

RADICAL TEACHER

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Undoing Neoclassical Economics in Elementary School: Three New York City Classrooms and the Teaching of Class Division

by Debbie Sonu



"SWEET EARTH- EXPERIMENTAL UTOPIAS IN AMERICA", 2005 BY ARTIST JOEL STERNFELDGRAND

The narrative underlying much of economics education in elementary and secondary schools across the United States is neoclassicism (Adams, 2019; Shanks, 2018). While other schools of thought exist, neoclassicism primarily emphasizes rational decision-making and self-interest with a focus on how individuals act in ways that optimize their goals for happiness, income, and capital accumulation. In the New York State Scope and Sequence Standards for Social Studies, Grades K-8 (NYCDOE, 2014), economics, one of the 10 unifying themes in elementary school, is identified as "Creation, Expansion, and Interaction of Economic Systems." Here, topics include "production, distribution, and consumption; scarcity of resources and the challenges of meeting wants and needs; supply/demand and the coordination of individual choices." By focusing on maximizing growth and the satisfaction of human wants and needs, such approaches neglect to contextualize the unsustainable inequalities that result from the systematic amassing of wealth by a select few. Even more, they claim a neutral starting position (Pinto & Chan, 2010) that severs economics from a long legacy of colonialism and the raced and gendered sociopolitical hierarchies that have been built for centuries under the logic of accumulation and a culture of deregulated capitalism (De Lissovoy, 2022; King & Finley, 2015).

At the same time, scholars in critical childhood studies argue for conceptions of childhood that are "discursive, inclusive, sociopolitically situated, transitory, [and] multiple" (O'Loughlin & Johnson, 2010, p. 1). These scholars, and teachers in this vein, understand that children make insightful observations about their social worlds, and thus challenge the notion that children are blank slates upon which to bank educational goals and objectives (Freire, 1970). Moreover, ample studies in child psychology show that children are continually internalizing the cultural milieu of the capitalist state. As early as age 3, they begin to internalize harmful ideologies and biases based on social class (Hazelbacker et al., 2018; Mistry et al., 2017). Within years, they learn to draw discriminatory comparisons between wealthier peers as hard-working, intelligent, and responsible, and low-wealth peers as lazier, prone to criminality, and uninterested in school (Bullock, 2006; Woods et al., 2005). Even as children explicitly share their resources, such as toys and food, in ways that intend fairness and equity, some studies show they still prefer to affiliate themselves with those more advantaged (Fehr et al., 2008; Li et al., 2014) and care more for members of their own ethnic, gender, or peer group when supplies are limited (Weller & Lagattuta, 2014). Additionally, while those with greater social power tend to protect the myths of meritocracy (Kane & Kyyro, 2001), children from low-income households are more apt to acknowledge the emotional toll of systemic inequality (Heberle & Carter, 2020) and to express skepticism about the promises of opportunity, social mobility, and work ethic (Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

As part of a larger survey project on how elementary school teachers in New York City experience, conceptualize, and imagine the teaching of economic inequality and social class, this phase followed teachers

into three classrooms across two public schools in the Lower East Side of Manhattan to witness what it might look like when teachers design curriculum and teach for economic justice. While elementary school teachers are often neglected in the scholarship on economics education, the three classrooms presented in this essay demonstrate how the foundation of a critical economics education begins with unpacking common capitalist-driven ideologies that are felt and internalized years before children enter their very first days of school. Not without its own challenges, teachers plan their lessons by first reflecting on the experiences of children growing up in a city with one of the largest wealth gaps in the country and create learning spaces that shift neoclassical meanings of economics toward critical understandings of economic inequality as it manifests in their lives and sociopolitical contexts.

In a school district of close to one million students, an astonishing 73% of children enrolled in the NYC Public Schools meet city benchmarks for economic hardship, including 119,000 children with housing insecurity (Advocates for Children of New York, 2023). At City School (pseudonym), one of the two participating schools in this project, the numbers cast a more concerning portrait. According to data published by the New York State Education Department (NYSED), 87% of families at City School are "economically disadvantaged" and 129 families are experiencing homelessness or living in temporary housing. At Community School (pseudonym), just down the street in the same district, 60% of students are "economically disadvantaged" with 23 families experiencing housing insecurity. The teaching of economic inequality, then, requires thoughtful consideration and great sensitivity to children's needs and understandings about self and others. As will be seen, in each of these classrooms, teachers make concerted efforts to dismantle the flawed belief that wealth equates to deservedness and value over others, which then becomes the foundational basis from which their lessons unfold.

