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Living Contradictions and Working for Change: Toward a Theory of Social Class–Sensitive Pedagogy

Stephanie Jones¹ and Mark D. Vagle²

This essay describes a vision of social class–sensitive pedagogy aimed at disrupting endemic classism in schools. We argue persistent upward mobility discourses construct classist hierarchies in schools and classroom practice and are founded on misunderstandings of work, lived experiences of social class, and the broader social and economic context of the United States and the world. Educators may unwittingly alienate the very students they hope to inspire, cause for serious inquiry into what a social class–sensitive pedagogy might entail. The manuscript highlights five interrelated principles that provide insights to what research tells us and how it can be used in K–12 and teacher education.

Keywords: cultural analysis; economics of education, equity, instructional practices, social class

Loaded Aspirations

“When I grow up I want to be a waitress just like my mom.” (A Little Girl)

“Oh, you can do so much *better* than that!” (Her Teacher)

Children and youth articulating aspirations for working-class futures are likely to hear responses similar to the one above. Such a response is informed by neoliberal discourses of social class and the assumed purposes of schooling: upward mobility in status, income, and perceived contribution to national economic growth is the goal and anything else is a disappointment (e.g., Aronowitz, 2008; Rose, 1989). We argue that persistent upward mobility discourses sediment the notion that certain workers and work are only worthy of very low wages while others are rewarded with wages up to four hundred times as much. The social class ladder metaphor aligns, then, with the idea that those on the bottom rungs earn less in wages, status, and overall perceived value and therefore, in order to be recognized as valuable to society either through measures of salary or prestige, must work relentlessly to climb the ladder.

Although “climbing the ladder” is often interpreted as a logical, unquestioned goal, this sort of upward mobility discourse constructs classist hierarchies in schools and classroom practice and is founded on misconceptions of work (e.g., Crawford, 2009, 2011; Rose, 2005; Sennett, 2009), lived experiences of social class (e.g., Bourdieu, 1990; Reay, 1998, 2004/2005; Sennett & Cobb, 1993; Skeggs, 1997), and the broader social and economic context of the United States and the world (e.g., Berliner, 2006; Condon, 2011; Faux, 2012; Hayes, 2012; Rothstein, 2004).

Educators engaging upward mobility discourses without doing the work it takes to better understand what is informing those discourses—and the economic policies shaping workers’ realities—may unwittingly alienate the very students they hope to inspire.

The teacher quoted above attended a two-day workshop on social class and class-sensitive pedagogies facilitated by the two of us (Stephanie and Mark). She told us this story on the second day of the workshop and wondered aloud what might have been a class-sensitive response to her student’s aspirations. Like most teachers we have worked with, this teacher demonstrated not only intellectual engagement with the ideas of the workshop and an eagerness to learn more about things she hadn’t been exposed to, but also a burning desire to do the best she can for her economically struggling students and their families. She wondered if her response positioned the mother and the work of a waitress as undesirable and not valued; or suggested that infinite high-paying jobs await those who work hard enough; or that the daughter should aim to become different from, and ultimately better than, her own mother. All of these and more are possible interpretations, but the teacher had never considered them before extending what she understood about work, workers, social class, economics, and assembling a social class–sensitive pedagogy. This kind of content and reflexivity embedded in class-sensitive pedagogies are imperative for teachers and their practice given that social class is still the best predictor of educational engagement

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and achievement (e.g., Berliner, 2005; Rothstein, 2004) and that the achievement gap between rich and poor children is now reportedly (Reardon, 2011) twice that of white and black children (Tavernise, 2011).

The larger sociopolitical context also demands attention to class-related histories, tensions, and futures as the world has recently witnessed the “Arab Spring” of 2011, President Obama’s proposed “Buffett Rule” to raise taxes on 0.3% of the wealthiest Americans, the Occupy Wall Street movement across the United States and the globe, and persistent claims of “Class Warfare” in the wake of attempts to shape policy to support America’s most economically vulnerable. In short, it has arguably never been more important to seriously consider social class, class inequity, and the insidious ways classism penetrates curriculum, pedagogy, and experiences of schooling.

To assist educators in taking up a serious study of social class in their professional growth and classroom practice, we call for a *class-sensitive* approach to policies and practices in schools. Acquiring a critical understanding about and sensitivity to social class, class difference, class bias, and class discrimination requires—for us—a commitment to an autobiographical, pedagogical, and broader social project (e.g., Vagle & Jones, 2012). Thus when we say *class sensitive*, we are referring to thought and action grounded in the goal of eliminating classism and class bias of all kinds, ensuring full access to dignified education and meaningful educational opportunities for working-class and poor children and youth of all races and ethnicities.

Throughout the article, we make seemingly contradictory statements about what a class-sensitive pedagogue might do, because this is a terribly complex endeavor that includes “living contradictions” (as in the title). We all—teachers, children, youth in K–12 classrooms, families, researchers, and teacher educators—are immersed in unquestioned discourses of meritocracy, and we don’t see any easy or straight-forward pathway to dismantle such deeply entrenched beliefs and ways of seeing the world and ourselves. Therefore, we accept responsibility for highlighting and working through some of the paradoxes inherent in what class-sensitivity might be and become.

To this end, we organize the remainder of this article around five principles that reflect a commitment to class-sensitivity as an autobiographic, pedagogic, and broader social project (Vagle & Jones, 2012). These five class-sensitive principles are not meant to be exhaustive nor separate from one another, but rather explorations of interrelated areas for potential change in K–12 and teacher education. We invite readers to imagine ways she or he can systemically work to eliminate classism of all kinds in her or his educational context and hope the five principles here can serve as either a beginning point, a reminder, or a catapult for readers to engage their own class-sensitive work:

1. analyzing educators’ and students’ experiences of class within broad social and political contexts.
2. locating and disrupting social classed hierarchies in schools and communities;
3. integrating social class and marginalized perspectives into curriculum;
4. perceiving classed bodies in moment-to-moment interactions with educators, students, and families; and

5. changing broader school and classroom policies and practices to reflect an anticlassist and antipoverty commitment.

Within each section, we summarize how the principle is grounded in what we have come to know and believe about social class in the United States based on research and our experiences with many educators, and we suggest concrete ideas about what we might be able to do in teacher education and K–12 classrooms to enact class-sensitive pedagogies and policies. “Workshops” are sometimes referenced in what follows, referring to class-sensitive workshops and institutes we have facilitated with over 1,000 educators in the state of Georgia.

