

# Understanding Students'

*To know our students, we must know their communities and acknowledge their challenges.*

**Donna Marie San Antonio**

**G**ood relationships in school matter. And they matter a great deal to students from low-income families, whose struggles and strengths may be unknown to teachers. A student's ability to stay engaged in school can be affected by that student's home responsibilities, lack of family resources, and peer-group tensions related to social class hierarchies. Low-income students in particular benefit from having a meaningful relationship with at least one school staff member who knows their interests, skills, and struggles.

The urgency of making meaningful connections with students becomes clear when we consider the dire consequences that may result if students disengage from school. Nearly one in three high school students in the United States fails to graduate from high school, and nearly half of students from historically disadvantaged groups fail to graduate (Swanson, 2003). Students of all races and classes graduate more often when they attend schools in which high school graduation is the norm, yet only 50 percent of black students and 40 percent of Latino students attend such high schools (Balfanz & Letgers, 2004). High school graduation and college completion have profound life implications. The gap in income between college graduates and people without a high school diploma has grown larger in the last 30 years (Mishel, Bernstein, & Allegretto, 2005). Those holding a four-year college degree now earn, on average, two-and-one-half times as much as those without a high school diploma.

Society needs to make policy and structural changes to respond to persistent social and education inequities, but research shows that educators can mitigate the effects of poverty on education outcomes by creating classrooms and schools in which students at risk of becoming disengaged are valued as part of the school community (Garbarino, 1995). As educators, we have a daily opportunity to build relationships



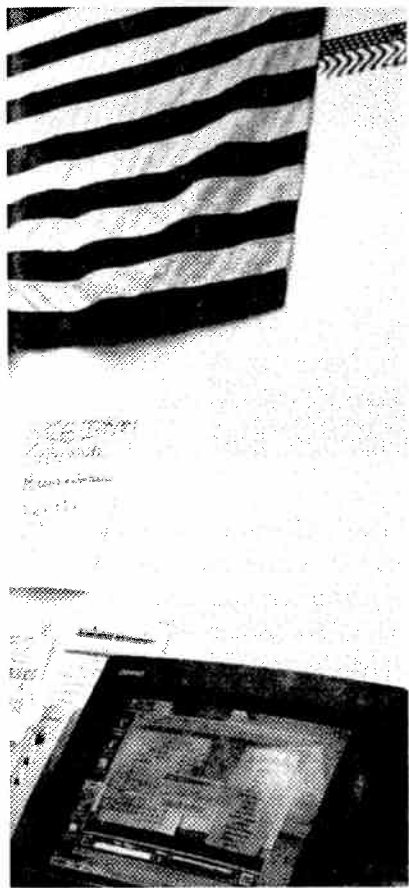
that can foster educational aspiration and performance. As a 2005 report for the Annie E. Casey Foundation asserts,

Some young people do well and stay in school despite tough circumstances. Researchers studying their resilience have found that children need personal anchors—stable, positive, emotional relationships with at least one parent or key person. . . . Teachers and other adults can play an important role in fostering resilience. They may mentor students . . . or they may play a role by offering emotional support during hard times, acting as the student's advocate when conflict arises in school or at home, or by providing an opportunity to pursue a special talent or interest. (p. 12)

## **School Relationships and Hope**

Our readiness to be recruited as personal anchors, mentors, and advocates for low-income students depends on our ability to acknowledge students' skills, interests, aspirations, and worries—and our willingness to learn more about the barriers to success they face. Teachers need accurate informa-

# Strengths and Struggles



tion about our students' communities so that we can understand the unique resources and knowledge that our students bring with them.

Despite citizens' frustration with inadequate and inequitable school resources, public schools are still locations of tremendous hope. The promise of education continues to inspire creative philanthropists, dedicated teachers, committed students, and hard-working parents. The value of good education prompted black parents to put their children on buses to integrate schools in hostile and dangerous circumstances, and the value of education continues to inspire community-based efforts to fight for equity and access for poor children.

