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THE GREAT EQUALIZER?

Poverty, Reproduction, and How Schools Structure Inequality

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Horace Mann was on to something. When he witnessed an angry street riot in New England, his conviction that "the educated, the wealthy, the intelligent" had gone morally astray by abandoning the public was fortified (Johnson, 2002, p. 79). Mann chided the economic elite for shirking obligations to their fellow man by favoring private education over common schools. He conceptualized public education as "the great equalizer," or the most powerful mechanism for abating class-based "prejudice and hatred," and, most important, the only means by which those without economic privilege or generational wealth could experience any hope of equal footing.

Whether inspired by Mann's plea to elevate the masses to higher moral and financial ground via schooling, or other notions of social justice, even now Europeans refer to publicly funded education as "the social elevator" (Lopez-Fogues, 2011). As Mann originally conceived the function of public education, there was overt recognition that something in society was amiss, and that "something" could be effectively redressed by offering public education to all—not just some. The same "something" that Mann was acutely aware of and deeply troubled by was and is the gross and *growing* disparities among the social classes. We continue to need methods for shrinking overwhelming and widening class divides. Many of us choose to address the equity gap by struggling to supply universal access to high-quality, free, and appropriate public education. Nearly two centuries later, "the great equalizer" cannot equalize soon enough.

"Twelve Years of Free Schooling: It's There for the Taking"

I have been teaching teachers for over a decade, primarily in teacher education programs designed to prepare urban educators and *always* guided by a social justice framework. For years I have been floored by the number of candidates who believe not only that public education is the great equalizer but also that children and families who remain poor are to blame for not exploiting such a freely available opportunity to improve their lots. My students struggle to

comprehend why young learners and groups who have been traditionally underserved by public schools continue to be challenged in education and life. These teachers of tomorrow are particularly concerned that even after all students have been offered "12 years of free schooling," they are unable to "lift themselves" out of poverty. In short, they genuinely wonder how such dismal outcomes for poor children could persist when the great equalizer undoubtedly works and a poverty-ending solution is clearly at hand. Year after year, I continue to observe that as a result of this flawed, deficit thinking, both pre- and in-service teachers have come to develop and staunchly cling to their disgust at what they perceive to be squandered opportunities. Poor children fail in schools because they are not taking advantage. Poor people exist because they wasted a good, free education. The poor themselves are the problem.

What scores of students—well-meaning educators, all—fail to realize is that public education does not serve its intended function as the great equalizer. Quite contrarily, schools actually *structure* inequality (gasp!) in insidiously subtle ways. To introduce countless future teachers to this "radical" notion, I devised a plan to combat pernicious thinking about poor students, the educational "failures" of poor students, and the "self-inflicted" demise of the poor.

Why Are People Poor? An Introduction to Reproduction

My new tradition is to begin each foundational course in my program by contextualizing and historicizing public education. To assist me, I use the diagram shown in Figure 16.1. The topics I address and the stories I tell within each rung of the ladder of structured inequality are candid, personal, and decidedly pointed in order to stimulate discussion.

When I begin discussions about poverty and achievement in public schools, my students often ask, "Why do poor students perform poorly?" The question is not about poor students and why they underperform in a system purportedly designed to elevate their opportunities and outcomes. The question is, "Why are people poor?" I insist that we begin with the lowest "rung" on the diagram because there we unpack the existence of a class of "poor people" who seem not to be living up to their potential in a presumably benevolent public education system that was designed—at least in the spirit of Horace Mann—specifically with them in mind.

Any serious discussion about the inception of poverty in this country must begin by recognizing that class is highly racialized (even globally), and vice versa. The origins of poverty among people of color—specifically descendants of African slaves—are rooted in several centuries of colorized, chattel slavery with no economic reparation after its formal or informal "end." The majority of poor people in the United States are White, but the majority of people of color