Teaching children with a wide range of diverse learning abilities, first-grade teachers Sam and Diane craft a lesson on the difference between equity and equality and how resources might be allocated differently depending on individual circumstance. Their lesson on inequality draws from direct observations of children's emotional capacities to understand the meaning of fairness beyond the universal. In third grade, Isabel and Lawrence, who teach a class where many of their students and families experience economic hardship, lead children through a restorative circle activity that surfaces internalizations of privilege as more than financial well-being and then use children's literature to analyze characters through the lens of social class and its hierarchies. Finally, Jia, a fourth/fifth grade teacher introduces the concept of classism and couches incidents of teasing and comparison within a multi-scalar approach that examines divisive institutional policies and practices in relation to their curricular unit on New York City immigration.

Teachers in this project were asked to participate in one initial and one exit interview and to plan and teach one lesson on social class and economic inequality that was

filmed, edited, and published online. Links to the short 10-minute films are provided below. There were no parameters set for the lesson and no feedback was given on its detail and sequence. Rather, I arrived at the school site, alongside two doctoral student researchers and one filmmaker, without much hint into what teachers had planned for the approximate hour. These portraits are not intended as best practices, knowing that the particulars of each context will always derail attempts to generalize what is best in schools. Rather, informed by scholarship within the field of critical childhood studies and with respect to the context of teaching economics in elementary school, each case is a glimpse into what can happen when teachers consider economic inequality as a subject worthy of consideration. The aim is that teachers and teacher educators everywhere come away with a sense that broaching these topics with young children is not only possible, but that accounting for the study of economic inequality in elementary schools is necessary to any agenda that views education as a vehicle for social justice.

Critical Childhood Studies

Oftentimes the very idea of teaching social class to children is met with discomfort, trepidation, even outright refusal. Part of this response sits within traditional discourses on childhood innocence (Garlen, 2019) and developmental appropriateness (Farley, 2018), two pillars of stage-wise theories that deny the complex entanglements of children with society while normalizing a particular vision of what children should be and become (Burman, 2017; Walkerdine, 1993). Oftentimes, anxiety and panic over what children are learning stem not from the capacity of children to explore the world around them, but from the discomfort and moral certitude of adults who, as critiqued by scholars in critical childhood studies, use the figure of the child to justify their own political and social agendas (Castañeda, 2002).

On this, scholars in this field interrogate the ideological, symbolic, and affective roles that the child figure plays as the centerpiece of broader political arguments and tensions manifested by adults. Anchored to Western European Enlightenment and the modern split of adult/child (Aries, 1960), the child figure is far from a biological or neutral fact. Central to a range of shifting adult-centered aims, the mobilization of the child figure within institutional policies, practices, and popular discourses served for centuries to inscribe societal anxieties around morality and corruption (Silin, 1995), decency and civilization (Ishiguro, 2016; Rollo, 2018), evolution and futurity (Castañeda, 2002), all which are inextricably tied to the maintenance of racial projects. Throughout history, metaphors of progress and advancement, alongside child-rearing practices including those found in schools, have catapulted forward a long legacy of recapitulation and evolutionary theories that reify white settler status (Bernstein, 2011; Lesko, 2001) and middle-class capitalist values (Lareau, 2011).

As the underpinnings of late-stage capitalism glorify competition, conquest, and unfettered capital accumulation, the child figure then embodies the

hallmarks of the future consumer primed to move forward a modern capitalist economy, a system that inherently produces specific kinds of vulnerabilities that are emotionally felt, witnessed, and learned by children themselves. Any critical approach to social education, then, should first acknowledge how children are observing and living amid the very historical and contemporary forms of economic dispossession that continue to target entire communities along the axes of race, gender, immigration, and ableism, while acknowledging how traditional theories of childhood innocence serve to perpetuate silence about social inequalities and injustices.

