

Deconstructing Meritocracy in the College Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to discuss meritocracy as it impacts our undergraduate college teaching. As college educators, we have come to realize how little students have been challenged to critically examine the notion of meritocracy. Seeking to understand why this is so and what we can do to engender a more nuanced understanding of how social class is structured and perpetuated across generations, we present an assessment of why the majority of students believe we live in a meritocratic society and how college educators can use specific activities to complicate this view. As we do this we include evidence of how social class and social mobility are structured and why an adherence to meritocracy is, we believe, an anathema to teaching for social justice.

KEYWORDS

Critical reflection; scholarship of teaching and learning; social class

“We need accountability and should not allow any more free rides!” “No wait, aren’t the rich getting richer?” “What about working for what you get?” “It just isn’t fair...how come no one talks about this?”

The statements above are typical of those that we (college-level teacher educators) hear from our undergraduate students when we broach the issues of social class and social mobility. And though these statements suggest a spirit of inquiry, we repeatedly find that when it comes to social class, social mobility, and equal opportunity, our students adhere to a flawed socioeconomic (SES) narrative. Meritocracy—the belief that with hard work any individual can overcome any obstacle and achieve success no matter where they start out in life (McNamee and Miller 2009)—has been repeated so often that it has for many, if not most, Americans become “common sense (Lakoff, 2002, 2008).” Further, meritocracy is so deeply entrenched as a national leitmotif that questioning its validity has become tantamount to sacrilege, even within the ivory tower (McNamee and Miller 2009; Wrye 2012). As college professors focused on preparing the next generations of K–12 public school teachers, we adhere to using education as a force for positive social change (aka, social reconstructionism). As educators who are deeply rooted in the philosophical intersections of critical theory and social justice, we believe that it is imperative that our students—most of whom hope to become K–12 teachers—understand how social class is both structured and perpetuated. We believe that, unlike the ideology underlying meritocracy, “social justice”

encourages and empowers teachers to be agents of change in their classrooms and communities. We concur with Bell’s statement that “the goal of social justice is [the] full and equal participation of all groups in [a] society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure” (Bell 2013, 21). Our aim is to facilitate thinking that encourages future teachers to focus on changing the institutional structures of poverty in schools rather than trying to change those individuals who experience poverty and inequity. We enact this commitment by designing hands-on activities in which students see for themselves the extant inequities in the distribution of opportunities. The lessons described below force students to recognize the too-seldom examined realities of trying to “get ahead” when starting from scratch. Combined, the activities are designed to push students toward a paradigm shift from which they can begin to critically question the validity of meritocracy as a guiding national/economic principle.

In what follows, we analyze why meritocracy is so appealing to our students, offer strategies for deconstructing meritocracy as a guiding ideology, and conclude with a preliminary analysis of a series of related pedagogical activities. It is our hope that this work might assist college educators (including instructors in education, political science, criminal justice, sociology, public health and other related fields) who—like us—are

committed to social justice and who struggle to engage their students in more critical and more nuanced understandings of social class.

Conceptual framework

In this work we draw heavily from critical theorists, including Stanley Aronowitz (2004), who describe how meritocracy functions as both an ideology and a mythology. Ideologically, meritocracy purports that with hard work anyone can achieve the “American dream” (the manifestation of which tends to be financial and social success). As a mythology, meritocracy relies upon revisionist and selective histories—most notably Horatio Alger tales—that present rags to riches and immigrant success stories as generalizable truth. Michael Apple (2000) notes that in addition to myriad other “official” sources, schools reify meritocracy through constant repetition in school curricula. When this is combined with competitive grading, school disciplinary norms, and an increasing emphasis on American exceptionalism, repetition moves the idea of meritocracy from a questionable philosophy into the realm of “common sense.”¹ However, the idea of the United States as a meritocratic society—with its attendant history and a focus on laissez-faire capitalism—is highly problematic as it obfuscates real economic trends, denies the experiences of minority populations, (e.g. non-white, indigenous, female, etc.), and ignores the reality of the bulk of middle and low-income American workers. The ideology of meritocracy is integral to the American “land of opportunity” zeitgeist. Unfortunately, the meritocracy narrative itself is—at least historically and presently—fatally flawed.

The unassailable economic reality

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2014; 2015), more people are working full-time and year-round than ever before; yet more than 46 million Americans live in poverty. Much of this is a result of income inequalities that have pushed ever-larger segments of the population into poverty (a statistic that would be far higher were the federal government to adjust its definition of “poverty” to reflect today’s economic realities). Poverty is widespread, as the Census Bureau (2015) confirms: “During the 4-year period from 2009 to 2012, 34.5 percent of the population had at least one spell of poverty lasting 2 or more months” (4) and is worse for people of color and women. The current median annual income for Whites is \$60,256, while for Blacks it is \$35,398; women still earn 79 cents on the dollar of men’s earnings. Poverty is also unequally distributed by age; 21.1% of all children live in poverty, representing a staggering 33.3% of all people

living in poverty. And although poverty is ubiquitous, it is most pronounced in the American southeast (where we work). Overall a significant number of both employed and unemployed people in the United States live in poverty, and the distribution of numbers of poor people is influenced by regionalism, sexism, classism and age. Merely having a full-time job (or two) falls far short of protecting individuals from poverty. Clearly the playing field is not even, a fact highlighted by our “disposable” income activity (described later in this paper).