Toward a Theory of Social Class–Sensitive Pedagogy

Analyzing Educators’ and Students’ Experiences of Class Within Broad Social and Political Contexts

What we have come to know and believe. Social class status is frequently reproduced from one generation to the next, not necessarily because youth and young adults desire to live the same *material* lives as their parents but because access to social influence, education, extracurricular activities, physical places, and social networks that provide entry paths into job opportunities are inextricably linked to one’s social class (e.g., Ball, Maguire, & Macrae, 2000; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Lareau, 1989/2000; Luttrell, 1997; Reay, 1998; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001; Willis, 1977). In other words, the cliché “It doesn’t matter what you know, it matters who you know” is often true in defining who gains access to particular social, economic, educational, and political opportunities. Thus, one’s “personal” experience as an upper middle-class professional is inevitably linked to the people, places, and options immediately surrounding her or him. Furthermore, it is not only the immediate context of people and places to which one might have access that is influential in determining one’s economic potential, but it is also the broader social, political, and economic context.

For example, middle-class and upper middle-class youth who have graduated from college during the most recent economic crisis in the United States (2007–present) have faced great challenges finding work and “employment and earnings situations of 16–30 year olds who have only a high school degree . . . is the worst since WWII” (Smeeding, 2012, p. 9). Although college-educated young adults might have financial safety nets of one kind or another that may keep them from suffering grave economic devastation, the broader economic context restricts their opportunities for financial independence. Poor and working-class youth, already vulnerable because of the economic vulnerability of their parents, face the current job market and political movements to limit workers’ rights with even more trepidation and without safety nets hanging below them to break the fall of long-term joblessness or temporary low-wage work. And to add insult to injury, low-wage workers in the 1970s were arguably doing much better economically than low-wage workers in 2012 because of significant wage stagnation alongside significant increases in the cost of living and a dwindling middle-class job sector (e.g., Faux, 2012). In short, although the United States has

long claimed an American Dream and meritocracy where anyone can be financially successful and upwardly mobile, we have come to know and believe that social class is not only an individual endeavor nor experience—it is also saturated with the broader social, economic, and political contexts including the grim reality that the rate of social class mobility in the United States is significantly lower than other industrialized countries (e.g., Norton & Ariely, 2011).

U.S. K–12 education, however, continues to wave the flag of meritocracy through a future-oriented discourse with the illusion of a good job, economic security, and upward mobility waiting at the end of the credentialed rainbow. Even with overwhelming evidence that upward mobility rates in the United States are scant at best (e.g., Harvey, 2005; Norton & Ariely, 2011), and whether the acquisition of a credentialed job or slightly higher wage should be considered upward mobility is challenged (e.g., Aronowitz, 2008), U.S. educational discourses carry on as though there is, indeed, a more economically secure life at the end of every high school diploma, postsecondary training, or college degree. Even if—and when—social class mobility is a possibility and a reality, scholars and other writers have demonstrated that upward mobility is not always entirely positive, but rather can inflict a host of psychosocial injuries upon those who are upwardly mobile and those who are left “behind” (Christopher, 2009; Sennett & Cobb, 1993; The New York Times Writers, 2005; Van Galen & Dempsey, 2009). In short, “Once you put the social back into individual transformation others bear the costs of self-betterment and you are left with guilty gratitude—the dirty pleasures of privilege that have always left [us] feeling slightly soiled” (Reay, 2004/2005, p. 7).

Putting the “social” back into individual narratives (e.g., Kamler, 2001) of success or failure forces one to recognize the tangled web of economics, politics, social networks, access, power, and personal opportunity. It means, however, that one must have access to some of the meanings of that tangled web, including economic theory, globalization, welfare reform, immigration policies, labor laws, housing policies, etc.

What we can do in teacher education and K–12 schools. Educators in our workshops routinely report they don’t understand labor laws, economics, the criminal justice system, housing, language, immigration, etc. as much as they would like. This is some of the content that might help them situate their personal experiences of social class in the world, and some of these understandings are imperative if educators are to recognize how they might be more reflexive in their thinking about individual experiences of class and their role as an educator.

This principle, then, is about learning to be more reflexive—with a careful social and ecological analysis of systems, contexts, and policies. Ultimately, situating the personal in broader contexts requires that the pedagogue and her K–12 students assemble a humble (e.g., Vagle, 2011) orientation that coconstructs reflexive and mindful interpretations of social-classed differences. In teacher education and in K–12 classrooms, then, students and teachers alike can be reminded of broader circumstances that might have influenced their past and present experiences of social class. For example, Stephanie (first author) grew up in a trailer park in the mid-1970s where most families were struggling to

make ends meet, but still managing to provide for their families without much assistance from state services. By the mid-1980s, however, Stephanie’s family circumstances had changed dramatically and even maintaining a meager existence in a small trailer became impossible. Although an analysis focusing on the individual family unit is possible—a step-father was unable to find regular work and a pregnant mother had to take on extra hours at her job until she was physically unable to work and then owed medical bills she could no longer pay—situating these individual stories within the broader context sheds light on why her family hit this stone wall at the same time many other U.S. families were falling into a deeper poverty.

By the mid-1980s, Reagan’s economic policies, aligned with emerging neoliberal policies in other countries, began to take effect. Significant tax breaks for the wealthy and corporations, stagnant wages for workers, a rise in unemployment and joblessness rates, and emergency financial resources for families in need of assistance began to decline. While Stephanie sat silently in her elementary and middle-school classrooms internalizing shame, fear, and embarrassment about the seeming hopeless situation her family was in, there were powerful policies taking effect across the country that affected her family on the most intimate level. It was not, as is most commonly assumed, a *personal failure* of her mother or step-father that the family experienced a drastic downward spiral in their living conditions—it was the *personal effect* of economic policies reflecting national and international politics, a full-court press of neoliberalism on the American public.

