



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2018 Volume I: An Introduction to Income Inequality in America: Economics, History, Law

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## **Examining Your Economic Identity and Making a Path for Upward Mobility**

Curriculum Unit 18.01.03  
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### **Introduction**

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The United States is among the wealthiest nations in the world and it also has some of the highest levels of inequality globally. <sup>1</sup> Investigations on inequality lead to questions on what America truly values. The persistent philosophy of this nation has been that if a person works hard enough they can be happy and successful. When examining trends in economic inequality, however, it seems as if the American Dream is reserved for a select few that have the money to fund opportunities that increase upward economic mobility. Has the idea of the American dream evaporated? Or is this dream reserved for Americans that won the birth lottery?

This unit asks my students to unpack their economic identity to determine how their economic status affects access to opportunities. Success depends on more than hard work, it also depends on a series of uncontrollable factors such as, gender, race, how much money one's parents make, and where a person grows up. These uncontrollable factors determine whether the path to success will be easy or rocky. A child born into a family with a lower economic status does not have less ability than a child who is born into a wealthy family. The ability to succeed exists in both children, however, the wealthy child will have access to more opportunities to hone their skills than the child in poverty. Through a careful examination of this facet of their identity, my goal is for students to identify the limitations that are correlated to their economic status and the choices that they can make to level the playing field between themselves and their wealthier counterparts.

By the end of this unit students will be able to

- understand that their starting line for success is set due to a series of circumstances that are outside of their control,
- identify that there are choices that they can make to change the trajectory of their futures and their children's futures,
- define and explain upward mobility,
- and understand that while it is not possible to pinpoint one cause or solution for the persistence of economic inequality, access to higher education is correlated with upward mobility and may be the path

towards breaking the cycle of economic inequality. <sup>2</sup>

By examining economic inequality and its connection to opportunity, I hope to arm my students with an understanding that empowers them to make choices that can increase their chances for upward mobility.

## Student and Course Background

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Teenagers are very interested in talking about themselves. Their identities and their reputations matter very much. This is appropriate developmentally. Additionally, examinations of one's identity are a valuable tool for students and teachers. What a student brings to the classroom determines how they will engage with the content of any subject. However, they do not often get the opportunity to unpack their identities to discover how their history and the history of their ancestors may have shaped who they are today. This step is important because it helps students, and teachers, figure out what matters most to them and why it matters. The information gathered during discussions and activities on identity can inform the types of content explored in connection to subject area as well as the activities used to engage students in lessons. To meet this need, I developed a course called Social Justice Theatre. It is an elective course inspired by the work of the organization Facing History and Ourselves. <sup>3</sup>

Facing History and Ourselves' motto is, "People make choices, choices make history." Their framework asks students to first consider their identity and how they fit into the world around them. Once a thorough investigation is made on stereotypes and the ramifications of stereotypes, students move on to consider the roots of stereotypes by investigating moments in history that define the world as they know it. In the next stage, students consider legacy, both the one they were handed and the one they pass along. The final stage of the framework is participation. It is in this stage where students explore the content learned through the lens of Theatre.

Theatre holds a mirror up to nature. During a theatrical experience, the audience is invited to take a moment to examine the world in which they live. Typically, the goal is for the audience to walk away with a fresh perspective of the world. The content learned during this unit on Economic Inequality will serve as the foundation for the creation of a piece of theatre that asks an audience to consider the harmful effects that economic inequality has on society.

## Rationale

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A person's identity is an intersection of social constructs. Up to this point, Social Justice Theatre has focused on unpacking one's race and the impacts that the color of skin can have on the choices a person can make and the opportunities available. While this is an important topic to explore, it highlights only one facet of the identity that impacts access to opportunities. To help my students understand the complexities of identity further, I wanted to develop a unit that explores the impact economic inequality has on a person's future income, wealth, and access to opportunity.