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Relationships are a key element of that persistent hope, as I discovered when I studied low-income students' adjustment to middle school. In an ethnographic study that focused on the transition from 6th to 7th grade, I explored how 30 students from economically diverse backgrounds adjusted to their new school socially and academically (San Antonio, 2004). These students were transitioning to a six-town regional middle school from their single-town elementary schools. The adolescents I studied came from either the community of Hillside, where many families struggle to make ends meet, or the more-affluent community of Lakeview.<sup>1</sup>

I used interviews, focus groups, and observations to explore the extent to which students built connections with their peers and teachers and how these relationships affected their adjustment and success in school. The students consistently commented on their desire to have good relationships with peers and adults in their new school.

## Knowing Our Students, Knowing Their Communities

The students I interviewed from Hillside frequently expressed concern that their ability to build positive relationships would be hampered by stereotypes or lack of knowledge about their community. A 7th grade boy told me,

People think if you live in a trailer home you are nothing but trailer trash. And people from outside Hillside think that that is how everyone in Hillside lives.

As they journey from their own neighborhoods into schools serving students from a variety of backgrounds, low-income students and their parents are aware of the assumptions that precede them, and they are justifiably concerned that these distortions might hamper their sense of belonging. To help all students feel welcome and valued, teachers must put themselves in contact with students' home environments.

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We can find ample occasions to become more familiar with our students' lives outside school—attending church suppers, participating in community events, or eating or shopping in the neighborhood. We can use school field trips to explore the historical, artistic, and social significance of students' neighborhoods. We can invite people from our students' communities to speak to our classes. Bringing into the classroom stories of courage, resilience, ingenuity, and accomplishment from the home cultures of our students sends a powerful message of respect.

Students are keenly aware of the distribution of the most precious resource of all: their teachers' time and attention. The students I interviewed wanted teachers to help them feel connected to the school and valued by their peers. Hillside students perceived that for some of their peers, these connections were ready-made. One student pointed out that the

teachers tend to know the families of more affluent students—they shop in the same places, go to the same gym, and play on the same golf course. He surmised,

Some of the teachers probably pay more attention to the Lakeview kids. They're from the same town. . . . They know the kid, the kid's family. They know lots about them so they can talk to them more.

Another student spoke about her hope that teachers would make an effort to know who she really is: "They just see me as someone who is really quiet and doesn't really talk a lot." Students were clear that peer relationships across class lines partially hinged on their teachers' ability to show equal interest and respect for all their students.

### Acknowledging Inequities

Social class lines often become more visible in middle school as a result of ability grouping, selective sports teams, and elected positions, such as student council. As placement decisions play out, low-income students face serious barriers. In economically and racially diverse schools that use ability grouping, students from low-income backgrounds and students of color are disproportionately left out of advanced classes (Brantlinger, 2003; Oakes, Adam, & Page, 1992). In my study, for example, none of the four Hillside boys with standardized math test scores at about the 85th percentile—and only two Hillside girls—were taking algebra in 8th grade, whereas all of the nine Lakeview students in this category were.

A similar situation exists in selective sports teams and after-school activities. In my study, only one-third of the students from low-income families participated in after-school activities compared with two-thirds of the students from more-affluent families. And low-income students fared no better when it came to elected roles



within the school. In the year I conducted my study, none of the Hillside students was elected to student council. When asked how this imbalance might be explained, a Lakeview student responded:

I don't think [Lakeview students] really want to claim the school for themselves . . . but I think Lakeview might be a little bit more successful because maybe the teachers know them better because they're from the same town.

When educators understand these disparities and know how to engage students in respectful conversations about unequal privilege, opportunity, and access, students are ready and willing to explore these issues.

### Respecting Home-Based Values

Students from low-income families have to work strenuously to accomplish a positive sense of identity in school when they find that the skills, values, and ways of interacting found in school do not resemble those of their home communities. These differences were evident in my study in three areas in particular: parental beliefs about inter-

vening in their child's education, ethics around how to prepare and support children when they face disappointment, and attitudes toward cooperation and competition.

