



# Dispelling the Myths, Engaging the Realities: Helping to Facilitate the Post-Secondary Transition for Low-Income Students

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# Quick Reflection

## Consciousness/Practice Tension:

- My philosophy: problem isn't lack of strategies, but lack of understanding of the complexities of the issue
  - So, there are a lot of good people doing a lot of damaging things in the name of "helping" poor people



# Guessing Game

My research of hundreds of studies regarding poverty and K-12 education found that one factor best predicts how effectively a teacher will teach a low-income student. What was that factor?



# Guessing Game

The extent to which the teacher holds onto or rejects a deficit view of low-income students (based largely on why she or he believes poor people are poor)!



# Warming Up

Challenges faced by low-income students transitioning to college?

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- a) Material challenges
- b) Time challenges
- c) Bias challenges
- d) Other challenges



## A Little Bit of Context

- Growing income and wealth inequality in the U.S. and around the world
- Belief in education as the “great equalizer” even though schools always reproduce economic divides
- When socioeconomic matters are discussed, poor people often are subject to deficit ideologies and assimilationist agendas



# Starting Assumptions

1. Poor people bear the brunt of almost every imaginable social ill in the U.S.

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2. All people, regardless of class status, deserve access to basic human rights, including equitable educational opportunity
3. Inequities in our society mean all people don't have this access



## So Today...

- Trail of educational inequities
- Caution regarding the deficit approach to “helping” low-income students
- Introduction to the resiliency approach
- Strategies for supporting low-income students using the resiliency approach





# Class Conditions in U.S. Schools, K-12

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# Inequities a-Plenty:

Compared to their wealthier peer, low-income students are more likely to experience:

- Inadequately funded schools (Strange, 2011)
- Lack of access to pre-school and kindergarten
- Low expectations from teachers (Garza & Garza, 2010)
- Less access to extra-curricular activities (Stuber, 2009)
- More bullying (Von Rueden et al, 2006)
- Less access to school nurses (Berliner, 2009)

# Inequities (continued):

- Higher likelihood of being labeled “disabled” (McDermott et al, 2006)
- Teachers receiving low pay (Palardy, 2008)
- Less experienced teachers (Chambers et al, 2010)
- Uncertified teachers (Rouse & Barrow, 2006)
- Chronic teacher turnover (Guin, 2004)
- Poorly-stocked school libraries (Constantino, 2005)
- Rote and otherwise unengaging pedagogies (Tivnan & Hemphill, 2005)
- Poorly maintained schools (NCTAF, 2004)
- Large class sizes (Barton, 2004)
- **Less access to college counselors** (Bergerson, 2009)

# All of This to Say:

Poor families already bear the brunt of every imaginable social ill:

- Lack of access to healthcare
  - Higher rates of chronic illnesses
- Lack of access to good nutrition
- Lack of access to recreation (like playgrounds)
- Lack of access to **living wage jobs**

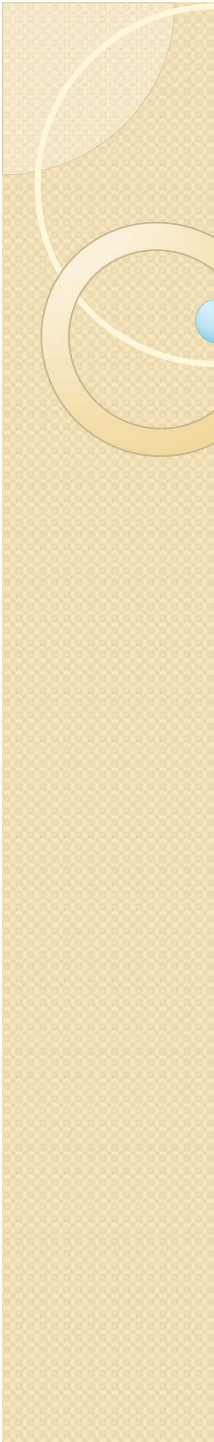
*\*\*\*Rarely do conversations about poverty and schooling in the U.S. take this context into account.*



## Working on Two Planes:

1. The immediate, in-the-system plane, which often involves reorganizing or mitigating existing inequitable conditions
2. The transformational, long-term plane, which involves changing the conditions that make transition challenging (or that create poverty to begin with)

***Problem is, there's a lot of #1, and little #2.***



**Avoiding the Deficit Approach to  
“Helping” Low-Income Students with  
Transition to Postsecondary  
Institutions**

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## The Primary Question:

- What are we defining at the “problem” when it comes to transition? Who or what needs to be “fixed”? Low-income students? Or unequal systems and structures? Who or what requires “remediation,” for example?