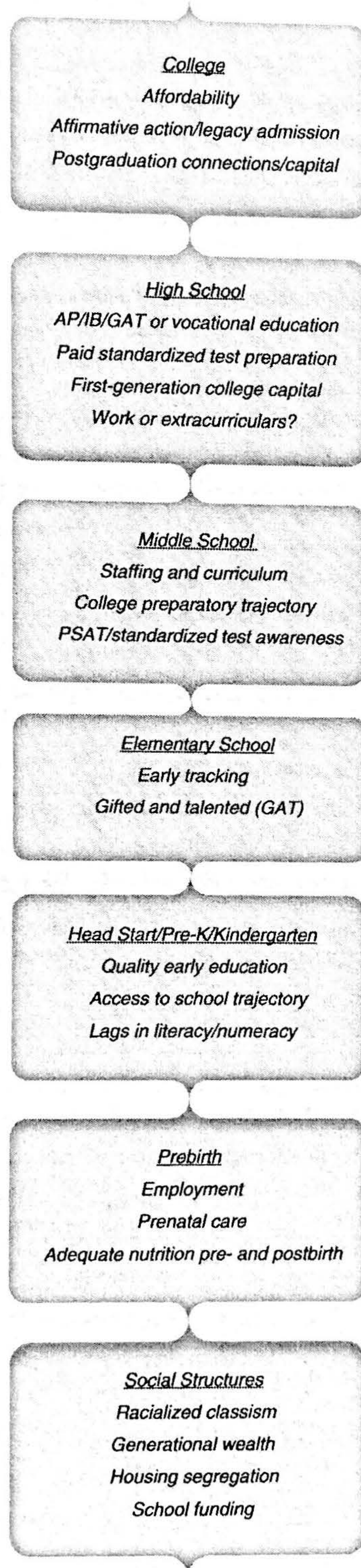

Figure 16.1 How Schools Structure Inequality.

are poor. Racial minorities (better phrased, "global majorities") are disproportionately represented in poverty. Therefore, an inordinate and overwhelmingly fewer number of people of color have access to generational wealth based on their recognition as only three-fifths of a human being and the subsequent denial of property ownership as a direct result of *being property* themselves. Masses of people of color who have been denied personhood, rights to stolen lands, citizenship, and any number of basic human freedoms based solely on race have *also* been denied generational access to wealth in the form of inherited property and assets.

The surest way to build wealth—as indicated by the *real* in real estate—is to own a home. Both Katznelson (2005) and Wise (2005) mapped, in brilliantly unconsidered ways, how "affirmative action" in the United States has always benefited Whites and most significantly in the building of White wealth. From establishing the country's earliest legislation restricting the landed gentry to White males, to offering mortgage loans to Whites only via the Federal Housing Authority and the GI Bill, to *excluding* Blacks and people of color from home loans and subdivisions by way of redlining and restrictive covenants, both scholars illuminate the long-standing and state-sponsored wealth gaps (ravines) between Whites and all others.

On the basis of the inability of far too many people of color, as well as a vast number of Whites—neither of whom inherited wealth from their forebears—to purchase homes or, more important, to purchase homes *in a "good school district,"* housing segregation continues to plague the educational and social outcomes of multiple members of the underclass. And on the basis of the method by which we have chosen to fund public schools in this country (relying heavily on the values of the surrounding properties), "demography is destiny" in that "students' test scores are highly correlated with the amount of money their parents make and the zip codes where they live" (Atkins, 2010, p. xi). It should be no secret, then, that people who lack access to generational or inherited wealth—and were legally barred from purchasing homes as the best prospect for building wealth—end up in subpar school districts that are funded by subpar tax revenue. It should also be no wonder that the *children* of poor people attend poorly performing schools in poorly funded districts with disproportionate concentrations of poor classmates. And yes, students in these circumstances are more likely to perform poorly.

Why are people poor? Most notably, why do the *same* groups of people tend to endure poverty from generation to generation? And ultimately, why do children of the poor predictably perform poorly in public schools? As noted earlier, a historicized and contextualized view points to several factors, including the by-products of imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, and racism. Bourdieu's cultural and social reproduction theories, alongside the Marxist "correspondence principle," just to name a few critical tools, help provide answers to our queries.

Historically and contemporarily, U.S. public schools illustrate the simplicity of reproduction—that is, the indelible relationship between current and eventual class membership—by way of replicating class status in the superior educational opportunities of those with more money. If you can—by way of inheritance, real estate, or accumulated class capital and wealth—afford a better home in a better school district, you will therefore receive a predictably better education (McGrew, 2011). Likewise, the correspondence principle refers to the perpetuation of social class stratification by sifting the same *types* of individuals into various labor classes by design, over time, and in full collusion with the public education system in a capitalist society (Au, 2006). Whereas Bourdieu was concerned with the transmission of cultural values, norms, and capital writ large, Marx specifically described the überimportant role of *schooling* in accomplishing the deliberate sorting and generational reinforcement of the classes. Why are people poor? Because our historical and social structures mean them to be.