Parents with economic and social advantages were not reticent about "manipulating their child's environment" (as one parent put it). Many of them contacted coaches, teachers, and administrators to weigh in on decisions regarding their child's education. When I asked low-income parents about contacting the school regarding athletic team decisions and classroom placements, what I heard was not indifference or ambivalence but a thoughtful, clear value system. Parents told me that they would not advocate for their child above someone else's, that they believed their child would need to speak up for himself or herself in the face of injustice, and that—disappointments being part of life—their child would need to learn to deal with them. They believed that the day-to-day decisions of the school did not belong in their hands.

The low-income students in my study took these lessons to heart and

responded to disappointment with resilience. If they did not make the school team, they would play intramurals. "Maybe it's for the best," they might say. "I'm busy enough as it is." Often a similar disappointment in the lives of affluent students was treated as intolerable, and parents quickly responded by calling the school.

We can imagine how these different value systems and styles of communicating might result in different expectations, experiences, and opportunities for students of different income levels. Yet rather than accepting one set of values over the other, we should make these differences visible and consider both value systems positively. Our role as educators is to understand the value systems and circumstances of all our students so that we can support them appropriately. Perhaps we can help students who accept disappointment too easily strive harder to achieve their desires—and help more economically fortunate students adjust to disappointment more resiliently.

Parents and students from different socioeconomic backgrounds also held different values around cooperation and competition. When asked to comment on the benefits of playing sports, students from Lakeview frequently pointed out how good it feels to win, whereas students from Hillside almost unanimously described the gratification that comes from teamwork. These are very different orientations to the world. I have observed low-income children becoming reticent and uncertain in competitive classroom environments, and I have observed them becoming more active and comfortable in cooperative classroom environments (such as unified arts classes) that emphasized a collective product. By thoughtfully structuring classroom environments to balance independence and interdependence, individual effort and teamwork, we can create both a comfort zone and a

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challenge for all. Competitive students can learn to cooperate, and cooperative students can learn to compete.

### Improving Understanding Across Class Lines

To foster relationships in the classroom and between school staff and parents, educators must find ways to improve understanding across social class lines. We can initiate discussions that help students understand class realities and

strengthen empathy within reading programs, social studies classes, or advisory activities. See "Resources for Teaching About Equity" (p. 77) for places to start.

The following activity, which I often use with graduate education students, is ideal for generating this kind of discussion; it is also appropriate for middle and high school students.<sup>2</sup> I break students into small groups, give each group a bag of materials, and ask them

## Resources for Teaching About Equity

**Class Action** ([www.classism.org](http://www.classism.org)) and **Class Matters** ([www.classmatters.org](http://www.classmatters.org)) both offer training, resources, and suggestions for actions students can take to explore the effects of inequities in society.

**Teaching Tolerance** ([www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org)) provides educators with free materials that promote respect for difference and appreciation of diversity, including a biannual magazine and curriculum kits.

**Children's Defense Fund's** Web site ([www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org)) gives a range of suggestions for education and advocacy education and advocacy concerning children living in poverty.

**Rethinking Schools** ([www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org)) publishes a monthly journal full of suggestions for bringing social justice questions into the classroom. Its Web site features links to other sites and resources. Rethinking Schools publishes many relevant books, such as *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice, Volume 1 and 2* by Bill Bigelow. This book provides examples of how teachers can promote the values of community, justice, and equality while building academic skills.

**People Like Us** ([www.pbs.org/peoplelikeus](http://www.pbs.org/peoplelikeus)). This documentary on class issues provides good discussion starters. The Web site includes games, personal stories, a teaching guide, and other resources.

**Why Segregation Matters: Poverty and Educational Inequality** ([www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/deseg/Why\\_Segreg\\_Matters.pdf](http://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/deseg/Why_Segreg_Matters.pdf)). This report analyzes the effects of poverty and racial segregation on education.

to construct the most spectacular mobile they can in 20 minutes. I let students know I will be doing some role-playing during the activity and that their peers and I will evaluate their final product. They empty the bag of materials and get to work with earnestness and energy.