Future incomes of American children are linked to the incomes of their parents. <sup>7</sup> Furthermore, correlations have been made between education and upward mobility. Investing in education is a possible intervention that can narrow the economic inequality gap and increase the likelihood of a child having a higher income than that of their parents. However, it is an opportunity that is not accessible for all students. Children born into a lower economic bracket have less access to early childhood education. Missing these early years of education are correlated with stunted academic abilities when students reach high school. <sup>8</sup> Furthermore, rising tuition costs and decreases in supports to assist in college funding are serving as a barrier for students to go to school once they are accepted. <sup>6</sup> I think this is particularly important topic for high school students to study considering many of them are at the precipice of deciding the directions of their future. Despite the importance of education towards long term success, as measured by wealth and income, few students I teach can explain how their own education can be a way to alter their economic opportunities. Furthermore, they do not have a grasp on the relationship between their family history and the impact that may have on the access to opportunities. I want my students to consider their economic identities as defined by their ancestors and the pathways they can take to alter their economic futures.

## Objectives

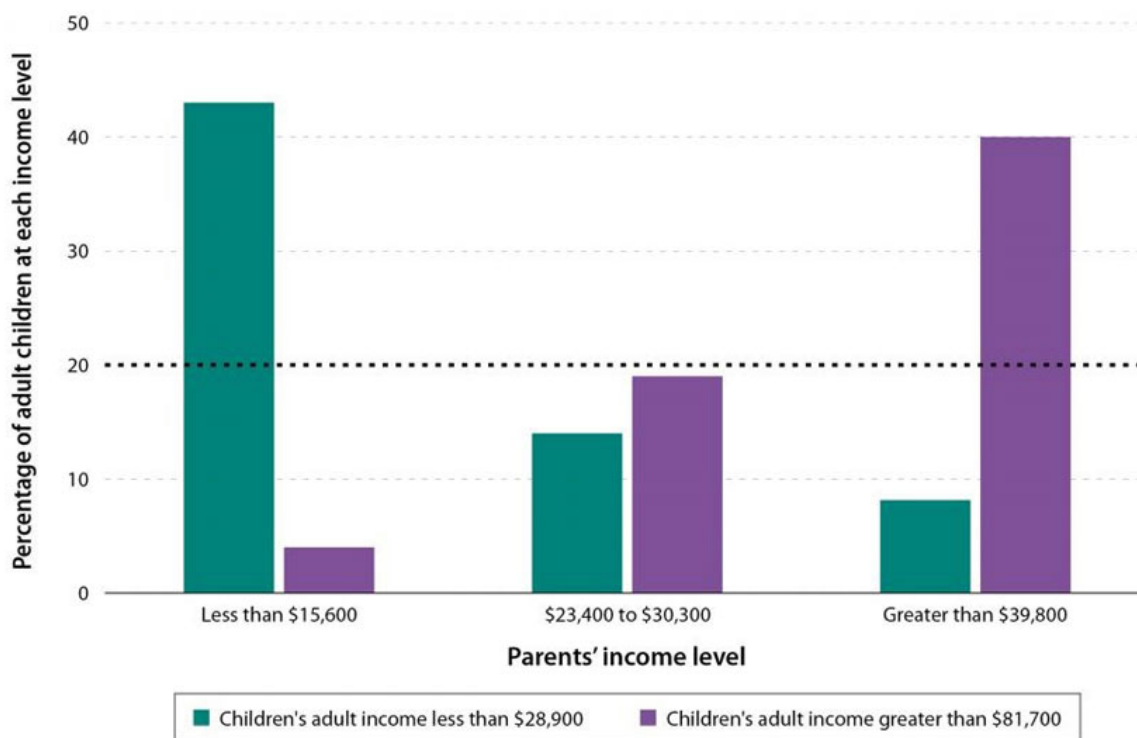
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*Students will examine data on income to understand that their future incomes are correlated with their parents' incomes.*

This is an important part of the economic cycle. An American citizens future income is rooted in the incomes of their parents, unless something changes access that they have to opportunities. This figure below illustrates that a child born into poverty will most likely remain in poverty while the opposite is true for a child born into a wealthy family.

## Probability of Children's Income Level, Given Parents' Income Level

Children born into low-income families are likely to remain at the low end of the income distribution as adults.