Woes in the Womb: Prebirth Effects on Educational Outcomes

When I first constructed the ladder to describe how schools structure inequality, I struggled with where to begin. My training as an early childhood educator, experience as a child care provider, education in developmental psychology, and specialization in human development told me to start in the womb. What are the factors that affect poor children before they are even born? First, women and children are overrepresented in poverty (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009). Part-time employment is the only sphere in which women outearn men. Their pay on full-time jobs continues to lag, with women earning a mere 81 cents to the dollar when compared to men with equal or fewer credentials (Mundy, 2012). I often share with students that my sister's employer worked her 39 hours per week *for years* to avoid providing health insurance. She had no access to pap smears, annual "well woman" breast exams, birth control, or a regular physician when she took ill. My mother recently ended a one-year stint at Walmart, where she was daily promised full-time employment. She is 63 years old, takes 11 prescription medications, and suffers from a number of health conditions that require frequent doctor visits. She was consistently worked just shy of 40 hours—again, the employer avoiding having to provide full-time benefits. During her final week on the job, she worked 39.5 hours.

Lack of access to health care and, more specifically, to *prenatal* health care plagues far too many women in poverty and, consequently, their children and future public school students. Inadequate nutrition, undiagnosed difficulties prior to childbirth, and treatable in vitro illnesses all contribute to the poorer health of these future scholars. And because so many poor neighborhoods are veritable "food deserts" where fresh produce, meats, and healthy items are

elusive, children gestated then reared in poverty enter the world with unspoken disadvantages, many of which are totally preventable, medically remedial, and unnecessarily difficult to overcome.

A Head Start for Whom? How Many Years Behind Am I?

Thankfully, poor children may have access to the federally funded Head Start program, but children of the wealthy have a different kind of head start. My sister recently sent me a copy of one of our favorite films, *Baby Boom* (Meyers & Shyer, 1987). In it, the corporate mogul lead character inherits a toddler, about whom she is immediately rebuffed for needing to "catch up." One fellow, a wealthy Upper East Side New Yorker, becomes fiercely inquisitive about which "preschool entrance exam preparation institute" she would be attending and for which "Ivy League preschools" the child was wait-listed. When the flabbergasted new mother indicated that her child was not on any wait-lists, that she had not listed her prebirth, and that she had no idea how the preschool preparation track worked, the nosy neighbor walked away in utter incredulity.

The neighbor's point was an excellent one. Access to quality child care, early learning, preschool, and even kindergarten (which is not mandatory in all states) is key. Investments in quality early childhood education not only has one of the highest yields—for every $1 spent on early education and care, $8 is saved on crime, public assistance, supplemental schooling, and so on—but is also one of the most important stages at which a child's educational trajectory is shaped (Nisbett, 2009). The question we must ask of children reared in poverty is, When they set foot in kindergarten, how many years "behind" are they in learning opportunities, literacy and numeracy development, reading and writing "behaviors," and the many benefits of quality early care? Although the nosy neighbor in our favorite film highlighted the disgustingly expensive extremes to which the wealthy will go to start their children's educational careers off right, the notion of needing to start *every* child's education with the highest quality experiences is spot on.

On Kittens and Puppies: Starting Off on the Wrong Paw

Tracking is never innocent. In my supervision of student teachers in classrooms across multiple cities, "ability grouping" and its more perilous effects are the order of the day. In any grade, but particularly the early grades, all too often students are sorted according not to their demonstrated ability but to the teacher's assessment of their behavior, likability, or academic *potential* (Smith, Polloway, Patton, & Dowdy, 2004). In classrooms where I have observed as a university

professor, children continue to be sorted for any number of reasons: reading, writing, the ability to assist others, mastery of the material, and so on. They are often given names like kittens and puppies, bees and bears, and I most recently heard (and enjoyed) butterflies and worms.

This form of early tracking, or dividing children into labeled groups based on the teacher's designation of their skill level, seems innocent. What we know, however, based on mounds of research—most notably among them Rist's (1970/2000) study of same-raced children of various social classes—is that teacher and peer expectations for academic achievement (and their subsequent treatment of students) are based largely on low and negative perceptions of the poor, regardless of their actual ability. We know that disproportionate numbers of poor children are far more likely to be identified as less academically adept or even as having special needs. The early tracking and labeling of children reared in poverty is cumulative and devastating. It not only hampers students' self-esteem and cripples their *own* expectations of themselves but also, as Rist (1970/2000) discovered, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for what too often becomes a trajectory of underachievement.