The students are unaware that the bags contain vastly different amounts of materials. One group gets scissors, a full set of color markers, tape, glue, string, glitter pens, wooden coffee stirrers, several clothes hangers, and lots of colorful construction paper. Another group gets two or three dull-colored markers, two coffee stirrers, a sheet of beige paper, some string, and one hanger. The remaining groups get varying amounts of supplies ranging from meager to abundant.

As students work, I circulate around the room. I smile at the group with a lot of resources and comment on how creative and colorful their work is (“Look at those neatly cut pieces and the colorful arrangement! You are doing such a good job!”). I tell the group with the least amount of material that their mobile probably isn’t going to be as nice as the others but “I just want you to do your best.”

When the time is up, students return to the bag all the materials that they did not use. Then each group shows its creation, and we debrief the exercise. The experience often evokes surprising emotion. The students with fewer resources are often self-conscious as we compare and evaluate the results. After we display the mobiles and discuss their merits, I take the bags of leftover materials from the group with the most and the group with the least resources and empty them onto the floor. Looking at the two piles on the floor—one with an ample supply of leftover paper and other materials, and the other with nothing but a couple of markers—the students with more than enough resources suddenly realize that the other groups

had less. They are often incredulous: “How could that group make such a nice mobile with so little?” The resource-poor groups typically are aware that they had less, but they remain quiet, rarely expressing resentment or indignation.

Talking about this activity as a metaphor for conditions in society leads to a lively discussion about the

ample resources often distribute materials to each person in the group and members work independently, drawing on their individual interests and skills. Those in the underresourced group realize that they have to plan, share, discuss, and cooperate with one another. When asked how they created such a good product, students often say that

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inequitable distribution of resources and the lack of consciousness about such inequalities. It’s important to acknowledge to students that the activity can never construct the lived experience of inequality, but that we can learn from it nonetheless.

Each group of students will understand this activity in a different way, but the follow-up conversations yield interesting observations and interpretations. We discuss society’s tendency to judge people’s performance on the basis of their personal qualities rather than on context and resources. We also discuss the experience of knowing and not knowing that the resources were unevenly distributed. I ask questions like,

- Can you give examples of situations in which people with abundant resources were unaware that others did not have as much? Why are people unaware?

- How might people respond when they know that their life circumstances are invisible to others?

- How does this lack of awareness affect policies and practices?

Another set of questions focuses on how each group worked. Because I tell students that their mobiles will be displayed and evaluated, there is often a sense of competition. The groups with

they realized they had to work together. This leads to exploration of how poverty and affluence might lead to different worldviews regarding relational versus material assets, community and individual goals, and interdependence and independence.

Finally, we talk about what resources students need in order to experience academic and social success at school—things like nice clothing, a place to study, high-speed Internet connection, and summer sports camps. If I’ve done my job well, by the time this exercise is over, students have a different level of awareness about attitudes, values, and the mind-boggling inequalities around us that often remain unexamined.

### Beginning the Dialogue Locally

Communities treasure schools that hold all students and parents in high regard, and they cherish teachers who find ways to know about their students’ interests, skills, family values, and cultural traditions. In the absence of accurate knowledge about home and school domains, people tend to create myths, and these myths (such as the myth that low-income parents do not value education) can have devastating results. Structural school reform and more resources for poor schools are

certainly needed—but let's not forget the profound importance of giving students equal access to relationships. Teachers build strong relationships when they honor what they learn from parents and value the ethics of care, community, and interdependence.

The will to engage in robust discussion about inequality—with teachers, students, and parents as key stakeholders—has been missing from our educational and political institutions. Local administrators and teachers can promote this dialogue and explore the conditions that foster or hinder strong school affiliation for students and parents across the economic spectrum. This will require a rigorous effort to see what is often unseen, seek information from sources we rarely consider, and engage in collective action on the basis of what we learn. **EL**

<sup>1</sup>Place names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup>This activity is adapted from *Open Minds to Equality: A Sourcebook of Learning Activities to Affirm Diversity and Promote Equity* by N. Schniedewind and E. Davidson (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998).

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