validates the lives of poor young girls despite their customary absence in children's literature or in the formal school curriculum. MacKenzie (1998), recommending a "pedagogy of respect," encourages educators to think about "what might be learned from the groundskeepers at work outside the . . . window, the electrician remodeling the library's lighting, the heating engineers" and the relationships between all such personnel and the professional staff at school. In the very halls of educational institutions, he argues, lie seeds of powerful lessons on class.

There may also be lessons on class in the lives of teachers. Because we do not ask, we know little about the class backgrounds of most teachers; as a result, we know little about whether those backgrounds help teachers create connections with poor and working-class students (Van Galen 2004). A research agenda oriented toward developing more effective schools for poor and working-class students would begin by acknowledging the life experiences of both researchers and teachers in the classrooms, because it likely does matter whether one's empathy stems from childhood memories or from primarily intellectual sources. Autobiography alone is inadequate preparation for serving poor and working-class students better, yet it may matter in how one assesses the urgency of that task.

A formidable challenge in teaching about class may lie simply in countering popular rhetoric that virtually everyone is middle class. In the new global economy, traditional job categories, cultural markers of class membership, and public discourse about class are all in transition. Students who might once have grown up understanding the inherently contradictory interests of bosses and workers from the artifacts of their parents' union status are now more likely to identify with global symbols of popular culture that cross class lines, such as clothing, MTV, and multinational fast-food restaurants (Walkerdine 2003; Willis 2004).

As Savage (2003, p. 536) observes, "Social relations [in previous generations] were organized around a powerful series of oppositions, between working class and middle class, city and suburbs, wage and salary, low- and high-brow, and so on. Class was a visible marker of social differentiation." Savage suggests that teaching children about their self-interest was more straightforward when class markers were clearer and even embraced as the core of one's family's identity. Now, most young people believe that consumption patterns can earn them membership in the middle class. He writes: "[I]t is now necessary to invoke a much more subtle kind of class analysis, a kind of forensic, detective work, which involves tracing the print of class in area[s] where it is faintly written."

Creating classrooms in which to undertake such detective work will require considerable imagination. We might imagine a pedagogy of class created with community members who can name the “in between-ness” of the upwardly mobile. We might envision partnering with community advocates who can envision alternative routes to mobility that sometimes challenge the structures of school, and sometimes sidestep school altogether. Cultural brokers with one foot firmly in the community and the other inside or beside the school may someday make the shifting rules of success clearer and, just as important, more subject to critical scrutiny. We cannot imagine change only for poor and working-class students, however, because we must also imagine that middle-class students will someday understand that becoming educated obligates one to examine one’s own privilege.

We might also try to imagine multiple ways of capturing the life trajectories of young people from all economic backgrounds. Given what we know about the complex intertwining of K-12 schooling, higher education, labor markets, idiosyncratic circumstances, and structural obstacles to mobility, I want to look far beyond the end of K-12 schooling to learn much more about the relationships between education and the life one lives as an adult. I want to know where students’ lives take them, and I want especially to know what they come to understand about the many possible permutations of “turning out well.” Michael Apted’s series of *7 and Up* films, or Lois Weis’s project (2004), in which she revisited young adults she had first interviewed in high school, suggest the richness of understanding that is possible.

The work collected in *Late to Class* suggests intriguing new directions for educating poor and working-class students, while also generating new and complex questions about the scope of that work in these changing economic times. As Diane Reay (1995, p. 914) has observed, “Schools are the repositories of all kinds of fantasies, fears, hopes, and desires . . . and consequently schooling is fertile ground for exploring psycho-social and emotional aspects of classed identities.”

There would indeed seem to be much to explore.

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