Chasing the hydra: Exploring the social spaces of meritocratic thinking

As we fight to bring the significance of this data to our students, we notice a blind spot in their thinking: for them, social mobility is an unassailable reality, and wealth and poverty are deserved. Our students repeatedly express to us that people simply “are where they belong.” Our experiences echo those of Wrye (2012), who found that “many students believe that there is more equality today than in earlier generations and that society is becoming increasingly fairer with each passing day” (140). As we struggle to teach a more complex reality, we first need to understand how meritocracy has gained currency. Our examination of this has led us to think of meritocracy in two closely related ways: as a hegemon (described by Antonio Gramsci (1992) as a ubiquitous agent of a society that reifies and shields from critique extant power dynamics) and as a hydra (a many-headed monster).

As teacher educators, we critically examine how the notion of meritocracy plays out in schools. Schools both espouse critical thinking as an ideal (critical thinking is repeated *ad nauseum* in the Common Core State Standards) and serve as a primary agent of the status quo and cultural and ideological reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Giroux 2012; Heath 1983; McLaren 2006). Concurrently, a corporatist view of public education encourages a logic through which schools are conceptualized as highly regulated factories with measurable outputs and quality control. In this system, students are raw materials that workers (teachers) shape via a coercive system of rewards and punishments. The main problem with this model of schooling is that it assumes homogeneous input (every child the same as every other child), homogeneous factories (identical school settings and resources), and homogeneous assembly-line workers (similarly skilled and motivated teachers in age-graded classrooms). Although such a conception of reality is clearly problematic (Ohanian 1999), this idea continues to snowball in popularity. Terms such as “accountability,” “healthy competition,” “merit pay,” “choice,” and

“managed instructional systems” (White 2012) force students from widely heterogeneous backgrounds to compete for grades and educational rewards using a one-size-fits-all curriculum with little to no structural support. One of the results of this system is that as the most successful students “earn” the rewards of entrance to the best colleges, graduate schools, and high paying jobs, they are tacitly led to believe that they are the cream of the crop. Conversely, they come to believe that their less successful peers have fared less well due to lack of a suitable work ethic and/or natural ability. Thanks to meritocracy, students who have benefitted from undisclosed benefits often express to us that they see their less-successful peers as apathetic rather than as having been robbed of hope.

Meritocracy is not just reified in schools, it is central to a robust self-help industry and an ever-more popular prosperity theology. Prosperity theology equates riches to “God’s reward” (see for example the work of aptly named Pastor Creflo Dollar), while self-help logic posits that simply *thinking* in a particular regimented manner engenders success. Both maintain that the universe/karma will respond to one’s beliefs, and the prizes of the American dream will fall into place. This “empowerment” triumvirate—philosophy, theology, curricula—reifies the idea that with enough psychological, spiritual, and academic effort, all citizens can share in the rewards of success. Despite dubious scholarship, a highly selective reading of American history, and an obfuscation of reality (and any critique of that reality), the meritocracy myth insists that we are all equally positioned to be anything. If we are not among those who are at the top, the fault is none but our own. These are the perspectives that we target via the entirety of educational activities that we will describe in more detail here.

Millennials, diversity, and bumper sticker equality

The idea that we can all “just do it” has considerable currency with millennials (those born between 1982–2002). This generation is often described as eager to engage in collaborative work in diverse settings (Carter 2008; Chronicle of Higher Education 2007; Gibson, Greenwood, and Murphy 2009) and as more multicultural, culturally inclusive, and tolerant of racial/ethnic, religious, and gender differences than were previous generations (Carter 2008; Raines 2002; Castro 2010). Some of this supposed openness must be credited to the rise of social media, now the primary means by which young people communicate (Ledbetter et al., 2010); Facebook alone has opened up more cross-cultural and cross-border connections to more people than all of the technological developments that preceded it. Yet the bulk of

the millennial generation’s openness to cultural differences appears to be superficial in nature—e.g., bumper sticker pronouncements that “we are equal,” that “you can be anything,” and that having a diverse group of “friends” equates to a true understanding of the realities of “the other.” Diversity in this paradigm consists largely of recognizing superficial cultural or physical characteristics and feel-good philosophies that, though laudable, lack real world application. This contrasts with a social justice perspective that focuses on a critical understanding of the connectedness of power, resources, and capital to race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status.

Compounding this problem is the fact that the K–12 public schools where millennials have been educated are more segregated now than at any point in the last four decades, resulting in educational experiences in which students are unlikely to have experienced significant cultural, racial, and socioeconomic diversity (Betebenner, Eisenhart, and Howe 2001). The dissolution of bussing and the rise of school “choice” have contributed to an increasingly homogenous student population in the nation’s public schools over the past two decades; affluent parents (aka middle and upper-class white parents) now have the ability to move their children to the schools of their choice, whereas students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are relegated to neighborhood schools regardless of those schools’ academic performance. This results in neighborhood schools that are highly segregated in terms of race and economic status (Betebenner, Eisenhart, and Howe 2001). Schools today have resegregated along both racial *and* economic lines. In short, millennials’ claim of openness to and respect for diversity—while in many ways a positive step forward—is nonetheless belied both by their having less face-to-face contact with people from diverse cultures than did their parents *and* by the fact that the vast majority of their cross-cultural communications take place via a nuance-divorced social media. For our classes, we designed an activity in which we use the video based upon Jonathan Kozol’s “Savage Inequalities,” which shows students the harsh realities associated with segregated and very unequal public schools.

