Choosing Democracy
A Practical Guide to Multicultural Education

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Chapter 4

With Liberty and Justice for Some: Democracy, Class Relations, and Schools

"Nowadays it is fashionable to talk about race or gender; the uncool subject is class. It's the subject that makes us all tense, nervous, uncertain about where we stand. Many citizens of this nation, myself included, have been and are afraid to think about class...

"As a nation we are afraid to have a dialogue about class even though the ever-widening gap between the rich and poor has already set the stage for a sustained class warfare."

bell hooks, Where We Stand: Class Matters. 2000 (vii)

The Crisis of Poverty

In Chapter 3 we examined several experiences of race, ethnicity, and identity in schools. Although these issues are important and have been extensively analyzed in professional literature, social class is seldom analyzed. Yet, social class may well be
as important in determining school achievement. To further understand the problem of democracy and failing schools, this chapter will examine the economic problems of poverty and social class.

A basic goal for democratic education is equal opportunity in schools. Being African American is not the problem. There are thousands of successful African American businesspeople and professionals and political leaders. Being Mexican/Puerto Rican or Hispanic is not the fundamental problem. Mexican American and Hispanic businesspeople own and direct major corporations. They are represented in all the major professions.

Major progress has been made on integration, particularly in the Southeast of the United States. We now have a distinct African American, Hispanic, and Asian middle class and upper middle class. Integration has occurred. Now that we have significant racial and ethnic integration in the middle class, we can see more clearly the class biases in our economy and in our schools.

Prior to the Civil Rights struggle (1954–1968), writers and social scientists observed poverty, but they saw race. That is, poverty and the cycle of poverty was clearly evident, but most observers described it as a racial matter. They looked at poverty and saw ethnicity. Now, with moderate gains in integration, the poor and the marginalized are more visible. They work more than 40 hours per week and live in poverty. Poverty and poverty conditions are particularly telling in schools. One group of students get well-functioning schools, and a second group gets oppressed, poverty-stricken schools. This difference is not about race alone; it is about race and poverty interacting to produce a cycle of poverty, or a cycle of oppression.
A major barrier to equal opportunity in schools is social class. The issue is school success and school opportunity when the student is Black and poor, or Mexican American and working class. The issue may be social class, and this chapter explores the ways in which social class impacts school opportunity and economic opportunity.

The recent report "Pulling Apart: A State by State Analysis of Income Trends" demonstrates that our society is increasingly divided along economic lines (Bernstein, Boushey, McNichol & Zahradnik, 2002). The wealthy live in luxury housing in affluent neighborhoods, professional workers live in comfortable middle-class suburbs, and working-class and poverty-stricken people make do with deteriorating and substandard housing in the central cities and many rural areas.

By 1997 the economy had recovered from a prior severe recession and economic restructuring of the 1980s and the early 1990s. The economy began a period of rapid growth that continued until March 2001. Although the economy was expanding, the economic problems that emerged in the 1980s continued to produce growing inequality. The growth in median income was produced by the well-off doing much better, the middle class working longer hours, and the working poor experiencing economic progress for a short time.

The impressive economic growth of the 1990s had benefited the upper class, while the economic situation of the average family remained stagnant until 1997.

The State of Working America, 2003/4 says, "Most notably, middle- and lower income families, whose economic fortunes had stagnated in prior years, saw real income gains over the late 1990s."

Figure 4.1 illustrates the growing inequality in our society.

**Figure 4.1  Family Income by Growth by Quintile**

[Diagram showing income distribution by quintile from 1973-2000]

In 1999, Wilson described this period as follows:

It is important to appreciate, first of all, that the poor and the working classes of all racial groups struggle to make ends meet, and that even the middle class has experienced a decline in its living standard. And unlike the top 20 percent of the U.S. population, these groups are indeed struggling; virtually all of the past decade's economic growth has gone to the upper 5 percent of families. Since the early 1970s, while the income of the top 1 percent of households has doubled, family and household incomes have stagnated or declined for 80% of the population. (Wilson, 1999)

While their wages have remained stagnant, many working people have lost health benefits and job security in the growing global market economy (Boushey, Brocht, Gundersen & Bernstein, 2001).

In March 2001 the economy had entered another of its regular recessions (a reversal in the rate of economic growth). The media and political leaders told us that our standard of living was improving. But, as the State of Working America 2002–2003 reveals, the economic problems of the 1980s and 1990s continue to produce growing poverty and inequality. The median family income in 1999 reached

Figure 4.2 Median and Poverty-level Income for a Family of Four in 2000

![Graph showing median and poverty-level income for a family of four in 2000](image)

$48,950; while it was $54,121 for Whites; $31,778 for Blacks; and $31,663 for Latinos (Sklar, Mykyta, & Wefald, 2001, p. 181).

Economists call each 20 percent segment of the population on the chart a quintile (one fifth). The top fifth of persons is doing quite well. For a detailed description of the U.S. upper class from opposing perspectives, see Domhoff (2002), and Philips (2002). In the period covered by the chart, their income improved by 61.6 percent. The middle quintiles, the heart of the middle class, are having a more difficult time. Their income has grown 24 percent and 33 percent, while their tax burdens have also grown. Working longer and working harder led to progress for the middle classes in the late 1990s. This growth appears to have been reversed during the Bush recession of 2001–2003 and the economic crisis of a falling stock market and corporate bankruptcies of Enron, WorldCom, and others. The middle quintiles, which include most teachers, nurses, and other professionals, are working harder and harder in an attempt to maintain and protect their current standard of living, healthcare, and retirement pensions (Pulling Apart, April, 2002).