Teaching Economics in Elementary School

According to Jim Stanford (2010), economics education ought to teach about the real causes and potential solutions to financial problems, the forces that shape opportunities, as well as the role of the government in mitigating or exacerbating societal inequities. Key tenets of a critical economics education should include: (1) exposure to how moneyed interests operate behind the scenes of a democracy; (2) content knowledge that demystifies economic policies; (3) real-world examples of how the power of organized people has rivaled, and can continue to rival, organized money; and (4) a forum to explore their own beliefs about these topics (Sober, 2017, p. 84). Yet the actual teaching of economics at the elementary school level is found to be at low levels of critical engagement and can inadvertently reproduce neoliberal capitalist logic (Swalwell, 2021). Extrinsic reward systems that distribute tokens to later spend in a classroom store is one example of how capital accumulation, consumerism, and competition are promoted in the classroom. In first grade, common lessons on basic wants and needs attempt to teach about scarcity yet often fall short of examining the forces that create such conditions. On this, Katy Swalwell (2021) offers alternative lines of questioning that include: "What basic needs should we ensure everyone has?" or "Why are some people rich and some people poor?" (p. 53).

In a review of the literature, lessons on economics in the elementary school include investigating the making and selling of clothes and tracing labor and human rights (Lyman, 2002/2003; McCall, 2017). Others draw from children's literature through themes of social class and meanings of welfare (Chafel, et al., 2007). Books such as *Sí, Se Puede!/Yes We Can!* (Cohn, 2005) or *Click Clack Moo: Cows That Type* (Cronin, 2000) introduce children to the struggle over the rights of workers; Nibi Emosaawdang/*The Water Walker* (Robertson, 2019) shares the story of an Ojibwe water protector; and *Those Shoes* (Boelts, 2009) emphasizes the virtues of family and care over material possession. With these texts, educators can help children question power structures and perceptions of socioeconomic class and status (White, et al., 2013). As found, children in classrooms where teachers taught directly about economic inequality were more inclined to think of class as malleable, rather than inherent, and began to imagine a range of ways to

alleviate class inequality beyond volunteer work and donations (Mistry, et al., 2017).

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, school districts have been rapidly trending towards financial literacy, which makes up only six of the 50 concepts and 20 standards published by the Council for Economics Education (2021). Disseminated by Federal Reserve banks and partnerships between state governments and national and international financial and credit organizations, financial literacy benchmarks for fourth grade include: monitor financial statements for a personal savings account, summarize the advantages and disadvantages of using credit, describe reasons for investing, calculate simple and compound interest earnings, and explain the benefit of a compound rate of return (Jump\$tart Coalition, 2017). Critics of financial literacy argue that its emphasis on the individual rational consumer overwhelmingly promotes a depoliticized and overly rational view of economic issues (Arthur, 2012; Lucey & Henning, 2021). Moreover, financial literacy often carries deficit perspectives on poverty that are laden with gendered and raced innuendos masked by the language of choice, empowerment, and value-neutrality (Soroko, 2020). The proliferation of online curriculum and its seemingly uncontroversial stance may make financial literacy an accessible replacement for critical economics education, especially for teachers who do not have the space, time, and support to plan and create curriculum on their own.

Films on Teachers Teaching Economic Inequality

In what follows, readers can view the 10-minute films made in each of three classrooms. Descriptions of the lessons are accentuated by interviews that offer greater insight into the rationale for why each teacher decided to create their lessons in the way they did. The intent is not to capture the entirety of the lesson but to draw out some of the key concepts and takeaways that teachers and teacher educators can use to foster further discussions in their classrooms and programs, and for other teachers to find inspiration and support in their own efforts to address economic inequality through their teaching.