Meritocracy and preservice teachers

Despite decades of efforts by university-based teacher educators to prepare teachers who will implement culturally responsive pedagogy, evidence suggests that the bulk of students hold tight to narrow views of diversity and access to opportunity. A synthesis of studies conducted between 1985–2007 revealed that students had not developed an understanding of complex issues such as inequities related to power and privilege (Castro

2010). This lack of a critical socio-cultural perspective serves to reinforce the belief in a meritorious society (in which schools are ‘the great equalizer’) (Castro 2010; Villegas and Lucas 2002). Castro’s analysis of studies from 1995–1999 in multicultural teacher education exposed how an “individualistic orientation to multicultural education allowed pre-service teachers to maintain a myth of meritocracy from which they could blame minorities and underachieving students for their lack of success in the public schools” (202). Despite reality, the ideology of meritocracy gives students license to believe that social and economic positions are based on a just and equitable distribution of society’s benefits.

We have found that our students come to see these issues far more clearly when, as part of classroom activities (detailed later in this paper), they assume the identities of people from widely varying socioeconomic classes. For example, when we assign students from wealthy or middle-class backgrounds to role play in a poor SES group, they quickly find that they are severely challenged in “making ends meet” with little income and in contexts in which they encounter the “costs” of everyday life that they had never before contemplated. They see via the school funding activity how and why their community struggles to provide adequate educational opportunities for their children. They must compete (against their more adequately funded peers) to perform well on high-stakes academic tasks, but they must do so with far fewer and lower-quality educational resources than those peers. Combined, these activities provide tangible evidence that draws into question the ideology of meritocracy.

Teacher education: Promoting or questioning meritocracy?

Because free public schooling has long been touted as the great equalizer—an avenue to success open to all—teacher education programs are logical places in which to examine epistemologies that can motivate and hinder student academic success. Yet we have found that critical examinations of meritocracy are seldom part of the official curriculum. In many teacher education programs, a critical examination of meritocracy is part of what Eliot Eisner (1994) calls the “null curriculum”: it is something its stakeholders (future teachers) need to know but are not taught. There is no guarantee that that future teachers have or will encounter any critical analysis of the relationship between dominant views of poverty and ideas about meritocracy. This is not surprising, as much of the corporately produced curriculum for teacher education celebrates the diversity of America’s K–12 student population but gives only cursory mention to how students

are differentially affected by poverty (Gorski 2008). Generally, we have found that these materials also sidestep examinations of teacher expectations of students, students’ views of educational opportunities, and the importance of these factors to educational success (or educational failure) more broadly.

In addition, essentialist classist paradigms are too often used to “explain” wealth and poverty in K–12 college materials. The most striking—and problematic—example of this is Ruby Payne’s, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2005), which is used in myriad school districts (including ours) to teach educators about poverty. This self-published text from the self-described “leading U.S. expert on the mindset of poverty” (Bohn 2007) “frames poverty as a deficit among students and parents that leans on the myth of meritocracy” (Gorski 2005, 2). Payne’s work has been discredited by academics across a wide array of fields for its lack of scholarship (Gorski 2005, 2008, 2012; Ng and Rury 2006; Osei-Kofi 2005), its misrepresentations of highly regarded research examining poverty and culture (e.g., Kozol 1991, 2005; Lewis 1963), its unwillingness to examine the connection of poverty to greater educational inequities (Gorski 2008; National Commission on Teaching America’s Future 2004), and its reification of meritocracy itself (Gorski 2008). Nonetheless, Payne’s *Framework* remains popular in teacher education courses, school-based teacher training seminars, and even mainstream teacher education textbooks. The inclusion of Payne’s (and similar) work in textbooks and in in-service teacher training programs provides these views with credibility they do not deserve. Rather than engaging future teachers in a critical examination of the inherent flaws in an inequitable educational system, these texts reify the status quo, as they reinforce negative stereotypes of our most vulnerable students: those in poverty.

Reflexivity, meritocracy and teacher education

In our classrooms, it is not uncommon for students who possess an abundance of economic and cultural capital (i.e. white, middle-class, able-bodied, straight, Christian, and who have realized and benefitted from the school system) to judge others via the lens of meritocracy. They are resistant to the idea that their journey through education may have been influenced by their social and class position. Adams (2013) notes, “Many people who are privileged as well as those disadvantaged by class find it difficult to acknowledge their internalized denials of their own class location” (144). Our students frequently insist that academic failure is a direct result of cultural deficits (Haberman and Post 1992) rather than as a possible symptom of a meritocratic system. Although pre-service

teachers overwhelmingly express that their choice of major is based on their desire to “make a difference,” they also express the belief that schools are spaces of equal opportunity. Their epistemology for helping all students to succeed can be summarized in their desire to “treat all students the same” (an ideology that minimizes if not ignores the copious differences in experiences of the students they will be educating).

Ryan (2006) argues that in order to be fair and culturally competent, teacher education students (and we believe all college students in a pluralistic society) must be challenged to examine the social construction of their identities. They must also critically assess their own social locations in order to understand those of others (Sleeter 2011; Kincheloe 2005). Accomplishing this includes reflecting on personal and cultural histories, identities, and values (Genor and Goodwin 2005) and those of social/cultural others through an examination of issues of race, class, power, and the privilege (Ryan 2006). Because there is frequently a mismatch between teachers’ and students’ respective cultures, and because there is an exceptionally strong relationship between teachers’ beliefs and the attitudes and expectations they exhibit in the classroom, it is essential to engage teachers in challenging and questioning meritocracy (Sleeter 2011; Kyles and Olafson 2008). Doing so gives teacher education students a lens through which to understand the complexity of unequal opportunity (Garcia et al. 2010; Martin and Van Guten 2002; Villegas and Lucas 2002). Once students understand the influence of their experiences and class positions on their academic journeys, and the ideologies that underlie their pedagogical decisions, then they can begin to develop an understanding of the way achievement is structured and can begin to craft equitable pedagogical spaces (Kress 2011).