In the 1950s, it was common in most White families to have only one adult working in the paid labor force. One income was enough to buy a home and to raise a family. Today many in the middle class achieve a higher standard of living by having husband and wife both working for pay outside the home. The average worker in the United States, the person in the middle quintile, worked 129 hours more, or three weeks more, in 1997 than in 1989 (State of Working America: 1998–1999, p. 72). Stressed families have an important impact on children in school.

The second quintile of the middle class, which would include many teachers who are single-parent heads of households, has experienced an overall decline in their standard of living over the last 20 years. From 1989–1996, they experienced a 0.2% decline. A decline of 0.2% is not enough to cause a crisis, but it does make it difficult to buy a home or a new car. This lower part of the middle class is at times referred to as the working class. They watch as their jobs are sent overseas, their job security is lost, their taxes remain high, and the economic opportunities for their children erode (State of Working America, 1998–1999).

The growing economic divisions in our society between winners and losers occurs because the economy in which we live and work is changing dramatically (Soros, 2002; Stiglitz, 2002). For example, most jobs created during the 1990s have been in the service sector of the economy (teaching assistants, truck driving, nurses assistants, janitors). These workers provide services to people and to corporations. The jobs are often part time or temporary. Even manufacturing jobs in the clothing industries and the computer industries pay poor wages and often do not include job security, health benefits, and retirement plans. These low-wage jobs do not allow working people to provide for their families, to buy homes, or to save for their children to go to college.

Some of these low-wage workers are threatened by poverty. The loss of a job, or a serious illness in the family—25 percent do not have health insurance (U.S. Census, 1998, pp. 60–202)—could quickly destroy their home and lifestyle.
Figure 4.3  Raise the Floor

They work five days a week, often more.
They work full time in the richest nation on earth, yet they can’t make ends meet.
They can’t make ends meet because their wages are too low.
They are health care aides who can’t afford health insurance.
They work in the food industry, but depend upon food banks to help feed their children.
They are child care teachers who don’t make enough to save for their own children’s education.
They work at vacation resorts, but they have no paid vacation.
They care for the elderly, but they have no pensions.
They work hard.
They work in the backbreaking work of picking lettuce and tomatoes, peaches and strawberries.
They work in the meatpacking plants at jobs so grueling and dangerous they call out for a sequel to The Jungle.
They work in fast food places and the finest restaurants where wealthy executives write off lavish meals as business expenses.
They work ringing up purchases at discount stores and luxury boutiques.
They work cleaning the homes and hotel rooms of people who make more in a day than they make in a year.
They work hard and they can’t make ends meet in the richest nation on earth.
Most Americans think that’s wrong.
Most Americans think work should pay enough to support workers and their families. If you work full time, you should not be poor. It’s as simple as that. No one should be working poor.

In the excellent book Raise the Floor: Wages and Policies that Work for Us All (2001), Holly Sklar, Laryssa Mykeyta, and Susan Wefald describe life for these members of the working class.

And, for our purposes, we need to point out that the working poor send their children to school, and you may be the teacher.

It has been the working poor who were most hurt by the flight of good-paying union jobs to other countries. Women in Haiti were paid only 6 cents for every $19.99 Disney garment they make, while teenagers in El Salvador were paid 12 cents for every $20 GAP shirt they sewed (National Labor Committee, 1998). This kind of global competition regularly drives jobs out of the United States to other countries where unions are almost non-existent. U.S. workers who lose their jobs
are understandably resentful of the loss of opportunity for themselves and their families. In the 1990s, political campaigns among the middle and working classes often blamed immigrants and affirmative action for the problems in the economy instead of recognizing the effects of the new global economy.

The global economic changes of the last decade dramatically affected their work-lives and the educational opportunities for their children. The economy is working very well for the top 20 percent of the people (Phillips, 2002).

Economist Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labor (1992–1996), noted that economic opportunity changes with the business cycles (1997). Conservative scholar Kevin Philips in Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich, describes the era: “Between 1979 and 1989 the portion of the nation’s wealth held by the top 1 percent doubled from 22 percent to 39 percent. By the mid-nineties, some economists estimated that the top 1 percent had captured 70 percent of all earnings growth since the mid-seventies” (p. xiii). After this came the stock market crash and the fraud revealed in the Enron, Global Crossing, WorldCom, and similar scandals (Grieder, 2002).

Meanwhile, more than one out of six children in the United States lives in poverty—a higher rate than that tolerated by other industrialized nations (“The Progress of Nations, 2000,” p. 33). Despite our idealism about equal educational opportunity, poor children generally attend poorly financed schools. This is because schools frequently mirror the neighborhoods around them. (See Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Carnoy, 1985). Detailed studies of five large metropolitan areas by Harvard political scientist Gary Orfield and Carol Ashkinage (1991) and Orfield (2001) demonstrate that because poor neighborhoods usually have poorly financed schools, class is often a major determinant of educational opportunity.

Yet working people have a faith in education. They have been among the primary supporters of public education since the growth of state-supported schools in the 1840s. Through good times and economic crises, working people have insisted on improving public schools. They expect the schools to teach their children how to participate in a democracy, prepare them for employment, and show them how they can improve the quality of their lives. They expect equal opportunity for their children.