Teaching About Equity & Resource Allocation in the First Grade

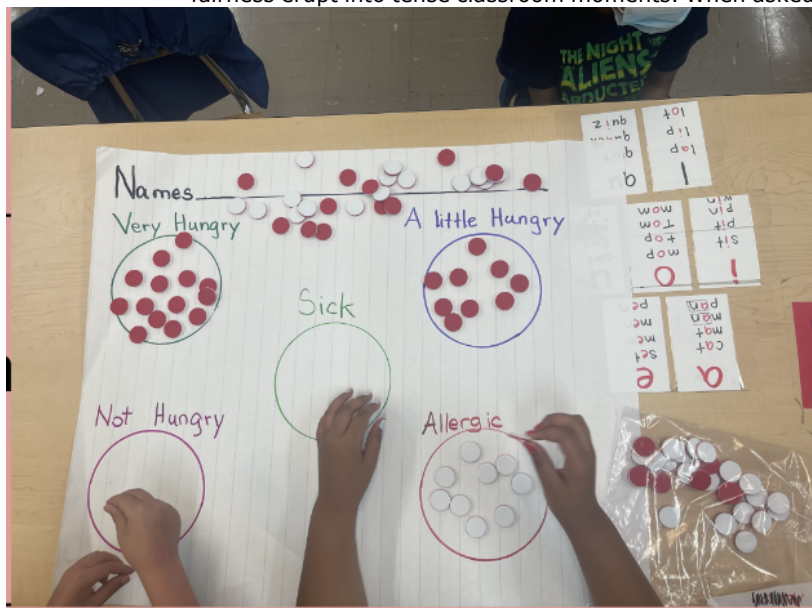
To view this resource visit:

<https://vimeo.com/848024021>

Teachers at City School are acutely aware of the ways that economic inequality affects their students' lives and learning. To meet the real material challenges faced by families, Sam and Diane's school regularly offers assistance programs, such as food pantries and clothing drives, and with Title I funds, provides an impressive array

of school-based programs including South Indian dance, cooking with visiting chefs, music instruction, and health and wellness clubs. In addition, the school enrolls a majority of students of color: 54% Hispanic, 23% Asian, and 14% Black students, with 23% identified as experiencing learning disabilities. Many of the classrooms at City School are Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) settings, where one of the teachers must carry special education certification. In 2022, when buses of asylum-seeking families began arriving in New York City, the school experienced a sudden surge of interest from families looking to enroll their children in a language-rich learning environment. Taking great pride in their cultural diversity and offering two dual language programs in Spanish and Mandarin, teachers found themselves faced with supporting the needs of children who experienced enormous adversity and cultivating classroom communities that were welcoming, caring, and just for both newcomers and all.

This film highlights Sam and Diane, two first-grade teachers working in an ICT classroom where children (ages 6-7) with and without special needs learn together. They open their lesson with a read aloud of the book, *Fair is Fair* by Sonny Varela and ask students to follow changes in the character's feelings as they are provided food that is distributed equitably and then equally. At the end, students use their new conception of fairness-as-equity and work together to decide how to divide resources to groups with specific needs (for fuller description of lesson, see Sonu & Herold, 2023). Sam and Diane designed this lesson partly in response to times when demands for fairness erupt into tense classroom moments. When asked



FIRST GRADERS DISTRIBUTING RESOURCES. PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR.

about this, Diane recalls a time when a free book giveaway led some students to feel angry for receiving fewer free books than others. As one student lamented, "Why can't they just go to the bookstore?" Sam and Diane are put in a position where distributing books equally may have avoided the situation altogether. Instead, Diane reminds the student, "Well, you can go to the bookstore. But stop

and think, is it fair that someone can't go to the bookstore? Should I give you the same amount of books as them, if you can go to the bookstore and buy it, but someone else can't?".

Certainly, and as seen at the beginning of the film, young children (and many adults) tend to equate fairness with equal resource allocation, and for some children (and some adults), the concept of offering extra support, welfare, and assistance can be seen as an unfair and undeserved privilege. By investigating how resource allocation can account for care and need, the teachers use a simulation activity where children exercise their newfound understanding of equity and their emotional responses to the characters in the book to then make informed decisions that respect the dignity of individuals in context and to ensure the wellbeing of the common good (Lucey & Henning, 2021). While neoclassical views proffer individual action as financial achievement, this lesson lays a critical foundation for children to acknowledge the very real obstacles faced by others and, as shared by Sam, the role that social services and government institutions can play in mitigating the inheritances of hardships for particular groups.