Fighting back

In the next section of this paper, we provide details about the activities (based on school funding and income) to which we have previously alluded. Through these, we hoped to lead students into a critical space from which they might be able to understand the impact of structural dis/advantages on school success and engage in complex understandings of class, power, and social mobility.

Activity I: The tax form

We created a faux tax form (Appendix 1) so that specific inputs—property value, population density, yearly and monthly income—result in specific outcomes that mirror a range of typical funding scenarios and that address student conceptions of funding equity. The form requires

that students derive per pupil revenue (PPR) amounts—the amount a district allocates to educate one student for one year—for people in different economic statuses. The analogy of the activity to determine one’s taxes is intentional: we want students to see and to question the reliance on property values as a major source of funding for public schools.

For this activity, students are paired (as hypothetical couples), or assigned to work individually (to represent single parents) and assigned to one of three economic identities with a corresponding annual income range: Low SES = \$20,000–\$30,000; Middle SES = \$50,000–\$90,000; High SES = \$100,000 – \$250,000. Each student family then determines the value of the property they would be likely to own (if any). This includes evaluating the kind of home and automobiles they could afford, the kinds of loans—if any—for which they would qualify, and the number of parents who work outside of the home. Once they compute the gross value of their property, students then use a simplified formula to determine how much total revenue is generated for their community (consisting of families of similar economic standing to their own) and the per-pupil revenue (PPR) for their school district (Appendix 1, line q). As a class, we record each student group’s outcomes in an associated chart (Appendix 2).

Activity II: “Disposable” income

Our second activity—one closely tied to the first—is the “Disposable Income” worksheet (Appendix 3). The worksheet combines some of the data from the tax form activity with difficult new life choices that the students have to make to “make ends meet” each month. Students are given worksheets, on which each “family” has to find a way to live “in the black” (without chronic debt) based upon their assigned incomes. They estimate expenses (rent and neighborhood, car payments, their monthly grocery expenses—including quality of food—daycare expenses, etc.). The activity is designed to teach students about the realities of economic life in the United States and to highlight the limits of low-income family budgets. We find this particularly important as most of our students have little understanding of the costs of everyday life, they have not struggled with insufficient incomes, and they express naïve beliefs regarding how income structures opportunity and choices.

Activity III: Tying school funding to learning opportunities

In the third part of our school funding and meritocracy lesson, students participate in an activity designed to

show how school funding affects individual student learning and opportunities to learn. This activity intentionally limits poor students' chances of success on a pseudo college-entry test by limiting the resources they have to find answers to that test (while conversely making success far easier for students with adequate resources).

Remaining in their assigned socioeconomic status pairings, students are given a timed "test" (with questions from a broad array of content areas) that they must complete (Appendix 4). They are told that scores on the test—analogue to the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or the American College Testing (ACT)—will affect whether or not they will be accepted into a strong college, a weak college, a trade school, or none of the above. Each student group/family is also given a specific amount of (faux) money that it may spend to purchase classroom/educational resources that might help them answer questions on the test.

The educational resources available to the students (Appendix 4) have associated costs relative to their educational value, some of which are prohibitive to students from lower SES backgrounds (who for example may be able to afford pencils but not test prep materials). Consequently, those with fewer resources must struggle to find the right answers to the test in the time allotted, (e.g. they need to do long division on math problems, answer geography questions using out-of-date maps, answer statistical questions using out-of-date resources). Some questions—e.g., "find the square root of 4913"—are either impossible to answer correctly without resources or require repeated trial and error that consumes significant amounts of time. Finally, we act as classroom teachers ourselves, delivering answers, hints, and advice that are themselves differentially based and correlated to how much the students could afford to pay for it. We do this in order to illustrate the fact that highly experienced teachers tend to gravitate toward those districts and schools with the most resources resulting in fewer qualified teachers willing to work in poorer districts (Jacob 2007).

Wrap-up activity: Narratives from the schools

The final part of our lesson (to demonstrate the real-world corollaries to our activities), we assign readings from Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (1991) and/or watch a video based upon Kozol's seminal text (*Children in America's Schools with Bill Moyers* (1996)). Even after having completed our activities, students tend to express shock at the stories depicted in these powerful documentaries. Kozol puts a very human face on the suffering wrought by

poverty, especially as it affects schools and learning—his work makes plain how children are deprived of the opportunities many of our students take for granted. Following Kozol, we wrap up our coverage of school funding with a class discussion about how "fair" meritocracy is in reality. We push students to be more reflective about educational opportunity and privilege by asking questions such as: "Who among you can afford a reliable computer and to have Internet access at home? Who among you has a parent (with a valid driver's license) with access to reliable transportation so that he/she can take you to a school of their/your choosing? Who among you has a parent(s) who can afford to hire a tutor for you when you struggle in reading or math?" (See Appendix 6 for full list of questions).