Source: Pew Charitable Trust, Economic Mobility Project (2012).

Note: Income estimates are in constant 2008 dollars and are adjusted for inflation using CPI-U-RS. Income categories along the x-axis correspond to the lowest, middle, and highest income quintiles in the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) as of 1968. Income categories in the legend correspond to the lowest and highest quintiles in the PSID as of 2008.

THE  
HAMILTON  
PROJECT  
BROOKINGS

Figure 1. This graph illustrates children's income level given their parents income. <sup>7</sup>

*Students will analyze charts and maps to determine the correlations between economic inequality and race, location, and upward mobility.*

While economic inequality crosses the boundaries of race and gender, it is “intersectional”. The term intersectionality was made popular by civil rights activist Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989. This concept explains that everyone's identity is made up of overlapping social categorizations and depending on the groups you belong in, oppression can be compounded. <sup>8</sup> Economic inequality disproportionately affects some races and genders more than others. For example, black children born into the bottom household income quintile have a 2.5% chance of rising to the top quintile, while white children born into the bottom quintile have a 10.6% chance of rising to the top quintile. <sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Hispanic, Asian, and white Americans are showing growing rates of upward income mobility. Low upward mobility characterizes blacks and Native Americans regardless of whether they are born into a high-income or low-income family. When considering options to close the economic inequality gap, it is important to consider these variations because interventions are not one-size-fits-all. Unless there is a policy change, it is unlikely that this trend will reverse. <sup>10</sup>

*Students will gather information that supports the hypothesis that economic inequality is circumstance that they are born into and it is correlated with access to opportunity and outcomes in the future.*

“Children born to parents in the top 1% of income are ten times as likely to become inventors than children born to parents of below median income.” <sup>11</sup> The children measured in this data have similar 3<sup>rd</sup> grade math test scores. This data tells us that regardless of ability, children born into the top 1% have better chances of acquiring a patent than poorer children. <sup>12</sup> This may be attributed to the learning environments that poorer children have access to compared to that of their wealthier counterparts. <sup>13</sup> Students will use this data to support or refute the claim “The economic status that a child is born into relates to outcomes.”

Students will then hypothesize ways to level the playing field between children born into low- and high-income families. They will listen to J.D. Vance’s TED Talk *America’s Forgotten Working Class*. <sup>14</sup> In this talk, he discusses his journey to upward mobility, sharing the obstacles he faced and the choices he made to overcome those obstacles. Students will use this personal experience to support or refute the claim “The economic status that a child is born into relates to access of opportunity.”

*Students will create neo-futuristic theatrical pieces using texts, data, charts, and case studies from this unit.*

The Neo-Futurists are an experimental theater troupe that was founded by Greg Allen in 1988. <sup>15</sup> Their work is non-illusory, meaning that they do not pretend for the audience. The actors play themselves and the play takes place in the theater or whatever space they are using for performance. They want to create experiences for the audience that are as honest as possible using a combination of sport, poetry, music, or living newspaper. The pieces they create cross a range of genres: political, satirical, comic, tragic, personal, and the list goes on.

This is an appropriate art form for a Social Justice Theatre class as there are a wide range of students in my class with a variety of talents. This form of theatre breaks boundaries and allows students to use the art that they feel comfortable with presenting to an audience. Furthermore, they can use the text that they examine through this unit as the script for their pieces.

*Students will reflect on how economic inequality shapes their identity by considering the power money has over the range of choices they can make regarding their future.*

Economic status is linked to important factors that impact the quality of life and opportunities. These factors are correlated with the chances of upward economic mobility. Does knowing this information change the way a student thinks about their future? Where they choose to apply to school? The neighborhoods that they decide to plant roots in? The things that they value in life?