When I ask my students if they have tracking programs at schools they have attended or where they completed their student teaching, many of them routinely answer "no." When I inquire about gifted and talented (GAT or TAG) programs, many of them instinctively begin to describe, in detail, the differentiated curriculum, enrichment opportunities, and vastly different experiences each program entails. Children of color, boys, and students from economically exploited backgrounds are consistently excluded and underrepresented in such programs (Callahan, 2005). Gifted programs are not the enemy, but the muddled definition of what constitutes "giftedness" is, and it overwhelmingly excludes poor and minority children. Programs like these represent early forms of tracking. They simply provide opportunities for class elitism and socioeconomic exclusion on the opposite end of the spectrum. Being labeled "gifted" or "talented" versus "regular" or "normal" or to be labeled a "kitten" or "puppy" is psychologically and educationally significant. And, too often, class-biased and deeply enduring.

Middle School: College Preparation Starts Here

In one of our famously interactive (and highly spirited!) discussions about how schools *structure*, rather than promote, equity, I ask my students the following: If you're going to make it to statistics, discrete math, or advanced placement calculus BC as a high school senior, when would you need to begin taking algebra? If you were to take physics or organic chemistry in your senior year, what are the benchmark years for completing biology, chemistry, and the prerequisite sciences? If you are to become fluent in a second language, or at least take

an advanced placement exam for that language, when would you need to begin learning that language? When do students in the best schools take the PSAT (Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test)? What are the consequences of doing well on the test? What is a National Merit Scholarship, and when do you begin to be considered for one? The answer? Middle school.

The middle grades are where the rubber meets the road. This is where college-bound freshmen and all the rest are separated like oil and water. Here, the issue of school funding and the deleterious effects of how we fund public education in this country becomes an obvious barrier to students' academic success and their ability to move upward in the social classes. "A college education is the most reliable step for moving from a low-income to a middle-class and higher status" (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009, p. 86). Contrary to popular belief, preparation for college, and therefore the surest promise of social mobility, does not occur in high school. Rather, it is a function of the staffing, teacher quality, curricular offerings, standardized testing capacity, counseling wisdom, and resources at the *middle school level.* Indeed.

Children reared in poverty disproportionately attend schools with the least-prepared, least-experienced, least-qualified teachers (Irvine, 2003). Staffing and course offerings are crucial in middle school because students who hope to attend college must engage in specific prerequisite courses *prior* to entering high school if they are to have any chance of competing for admission to top-tiered or even average-quality four-year universities. For instance, my high school offered advanced placement and college-level courses that would grant students "jump-start" credits once admitted to an institution that recognized such credits (which many do). I attended Harvard as an undergraduate and was therefore eligible to forgo an entire semester of courses if I received a score of 4 or 5 on four advanced placement exams. Given that my tuition and fees easily exceeded $50,000 that first year, not having to pay for a full semester's worth of college credit would have benefited my family tremendously. But no one told me about the course sequence in middle school. That's when I would have had to enroll in my first algebra and Spanish classes and the appropriate high-level science courses. To reach discrete math, Spanish VII, and physics, I would have had to begin taking those courses in the sixth grade. My school did not offer those. I missed out, and the effect was costly. Over $25,000 to be precise.

Luckily, I did take the PSAT, or the precursor for one of the most popular college entrance exams, as part of my GAT program in the seventh grade. We were told that this was a very important test that would prepare us for another very important test, and if we scored well enough, we could skip a grade. Taking the PSAT early and being aware of the SAT, ACT, and standardized testing requirements for college entry were *vital* pieces of class capital that neither of my parents could offer. Like so many other children in first-generation college families, I would never have taken the PSAT, or had my name entered in a

database to begin receiving information directly from colleges, or been aware of the National Merit Scholarship—something I could look forward to in high school if I practiced the PSAT enough in my gifted program—if the opportunity had been absent in middle school. Lucky me?