Preliminary analysis of student reactions

Using critical ethnographic field notes (Carspecken 1996), we conclude with a preliminary analysis of the success of our pedagogy. Our activities were designed to engage students in an imaginative but concrete journey as they navigate the material realities of social class and schooling. Students assigned to be poor must consistently cut their budgets in order to "get by." Many find that they cannot afford health care or a car, and that the costs of daycare exceed the economic value of both parents holding a job. Students assigned to middle income—especially those at the lower end of the income range—frequently find that while their gross income "seemed like a lot of money at first" (student comment), the costs of raising a family consume much if not all of those funds (it is typical for a family earning \$5000/month to find that, after expenses, they have only \$0-\$300 as a safety net). A student from this group summed up a common experience by saying: "We thought we'd have lots left over to spend because we were the rich couple. I guess what surprised me was how much we'd spent on stuff." Most of those in the upper-income group, however, find that they have ample additional funds to support college and retirement savings, soccer camps, vacation getaways, etc. These are also the students who contemplate the great things they might buy with their extra income.

Students in the poor group (and some in the middle-class group) have to revise their worksheets repeatedly to make ends meet; often reductions in one area required changes to other areas. One student commented, "It [the tax form] was fun but sometimes frustrating. We kept having to go back and change it so we weren't in the negative. We started out spending way too much." Another student expressed his frustration by saying "I'm not sure we can do it...how can we afford to eat and pay rent

when her [the wife's] salary doesn't even pay enough for daycare?" They had to revise their sheet to a scenario in which one parent stayed home, and they lost that income. Another couple had to "recruit" a grandparent to watch their infant while another couple required almost full-time babysitting from their middle school-aged child. The rich families, on the other hand, seldom had to make any substantive changes to their forms; they have enough money to "buy" the lifestyles that they envision.

With this last part of the activity, students are given the opportunity to see that funding affects not just the quality of the schools their children attend but also the "unevenness of the home playing field" (student comment). By highlighting inequities in funding based upon property taxes, pre-service teachers may begin to see how financial resources, and the quality of life they bring, are unequally distributed and how differences in lifestyle choices based upon variables that have little or nothing to do with intelligence, creativity, or hard work. They appear to see—and through the activity, experience—the need for those with fewer resources to work harder just to make ends meet. Said one student after the activity, "Finally, others started to see what you've been talking about this whole semester. Poor kids get screwed and the school system doesn't help. Poor kids go to lousy schools and the rich kids get whatever they want." This final activity helps our students realize that hope—a prerequisite for meritocracy—is itself unequally distributed.

Implications and closing thoughts

Our preliminary analysis of comments from our students suggests to us that despite the ubiquity of meritocratic ideology in schools and popular culture, a shift in thinking toward a more critical and nuanced stance is possible. However, some students—especially white middle or upper-class students—cling to the belief that despite the fact that schools are differentially funded, hard work and determination alone will see students through to success (and, conversely, that responsibility for academic failure lies solely with the student and her/his parents). As one (white, male, middle-class student), nearing the end of the semester stated, "if everyone was just more like me, we wouldn't have these problems." Still, most of our students appear to experience some shift their thinking about meritocracy (from being slightly more willing to be critical of meritocracy to overt outrage at the "corrupt" and "unjust" system).

Although students enter our classrooms believing in meritocracy, we find that we are able to engage them in more concrete and complex understandings of how

social class is structured. By the end of our activities, our students typically react with incredulity, sadness, frustration, and finally with outrage. Speaking for many of his classmates, one student summed up his reaction this way: "It [does not] seem fair for this to happen in America and with kids." Added his classmate, "Seems we only want *some* students to be successful. Students like me (upper-middle class and white)." The combination of activities and text resources helps lead our students to a broader questioning of meritocracy. Because meritocracy is so closely tied to the belief that the United States is the "land of opportunity" where anyone can achieve "the American dream," many students encounter significant disequilibrium when forced to recognize meritocracy's many flaws. As they question meritocracy as it affects schools—the great social and economic equalizer—students are also positioned to question its validity more generally. Doing so causes some to realize that the privileges to which they have become accustomed (and that their social and economic standing in the world) are not necessarily "earned" but are the result of cultural (and capital) reproduction. As income disparity increases, and structural racism and sexism continue to impact socio-economic status, we believe that it is increasingly important for college educators, particularly those who are invested in social justice, to give students the access to analytical tools through which they can both understand how social and class is structured and see how schools play a role in this. We hope that once they are able to theorize and practically address the idea of meritocracy, they can work toward creating a more just and equitable world. We also hope that our efforts will add to those of our peers in engaging today's college students in critical examinations of the "common sense" notions to which they have long been indoctrinated.

Note

1. For more on the connection between language, ideology and common sense see Lakoff, 2002, 2008.

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Appendix 1

Financing Schools and Life: Tax Worksheet & Financial Planning Worksheet

PURPOSE:

The purpose of this activity is multifaceted. It is my goal that, through this activity, you come to a better understanding of:

- a) how schools are funded through property taxes;
- b) how district funding (and thus school funding) varies depending upon property values;
- c) how students receive different opportunities based upon socioeconomic status;
- d) how school 'choice' is, at least for the lower end of the American economic sector, no choice at all;
- e) how income makes a difference in education and opportunity (for parents and for children) outside of school;
- f) how parents' choices for their children are often very limited (to work, use daycare, send their children to private schools, etc.)
- g) how the economics of home ownership plays into wealth, savings, and opportunities;
- h) how balancing a checkbook and saving money—after life's expenses—is no easy task (and is a task that is exponentially harder the less wealth one has).

DIRECTIONS:

Please follow the directions below and ask questions about any problems you encounter.