Even young children can engage in reconsidering their personal experiences as influenced by other things around them: For example, if a business closes down and a father loses his job, it is, again, not the personal failure of the father but a *personal effect* of the larger economic context; and if a mother is unable to acquire work for a long period of time and the state ends welfare assistance to the mother, it is not a personal failure of the mother but rather a personal effect of state welfare policies. Of course, this is not to say that individuals never play a role in their economic situations. However, the assumption of personal failure is so prevalent that it is rarely even thinkable for such circumstances to be attributed to the personal effect of larger systems and policies—in other words, the individual is the one most often blamed. One thing the class-sensitive pedagogue can do is to be much more attuned to the possibility of personal *effect* and work against the discourse of personal failure.

That said, this kind of intellectual exercise in a classroom can leave someone feeling powerful as they realize that the perceived educational or economic failures of their parents or of themselves are not reflective of individual deficits. On the other hand, this kind of exercise can leave a person deflated, having always believed her or his parents’ and her or his own hard work and natural intelligence led to education or economic successes. In both of these cases, and myriad other possible responses to situating personal experiences within broader social processes, it is not likely to be a straightforward journey from dominant neoliberal discourses of individualism and meritocracy toward a social and political view of personal experiences of class. But doing so can help educators and their working-class and poor students value their own and one another’s lived realities (e.g., Dutro, 2008, 2009, 2010; Hicks, 2004a, 2004b, 2005), while also providing

tools to shift away from individualist discourses of success and failure that continue to blame the victims of poor social and economic policies and practices.

Locating and Disrupting Social-Classed Hierarchies in Schools and Communities

What we have come to know and believe. People often judge others (and themselves), and are judged by others, based on perceived social class and economic status. These judgments might be based on where someone lives, what someone does for a living, how someone talks, what that person wears, where she or he goes to school, etc. One is not “born” with the classist sensibilities necessary to position folks into hierarchical slots, but we are all immersed in hierarchical discourses from the time we are young, and most of us unwittingly engage those discourses to make sense of ourselves and others we see in the world. Two important aspects of these classist ideas include the insistence on individual responsibility (vs. working for a collective good) and the idea that everyone should always strive toward more money and material goods for individual happiness (vs. the pursuit of fulfillment and happiness through internal worth).

Fraser (2009) and Harvey (2005) write about the insidious discourses of neoliberalism that can undermine social change projects such as the redistribution of wealth toward a more egalitarian society (e.g., Condrón, 2011). Neoliberal theories of the social and economic world grounded in ideals of individual responsibility, autonomous transformation, deregulation of markets, and the diminished role of society (e.g., Fraser, 2009; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Harvey, 2005) are antithetical to class-sensitive theory and practice. In addition to perpetuating unearned privilege and power for the people who are perceived to be at the top of the hierarchical social class ladder, this individualist hierarchical thinking/acting perpetuates discourses that tend to position working-class and poor people as either intellectually incapable of the hard work required for upward mobility, or lazy. A working-class or poor student who takes up hierarchical discourses focused on individuals and their worth (e.g., Jones, 2004, 2006a, 2012) may be at risk of enacting what Freire would call the oppressed becoming the oppressor (Freire, 1970), what hooks (2000) would consider internalizing dominator ideologies, or what Foucault might call a successful disciplining of the body in compliance with goals of the state (Foucault, 1990).

As adults who grew up in working-class and poor families, we continue to struggle with our own internalized shame and the seduction of hierarchical discourses. Therefore, it does not surprise us when we work with educators facing similar challenges and struggles with their personal experiences of class marginalization. Many workshop participants tell us stories of being the exception in their family—of “overcoming” economic obstacles to acquire a middle-class job and material life. Some are quick to articulate a clear separation from such dire situations (“trailer trash” and “ghetto,” two classist insults still acceptable, are sometimes used to describe their family members in the present). Others weep as they try to articulate the suffering they and their families have endured in the face of economic hardship and class discrimination in schools. And, on occasion, a teacher will stop us after a workshop to share that, if nothing else was gained from

the workshop, she or he no longer feels ashamed to be from a poor family.

Harvey (2005) reminds us how brilliantly neoliberal discourse deploys seductive language related to an illusory American Dream. This seduction *toward* particular discourses and ideals distracts *from* questioning and criticizing economic realities and how those inherently afford or constrain any one person’s ability to transform oneself:

It has been part of the genius of neoliberal theory to provide a benevolent mask full of wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice, and rights, to hide the grim realities of the restoration or reconstitution of naked class power, locally as well as transnationally, but most particularly in the main financial centres of global capitalism. (p. 119)

Neoliberal discourses are relentless in both their positioning of the individual person as capable of changing her own world and the relinquishing of responsibility of government for grossly inequitable social and economic outcomes. Such discourses construct a desire for hierarchical understandings of the world, while simultaneously constructing the hierarchies of desire, entitlement, intelligence, and worth as reflected in the stratified winners and losers of materialism and capitalism. These discourses—and the privilege and exploitation they produce—need disrupting at all levels of schooling and would be an important part of any class-sensitive pedagogy.

What we can do in teacher education and K–12 schools. A class-sensitive pedagogue would explicitly critique the way power and privilege operate in society and in schools and support students’ questioning of why privilege and hierarchical thinking can seem “natural.” For example, units of study focusing on “community workers” or “careers” are commonplace in K–12 education, with predictable kinds of work and workers given privilege in these spheres. Doctors, lawyers, veterinarians, nurses, and maybe police officers and firefighters are regularly incorporated into the curriculum, often as guest speakers. When professional parents are a part of the school community, they might be invited to discuss their work as journalists, engineers, professors, etc. but migrant farmworkers, fast-food service providers, and waitresses are rarely present in the curriculum and classrooms. Teachers and students can interrogate why some workers are privileged and others excluded, and the ways some types of work are constructed as desirable and other types of work are constructed as undesirable. For example, exposure to and learning about trades and service jobs (e.g., Rose, 2005) as intellectually engaging and imperative to a healthy society is a crucial move toward disrupting hierarchies of power, privilege, and the presumed intelligence of the workers based on how and whether they work with their “bodies” or with their “minds”—as if the two can be disconnected. These lessons might include inquiries into workers’ intelligences and their rights, how workers experience surveillance on the job, and how perceived status in a hierarchical society often plays a role in workers’ experiences in their workplaces. In other words, inquiries into unearned privilege based on perceived class are just as critical as inquiries into undeserved marginalization based on perceived class.

