



ARTICLE

School Is No Place for Class(ism)

The language that educators use to address students can maintain and reinforce class structures and classist attitudes. The antidote? Anti-classist language.

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Leaving school one day, I overheard an adult tell a male student, "You don't want to be on welfare later in life. Make sure you study and do well in school." While I am sure this advice came from a place of good intentions, it led me to pause and to consider the ways in which we use language to—intentionally or unintentionally—maintain classist structures in our schools and communities. It also prompted me to recommit to using anti-classist discourse in my own work with students, teachers and families.

How many times have we heard, or even used, the microaggressive and oppressive advice/warnings: "You don't want to end up working at a fast food restaurant for the rest of your life!" and "Dress for success!" And with the ongoing national dialogue about implementing a livable minimum wage, how many social media posts have we seen that criticize people who are earning minimum wage for their desire to earn a better salary?

Our students are not sheltered from these harsh realities, and we are preparing them for their future. How do we ensure that we are preparing them for a good future? How do we define a "good" future?

I have learned that many of our students' family members work at fast food restaurants, and many are receiving subsidies for the precise reason that, despite their hard work, they are not earning enough money to make ends meet for their families. How disparaging it must be to go to school and hear adults reinforce

negative stereotypes about people like those you love most and who you *know* are working their best to take care of you and your family.

As a mentor for new educators (and former classroom teacher), I use language that models for teachers how to empower students to envision their own futures. Instead of open-ended classist comments, such as those described above, teachers can use non-classist language *and* engage students in conversations about socioeconomic class and the impact of policies on various people in our society. Students also benefit from the study of income inequality (part of equity literacy) and analyze factors that affect one's ability to live well in the United States and around the world. Students could even benefit from inspecting social media, propaganda and social language with a critical lens toward eliminating bias and dehumanization.

What else can we do? Avoid disparaging remarks about low-wage jobs, and instead tell students we believe in them and want them to have "all options available" to them as they go through school and graduate. It's a powerful way to shift our conversations. As educators, we can even use our own life experiences, possibly as first-generation college students or as people who might work multiple jobs to make ends meet, to express empathy with our students and the challenges they face. We can show them that it's possible for them to achieve their goals, despite the odds. But it's not enough to simply tell them; we also must follow those words with actions that remove barriers (where possible) and support students in working around institutional roadblocks to their success.

Could a student dream of working in a restaurant? Absolutely! Can we encourage her/him to think about what it might be like to work in a restaurant aboard an expedition ship, where s/he could also travel the world and learn about unique places? You bet!

In addition to exploring career fields beyond those in their local community, it is also important for students to be guided to think critically about the existing systems and structures that create barriers and to consider how to change those systems so that all people can live well. Essentially, this involves learning about what life is actually like for other people and making the changes necessary to support one another.

Engaging students in this type of critical thinking and encouraging them to think beyond their immediate experience is a powerful way to guide them in becoming the innovative, empathetic leaders that we so desperately need.

In this anti-classist work, perspective and language are everything.

Berg is a new educator mentor in Madison, Wisconsin.

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