- 1) Choose (or be assigned) a lifestyle
 - a. married
 - b. single/divorced
 - c. same sex partnership
- 2) Choose (or be assigned) an appropriate partner
- 3) Choose number of children you have (0–6 depending upon your particular context)
- 4) Choose (or be assigned) to one of three economic groups based upon family income (low, middle, upper class)
 - a. Within that group, determine as realistically as possible your family's income (based upon location, potential jobs, national and local economy)
 - b. Determine the purchase price of your home (if applicable) to be within three to five times your gross annual income
- 5) Use this information to fill out the attached sheet per its directions
- 6) **MAKE SURE** that, at the end of the worksheet, you are **not** seriously 'in the red' (in a deficit). If you find yourself seriously in debt, go back and make appropriate changes. Make note of where, how and why you had to make changes. Be prepared to report your findings to the instructor and class for a whole-class comparison.

CAVEAT:

The financial worksheet attached is not meant to be fully representative of the current tax structure nor is it intended to portray with 100% accuracy such issues as a mortgage, insurance, or the myriad other issues that our financial lives complicated. Rather, it was designed to highlight the issues above. Similarly, it was not my intent when creating this activity to perpetuate stereotypes.

Gross Family Income per year

Group 1 (\$90,000 - \$250,000)

Group 2 (\$35,000 - \$74,000)

Group 3 (\$10,000 – \$25,000; from unemployed to single-parent income)

of parents working

1) _____

a) _____

Taxes

Group 1 (35%) (a x .35)

Group 2 (22%) (a x .22)

Group 3 (15%) (a x .15)

b) _____

Net Income: (a – b) c) _____

Net Income/month (c / 12) d) _____

Value of your home¹ e) _____

Group 1 (between 3 – 5 times gross income)

Group 2 (between 3 – 4 times gross income)

Group 3 (no home ownership; go to Rent)

Gross Mortgage amount f) _____

Group 1 (e x .82 (= 20% down, mortgage 80%))

Group 2 (e x .9 (= 10% down, mortgage 90%))

Group 2 Option (0% down) –all mortgage

Monthly Mortgage Payment g) _____

(Approximately \$750 per \$100K borrowed per month)

(OR (f) x .0075)

Total Mortgage Payments (30 year loan) h) _____

Group 1 (Mortgage on home (f) multiplied by 2.5)

Group 2 (Mortgage on home (f) multiplied by 3)

Total Home Payments over loan (to true ownership) i) _____

(Total mortgage payments (h) + down payment)

¹When calculating value of home you purchase, consider reasonable amount that you might be able to spend, depending upon other considerations (variables on last sheet of this worksheet), savings, help from parents, etc.

3

Rent j) _____

Group 3 only: \$500 - \$1200/month

(Rent amount depends upon: neighborhood (and schools), number of children (Bedrooms), kinds of jobs held, race/ ethnicity and SES, etc.). Think in terms of cars owned, bus lines to work, etc.)

Health Insurance/month k) _____

Group 1, \$0 (\$100-200/month; most paid by employer)

Group 2, \$100/month individual

\$200/month for couple

\$325/month for family

Group 3, \$0 - \$350/month (optional) NOT picked up by employer

Number of cars 2) _____

Group 1 (2-4)

Group 2 (1-2)

Group 3 (0-1)

Total Value of Automobiles l) _____

Car payments 3) _____

Group 1 (\$0 - \$800/month)

(Car/cars paid for in cash and/or financed)

Group 2 (\$300-\$600/month)

(Depending upon number of cars and loans for each)

Group 3 (any cars? 1? New or Used) 4) _____

(Car repair; older the car = higher repair)

Car Insurance m) _____

Group 1 (\$65/car x 12 months) (\$1000 deductible)

Group 2 & 3 (\$50/car X 12 months) (\$500 deductible)

Group 3 (\$30/month per car, if any) (liability only)

4

Property Taxes/Year (e + 1 (letter)) x .03 n) _____

Community Property Taxes o) _____

Total revenue raised in your community by property taxes)

Group 1, n x 60,000 (members in your residential community)

Group 2, n x 150,000 (members in your residential community)

Group 3, n x 30,000 (members in your residential & business community)

Group 3, add \$6 million to your community property taxes to include businesses and industry in the community)

Local School Allocation p) _____

(o x .30) (a generous 30% funding to schools)

Funding per student in your district* q) _____

Group 1 (p / 22,000 students)

Group 2 (p / 50,000 students)

Group 3 (p / 15,000 students)

* ALSO KNOWN AS PER PUPIL REVENUE (this amount pays for: school building, teacher, administration, staff salary, curriculum, buses and fuel, school utilities, insurance, supplies, continuing education, % of health benefits for employees, standards experts, testing experts, lawyers, etc.)

Appendix 2. Student-derived PPR Outcomes and “Discretionary” Income from Tax Sheet Activity.