Students and teachers should also look beyond focused units on jobs and careers, and question power and privilege in books, media, and everyday conversations surrounding the work someone does or does not do. Is a roofer who is paid \$12.00 an hour (or about \$15,000/year) and doesn't have access to sick days, paid vacations, or health insurance less worthy of these employment benefits than the doctor who earns in excess of \$200,000 a year and hires that same roofer to put a new roof on her \$400,000 home? Mainstream justifications for these kinds of income gaps often include assertions that the doctor has "worked hard for her position," or that she "paid a lot of money for her education to become a doctor." But we rarely ask ourselves, "what privileges might have afforded her the opportunity to make it all the way to and through medical school?" And a follow-up question, "How can we make sure that working-class kids who want to become doctors have pathways to do so?" Many working-class workers have to work under more challenging and dangerous conditions than their more esteemed counterparts without the benefit of knowing they have financial security in the case of an injury or sickness, or a lay-off from an employer. Privilege, power, and a hierarchical sensibility about one's income and one's worthiness can be disrupted through these inquiries.

Students and teachers will also want to educate themselves about movements for universal healthcare, Living Wage policies, and state policies reducing access to foodstamps, welfare eligibility (including trends to screen applicants for drug use), housing subsidies, and decreased funding for public education. These can be considered alongside lower taxes for the most wealthy Americans and other tax policies that inherently benefit (or "subsidize") the middle and upper middle classes such as the tax deduction for interest paid on home mortgages. Who benefits from such initiatives? Who is potentially harmed? How do these initiatives set up ideas about who is worthy of government aid and who is not? A constant struggle over hierarchies of worth is produced in legislative sessions and legislation, and students and teachers can actively question and critique such hierarchies.

Hierarchies are also produced and perceived through material possessions, and they can be disrupted through sensitivity to both the human *and* ecological damage of material production and waste in a materialistic society (e.g., hooks, 2000; McKibben, 2007). In other words, the exponential growth of material acquisitions is unsustainable—and accepting or perpetuating a hierarchy of human worth based on materialistic possessions is an unethical stance to take in schools. Examining the fast-paced change in technological devices (e.g., phones, televisions, computers) and the expectation that consumers will continue to purchase new devices even when the "old" ones might suffice, both challenges the assumption that material goods symbolize status, and prompts questions about the afterlife of such devices (e.g., digital dumping grounds). The same could be said for modes of transportation. Users of public transportation, bicycles, or their own bodies for mobility either out of necessity or by choice damage the earth and consume its resources far less than those who own and operate high-status and expensive vehicles. In addition, families living in modest homes, campsites, apartment buildings, or mobile homes that use far less energy than spacious single-family dwellings (e.g., Rosen, 2010) can be examples for all of us regarding our own carbon footprints.

Considering high-status material goods as potential exploitations of human and natural resources disrupts the metaphorical hierarchies built on assumptions that "bigger and more is always better." Given increased marketing to children, a shift toward a consumption-driven economy, and our experiences living in a society saturated in materialism, there seems no way to stand outside these discourses and practices. However, assembling critical class-sensitive sensibilities that question materialism and the hierarchies it produces on the backs of low-wage workers and at the expense of natural resources is a worthy pursuit.

Educators should know, however, that holding up dominant ideas of classed hierarchies and turning them inside out can produce complex emotions in ourselves, other teachers, students, and families alike. A family living in a 4,000-square-foot home with nonindigenous landscaping, a four-car garage, and accumulating wealth as a result of investing in a chain of fast-food restaurants paying workers low wages can quickly become demonized. Children from such families might resist anticlassist lessons or internalize them and become ashamed of their own family—neither response being productive in the overall purposes for a class-sensitive pedagogy.

This is precisely where our emphasis on *class-sensitive* pedagogy pushes educators to be sensitive of all classed locations and discourses—and to be agile and fluid enough to guide criticism away from individuals and situate choices and behaviors within the larger context of the social and political world. Critical questions such as "Under what conditions would people want or need to live this way or that way?" or "Under what conditions would people desire to consume material goods this way?" can support social and political critique rather than individual criticism. These questions can help us interrogate personal desires and contradictory lives as we work toward a fuller understanding of class sensitivity and class solidarity.

The examples above point most directly to changes in official curricular work and the kind of content students at all levels can be exposed to and study. One of the most difficult things to do, however, can be to actively locate and disrupt social-classed hierarchies in the classroom. Whose stories get heard and valued in the classroom? Who is perceived to be "teacher's pet" and how is that connected to social class hierarchies? Which students or families are habitually privileged or marginalized by other students and teachers? How can these hierarchies of worth and value be deliberately disrupted? The interpersonal workings of students and teachers in the classroom are often informed by social class and assumptions about classed hierarchies in the larger society. Studying working-class experiences in the classroom is one thing, but fundamentally changing how individual children, youth, and families are treated in classrooms and schools takes this principle to another level of responsibility and possibility for everyone.

Integrating Social Class and Marginalized Perspectives Into the Curriculum

What we have come to know and believe. Children and youth marginalized in school because of their social class often live with long-term effects of feeling inferior and of internalizing shame, anger, and other complex emotions and ways of being. Skeggs (1997) studied the ways social class influenced women's

lives across economic, social, and psychological spheres. These influences were felt intimately and emotionally, and though some women named social class as a force in shaping their lives, most dissociated from a working-class position through processes of disidentification and dissimulation (p. 13). Skeggs asserted that mainstream rhetoric about class and the associated values of people and their knowledge in class-specific locations influenced the psychosocial experiences of working-class women across their lives—leading them to feel ashamed of their class status and to actively try to “pass” as middle-class.

Because of such pressures to “pass” all their lives, many teacher education students (and teacher educators) have worked to shed their working-classness and take on the discourses they *think* the educational institution built upon meritocracy expects of them (e.g., Van Galen & Dempsey, 2009). Their hard work pays off when they gain access to higher education, but “passing” oneself as privileged and using mainstream discourses typical in educational settings (including discourses demonizing the poor) may be misread by a critically oriented teacher educator who might assume the student has acquired unexamined privilege that needs to come under scrutiny. In other teacher education spaces, their working-classness might be interpreted as not good enough for completing teacher education credentials because of their lack of professional dress or their “nonstandard” English. Higher education students and K–12 students from working-class and poor backgrounds are persistently positioned precariously in these institutional no-win situations.