But our schools are not living up to these expectations, especially for children of the poor. Thirty-one percent of African American children, 28 percent of Latino children, 8 percent of Asian children, and 9.4 percent of European American children live in poverty (Bureau of Census, March 2000). Although these were the lowest poverty rates since 1979, too many of these students still attend inadequate and even failing schools.

Four social crises have devastated teachers and schools particularly in the urban United States during the last two decades. First, as described in Chapter 1, a global economic system has developed producing winners and losers. In the United States, the working poor are the losers (Faux et al., 2001). Second, during economic crises of the 1980s, a new form of market fundamentalism came to dominate political discussion. In pursuit of the ideology of unregulated free markets, public regulation of
Table 4.1

By 2000, the federal corporate taxes reached their lowest levels since 1983. For example, an average family of four making 30,000 per year had an average tax rate of 17 percent. But, Ford Motor Company,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre tax profits</th>
<th>$18,625,000,000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Federal income tax</td>
<td>$1,050,800,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective tax rate</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And, Microsoft Corporation,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre tax profits</th>
<th>$21,866,500,000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Federal income tax</td>
<td>$386,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective tax rate</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


corporate behavior was repealed and public financial support for all social programs, including schools, was severely cut. The conservative Philips describes consequences of this era as, "high levels of political corruption, the arrogance of global economic power, the twisting of the U.S. tax code, and the voter belief in the captivity of government to private interests" (xii). During the 1980s and the 1990s, in part to gain funds for speculative capital, public funding of most social programs (except prisons), including schools, was not allowed to grow or was severely cut back.

A third crisis was the societal abandonment of responsibility to care for and guide our children. Adults without children pursued their own wealth. Some demanded tax reductions while increasing their own public benefits. Reversing a 100-year pattern, voters refused to pay taxes to fund the schools sufficiently. The voting majority of the adult population and their political leaders abandoned the schools, particularly in urban areas, abandoned the children, and the future in favor of buying a new car, a new home, or a new missile system. The financial and physical condition of urban schools sank into a state of chronic crisis. At the same time, many parents, squeezed by a slow, hidden economic decline of working-class incomes since the 1970s, were working more hours and consequently shifting more of the responsibility for child rearing onto the schools. Poverty continues to grow. Increases in poverty particularly affect women heads of households and their families.

Barbara Ehrenreich gives a series of intriguing first-person accounts of her own efforts to make a living alongside the working poor in *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (2001). You may recognize the situation from jobs you have held.

She says,
So, if low wage workers do not always behave in an economically rational way, that is, as free agents within a capitalist democracy, it is because they dwell in a place that is neither free nor in any way democratic. When you enter the low-wage workplace—and many of the medium-wage workplaces as well—you check your civil liberties at the door, leave America and all it supposedly stands for behind, and learn to zip your lips for the duration of the shift. The consequences of this routine surrender go beyond the issues of wages and poverty. We can hardly pride ourselves on being the world’s preeminent democracy, after all, if large numbers of citizens spend half their waking hours in what amounts, in plain terms, to a dictatorship.

Any dictatorship takes a psychological toll on its subjects. If you are treated as an untrustworthy person—a potential slacker, drug addict, or thief—you may begin to feel less trustworthy yourself.

Ehrenreich, in her earlier work, *Fear of Falling* (1989), summarized decades of research to describe a fourth crisis produced by these social changes: the abandonment of the cities by the middle class. With the rapid growth in the ranks of the poor and consequent increases in homelessness, street gangs, drug abuse, and prostitution, many middle-class professionals no longer find the cities a safe environment to raise a family. They may have to work in the city, but increasingly they choose to live in the suburbs. The cities, with their declining tax base and decaying school systems, are being left to the working poor (White, Black, and Latino) (Jargowsky & Bane, 1991; Orfield, 2001; Orfield & Eaton, 1996).

These crises in society have produced crises in the schools. Today's parents are working more hours and earning less money. More than ever, they are looking to the schools to bring up the next generation of children. But schools in many areas have been unable to respond to these momentous changes in the economy and the society. With shrinking budgets, decaying physical facilities, and a deteriorating social environment, the schools are falling behind. The burden of this failure weighs most heavily on the children of the working class and people of color because their

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### Table 4.2 Changes in Wages by Gender, 1973–1997

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>$14.08</td>
<td>8.89</td>
<td>63.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>$14.39</td>
<td>9.03</td>
<td>62.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>$13.07</td>
<td>9.55</td>
<td>73.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>$12.19</td>
<td>9.63</td>
<td>79.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The change in the gap between men and women's wages is due to both increases in women's wages and decreases in men's wages.

parents can escape neither the public school system nor the cities where the problem is most acute (Kozol, 2002).

Social Class as an Analytical Concept

The racial and cultural analyses of school achievement described in prior chapters use the concept of identity and revealed only part of the story. Social class and gender interact with culture, race, and identity to influence each individual child's school achievement.

Social class is a concept, an intellectual construct, a tool that helps us to categorize, store, and retrieve information. In Chapter 2, we used the concept of culture to organize a wide variety of information about how groups of people live. We may not remember all of the particulars of a group of people, but we recognize the general concepts of culture and identity. Having learned these concepts, we can approach learning about new groups of people using the same organizing ideas.