Does *every* middle school have the capacity to facilitate PSAT testing for its students in the lower grades? Does *every* middle school in economically blighted districts have highly qualified teachers who can teach college preparatory courses? Does *every* middle school employ counselors who can set each student on a trajectory toward college? No. Even less so in schools that serve poor children. This is how schools limit college admission for poor students and, in turn, mass social mobility much earlier than we realize. This is how schools structure inequality.

"Borrow Money If You Have to From Your Parents": The Wealthy on Becoming Wealthy

In the throes of his 2012 election-year bid for president, and deeply steeped in his own wealth, Mitt Romney issued a word of advice for young people about what it might take to be successful and wealthy. To contextualize his contribution, he first offered the example of Jimmy John Liautaud, who borrowed a whopping $20,000 from his parents to begin his sandwich franchise, Jimmy John's. Romney then told students at Otterbein University that such opportunities were afforded to them too. He encouraged—admonished—them: "Take a shot. Go for it. Take a risk. Get the education. Borrow money if you have to from your parents. Start a business." Just like that.

By the time students—especially *poor* students—enter high school, one of the most crucial forms of cultural capital they will need is the ability to pay for a college education. On the basis of the lack of access to generational wealth, inexperienced parents who often have not attended college, and the pangs that stem from being a first-generation college goer, high school becomes a critical juncture at which students are either aware, prepared, and savvy about college admissions or woefully behind in their ability to navigate the application process.

Romney's assertion that one should simply "Get the education. Borrow money if you have to from your parents" is indicative of his and many people's inability to understand poverty or any class status other than their own. Romney's assumption is that education is there for the taking. All one needs to do is reach out and grab it. In addition, he is making a bold assertion about your parents' financial holdings. *Of course* they have money you can borrow. Lots of liquid assets. Just ask for them. Just like that. In his naive, ridiculous, and class-ignorant "advice," Romney demonstrated a profound lack of understanding

for how education, particularly at the high school level, can be a daunting and dangerous time for students who, unlike himself, are *not* wealthy. For instance, if a student does not attend a high-quality school in a wealthier, better-funded district, programs such as the International Baccalaureate (IB), advanced placement, and other college credit programs that often facilitate the matriculation of students into postsecondary settings are not likely to exist. Furthermore, if the school is located in an economically exploited area characterized by racial diversity, as is the case in the lowest-income wards in New Orleans and the most highly populated Latina and Latino schools in Houston, high schools may even have a more vocational, trade-based, law enforcement, or strictly military focus (Buras, Randels, ya Salaam, & Students at the Center, 2010). They are designed to steer poor students into trades, vocations, and jobs, not professions and high-paying careers. On purpose.

My sister, who is half Chinese, one-quarter Thai, and one-quarter Southeast Asian Indian, attended a historically Black college. Not by choice but by lack of cultural capital. As the eldest child in our family, she was the first to brave the collegiate admission process. Her high school counselor never called her in for counseling, "noticed her potential," or placed her in contact with various colleges and admissions offices around the country. Those consultations happened frequently for her White counterparts. She had no idea when applications were due, what they entailed, what fee waivers were, or when to take standardized tests. She dreamed of attending James Madison University. She ended up at Norfolk State University because it was the only college to accept her application late. She dropped out before the midpoint of her first semester.

In addition to the sheer volume of cultural capital students dwelling in poverty need just to take command of the college application process, other class issues are at play: Do I have to work instead of participate in résumé-boosting and community-building extracurricular activities? Will my family need my services as a caregiver or contributor while I am away? Most important, can I afford costly, for-profit test preparation programs such as Kaplan or Princeton Review to score better on the SAT or ACT and strengthen my candidacy? And if I am accepted to a college, can I afford to go?

Unfortunately—and this may be news to Mitt Romney—the ultimate question is the most problematic for far too many. Not everyone has parents or family members with access to magic money that students can borrow to "get the education." Rather, high school represents a sad and all too common divergence in the road for the "haves" and an excessive number of "have-nots." There are those who have better-resourced schools, advanced curricula, funds for test preparation, and the counseling and wherewithal to successfully master the college process. They will likely attend college and maintain or even improve their class status. And there are those who *have not* a clue as to how one might go about "getting the education" in the absence of disposable money,

only available to some. The poor are not the problem. Ignorance about widespread poverty and how it functions, however, is.

A Trail of Tears: Debts, Tokens, Jobs, and Knowing No One

When a student who is poor makes it to college, it is unlikely that he or she is a "legacy admit." These are applicants whose parents or relatives have attended, have contributed to, or are in some way affiliated with the university. As a Harvard alumna and admissions interviewer, I can verify that the application includes an inquiry about any person you are related to who went to Harvard. And there is consideration for that.