## **Economic Inequality in the United States**

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The American Dream is grounded in the idea that if you work hard enough and exercise grit you can achieve success. For the purposes of this curriculum unit, success is defined as upward mobility or an individual climbing the economic ladder. Traditionally, education has been the path to success. <sup>16</sup> However, economic inequality is making it harder for people of low-economic status to access educational opportunities. The United States is caught in a cycle: rising inequality leads to inequality of educational opportunity which leads to inequality of educational attainment. All of this results in continuing economic inequality for generations. <sup>17</sup>

On the surface, inequality may seem like a simple word to define. However, depending on your point of view, inequality means different things to different people. <sup>18</sup> And economists not only struggle to define the word but also how to measure it. <sup>19</sup>

There are three metrics used to illustrate economic inequality: income, consumption, and wealth. Typically, wealth is the most unequally distributed and consumption the least. <sup>20</sup> While the three measures are distinct, inequality across all three areas is trending upward. The United States has the most wealth inequality in the world and is one of the most unequal nations regarding income. Using the Gini coefficient as the measurement, where 0 is perfect equality and 1 is perfect inequality, the United States scores a .80 for wealth inequality <sup>21</sup> and a .48 in income inequality. <sup>22</sup> As illustrated in the figure below, one can see that the families with the highest incomes are exclusively making wealth gains.

### Only Upper-Income Families Have Made Wealth Gains in Recent Decades

*Median household net worth by income, 2013 dollars*

	ALL FAMILIES	LOWER INCOME	MIDDLE INCOME	UPPER INCOME
2013	\$81,400	\$9,300	\$96,500	\$639,400
2010	82,300	10,500	96,500	595,300
2007	135,700	18,000	158,400	718,000
2001	114,100	19,100	134,200	590,300
1992	80,800	13,800	94,100	338,500
1983	76,600	11,400	94,300	318,100

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of Survey of Consumer Finances public-use data.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Pew Center "The many ways to measure inequality" (September 22, 2015)  
<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/22/the-many-ways-to-measure-economic-inequality/>

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Figure 2. This graph illustrates the change in wealth overtime. Upper income families are shown to be the only group making gains in wealth. <sup>23</sup>

In the United States, we are seeing a positive correlation between wealth and income across generations. The more wealth and income you have, the more likely it is that you will be able to grow and save your money to pass it on to future generations. <sup>24</sup>

## Economic Inequality and Human Capital

Economic inequality in the United States has been studied extensively, it has been nearly impossible to determine what precisely is causing the inequality and how this inequality may be harming the economic well-being of United States and its people. <sup>25</sup> We do know that economic inequality matters when we consider its



effect on the overall efficiency of the United States economy. <sup>26</sup> Economists may not be able to put their finger on one cause or solution, they do find correlations between unequal societies and poor public health or mass incarceration. These are just two things that negatively impact the growth of human capital which is the foundation of the American Dream of upward mobility.

Human capital is an individual's collection of skills and knowledge that increase economic value for the individual. <sup>27</sup> Development of human capital begins from the day a person is born. And, as you can imagine, the circumstances of birth greatly impact how fast or slow human capital grows.

Wealth can be inherited, unlike income. Therefore, children born into wealthy families have an advantage. Especially if the families have large amounts of wealth that make it easier for them to save more of their annual income than they spend. <sup>28</sup> This increases the likelihood that wealthy families can provide better housing and educational supports that help grow their human capital. <sup>29</sup>

Upward mobility and human capital is linked to the areas in which a child grows up. For example, a low-income family can find adequate housing in a neighborhood that they can afford. However, that neighborhood may have lower tax rates to fund local schools. <sup>30</sup> Areas with higher tax rates are linked with higher rates of upward mobility because there are more quality resources available to its residents.