Class is a multidimensional concept. E. William Domhoff has written one of the classic studies of the U.S. class systems. He argues,

First and foremost, the term [class] refers to an intertwined economic and power relationship between two or more groups of people who have specific roles in the economic system. Owners of businesses and the employees of those businesses are the most obvious example of this dimension in the nation-states of the Western world, but not all societies have economies that feature owners and employees. Second, class is a category that refers to the social institutions, social relationships, and lifestyle within the various economic groups; common neighborhoods, common clubs, and recreational activities, and a strong tendency to interact primarily with people from one's own economic class. (Domhoff, 2002, p. 4)

An important attribute of concepts (such as culture or class) is that they shape the thinking of their users. Thomas Kuhn, in his landmark work The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1970), described how the selection of basic concepts for research strongly influences researchers' methodologies and results. For example, a researcher who sought explanations for school failure by examining the concept of social class (usually a sociologist or economist) would pay attention to different evidence than a researcher who looked at failure through the concepts of psychology (identity) or the neoconservative philosophies of the recent school reform movement.

As a result of their personal histories and the worldviews and cultures of most professional educators and many U.S. sociologists and psychologists, the literature in education pays only limited attention to class issues or avoids discussing class. Instead researchers refer to socioeconomic status (SES). The social status approach, one of two approaches commonly taught in university sociology courses, follows the

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1The complexity of definitions of social class in the United States and the rapid changes in professional jobs in the middle class lead some researchers to avoid class issues. But the difficulty of arriving at a clear definition of class is not an adequate reason to avoid using it as an analytical concept (Ehrenreich & Ehrenreich, 1979; Parker, 1972; Walker, 1979).
tradition of W. Lloyd Warner (1898–1970). The concept of SES blends both economic issues of jobs and income (or lack of work) with status issues of role relationships, consumption patterns, and implied values to determine a prescribed socioeconomic status. Education research usually follows the Warner tradition and uses the concept of SES rather than the concept of social class to describe differences among families, neighborhoods, and schools. While SES studies explain some issues, the concept, as Kuhn (1970) noted, also shapes the perceptions of social scientists and teachers.

The use of SES as an analytical tool emphasizes the role of the individual in determining success or failure. Status can be improved, for example, by getting more education or earning a big promotion at one’s workplace. Researchers using SES as an organizational concept usually assume that people improve their position in society primarily by individual effort and that schools serve as vehicles for economic and social advancement. The SES approach rarely challenges the inequality of the system. The use of the concept of status leads to seeking incremental improvements in the schools to benefit those students who appear to be willing to try harder.

The assumptions behind status research reinforce the position that it is the individuals who need to change, not the schools. Decades of educational research and policy development from this perspective have described the deterioration of education opportunities for students placed at risk by declining economic opportunities in many regions, but the research has not led to the development of democratic alternatives for teachers and students (Wilson, 1996).

Research organized around the concept of social class works from substantially different assumptions. From a class perspective, our society is made up of an upper class that includes the owners and managers of businesses and corporations; a middle and working class that includes a professional stratum, many service workers, and blue-collar workers; and a lower class characterized by social isolation, often irregular employment, welfare, and family disruption.

Some of the difficulties that result from using the idea of SES rather than class are revealed in the common use of the term middle class. The press and people in casual conversation use the term to mean a wide variety of living situations. Stephen Rose, in his excellent work *Social Stratification in the United States* (2000), gives examples of two people who would probably be considered middle class.

The term middle class is widely used—most Americans consider themselves part of it—but rarely defined. People usually reject the alternative categorizations, lower or upper class, because no one wants to be poor and few consider themselves wealthy enough to be classified as rich.

Consider the following two families. In the first, the family income is $30,000: the husband works as a forklift operator at an assembly plant while the wife stays at home caring for their two children. They rent their home and worry whether the local schools are good enough to prepare their children for college. The other family is a suburban couple, a dentist and psychologist, with a combined income of
$125,000; they own a $300,000 house and three cars, one child is in college, and another attends a local private school. Both families might describe themselves as being “strapped” for money and as having little left over for frills. Both would probably consider themselves part of the middle class—though, the first family might add the adjective “lower” and the second add “upper.”

In other words, “middle class” has become a nearly all-inclusive category, one so broad that it not only blurs real distinctions in income, lifestyle, and well-being but often clouds public discussion as well. By extending the popular conception of “middle class” to almost all White people, we have in fact hidden class from our view.

In Figure 4.2, middle class (including both professional employees and blue- and pink-collar workers) would include all families making more than $30,000 per year (the federal low budget line) and less than $85,000 per year.

Most people in this society work for someone else. Managers direct workers and owners control the jobs. Over 50 percent of all U.S. families depend on wages for their income. The jobs, the income, and the class position of the parents of students largely determine where the student will live. In turn, where a student lives significantly affects the quality of the school the student will attend.

Bowles and Gintis (1976), Carnoy and Levin (1985), Domhoff (2002), and others whose research is based on a social-class perspective argue that our economic system produces social classes and that these classes are group phenomena, not individual choices. Wexler argues convincingly that social class is more than a position on a scale, it is always a relationship to others. That is, the working class, the middle class, and other classes exist in relationship to the other classes. The huge, even obscene, profits garnered by CEOs and owners of high-tech companies in the 1990s were an issue not because these people were rich, but because of their relationship to the salaries of the workers in their companies, and the taking away of pension and health benefits for the broad sector of working people in the service industries (Phillips, 2002).

Changes in class composition occur as a result of changes in the economic system. The structural changes presently occurring in our economy are having this effect. Good-paying union jobs in auto, steel, electronics, and other industries are being transferred to other countries and are being replaced by low-paying service jobs. These are class changes—not individual changes.