Sam and Diane's commitment to equity as contextual, circumstantial, and needs-based is a direct challenge to the nascent beliefs and behaviors exhibited by their students. "I don't want to shelter the kids from understanding their reality," Sam shares, and while items such as snacks and materials are passed out in equal measure, she also recalls times when they instill in children the idea that equity might require that someone receives more than others to ensure everyone's well-being and accessibility to the promises of education. "One kid needs to take a break, or to play with Legos...Our kids have special needs, [and] this helps all of them learn." At the end of the read aloud, Diane asks the first graders, "So, what does fair mean?" In response, one child shares, "Fair doesn't mean everyone gets the same thing. Fair means everyone gets enough and sometimes they need more." The teachers here are impressed with their students, their ability to make such a complex ideological shift, to empathize with the plight of others, and to make decisions that apply their newfound theories to the welfare of the common good. Their lesson shows, in one small way, how the evolution of a child's thought can move from a belief in equality as universal application towards a more nuanced conceptualization of equity that is based on a deeper inquiry into one's circumstance and need.

Teaching at the same school as Sam and Diane, Isabel and Lawrence work with third-graders (ages 8-9) as they explore various aspects of social identity. Since the beginning of the school year, students in this classroom have been utilizing the model of restorative circles and the identity wheel as tools to discuss gender, race, and ethnicity as part of their social studies curriculum. Yet social class is an aspect of identity that is perhaps more complicated than others, as it is usually perceived to be earned rather than ascribed and is not celebrated or sustained for its diversity and difference. In an interview, Isabel admitted: "We looked all over the place and it was so difficult to find social class lessons for our elementary students. We had to come up with our own way of discussing social class; it just wasn't there." Prior to this filmed occasion, Isabel and Lawrence created and taught a series of introductory lessons on social class, which included discussing scenarios, reading children's literature, even a math lesson which showed how some neighborhoods had more and nicer benches in their local park than others.

Knowing that the integration of class strikes differently from inclusive approaches taken with race, ethnicity, and multilingualism, Isabel and Lawrence learned that conceptualizing social class would take some extra thought and planning. They drew concept maps and worked with children to show how wealth as symbolic discourse produces a set of social privileges tied to judgments on education, leisure, clothing, language use, and housing, not only income and occupation. They then staged an activity where students would align themselves along a row of chairs each representing 1/10 of the nation's wealth percentile. "In the end, a group of students ended up having to share one chair," Isabel explained. "But then one child ended up sitting in the 1% chair and the students were going, look at him, he did nothing to get that chair! And then the kid [in the chair] goes, well look, I'll give you everything!" Amid the bustle of the activity,



THIRD GRADERS IN A RESTORATIVE CIRCLE. PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR.

Using Restorative Circles to Surface Social Class in Third Grade

To view this resource visit:
<https://vimeo.com/786442204>

Isabel explains how the conversation then veered into how the ultra-wealthy have made gains over others, to which another student decided, "Well look, one person has all the riches, and he probably inherited it." On their own, the young children in this class have exposed a major facet of

our imminent economic crisis -- that the U.S. is projected to incur the greatest wealth transfer in its history, which according to economics and historians will play an outsized role in exacerbating racial disparities and future wealth gaps (Zhu & Zinn, 2024). Not only are the children making nuanced and candid hypotheses about the distribution of wealth at the national level but are also acknowledging the role of inheritance and generational wealth transfer in the exacerbation of class division and hierarchy.

Restorative circles are pedagogical spaces for dialogue where students come together to foster collective understanding across differences (Koltz & Kersten-Parrish, 2020). On the day of the observation, the teachers utilized the well-practiced method of restorative circles to engage students in a stand-up/sit-down activity that examined the kinds of uneven privileges that result from economic differences. Through guided listening, restorative circles center the perspectives of children by encouraging them to share their experiences and respond to others with sensitivity and care. These practices have been built into the fabric of Isabel and Lawrence's classroom, and their deftness is so well-known that it is common to find visitors from across the district in their room to witness and learn from their work. Yet in a lesson that intentionally acknowledges and publicly discusses who has and who has-not in the room, it is hard to ignore the emotional gravity that begins to appear. When asked what they noticed from the stand up-sit down activity, one student shared how such division can create feelings of happiness for those who stood up and sadness for those who remained seated. In their study with drawings, Howard et al. (2018) found that children are continually engaging processes of "class-making" wherein understandings of wealth and poverty are not only material, but also linked to variable emotional states of happiness and exclusion.