*The answers to these questions will predict whether we challenge or contribute to class inequities; whether we are predisposed to a deficit view or a more empowering view.*



# Deficit Ideology Is...

- A worldview that explains outcome inequalities as resulting from supposed moral, intellectual, and cultural deficiencies in disenfranchised communities and individuals
  - The “achievement gap”





# Deficit Ideology Is...

- A worldview that ignores the relationship between systemic inequities and outcome inequalities
- So it's a "blame the victim" approach and it's an assimilationist approach. It's also the most popular ideological orientation, even among well-meaning people.



# Deficit Ideology Feels Natural Because...

- We are conditioned to stereotype most negatively those who are outside our own identity groups:
  - Psycho-social research
- However, we also are conditioned to stereotype “target” groups, even when we are part of them
  - Think “welfare debate”



# The Danger of Deficit Ideology

- It “morally” justifies existing social conditions by locating the *problem* of outcome inequalities within disenfranchised communities
  - “If *those people* just cared more about their children’s education...”
  - “If *those people* would just try harder to fit in...”
  - “If *those people* didn’t come here so unprepared...”



# The Function of Deficit Ideology

- To ensure that popular solutions to outcome inequalities (e.g., college success) focus on “fixing” *disenfranchised communities* rather than on fixing those things that *disenfranchise communities*
  - So in place of addressing class inequities in all of the things that make college transition such a challenge for low-income students, we offer “mitigations” like mentor programs to low-income families ...



## As a Result

It might mitigate some of the challenges,  
but it never can eliminate the challenges.

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## Why I Don't "Buy" Deficit Ideology





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# Resiliency Approach





# Values of a Resilience Approach

- Focuses on positive adaptation despite adversity—how poor people cope with the repression of poverty and still thrive (Rockwell, 2006)
- Refuses to blame poor people for the inequities they experience
- Identifies educational approaches through “funds of knowledge” in poor communities





## Values of a Resilience Approach (continued)

- Students' identities are viewed as robust, complex, and worth of equity (Sato & Lensmire, 2009)
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# Examples of Resiliency in Poor Families

- Globally, compared to wealthy people, poor people are:
  - More generous to strangers;
  - More trusting;
  - More likely to take on difficult tasks to help others;
  - More compassionate; and
  - *More prosocial.* (Piff et al, 2010)



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# Strategies Using Resiliency Lens



# Note About Breadth

Some of us work in higher ed institutions, others in K-12 institutions, others as advocates in community organizations: these will be relevant to us in different ways...



# Strategies

**“Help” institutions** to understand that just getting low-income students to campus is not enough if those students don’t have access to equal opportunity once they’re there. Advocate for:

- Access to study abroad
- Access to extra-curriculars
- Access to faculty mentors

But also push the institution to deal with institutional class biases in the campus culture.



# Strategies

***Push institutions to consider students who must work full time by offering diverse class schedule options (such as evening and weekend classes)***

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# Strategies

***Avoid assumptions***, such as that the student has no supports at home (even if they're different supports); the idea is not to “save” low-income students from their home cultures (which assumes their home cultures are the problem) but to help them navigate inequitable systems.

When you talk about a student “escaping” their neighborhood or community you are assuming they're moving to something better (consumer culture?) and that they're leaving nothing of value behind. This amounts to implicit assimilationism.



## Strategies

***Provide support for navigating financial aid opportunities***, since many low-income students are cheated out of college counseling in their high schools, *and not because you think their families didn't care enough to help them.*





# Strategies

***Provide support for understanding financial aid opportunities*** to low-income families, who are least likely to have access to this information.

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# Strategies

***Provide access to tutors***, but make sure they are well-trained to avoid deficit approaches. Peer-tutoring has been shown to be particularly effective for low-income students.



# Strategies

***Provide resources to help students stay connected with family and friends back home*** (if they're going away to school) because family connections have been shown to be vital to the success of low-income students.



# Strategies

***Help facilitate peer social groups with students from similar backgrounds (among others).***

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# Strategies

***Create a mentor program***, but be clear that mentoring is aimed at helping students find a niche and make their way *as they are* and not to encourage them to assimilate into a “college culture.” The most effective mentors might be those who experienced college as low-income students.



# Strategies

***Engage low-income students and families*** on the question of what they “need” to support their transition; not everybody needs the same thing.

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# Strategies

***Your ideas, using the resiliency lens..?***

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What has worked in your contexts?

What hasn't worked?

# Final Reflection

The research points most ferociously at one conclusion:

If you believe that poor people are poor (or that they do worse in school on average than their peers) because of their own deficiencies and not because of systemic barriers, you are likely to contribute to the very inequities you're here to eliminate. Our attitudes about poor youth is the most critical single variable affecting the world we are creating for them.

But no pressure. 😊





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Thank you.