Attention to social class rather than SES yields additional insights into the functions of schooling in our racially and class-polarized society. Scholars, teachers, and researchers interested in promoting equality in schooling use the concept of social class to explain how the gaps in school achievement among students from the upper, middle, working, and poor classes reproduce and maintain inequality in society. According to Bowles & Gintis (1976), only when we grasp the role of class in our educational system can we begin to counteract its effects:

Understanding the dynamics of class relationships is essential to an adequate appreciation of the connection between economics, racism and education. For the institutions of economic life (including schools) do not work mechanistically and mindlessly to produce social outcomes, but rather change and develop through the types of class relationships to which they give rise. The educational system is involved in reproducing and changing
these class relationships and cannot be understood by simply "adding up" the effects of schooling on each individual to arrive at a total social impact. (p. 67)

When class is not considered, or when ethnicity or SES is substituted for class, the analyses fail to recognize how hard many people work to survive in this economy. Workers struggle 12 to 14 hours per day six and seven days per week in sweatshop clothing manufacturing plants, in cleaning hotels and restaurants, in order to have a home and to put food on the table for their families.

Parents working in these grueling jobs, usually women and single parents, have a difficult time helping their children in school. Few of the children have dental care or health care. School policies such as required homework where the parents are expected to monitor and to check the homework are a cruel parody of reality. And, in difficult times when companies move their work and their factories to other countries, the families of these most exposed workers are often destroyed (Yoon Louie, 2001). These workers are struggling for survival, for a piece of the American dream, and to keep their children in school.

Researchers such as Gary Orfield (2001) and William Julius Wilson (1999), who pay attention to class issues, view the way in which education is presently dispensed as a part of the system of maintaining class relationships. Tracking, ability grouping, teacher expectations, counseling services, and inequitable school expenditures reinforce already existing social class differences (Carnoy & Levin, 1985). Researchers who approach these problems from the perspective of social class usually have different goals for schools than those using a status-based approach. They argue that democratic schools should produce more equality rather than advance a few individuals within the present unequal system. This viewpoint regards schools as a product of public policy and as an institution that is subject to change based on the democratic demands of the majority.

**Formation of the European American Working Class**

To have an accurate understanding of our society, it is important to know that the majority of the population is not only "white," but that most "white" people belong to a working class. Each part of the macroculture has its own history and identity. As an example, consider the Irish in the United States.

The Irish Americans are descendents of immigrants. They trace their roots to Ireland. Ireland had always produced a surplus of food. Between 1641 and 1652, one fourth of the population of Ireland was killed in an invasion by the English general Cromwell, and more than 100,000 children were sold by English masters off to slavery and prostitution to plantations in places such as Barbados (O'Callaghan, 2000).

The forced imposition of the English ownership of the land after 1640 changed agricultural production in Ireland and forced the remaining peasantry into extreme poverty.

In 1846 and 1847 the Irish potato crop failed, and more than 1 million people faced starvation. During this time Ireland produced sufficient food for all of its people, but the control of the food production was in the hands of English nobility.
When the potato famine hit, starvation was so severe that the bodies piled up by the side of the roads. There were not enough healthy people to bury the dead. More than 50 percent of the male population either fled or died. Some moved to England to earn a few dollars, and then fled to Australia, Latin America, and the United States. Families survived by sending their young men, and later young women, to the United States looking for work.

Irish workers were recruited in England, Ireland, and in the cities of New York and Boston to build railroads, work in the coal mines, and dig canals. By 1850 a majority of people in many of the major cities in the United States were immigrants, predominantly the Irish.

Irish immigrants enjoyed a few advantages: they spoke English, they had a history of political organizing, and they brought several community organizations with them, notably the Catholic Church. Irish immigrants used these skills to create labor unions in the United States and political organizations to defend themselves from factory owners. The Irish had long developed resistance societies in Ireland, and political organizations soon arose in the United States. The Irish developed their own schools and universities, known today as Catholic schools.

In the United States, the new Irish immigrants faced racism and prejudice directed against them. Irish workers and their unions were attacked as subversive. But the Irish entered an economy with a rapidly growing job market. The factories, mines, railroads, and the U.S. army needed workers. Immigrants could enter the job market without an education.

The children of the immigrants went to school, and some even to college. The better-paying jobs, and the public service jobs such as police and fire, jobs that required training, were opened to the Irish through kinship networks, political patronage, and Catholic schools.

Factories and mines grew in the North after the civil war. More unskilled and menial workers were needed to do the dangerous and exhausting work. Unions began to form in the mines and on the railroads and to spread to more industries. Factory owners responded by recruiting new immigrant workers in Europe. They sent recruiters to Poland, Germany, Lithuania, and to Italy in search of more workers.

When Irish and U.S. workers went on strike, Polish workers were imported to do the work, or Italians or Finns. These workers were brought here by labor contractors and did not speak English. Like the Irish before them, they were fleeing the poverty of peasant life in Europe. They came to earn money and to feed their families. They could be used to break the strikes of the Irish and the Germans.

Not all immigrants reached the U.S. cities alive. They crossed the ocean as cargo. They had to bring their own food and water on the ship. They were packed below deck on the large ships. Diseases and epidemics killed tens of thousands of immigrants on their way to the United States.