Emotions are not merely psychological states, but cultural practices that carry the affective force to align bodies in ways that can be either collective and exclusionary (Ahmed, 2004; see Massumi, 2014 on affective capitalism). They do not reside solely in an individual, but function to differentiate, circulate, and move individuals together and apart, oftentimes in conformity with social norms and expectations. While the study of class is typically treated as rational inquiry (Lindquist, 2004), the actual experience of social class is affective and emotional. To acknowledge this requires a kind of pedagogy that moves students not beyond but rather into and toward an understanding of class-based relations and histories, an embodied approach that is often absent in neoclassical approaches to the teaching of economics. Nonetheless, numerous ethical and pedagogical questions abound and certainly not all discomforting pedagogies are appropriate (Burgard, et al., 2024). But if we accept that emotions are intricately bound up in relations of power, then a level of discomfort might be necessary for interrogating the deeply-entrenched normative practices that sustain social inequities (Boler, 1999; Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017; Zembylas & McGlynn, 2012). Even in a classroom where difficult conversations and social issues are frequently discussed, Isabel and Lawrence admit that the planning and teaching

of social class, a new topic for students, required an extra level of trust, responsibility, and compassion in order for difficult conversations to not lead to feelings of despair or exclusion. "This is personal to me," Isabel shares, "because I lived this. We didn't want kids to say, I'm poor, I have nothing. We didn't want them to walk away with that...But it isn't an easy life, you know. Yuyi Morales when she first came to the United States, she had nothing. She was looked down on because she spoke Spanish. It was personal for us. That's what teaching is."

Introducing Social Class & Institutional Classism in Fourth/Fifth Grade

To view this resource visit:

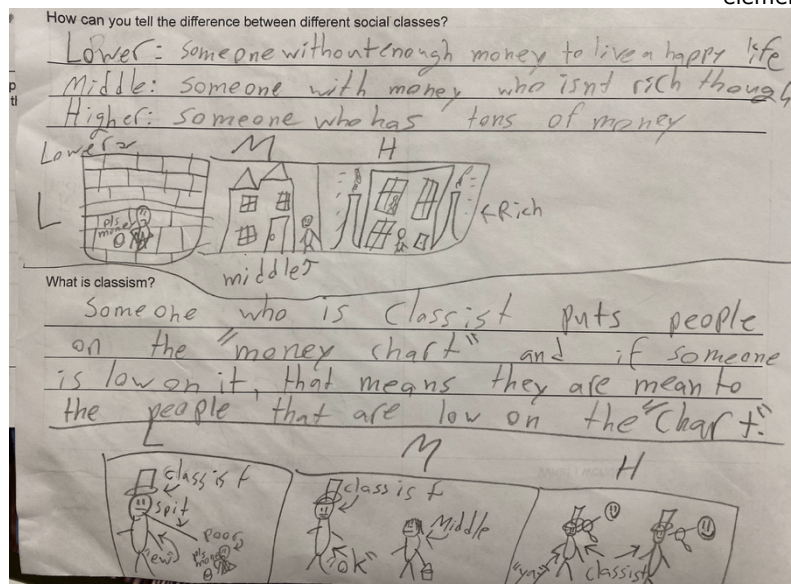
<https://vimeo.com/761939810>

A few blocks over at a different school, Jia, a fourth/fifth-grade teacher, is exploring the concept of social class and classism with her students (ages 9-11) for the very first time (for a fuller description of lesson, see Sonu, 2022). As part of a progressive consortium, the school Jia teaches at is well-known for their centering of social issues in the classroom. Serving a majority students of color (49% Hispanic, 9% Black, and 5% Asian), the teachers practice descriptive reviews of their students, submit narrative reports instead of traditional grades, strive towards egalitarian and participatory governance, and have instituted an open work period once a week that is completely student-led. This year, 80% of the students at her school opted out of taking the state exams. In contrast to the previous school she worked at, which in the wake of No Child Left Behind shifted dramatically towards test scores and accountability, Jia shares that a central core of her teaching is collaboration, not just with other teachers, but when possible, with students and their families. They ask together: "What does it mean to be well-educated? How do we make whatever they are learning purposeful? Teaching has to have meaning," she shares. "We have to attend to education in an emotional way, as well as research and analytical skills."