Column B GROUP Socioeconomic status (SES)	Column C Yearly Income	Column D Value of Home (line)	Column E Per Pupil Revenue (PPR) (line)	Column F Discretionary Income (line)
Wealthy Group 1	\$250,000	\$1 million	\$14,220	\$1,750
Wealthy Group 2	\$150,000	\$450,000	\$13,628	\$1,264
Wealthy Group 3	\$100,000	\$300,000	\$8,229	\$120
Wealthy Group 4	\$300,000	\$1.2 million	\$14,243	\$1,000
Wealthy Group 1	\$230,000	\$690,000	\$30,037	\$466
Wealthy Group 2	\$110,000	\$330,000	\$12,487	\$320
Wealthy Group 3	\$440,000	\$1.76 million	\$64,462	\$165
Average	225,714	510,000	22,472	726
Middle Class Group 1	\$70,000	\$101,000	\$1,089	\$640
Middle Class Group 2	\$74,000	\$148,000	\$3,686	\$348
Middle Class Group 3	\$65,000	\$100,000	\$989	\$671
Middle Class Group 4	\$75,000	N/A Rent	\$7,500	\$41
Middle Class Group 1	\$67,000	\$134,000	\$5,796	\$1,215
Middle Class Group 2	\$65,000	\$130,000	\$5,688	\$477
Middle Class Group 3	\$60,000	\$150,000	\$6,444	\$447
Middle Class Group 4	\$50,000	\$200,000	\$7,920	\$0
Middle Class Group 5	\$60,000	\$180,000	\$7,560	\$595
Average	65,111	127,000	5,186	493
Poor Group 1	\$20,000	N/A Rent	\$18	\$163
Poor Group 2	\$23,000	N/A Rent	\$27	\$189
Poor Group 3	\$18,000	N/A Rent	\$14	\$27
Poor Group 4	\$25,000	N/A Rent	\$18	\$72
Poor Group 1	\$25,000	N/A Rent	\$108	\$8.92
Poor Group 2	\$25,000	N/A Rent	\$104	\$147
Poor Group 3	\$15,000	N/A Rent	\$36	\$0.50
Poor Group 4	\$21,000	N/A Rent	\$410	\$136
Average	21,500	\$0	\$92	\$93

Note: different instructors taught each of these classes; their instructions and preferences influenced the income ranges. Instructors’ instructions and *student errors* in computation led to relatively minor discrepancies in Column E.

Appendix 3

Monthly Expenses Worksheet r) _____

(Total of calculations below (not including (s))

Monthly mortgage payment (g) _____

Property Tax (distributed by month) (n/12) + _____

Rent (j) + _____

+Homeowner's Insurance + _____
 Group 1 (\$0 – insurance rolled into mortgage)
 Group 2 (\$100/month homeowners)
 Group 3 (no homeowners insurance; renter's insurance optional at \$80/month)
 +doctor's bills + _____
 Group 1 (\$0, paid by insurance)
 Group 2 (\$90, majority paid by insurance)
 Group 3 (\$125, no insurance)
 +Car payments (line 3 & 4 above) + _____
 +Monthly car insurance (m/12) + _____
 +Life Insurance (groups 1 & 2 only)
 (\$25 month for every \$100K) + _____
 +Groceries + _____
 (minimum \$300/month for two people, extra \$100 for each child)
 +Clothing + _____
 (\$75/month +, depending upon lifestyle and # of children—be realistic!)
 +Entertainment (eating out, movies, movie rentals, music/iTunes, electronics purchases, etc.) + _____
 +Miscellaneous (home repair/improvement) + _____
 Group 1 (\$50–\$300)
 Group 2 (\$50–\$200)
 Group 3 (\$25–\$50)
 +Private School (optional for groups 1 & 2) + _____
 Group 1 (\$1000/child/month)
 Group 2 (\$700-\$800/child/month)
 Group 3 (public schools only)
 +Daycare + _____
 \$0 if two parents, one of whom stays home
 (possible for groups 1 & 2)
 \$800/month/child if only one parent or if both parents work (groups 1 & 2)
 +OTHER (expenditures you anticipate in normal living) + _____
TOTAL _____
Monthly Remainder “Disposable Income” (d-r) s _____

Appendix 4. MUST PAY associated cost of their use to the banker.

Groups	Money
1) Poor	\$50
2) Middle Class	\$100
3) Wealthy	\$150

NOTE: For limited resources, SES status determines who gets resources first; students with more financial resources get to use resources.

Resources	Associated Costs
Paper and Pencil (required)	\$10 Each
Teacher Help	1) Mediocre Teacher Help: \$5
2) Good Teacher Help: \$10	
3) Excellent Teacher Help: \$15	
Dictionary	\$5 Each Use
Photocopy Map	\$10 Each
New Atlas/Map	\$20 Each
Almanac (dated)	\$10
Almanac (new)	\$20
Economics Textbook	\$20
Data Book (child well-being)	\$20
Calculators	\$40 Each
Computers w/ Internet Access	\$100 Each

NOTE: Students may use their own computers, iPhones, and calculators but

Test Answers

- 1) **What is “orography”?** (5 points)
The study of the physical geography of mountains and mountain ranges
- 2) **What is the cube root of 4913?** (10 points) 17
- 3) **In what country is the city of Maracaibo located?** (5 points)
Venezuela
- 4) **What is “imperium”** (10 points)
Absolute rule or power; a sphere of domination of influence; the right of a state or power to enforce laws
- 5) **Name five countries that border the Black Sea?** (2 points each)
Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Georgia, Russia
- 6–7) **Rounded the nearest hundred thousand, what are respective populations of Madagascar and the United Arab Emirates?** (10 points; 5 points each)
Madagascar 20 million (2009) United Arab Emirates 4.6 million (2009)
- 8) **Solve the following: $45,678,910 / 873.5$ (round to the nearest 100th).** (10 points)
52294.12
- 9) **Who was Clara Barton?** (5 points)
American nurse and founder of the American Red Cross (1821–1912)
- 10) **SCIENCE: What are Plasmodesmata?** (5 points)
Plasmodesmata are narrow channels that act as intercellular cytoplasmic bridges to facilitate communication and transport of materials between plant cells. The plasmodesmata serve to connect the symplastic space in the plant and are extremely specialized channels that allow for intercellular movement of water, various nutrients, and other molecules (including signalling molecules) (Epel, 1994). Plasmodesmata are located in narrow areas of cell walls called primary pit fields, and they are so dense in these areas (up to one million per square millimeter) that they make up one percent of the entire area of the cell wall (Salisbury and Ross, 1992)
- 11) **What is the symbol, atomic number and weight of Tellurium?** (10 points)
Te; 52; 127.60
- 12) **Solve for Y: $(368 \times Y)/23 = 32$** (5 points)
2
- 13) **What is solipsism?** (5 points)
The theory that the self is the only thing that can be known and verified; the view that the self is the only reality.
- 14) **Early in his career, then Vice-President Nominee Richard Nixon made a speech in which he described being given a pet dog. What was this dog’s name?** (10 points)
Checkers
- 15) **Name, in order, the world’s ten wealthiest people according to *Forbes Magazine*: (one point each)**