What we can do in teacher education and K–12 schools. One way to build knowledge and even pride in working-class and poor folks’ lives is to integrate issues of social class broadly, and working-class or poor perspectives specifically, into and across the curriculum. Situating lessons about slavery, for example, within broader economic practices helps to elucidate the persistent pursuit of cheap labor for increased profits before antebellum slavery and continuing today (e.g., Blackmon, 2008). And in comparison, lessons on alternative economies in local and virtual contexts—both capitalist and noncapitalist—are crucial, including cooperatives, timebanks, flea markets, yard sales, online markets, farmers’ and artists’ markets, etc. (e.g., Gibson-Graham, 2006). Such economic practices may or may not require currency, but most require smaller amounts of money to acquire goods and services families want and need and often improve the quality of community relationships.

Expanding school texts to include working-class literature, student-produced texts about their own lives and experiences with school, popular culture texts, and any resources necessary for inquiry related to students’ interests (e.g., Dutro & Zenkov, 2008; Jocson, 2011; Jones, 2008; Morrell, 2004; Vasudevan, 2006; Zenkov, Harmon, & van Lier, 2008) in K–12 classrooms is also imperative. The more diverse lived experiences portrayed in classrooms, the better. But diversity through representations is not enough and will never replace a critical approach to reading issues of power, perspective, and positioning in texts (e.g., Jones, 2006b). Educators can examine how working-class children’s literature and other texts (e.g., online content, media, and student-produced texts) can be used to help them and their students examine their assumptions of (classed) normality and the ways

they connect and disconnect with the perspectives being expressed.

Theories and pedagogies abound for incorporating working-class and poor students’ passions, lives, places, and funds of knowledge into curriculum as a way to lower traditional barriers between schools and communities and to encourage children and youth to critically engage with their world (e.g., Campano, 2007; Comber & Nixon, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Turner, 1997; Heath, 1983; Hicks, 2002, 2004a; Hill & Vasudevan, 2008; Jones, 2004, 2006b; Lee, 1993). In addition to incorporating economic and ecological justice into existing curricular lessons, a class-sensitive pedagogy working against classism and toward solidarity would invite lives into the classroom, encourage creativity in expression and inquiry, and expand capacity and possibility.

Perceiving Classed Bodies in Moment-to-Moment Interactions With Educators, Students, and Families

What we have come to know and believe. Social class is lived in and performed through the body in subtle and obvious ways—all influential in the ways people perceive and interact with one another (e.g., Bourdieu, 1990, 2000). Classism in education, then, is often expressed through what we *do* with our body; what we *say* through our language; and simultaneously how we perceive others’ bodies and their language (e.g., Reay, 1998; Walkerdine et al., 2001). A raised eyebrow, a widening of the eyes, a turning of the back can all be perceived as performances for harsh judgment or dismissiveness. We might use our bodies this way without awareness, thus inflicting injury without intention and moving on to the next encounter similarly—or behave in a class-sensitive way in the very next interaction.

Although educators cannot control how others perceive them, they can control what they think and do with their own perceptions of students and families. Educators’ misperceptions of working-class and poor students and families can result in families’ fear or suspicion of school authorities, teacher reports to social service agencies, and negative stereotypes, particularly about working-class and poor mothers across race and ethnicity (e.g., Jones, 2007; Osgood, 2011; Reay, 1998; Steedman, 1994; White, 2001) and boys and men of color as in their criminalization and consequent assignment in the school-to-prison pipeline (e.g., Wald & Losen, 2003). It is a mistake to presume that the targets of such criticisms do not realize what is happening and sometimes internalize the same criticisms.

In studies investigating the role of stereotype threat in the underperformance of working-class and poor students on academic tests, researchers (Croizet & Claire, 1998; Spencer & Castano, 2007) found that when social class status was made salient prior to taking the test or when participants were told that the test would reflect intelligence, the working-class and poor students performed significantly lower than their more privileged counterparts and lower than their working-class and poor peers who took the tests in a nonthreatening context. And yet when those “threats” related to a stereotype about poor people were removed, there was no substantial difference between the test performances of low- and high-SES students. In short, the way educators perceive bodies in moment-to-moment interactions

with students and families has real consequences for interpersonal relationships, trust, academic achievement, and the reproduction of inequality.

When educators produce negative perceptions of working-class and poor students, the results can be devastating, including a tendency to perceive middle-class students' academic performance as "moveable" and working-class and poor children, children of African descent, and children of color as having abilities that were "increasingly fixed and less worthy of attention" (e.g., Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, cited in Apple, 2004, p. 37). Partial, messy, and inaccurate perceptions of students grounded in classism often construct the false idea that students' capabilities are somehow already known, a fixed variable eerily reproductive of social class status outside school walls.

Tracking for academic study is but one example of a school-based practice borne out of presumed fixed abilities, resulting in accelerating or decelerating access and opportunity. A plethora of other examples circulate constantly in our society, including a well-oiled school-to-prison pipeline that begins with the criminalization of bodies being black and/or working-class or poor (e.g., Alexander, 2012; Gans, 1996). And persistent income inequality in our society that deems some bodies—particularly white men and people of Asian descent—as more deserving of higher salaries and others, including women and people of color, as deserving of lower wages (e.g., Apple, 1996, 2004; Bourdieu, 1984; DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2011). This is the condition in which we find ourselves, and revolutionizing income distribution is beyond the work in this article and beyond the work of schools. What educators can do, however, is actively work against perceptions of bodies that simply mirror and produce the inequalities of the social, economic, and political world outside of school.

What we can do in teacher education and K–12 schools. Transforming the body, and how one's body perceives others, is never complete. In fact, one potentially powerful transformation of the body might result in the body's flexibility in ebbing and flowing with constantly changing contexts and perceptions. It is important, for example, that class-sensitive educators work diligently to understand working-class histories and genuinely feel committed to living their lives in class-sensitive ways. But that educator should also recognize that she or he can be offensive to working-class and poor folks when asserting knowledge about labor movements, economic policies, social policies, and what she or he assumes life is like living on class margins.