These migrants hoped to find farmland in the West, but many got no farther than Cleveland, or Detroit, or Milwaukee, wherever the most desperate jobs could be found. Men, women, and children worked 12 to 14 hours per day for barely enough to eat. Living conditions in the urban immigrant communities (ghettos) were almost
subhuman. Housing was unbearable. Workers in factories often could only rent a bed, which they shared with workers on other shifts. Women and children went to work at 12 and 14 years of age. If they couldn’t find a position in a mill, they would be forced to work as servants or, losing that job, many were forced into prostitution. After 10 years of hard labor, many immigrants were too diseased or mutilated to continue to work, so they were thrown out on the street. Criminal behavior and drunkenness were common in immigrant quarters.

Slowly, painfully, each community was able to get its children into schools. It took more than 80 years of struggle to create unions, in part because each immigrant group could be used against each other. After one or two generations, with union wages and working conditions, stable families began to develop.

Throughout the East and Midwest, ethnic communities developed around industries: the Irish in Boston and New York; Poles, Italians, and Irish in Pittsburgh; Slovaks and Italians in Cleveland and Buffalo; Germans in Milwaukee and Chicago; Finns in the iron mines of Minnesota; Irish in the coal fields of Pennsylvania; German and Russian Jews in New York.

People in these immigrant communities worked hard. They sent their children to school. Public schooling offered the families a hope for a better life. The schools were vehicles to “Americanize” the children, to teach them English. After decades, a new, fiercely “American” culture developed among these working class descendants of immigrants.

After WWII, these communities began to redefine themselves as “Americans” rather than Irish or Polish, and working people began to move out of the central cities to the new places called suburbs. Federal veterans home loans (subsidies) helped them purchase homes, and the GI Bill (financial aid) allowed many young men to attend college. During and after both wars, a large migration of African Americans moved from the South to the North, often coming into conflict and economic competition with the working-class descendants of immigrants.

In their own communities’ view of history, these descendants of immigrants believed that they worked hard, built their unions, played by the rules, educated their children, and became “good Americans.” This European American working class culture, like other cultures, passed on a perspective, a worldview, of the melting pot to its children. And they see this worldview as accurate history.

Each new immigrant group became economic competition for those already here, and they were often faced with hatred. Immigrant groups were easily turned against one another. In the 1830s, “native” working people rioted when the Irish began to arrive in large numbers. Political parties were created to keep the Irish out. In 1846 Irish immigrants became the soldiers for the U.S. invasion of Mexico. In the 1860s Irish workers in New York rioted rather than be drafted to fight in the Civil War. In the 1870s the new Republican Party campaigned against the Irish with opposition to “Rum, Romanism (Catholicism) and Rebellion” (Ignatiev, 1995).

Although they had been treated as “outsiders” themselves, by the 1850s, Irish workers and other “natives” used both the courts and terrorism to demand that Mexican workers be driven out of the gold fields of California and their land seized.
In the 1880s Irish political leaders led the Workingman’s Party and demanded that the Chinese workers be kept out of California (Almaguer, 1994). The Irish, the Czechs, Poles, Italians, Russians, and Jews, were each in turn considered aliens, foreigners, a threat to the “American Way” of life by nativist forces.

In the 1920s and again in the 1940s, unions, political forces, and terrorism were used to keep African Americans from gaining political power as they migrated from the South to take jobs in factories in the North. Unity between Protestant and Catholic European immigrants could often be achieved within the working class by uniting against African Americans, or more recently Mexican and Latino immigrants who seemed to pose a threat of economic competition.

These European immigrant groups, along with others, built the railroads, dug the coal, produced the steel, and made the autos. As they achieved economic stability, they created schools and universities and enrolled their children. The former separate Irish, Italian, Polish, etc. subgroups have widely intermarried; as a result, their children have a substantially mixed, and new, cultural heritage. Having benefited from education, the children, particularly the women, of these European American working-class families seek a secure job in the lower-level professions, such as teachers and nurses.

At present many European American working-class families are under severe financial pressure to keep a secure job. The international economic restructuring has replaced many of the good-paying, unionized, industrial jobs. Most members of this group do not see themselves as a class, but as “Americans,” or sometimes as Whites (Guinier & Torres, 2002). This lack of class consciousness, in part taught in schools, hides and distorts significant class inequality.

In the 1980s and 1990s right-wing political candidates such as Patrick Buchanan, talk show hosts, and conservative opinion-shapers in the media and on college campuses blamed minority advancements and the women’s movement for the economic stagnation of working people in our society, a view accepted as valid by some (Domhoff, 2002).

**The Working Poor**

Barbara Ehrenreich, in *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (2000) gives detailed personal testimony of the lives of waitresses, housecleaners, sales clerks at Wal-Mart, and the vast array of the working poor. These workers, many of them White, spend more than 40 to 60 hours per week as nurse’s aids, gardeners, day laborers, janitors, and meat packers, and they do not earn enough wages to afford healthcare or an adequate diet for their families. *Hardships in America: The Real Story of Working Families* (EPI, 2000) provides a detailed analysis of wages and living costs around the nation to demonstrate that 29 percent of all families with one to two adults and one to three children under 12 have incomes below family budget levels. These families go without food, have utilities turned off for lack of payment, face medical crises, and at times are thrown into homelessness (Boushey et al., 2000). These serious and persistent crises dramatically affect the children’s stay in school.
The working poor live in inadequate and often unsafe housing, rely on emergency rooms for their healthcare, and church food closets and clothes closets to feed their children. And these are people who all live above the poverty line! (The U.S. poverty line is kept artificially low by political decisions of the Labor and Commerce Depts. See Boushey et al., 2000.)