In teaching economic inequality, Jia begins by helping students as they slowly open up about the ways classism plays out with each other. In an interview, she remarks, "my interest in the work is from seeing how children treat each other. People might assume that kids don't understand or recognize social class, but they do whether we name it or not." When asked about how economic inequality appears in her classroom, Jia recalls how, in the recess yard, conflicts sometimes arise as students notice who has new sneakers, outfits, or fresh haircuts. Children have been seen "saying hurtful and mean things to delineate the haves and have-nots." Those without certain things begin to express embarrassment, covering their hair if it grows too long or if they feel unkempt in comparison. The fear, Jia explains, is that they begin to believe that "if you just work hard enough, you can make it right. You just have to pick yourself up by the bootstraps. That kind of messaging...we're trying to debunk that." In direct opposition to economics theories that foreground self-interest over community, her lessons serve as an

intervention that disrupts the belief that “stepping on or pushing down” others for the sake of personal gain and recognition is acceptable and necessary.

For many of her students, this will be the first time they are hearing the term ‘social class’ and learning directly about the historical and contemporary machinations of capitalism. To begin, and as seen in the film, Jia draws out their emergent ideas as they develop a working definition



FIFTH GRADER WRITES ABOUT CLASSISM. PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR

that includes the terms “ranking,” “separating,” “power,” and “worth.” She then hooks their own experiences with and observations of classism with a broader analysis using an analytical chart on the four levels of inequality -- internalized, interpersonal, societal, and institutional. Bridging internalized and interpersonal encounters with broader socioeconomic and political critique is the leap Jia hopes to make. To do this, she returns the children to their previous unit on immigration, a documentary they viewed on the NAFTA trade agreement, and patterns they noticed when looking at census data or when discussing the push and pull factors that spurred waves of immigrants during various historical epochs. In surfacing primary source photographs from their study of the ‘American Dream’ and encouraging them to think deeper about how institutional and foreign policies contour the limits and possibilities of economic mobility, Jia admits: “I did anticipate maybe some confusion between some of the different layers like maybe societal and institutional. I had that in the back of my mind. We’ve talked a lot about things, but it wasn’t quite connecting. But I know this. As an educator, I can recognize it.” She vows to pick up from this reflection to build a more expansive analysis into the societal and institutional realms of economic policy and its far-reaching impact on communities and society itself.

To some degree, Jia disagrees that there is a lack of resources available for elementary teachers on economic inequality. When asked what resources she drew from when planning her lesson, she recounts the book, *The Spirit Level* (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011), which

demonstrates how societies with the most severe income inequalities tend to present the greatest societal ills and hardships. “Everything I see is through this lens now,” she shares. “If you live in a society where everyone feels taken care of, it actually benefits everyone in that community. We need to unpack that for kids very early on.” Although much of published curriculum is geared for middle and high school/secondary students, she believes the work of elementary school teachers is to know their children well enough to make the needed modifications, “to try things out.” “If you notice it’s not quite connecting,” she goes on, “be able to tweak things and learn from that.” Building from her own study into economic inequality and her many years of teaching and wisdom, Jia crafts her lesson to help children root out the ways that classism plays out in their own sense of self, in their relationship with others, and within the expanse of the social world around them and in which they participate. Of course, learning about the world takes time, continuity, and practice, and even as teaching about social class presents its own challenges, Jia is certain their curiosity has been piqued. The students go home that day and discuss the lesson with their parents; they come back the next day wondering if they would learn more.

Future Directions

Certainly, there is much for teachers and teacher educators to parse out from these three films on teaching social class to young children. Upon viewing them, discussions can lean into curriculum and pedagogy, but also a multitude of other directions including teacher epistemology and beliefs, child-centeredness and care, the pros and cons of capitalism and its excesses, the teaching of neoclassical economics versus inequality, as well as the classed history and hidden curriculum of schooling and educating for economic justice. In the cases presented here, all teachers begin with an intimate understanding of how social class matters to the lives of children and the relationships they forge with others. All the teachers were particularly concerned about how banal meritocracy (Fine & Burns, 2003) affects their students’ perceptions of self and others, and how such judgments are shaped through an oversimplification of achievement, hard work, and individual will. They make clear that material and social privileges are not solely a function of one’s ability and capacity, but rather contextualized by the realities of inheritance, historical denials of opportunity, and bandwagon beliefs on resource distribution.