The class-sensitive pedagogue must pay attention to assumptions and perceptions of middle-class normality—that is, we may put middle-class normality (e.g., everyone vacations in summer; material goods are always purchased by nuclear family members; a particular way of dressing or speaking or interacting is "appropriate" or "inappropriate") on others as it has been put on us. An important aspect of this principle lies in the complicated ways one's class-sensitive perceptivity moves and shifts in and over time. Merleau-Ponty's (1947/1964) description of perception as a *blending of perspectival views* to capture the ongoing, never-ending realities of perception is useful here (Vagle, 2009). In this way, perceptions are recognized as partial, messy, classed, and always informed by multiple and contradictory perspectival

views circulating about differently classed bodies in society. Therefore, in order for teachers to continually develop class-sensitive perceptivity, we argue that they must learn to be profoundly attuned to the moment-to-moment interactions they have with their students, students' families, and their colleagues. We must learn to pay attention to *spaces* differently, as classed places, and to our bodies within those spaces, which offers promise for transforming perceived, embodied classism.

K–12 educators in our workshops have found it useful to consider and discuss the differential "greetings" students and families receive as they enter school buildings and examine those interactions from class-sensitive perspective. Discussions about the ways working-class and poor parents (particularly mothers) are perceived based on the physical appearance of children are also useful.

Another helpful exercise is for educators to analyze disciplinary practices in their schools and events such as the police intervention and charging of a six-year-old for a tantrum in a kindergarten classroom (*CBS News*, 2012). The kindergartner was an African American girl, social class unreported. In teacher education courses, instructors and students might discuss whether (and why or why not) they think a white daughter of a middle-class university professor would have been treated the same way. Even talking about these contradictory and dangerous "reading of bodies" can raise awareness about how the working-class or poor bodies of students are so rarely read as *fine just the way they are*. Teachers can examine their own experiences of being in spaces where their bodies were read as not enough (e.g., Hughes-Decatur, 2011; Jones & Hughes-Decatur, 2012) of one thing or another, and how realizing the others' gaze on one's body can produce anxiety, fear, and resentment (e.g., Vagle & Jones, 2012).

Another change teacher educators and K–12 teachers can make in their practice is to maintain the inextricably linked technical aspects of teaching and learning (assessments, lesson plans, record-keeping, reading aloud, giving feedback, etc.) with the inescapable social-classed ways of being a teacher and a student. One concrete example is to reimagine their formative assessment practices, drawing from the work of Dylan Wiliam (e.g., 2007a), to think differently about the way formative assessment is both conceived and enacted. In teacher education programs and in K–12 schools, formative assessment is often conceived and practiced in what Wiliam would term medium and long cycles (2007b). That is, at the end of units of study or at midsemester, as a way to learn more about what students know and can do in preparation for an often higher-stakes summative assessment scheduled for the end of the semester or academic year. Although Wiliam sees these sorts of medium and long cycles as important, he feels short cycle formative assessments (moment-to-moment changes made "on the fly" in the middle of instruction) are much more powerful. We wholeheartedly agree, and take Wiliam's point a few steps further.

First, we suggest that teachers (and teacher educators) examine the moment-to-moment ways they tend to recognize and respond to their students' ongoing understandings (Vagle, 2006); think reflexively about who is potentially privileged and potentially marginalized by these tendencies; and to make necessary changes to their practices as a result. Second, we ask teachers to

purposefully plan to make their moment-to-moment formative assessments class-sensitive. We ask them to think carefully about what language they use and how their bodies look and might be perceived when giving feedback to a student who, for example, looks confused when asked to describe a *wastepaper basket*, but whose eyes light up and shoulders relax when the word *trash can* is uttered instead.

That is, we think teachers and teacher educators would be providing a most valuable service by making their “in the moment” formative assessment practices highly perceptive to social class issues. We suggest that all educators should actively and persistently examine how their and their students’ bodies move in the socially classed classroom space. In this way, something presumably technical such as providing students with helpful feedback about their work (Hattie & Timperely, 2007) is never *only* about whether they understand the mathematical problem or can answer the comprehension questions from a reading passage. It is also just as much about how the teachers’ and her students’ socially classed lives come together through pedagogic interactions—regardless of whether those pedagogic interactions are academic in nature or otherwise.

Changing Broader School and Classroom Policies and Practices to Reflect an Anticlassist and Antipoverty Commitment

What we have come to know and believe. Economists studying issues of poverty argue that the number one priority for improving the economic stability of people with meager financial means is to *keep money in their pockets* (e.g., Edwards, Crain, & Kalleberg, 2007). The “anti-poverty” commitment in this principle is aligned with this goal of keeping money in the pockets of families who are already struggling financially. And although one educational mantra tends to be something like “education can end poverty,” schools regularly request and require financial contributions from the very families who are struggling most with meeting their basic needs at home. These two practices are contradictory—fighting against poverty and requesting money from families who are impoverished. Subtle exclusion or outright punishment often results when families do not submit fees necessary for full participation, including but not limited to: book fairs, school T-shirts, schoolwide field days, supply fees, lab fees, test fees, food drives, fundraisers of all variety, etc. These kinds of practices and policies are not only *classist* in the way we have been discussing in this article but they also increase the immediate burden of poverty rather than alleviate it.

One discourse driving some of these classist practices and policies is the “undeserving poor” discourse (e.g., Gans, 1996). This discourse operates under the assumption that poor or working-class people are trying to “work the system” to get free things from school and society, and behaving in ways that are perceived as “not caring” about education. Although some schools make sure all students participate in fieldtrips, and even provide students from families receiving government assistance to participate in all extracurricular activities for free, etc., other schools leave children behind who cannot pay the small fieldtrip fee or who owe fees to the school for other reasons such as library fines, report card fees, or supply fees. Producing fee-paying practices in publicly funded schools systematically discriminates against

those who do not have the money to participate (not to mention calling into question the responsibility of fully funded public schools with public money). And when families who are struggling contribute the requested/required money—they often pay the price of having to sacrifice another need in their home lives.