A clear majority of the working poor is European American or Latino, but this class is distinctly multiracial. Author bell hooks describes this situation:

By the early nineties, the black poor and underclass were fast becoming isolated segregated communities. Big Business, in the form of a booming drug trade, infiltrated these communities and let addiction and the violence it breeds and sustains chip away and ultimately erode the overall well-being of the poor, and working-class black folks left. (hooks, 2000)

And David Bacon describes the life and difficulties of Asian and Latino workers in the hotels, restaurants, construction, gardening, and day-labor markets. The service economies of most of our major cities, and the entire South and Southwest, would not function without these low-wage workers.

**An American Dilemma: Poor Children in Poor Schools**

There often exists a direct relationship between poverty and school failure. Under our present structure of schooling, poor kids fail more often than kids from middle-income families. The number of poor people in our society is growing. We can therefore predict that a growing number of children will fail in school. Why they are failing is a more complex question.

To understand the crisis of poor children in urban and rural schools, we need more information about the growth of poverty in our society and how poverty, schools, race, ethnicity, and class groups interact to produce school failure.

As described in earlier, substantial economic transformations are causing rapid changes in our society and our schools. The U.S. economy has lost its dominant position in the world. Figure 4.4 reveals a decline in the standard of living and job opportunities of many young people from the working class. Trends described in *The Field Guide to the Global Economy* (Anderson, Cavanagh, & Lee, 2000) indicate that both the absolute and relative size of the poverty class will grow. As poverty increases, school problems increase.

During the 1960s, as a result of economic growth and government programs known as "the war on poverty," there was an overall decline in poverty in the United States. In the 1970s, the poverty rate stopped declining but remained stable, despite the fact that the poverty level increased with each recession and decreased in each recovery.

As the economy entered the current period of structural change, poverty levels have increased in recessions and remained high during recoveries. Clearly, some segments of society do not benefit significantly from current economic recoveries.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the total number of people living below the official poverty line, with an annual income of $17,029 for a family of four, was 31.13 million in 1999. More than 11.3 percent of the total population lives below this index of poverty. Poverty levels in the United States remained stationary in
1996 and 1997, higher than they have been at any time since 1979 (U.S. Census, Sept. 1998 pp. 60–201). Finally, in 1999, after a decade of prosperity, the poverty rate dropped for people under 18 from 18.9 percent to 16.9 percent. The poverty rate remains closely tied to race. In 1999, Blacks had a poverty rate of 23.6 percent, Whites (not Hispanics) had a rate of 7.7 percent, for Hispanics it was 22.5 percent, for Asian/Pacific Islanders 10.7 percent, and for American Indians 25.9 percent (U.S. Census, pp. 60–210).

Poverty increased during the most recent time of economic prosperity. In 1970, 15 percent of children in the United States lived in poverty, whereas in 1999, 16.2 percent lived in such severe poverty that their basic needs for nutrition, health, and housing were not reliably met (Changing America, 2000; Children’s Defense Fund, 2001; U.S. Census, 2000).

Federal tax changes and budget cuts enacted by the Reagan and Bush administrations (1980–1992) significantly increased the presence of poverty. Since the 1980s, structural changes in the economy and the removal of government social support programs have produced a growing semipermanent class of poor families with children.

The Children’s Defense Fund is a respected source of information on income levels of children. It says,

Government poverty figures for 1999 show that over 12 million of America’s children lived below the federal poverty level of $13,290 for a three person family. ... Although the number of poor children has dropped for six straight years—most recently by 1.4 million
children in 1999—a child is more likely to be poor today than 20 or 30 years ago. Unequal incomes help explain why so many children remain poor in an era of unprecedented prosperity. (Children’s Defense Fund, 2001)

In past business cycles poverty declined during times of prosperity. The 1994 to 2001 business cycle was one of the longest, most sustained times of progress in the nation’s history, yet poverty rates remained stable until 1998.

In 1996 the Republican Congress passed and President Clinton signed a Welfare Reform Law that again substantially reduced federal spending for the poor and significantly changed the 60-year-old program for assistance to poor families. Finally, in 1998 as a consequence of the longest sustained economic expansion in over 50 years, the poverty rate stopped climbing. The passage of a raise in the federal minimum wage actually reduced poverty levels slightly in 1998.

At present our society, unlike other modern industrialized societies, does not have a policy to prevent poverty or to help families escape from poverty. Certainly any plan would include quality public schooling for the children. Without a policy, we pay the enormous social and human costs of creating a poverty class.

One of the very real human costs is that poverty affects whether children live or die. San Francisco, California, for example, has an infant mortality rate of 7 per 1,000 births—the same as Norway or Switzerland. The rate in Detroit, Michigan, on the other hand, with its higher percentage of urban poor, ranks below that of Cuba, and Washington, D.C., has the same infant mortality rate as Jamaica. When infant mortality is compared by race, white infant mortality is 8 per 1,000 births—one of the best in the world. Black infant mortality in the United States is 18 per 1,000—higher than that of Bulgaria, Poland, or Cuba. For more on health and poverty measures, see “Changing America” by the Council of Economic Advisors to the President, 2001.