Even *after* poor students enter college, there is often an imposed sense of not feeling entitled to their own admission. Minorities of any kind are positioned as "affirmative action babies" or "token [fill in the blank]." Legacy admits, however, are rarely if ever questioned. Gurin et al. (2004) candidly put forth that the only time admissions standards are drastically lowered or foregone in order to accommodate an unqualified candidate is in the instance of legacy admission. In other words, it is only when applicants are affiliated with a significant donor or "major money" that their candidacy is strongly considered and too often accepted below standard. Not the other way around. That is, we are not admitting disproportionate numbers of poor and minority candidates who hail from humble backgrounds. Rather, we are filling our collegiate campuses with a mix of legacy admits who would *never* have been accepted but for their connection to financial resources.

In addition to dealing with any number of indignities as a result of being perceived as somehow undeserving of their admission slots, poor college students must also face dilemmas that the moneyed do not. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds suffer not only the damaging comments and class-based assumptions from peers and professors but also the social isolations that stem from the frequent predicament of not having college-experienced family members or friends with whom to relate. Expensive opportunities may elude them: Can I afford to study abroad and gain more global citizenship skills, or must I work one or several jobs to pay my tuition? Once paid, whom will I need to financially support back home? Moreover, it is often difficult to prepare for graduate or professional schools if none or few around you have advanced degrees. I learned what PhD stood for during the fourth year of my doctoral program. My father finished seventh grade, and my mother is an immigrant from Bangkok, Thailand.

At the baccalaureate service during one of my final days at Harvard, the speaker made what he believed to be a joke. He said, "Remember, graduates: It's not who you know. It's *whom*." Everyone got the joke immediately and laughed

uproariously. As a grammar freak, I could appreciate the sly lesson in mechanics. What I found incredibly scary, however—at a time when people were falling off the pews of Memorial Church in stitches—was that he was right. And dead serious. If I had any hope of being as successful as my well-connected peers, many of whom outclassed me, I would need to *know* some people. Someone to set up my internships in the summers, my job interviews for the 90% of positions that are never advertised, my "foot in the door" or "let me see who I can talk to" opportunity that only insiders can get you. I didn't know anyone. I was from a poor family. None of my relatives owned businesses or knew anyone. We didn't have physicians, or attorneys, or engineers in our family because we were deliberately kept out of those spaces. There was no legacy. No one to open the door, leave it cracked, and let us in. I looked around, and people were dying laughing. I was dying. I cried.

At long last, even after first-generation and poor students like me surmount class-based difficulties in college, the debt looms for decades. Although a college education is "the most reliable step" for upward social mobility, the debt that poor college students incur and retain for years keeps them at a handsome distance below their more well-off contemporaries in building net worth and wealth (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009). Therefore, matriculating and even graduating from college does not remedy wealth gaps in as "clean" a manner as we might hope. Moreover, the cultural capital that one brings to the collegiate table and then builds while there is often more valuable than the degree itself. The Posse Foundation, which sends traditionally underadmitted students to college in teams, has found a way to combat at least the social isolation and class-based hostilities that poor students often face, as well as to preserve the community cultural capital of the underrepresented group itself. In this way, groups or "posses" of students who tend not to fare well in college can surround themselves with familiarity, solidarity, and the potential to build connections together. They may not have as many nepotistic or wealth-based connections as their peers, but at least they have their posse (Rosenberg, 2012).

Insisting on Class Equity: What's Really at Stake

When my students and I conclude our discussions about the ways in which schools *structure*, not ameliorate, inequality, I am faced with questions about what to do and why we should do anything at all. Public education is the largest mechanism for socialization in any society (Spring, 2008). It is also the bedrock of a participatory democracy where citizens can pursue self-actualization without hindrance and with full right. If we truly believe that "the potential for brilliance is sprinkled evenly across all ethnic groups" and all social classes,

then we will make decisions that dismantle structural barriers to quality public education for all, and we will govern ourselves accordingly (Bennett, 2007). At the time of this writing, Horace Mann may not have gotten his wish of using public education to promote and, indeed, to remediate the ills of a highly stratified society. But brilliance can come from anywhere. If we insist on class equity in schools, it will come from *everywhere*.

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