In addition to students’ potential exclusion from full participation in their school as a result of financial constraints, many researchers have written convincingly about teachers’ persistent perceptions of working-class and poor students as deviant and deficient and in need of remediation and intervention that frequently limits educational experiences (Anyon, 1980; Bernstein, 1971; Campano, 2007; Dutton, 2009, 2010; Finn, 1999; Hicks, 2002, 2005; Rose, 1989; Van Galen, 2000, 2004; Willis, 1977). There is sufficient evidence that working-class and poor students are living their school lives in the dangerous waters of middle-classed institutions. They find themselves constantly negotiating the precarious nature of a context where they do not *fit*; must work to *belong*; experience the push and pull of wanting to please a teacher and peers and not always knowing how to do so or if doing so would be betraying someone—or something—else in their lives, and don’t know how to advocate for themselves even when they recognize their inequitable education. In other words, there is sufficient evidence of endemic classism saturating schools.

Much of this saturation is brought into being (Heidegger, 1962) through perceptions of bodies that populate that particular school (e.g., perceiving social-classed bodies in moment-to-moment interactions). When it comes to working-class and poor students and families, perceptions of them as deficient and in need of remediation too frequently result in their marginalization and miseducation through a systemic classist practice legitimized under compelling rationales for “tracking” or “ability-grouping.” Creating such academic hierarchies in school that often align with social class, however, often does little more than ensure that more advantaged children and youth have access to more advantage and less advantaged children and youth have access to less advantage (Kelly, 2008; Lew, 2006; Rist, 2000; Rose, 1989).

Although tracking might be considered a staple in America’s middle- and high-school practices, separating children based on even very small differences in academic performance is also not uncommon in early elementary schools. One workshop participant reported her school as having a “cute dresses and hair bows hall,” referring to the “high” first-grade classroom where all the economically privileged (and mostly white) cutely dressed girls were assigned, in contrast to the working-class and poor girls who were dressed differently and assigned to the “lower” first-grade classrooms. As the teacher told this story of less well dressed children being perceived as less academically capable, the more than 40 participants from different schools and grade levels in the workshop nodded their heads in solemn agreement—it was happening in their schools too.

Local schools have some control over some of these classist policies and practices. What we have come to know and believe from our work with teachers and administrators is that policies regarding, for example, what can be done with uneaten lunchroom food, whether community supplies are provided, disciplinary actions that remove access to transportation to and from school, athletic physicals, field trips, field days, picture day, fundraisers, predetermined meetings with families, open house times

and days, information provided only via email and internet, background checks for parent volunteers, and so many other details of the running of a school often restrict participation and access for students and families with limited resources.

Future-oriented discourses of responsibility often emerge in conversations about these classist policies and practices when we're working with educators. Questions such as "What are we teaching them if we let them go without paying?" or "What are we teaching them if they get special treatment?" and even, "We're not preparing them for the real world if we make adjustments for them or their family—the real world doesn't do that" miss our *social class-sensitive* point. We have come to know and believe that students and families do not need special treatment; they need practices and policies in place that do not discriminate against them by default. In other words, they need schools that operate from an anticlist and antipoverty commitment.

What we can do in teacher education and K–12 schools. The actions we advocate for here extend this point. Again, working-class and poor students and their families *do not need saving*; they need schools to stop practices that consistently demand financial contributions they do not have. In addition, working-class and poor students do not need "saving" from marginalization—they need practices and policies in place that do not marginalize them, such as those that reward middle-class students, discipline working-class students, and exclude children and youth from participating in activities because of resources. Moreover, there are hundreds of policies and practices enacted in different schools that produce classism and unequal access to a full and dignified education—we include only a couple in this section but imagine schools making a commitment to locate, name, and then change classist practices and policies in their schools.

We argue, however, there are some changes schools can make immediately and other changes that schools can work toward as a larger social project. All systems of tracking and ability grouping can be reconsidered from a class-sensitive lens. Teachers and administrators can begin by asking the simple questions: Who are the children and youth assigned to low and high tracks; and do the tracks reify an existing social class hierarchy? Where can heterogeneous groupings be implemented right away to eliminate disadvantaging working-class and poor students? These two questions can offer much material for deep reflection, conversation, and study. Teachers, teacher educators, and teacher education students can consider what "privilege for all" students (e.g., Fine, Anand, Jordan, & Sherman, 1998) might mean for their schools' structures of differentiating students. We fully understand the upheaval such changes might create in schools—especially where privileged families have been influential in creating and maintaining class/track structures in schools. However, a commitment to eliminating classism in schools will undoubtedly face some resistance from those who are happy with—and privileged by—the structures in place.

Another potential site for change is the complex but persistent discourse that assumes poor people are undeserving and only trying to get something for free. We have noticed a tendency in our workshops for some participants to articulate judgment about how poor people use their money—one of the ways to "prove"

such families do not deserve any "help." In our conversations about families' money, we remind ourselves and others that (a) public education is a publicly funded endeavor and basic right in our country that should not be a financial burden on individuals who are supposed to benefit from it; (b) ending poverty, or at least alleviating some of the tremendous stress of economic instability, will involve keeping more money in the pockets of those who struggle; and (c) most of us would not want to be scrutinized and judged as moral or immoral based on the ways we spend our money.

One example we hear teachers contemplating in our workshops is that the "student comes in with [e.g., a cell phone, a nice hair-do, new shoes], and can't even pay the supply fee." Unpacking assumptions one might have about such a situation is important and often leads us to explore multiple ways children and youth acquire material possessions beyond their nuclear family (e.g., extended family members, mentors and family friends, low-priced flea markets or other underground markets, hand-me-downs, low-cost thrift stores). We also consider the precarious Catch-22 position for caregivers. They often know all too well that their children may be harshly judged if they arrive at school with ill-fitting or worn clothes and want, instead, for school authorities and their children's peers to recognize their children as well cared for and worthy of positive attention. Few realize, though, that they may also be harshly judged for their children's *nice* appearance. They are in an impossible position: Harshly judged for being perceived as *not caring for their children* who come to school in the same clothes week after week, and harshly judged for being perceived as *not caring for their child's education* because they put time, money, and energy into their child's appearance for school. With limited economic resources and overwhelming demands on those same resources, families have to make decisions about where the money will go—and who are educators to judge those decisions, especially when there is no way for families to please everyone?

If an individual teacher decides to take an anticlist and antipoverty stance, she will also find herself in a Catch-22 as she might be required to request money from families even while she believes it is wrong to do so. We know too many teachers—facing pay cuts, furloughs, increasing health insurance premiums, and worsening work conditions themselves—who take money out of their own dwindling personal budgets to pay for children who wouldn't otherwise be able to participate in something at school. This is not a solution to the systemic classism saturating schools, and may even contribute to such blatant problems continuing without open conversations and collective, systemic solutions. Although we encourage as many individual teachers as possible to create class-sensitive pedagogies in their classrooms, we strongly encourage working in groups and at the school and district level to address systemic classism. In fact, changes at the school and district level will require nothing less than a well-informed and confident collective working to eliminate classism.