At the heart of this work is an acknowledgement that children, too, harbor deep feelings about the conditions of their own welfare. Internalized from within the ideologies of American exceptionalism, young children possess a strong sense of the stereotypical tropes tied to various social categories and are found to play out the neoclassical belief that material wealth determines status and value (Heberle & Carter, 2020). This is no less true in classrooms where a significant number of children experience

firsthand the hardships that come with economic poverty. Since children who do not have class privilege can subscribe to the notion that their class position is of their own making (Gilbert, 2008), this makes the redress of beliefs and behaviors fundamental to fostering the beginnings of critical analysis. The fear that such teaching might elicit discomfort should not prevent engagement with what Wayne Ross (2018) claims is “perhaps the single most important variable in society” (p. 250). Instead, teachers should take care in their curriculum, be thoughtful with their classed assumptions, and mitigate the capitalist ideologies that push some students into feelings of despair, shame, and inadequacy.

In such work, it is also important to recognize that one of the greatest false dichotomies lies in the ideological rift between a critique of capitalism and the individual desire for upward mobility (Fine & Burns, 2003). As if striving for opportunity, access, and security somehow runs counter to demands for an economy that tempers unfettered accumulation for the sake of greater stability and egalitarian good. As if ensuring basic wants and needs -- of securing house, health, and sustenance to live -- is separable from dismantling systems of labor exploitation and expropriation (Fraser, 2022, p. 149). As argued by Heather Bullock and Kathryn Lott (2019), the teaching of social class should not be an investigation into poverty alone, but rather a shift toward examining how economic inequality is a problem for all. To do this, the teachers importantly bridged curricular standards on economics with the civics standards of “social class, systems of stratification, social groups, and institutions” as well as “social and political inequalities” and the “expansion and access of rights” (NYCDOE, 2014, p. 2) to ground a range of pedagogical moves including interactive read alouds, simulations, restorative circles, character analysis, whole-group discussions, document analysis, and historical connections and investigation.

At a time of tightened curriculum and heightened surveillance on teachers and teaching, notwithstanding the great limitations of mayoral control over schools, all the teachers here credit their administrators and school culture for supporting this kind of teaching, for enabling the freedom and space they need to create and design, to collaborate and discuss. In her interview, Sam shared: “our principal is very passionate about cultural diversity and equity. She doesn’t shy away from having those talks. You really can’t pretend that it’s not happening.” In addition, both schools are known to lift up the teaching of social studies as the central subject from which other disciplines, content areas, and skills are taught. While social studies is said to be at-risk in the elementary school classroom (Halvorsen, 2012), overshadowed by the predominance of literacy and math, it remains one of the most important disciplines in which to study identity, history, and civic engagement.

This project responds to a gap in literature on the teaching of social class and economic inequality (Shanks, 2019; Vagle & Jones, 2012). In contrast to neoclassical economics and financial literacy, the teachers in this project take a critical lens on local, historical, and felt experiences of inequality and critique the inability of free

market capitalism to materialize fairness and justice for all. For younger children, this includes unpacking meanings of fairness and equity, instilling the values of social cooperation and collective good, and drawing from stories to focus on solidarity and change. For older children, teachers can teach about the structural bases of social class and its inequalities, how social class is conceptualized and measured, and the role of institutions in creating, mitigating, and maintaining class status. The current times will always call for an education in which students recognize societal problems and think together about how to act upon the world. Social class and economic inequality, as an issue that is both nowhere and everywhere, needs more saliency in our classrooms and the teachers in this project show us, each in their own way, how such teaching begins with our young children.

Note

To view all the films mentioned in this article, as well as additional resources visit:

<https://inequalities.commonsc.gc.cuny.edu/short-films-on-teaching-economic-inequality-to-young-children/>

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Debbie Sonu is Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Hunter College and doctoral faculty at The Graduate Center, City University of New York. She is interested in what happens when public school teachers bring social issues into their classrooms. This project was supported by the Louis Kampf Radical Teacher Fellowship Award from The Center for Critical Education and the PSC-CUNY Enhanced Research Award.



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