Poor Children in the Classroom

When a child comes to school from a middle-class family, that child already has learned prereading skills and home values that closely match the school values advocated by teachers. The child knows much of the culture of the school upon entering. Further, middle-class children have social skills, behaviors, and attitudes that teachers find appropriate. The children are similar to the teachers’ own children in most respects. Because the middle-class child’s culture is similar to the teacher’s culture, most teachers react positively to their middle-class students, and supportive bonds develop between them. In elementary school most of the teachers are female, producing particularly supportive bonds for girls.

A child from a poor, marginalized family is more likely to enter school less prepared with prereading skills (Coley, 2002). While the school expects children to know the themes of mainstream children’s literature—Cinderella, and other European folktales—some children come from homes where few people read. Other children’s language skills may be extensive in Spanish or Vietnamese but limited in English. Yet the school culture expects performance in English. Some kids come from homes where computers and the Internet are often used, while others come
from homes dominated by television. The punishment and reward systems used by schools are often confusing and different from those familiar to the child.

Some children arrive at school from homes where poverty or divorce has disrupted stable living arrangements, although disruption and disorganization of home life are not unique or universal to families living in poverty. Middle-class families also frequently experience disruption and are made dysfunctional by divorce, alcoholism, drug abuse, and physical or psychological abuse.

Poor but stable families usually prepare their children well for school success. The safety and security of a stable home environment enhance the child’s ability to view the new environment of school without undue fear. Getting a good start in school in a safe, protected environment helps children learn the culture of school and the new ways of doing things. Children who fail to learn these new behaviors and values required for school success may encounter conflict at school.

The high rate of children moving from school to school in poor neighborhoods degrades the quality of their school experience. Poor people often lose their jobs and their apartments. Poverty, health, and economic crises require them to move. Some even become homeless. For children, frequent moving produces a pattern of health problems and school disruption with a constant array of new teachers, new classmates, and new curricula.

The truly poor have severe financial problems simply getting through the month. A doctor’s visit can require two days of waiting for service at a public health clinic. For recipients of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), contacts with governmental institutions are intrusive, overwhelming, and full of dangers. In poor neighborhoods, a simple school request for family information may cause fear and alarm at home. Parents may fear that yet another social worker is going show up to reduce their already inadequate benefits.

In spite of the problems of poverty, most poor parents still look to school as the best hope for their children’s future economic opportunity. They believe in the ideals of our school system. They recognize schooling as the best available route to ending their own cycle of poverty. These parents sacrifice for their children. Other parents, too often destroyed by the drug trade and violence, may not support the schools.

When poor children come to school, too often they encounter frustration and failure. Large urban school districts with bureaucratic authoritarian structures and intrusive cultural demands seldom ensure success for poor children (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Ravitch, 1998). Not one of the major cities provides a quality education to all of its students. Up to 50 percent real dropout rates are common. More than 30 percent of the schools in these urban areas fail to educate these children even to basic levels of literacy (Children’s Defense Fund, 1997; Orfield & Eaton, 1996). The children fail to learn the rules of the school and find it difficult to meet the school’s expectations. Middle-class psychologists and educators may label the students “bad” or “unmotivated.”

Even in “difficult” neighborhoods, most of the parents are struggling to achieve an education for their children. These efforts are sometimes counteracted by overworked and burned-out school staff workers whose main focus is to maintain control of the school campus. Tired school faculty too often hold low expectations for
the children; routinely practice tracking; and ultimately blame the children, their parents, and their communities for the problems. The parents blame the schools and the schools blame the parents. Neither approach helps the children. Rather than continue this fruitless cycle, teachers need to accept their responsibility to work with parents, to educate children, and to maintain high standards for all children.

In the face of such school conditions, families can lose hope and confidence in themselves and in schools. Other families, who recognize the violence happening to their children and see their own dreams of opportunity fade, become defensive or hostile toward the schools. They vote for tax limitation plans and “choice” or voucher plans that reduce school funding. Some parents make enormous financial sacrifices to place their children in tuition-based private schools, such as the Catholic school network. Some frustrated parents avoid the school. Others, angry at a society that seems to have abandoned their children, encourage students to engage in open conflict with school authorities.

Society’s Obligations to the Children

The interaction between poverty and schooling is complex and changing. Teachers have always needed to control and redirect a few children in each class who fail in their schoolwork or who refuse to adjust to reasonable standards for social behavior. In many impoverished neighborhoods today, however, matters are much worse than in prior years. Whereas a teacher in the 1950s might have faced two disruptive children per class, today’s teacher may face six or, in some classes, up to 10.

Two worldviews of society’s obligations to its children are contending for support. Voters and taxpayers have long insisted that our democratic society promote the common good. Our federal constitution and most state constitutions assign the government the task of promoting the “general welfare.” One view holds that a society needs to arrange itself so that children are cared for, their health protected, and their education provided (Labaree, 2000). This view has been the mainstream opinion since at least the 1850s and provides the justification for establishing schools as a public responsibility.

A “theory of the common good” recognizes that if a society stops caring for its children, all parts of society suffer. Even a family that is responsible, protective, and nurturing can lose children to the war zones found in some urban neighborhoods. Society as a whole loses when a child is shot in random gang violence, killed as a bystander at school, or kidnapped by a person who ought to be receiving mental healthcare and perhaps hospitalization. Parents in marginalized neighborhoods recognize the danger to their families, and they resent the refusal of political leaders to respond to their children’s most basic needs of security and educational opportunity.

Unfortunately for children, the ideology of the conservative political activists of the 1980s and 1990s promoted an alternative view of society. Conservatives convinced a majority of voters that by saving money and not paying taxes they would be