Many teachers and administrators tell us there is simply no money to provide basic supplies much less field trip fees, physicals, or other necessities for families who are economically vulnerable. And especially in these times of austerity: state budget crises, teacher lay-offs, school closings, and so on, that may be true in some school districts or schools. However, staggering

amounts of money are still spent every year by public schools and districts on standardized testing materials and scoring alone, and districts often adopt textbooks at half-million dollars or more in regular rotations (textbooks that are likely to be class-biased; e.g., Dutro, 2010). In short, asking questions and becoming active about policies and practices influencing budget decisions at the district, state, and federal level is crucial to potentially finding money to ensure equal access and full participation for working-class and poor students in K–12 schools. When school districts are mandated by the state to spend their funds in particular ways, we would advocate for engaging kids, families, and classroom teachers in budgetary activism—for their own good. Conversations about what would most fundamentally change their experiences in schools—and potentially change the trajectories of youth—can lead to requests for budgetary changes to eliminate classism at the local and state boards of education as well as the U.S. Department of Education.

Here is precisely where changing (presumably) locally controlled policies and practices to reflect an anticlassist and antipoverty commitment becomes complicated. When class-sensitive educators set out to change district- and school-level policies and practices, they inevitably are led to an infinite number of broader, far-reaching classist policies and practices—many of which lead back to market-based capitalism. Nevertheless, changing policies and practices to keep money in the pockets of struggling families and to extinguish systemic privileging of middle- and upper middle-class students and families should be a goal in developing class-sensitive pedagogies and schools.

Living Contradictions, Hoping for Something Different

In this article, we have attempted to present some of what we have come to know and believe about social class and classist practices in schooling and society and some experiences we have had in our professional learning work with educators in the state of Georgia. Research and theory from the past several decades offer generative possibilities for what schools and teachers might do differently to better meet the needs of working-class and poor students and families. We have organized “what we have come to know and believe” and ideas for “what we can do” across five interrelated principles we believe can guide schools and educators toward eliminating classism in their schools. What we imagine might be best for working-class and poor students is far from prescriptive, however. Rather, we imagine creative, intellectually engaged, dynamic learning spaces that draw from the strengths of students, teachers, and communities *working with class-sensitivity in mind*.

At the same time, it is naïve to think that developing class-sensitivity in ourselves and in schools alone will bring about the change we envision—that would require acknowledging that neoliberal capitalism inevitably perpetuates social class hierarchies and gross income and wealth inequalities, which, in turn, make it possible for a small percentage of citizens to achieve profound wealth and “freedom” and a much greater percentage to struggle to have their basic needs met. Class-sensitive pedagogies will not change this reality—only a serious consideration of state and national policies designed to redistribute resources similar to those in place post World War II and during the Civil Rights Era, would make a difference in this regard.

However, we are educators concerned about the experiences of working-class and poor students and families in schools. In our work as educators, we want to live out what Apple (2010, 2012) asks of what he terms the *socially committed critical researcher*—that is, for example, to tell “the truth about the relations of inequality” and to engage “in a critical analysis that also shows where possible actions can be and are going on to challenge these inequalities” (2012, p. 230). Thus, we are determined to open up conversations and potential practices and policies about class and the role educators play in maintaining—or disrupting—classism and its devastating impacts on children and youth.

Growing class-sensitive pedagogies is not necessarily about taking up a *particular* orientation toward the world, but more about acquiring bodied habits of “judging” our judgments so they do not continually take hold of us (Gadamer, 1960/1998) and lead us to making classed reactionary comments—and speaking out with urgency in solidarity (not sympathy or pity or hatred) with working-class and poor students. It is about acquiring and sharing ever-widening knowledge about history and contemporary issues facing families struggling to survive *and* acting with great humility to hear a personal story that may contradict all of the knowledge learned in books.

Perhaps most importantly, a class-sensitive pedagogue pursues knowledge, understanding, and experiences that can help her create conditions for learning that are in the best interest of working-class and poor children and families—but she knows the work is never complete. Children in the classroom will change, a different book will be read, a current event publicized, social and economic policies implemented, etc. The constant shifting of personal experiences of class and broader sociopolitical discourses and policies around class will keep us nimble and having never quite “arrived” at this thing we are calling class sensitivity.

Therefore, the class-sensitive pedagogue is both confident in what she knows and can do and also humble, knowing she can always know and do more. This is not a weakness, but a strength, in the teachers who are taking and continue to plod along this path. And she knows that her class-sensitive work is not a liberation project for other people (indeed, teachers critically examining their own working conditions, income inequalities, and classed experiences as workers in schools can bring about tremendous insight and power). The pedagogue consistently works on her personal transformation finding that she may experience powerful changes in herself, but she can’t know the paths for others’ transformation (students, peers, or colleagues). Her body, moving and speaking differently through the world of education and outside school, produces new possibilities of what can be spoken, thought, and performed.

And when faced with a young girl who admires her working-class mother who is also a waitress, this class-sensitive pedagogue responds in a way that acknowledges the contradictions lived in a society where dominant discourses of upward mobility and infinite growth collide with massive job loss, historic wealth and income gaps, and hierarchies of materialistic consumption. She will know that her response will be a classed response, and if it is not in the interest of the child’s and mother’s dignity today—while also opening up possibilities for living dreams not yet considered—she might unintentionally inflict psychosocial damages that cannot be undone. A class-sensitive pedagogue would know

that her response in the moment is crucial, and the conversations, interactions, curricula, and learning experiences in the classroom will continuously build on and complicate that in-the-moment response. And, maybe, the class-sensitive pedagogue's response will be one filled with genuine curiosity marked by openness: "Tell me more about that. I'd love to hear about your mother and the work she does as a waitress." The child's responses may well lead into a class-sensitive inquiry around work and workers, children who follow in their parents' career paths and those who take different paths, oral histories of restaurant workers to share with the broader community, or an infinite number of other curricular possibilities.

NOTES

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