Rank	Name	Citizenship	Age	Net Worth (\$bil)
1	Buffett	United States	77	62.0
2	Carlos Slim Helu	Mexico	68	60.0
3	William Gates III	United States	52	58.0
4	Lakshmi Mittal	India	57	45.0
5	Mukesh Ambani	India	50	43.0
6	Anil Ambani	India	48	42.0
7	Ingvar Kamprad	Sweden	81	31.0
8	KP Singh	India	76	30.0
9	Oleg Deripaska	Russia	40	28.0
10	Karl Albrecht	Germany	88	27.0

- 16) **What is the world’s largest ship (and what is its length, width, draft, dry and wet tonnage)?** (5 points ship name, 1 point each length, width, draft, tonnage wet and dry; ten points possible)
The largest ship ever built is the Knock Nevis, a supertanker 458 meters (1504 ft) in length and 69 m (226 ft) in width. Its dry weight is 564,763 tonnes, 647,955 tonnes when fully loaded with oil. Built between 1979 and 1981 in Oppama shipyard in Japan, this ship is larger and heavier than the Empire State Building on its side. For over a decade it has been the world’s largest ship by a significant margin, although its current function is only as an FSO (floating storage and offloading unit).

17) Solve (round to the nearest 100th): (10 points)

$$4231.56 \times .741 = 3135.59$$

130 points total***Rubric for test outcomes:****Grading: 7 points for each question (answers that are partially correct can receive partial credit). 105**Total Points Possible. Your Score:***130 = Perfect Score on SAT & great high school experience at a private prep school**

Choose your top-ten college and congratulations on your partial or full academic scholarship. You will, given hard work in college, have your choice of graduate schools. First year of college seems relatively “easy” to you because much of it is review of knowledge already gained in high school. You are the educational and social “elite.” In high school, your highly qualified teachers all knew your name, your interests, your parents...

115–129 = Excellent ACT/SAT scores, good high school grades at a highly respected private school or wealthy public school.

Choice of college (depends solely on how hard to work in school). You will have an excellent education in college and graduate schools are an obvious option for you. Jobs right out of school relatively lucrative. First year of college relatively easy—lots of time to socialize, travel, and “find yourself.” Your teachers in high school were your mentors.

100–114 = Very respectable SAT/ACT and good high school grades at a good school.

Upper-level (top fifty) college acceptances. Many educational opportunities. Graduate school an option. No real academic adjustment problems to college. You—and your parents—can brag about your SAT scores. Good money in your future. Excellent high school teachers, facilities, experiences (extra-curricular)...

80–99 = Good (average) SAT/ACT at a good high school.

Choice of colleges somewhat limited (depending in part upon your high school grades). You will definitely get into some 4-year college and, with hard work, you can do well therein. Some adjustment problems if you go to a better college b/c some of the knowledge other students know you is foreign to you. At a better college, you feel somewhat alienated from other students. At a mid-level college, you fit in better but wonder about the quality of your classes/coursework.

Graduate school an option with very hard work in college (your grades in college need to help make up for relative obscurity of your school).

70–79 = Lower Average SAT/ACT Score at a mediocre public high school (its reputation is not very strong).

You must consider very small, less-academically-rigorous 4-year colleges or a junior college/community college to start. Your scores are below average nationwide, and the better schools won't touch you, in part because your high school does not have a very strong reputation. You will, at many colleges, feel academically under-prepared or simply unprepared.

Your first year will be a major struggle. Graduate school is unlikely unless you do exceptionally well in your first year(s) and transfer to a better school.

60–69 = Below average SAT/ACT scores at low-performing high school.

Community college or junior college are your only real choices (they have open admissions). You may get lucky—with some ‘connections’ to get into a small, low-tier college. You are likely to be/have been tracked into a trade rather than an academic field b/c you have low academic skills. Carpentry, plumbing, etc. are options, though they take significant coursework which may or may not prove difficult for you.

50–59 = Low SAT/ACT scores (generally combined with average to below average grades) at a poor public high school.

Community college for a “trade” your only real continuing education option, though you'll be lucky to survive there b/c you have not received the training or background knowledge you need. You don't read well (6–8th grade level at best), you cannot write a good sentence (much less a paragraph, letter, or essay), your math skills are basic-level, and

your science background is virtually non-existent. You'll have trouble helping your own children with middle-school and high-school level homework.

< 49 = **Abysmal SAT/ACT scores at an impoverished, inner-city high school.**

No wonder you didn't do well: your teachers are under-paid, under-qualified in their disciplines, and burned out. Your school library was pitiful; your school offered no AP classes. The building itself was falling apart and there were many temptations outside of the building (drug sales, various criminal activities). Your own parents hardly speak English or early (no real importance placed on schooling). Going to jail is not even a mark of shame to you/your community and is thus another option.

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