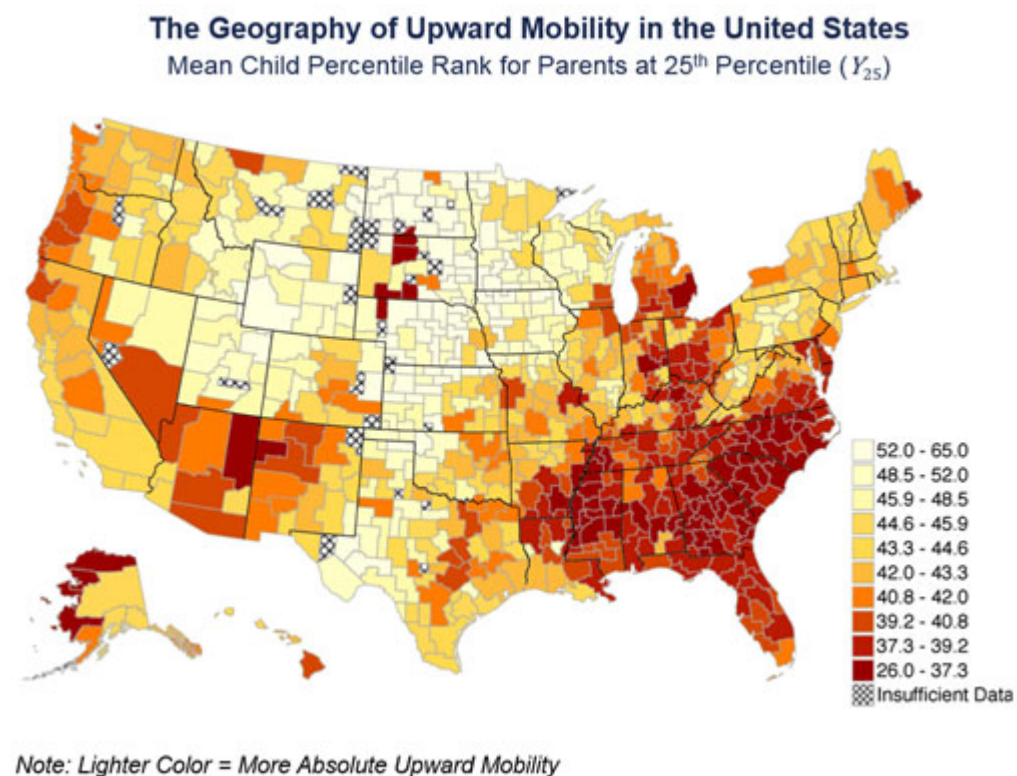


Figure 3. This figure illustrates the geography of upward mobility in the United States. Lighter colors indicate places where children from low-income families are more likely to make a higher income than that of their parents. <sup>31</sup>

While economic inequality poses a threat to all people regardless of race and gender, it is worth noting that upward mobility is lower in areas with larger African American populations. <sup>32</sup> Historically, these areas tend to have greater racial and income segregation. <sup>33</sup> White individuals living in these areas also have lower rates of

upward mobility. Therefore, it is possible that segregation by race and income has harmful effects on upward mobility for all races. <sup>34</sup>

Opportunities such as quality day cares and preschools increase human capital, however, not everyone has access to these programs. These institutions increase language acquisition and the ability to hold a conversation, skills necessary for success in kindergarten. For example, children in wealthier families can use approximately 1,116 words by the age of three. Whereas a child born into the working class may know 749 words and child born into poverty knows 525 words. <sup>35</sup> Children in wealthy homes not only have access to preschool opportunities but also educational add-ons such as books, tutoring, and extra-curricular activities.

A child's economic status determines their starting line for education as early as kindergarten. Additionally, it is almost impossible for a child to catch up on this skill building once they enter primary school. This loss of human capital means that children born into poor or working-class families will not be prepared in the same ways as their wealthier peers for their years in education. This, coupled with high tuition costs, puts them at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing a quality higher education program. <sup>36</sup>

## **An Argument for Free Higher Education**

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When examining levels of inequality globally, there is a correlation between countries that have free college tuition and low levels of inequality. Norway, Finland, Sweden, Germany, Slovenia, and France offer their citizens free or almost free education. <sup>37</sup> They are also ranked lowest in inequality according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. <sup>38</sup>

This correlation could possibly serve as evidence to support the notion that education is an intervention that could level the playing field. As stated in the previous section, children born into a lower economic bracket do not have the same educational supports in their early years of education. This puts them steps behind their counterparts in the higher economic bracket and could result in the individual not being college-ready. <sup>39</sup> Furthermore, rising tuitions costs are making it increasingly difficult for young adults to fund college. However, if higher education were free, provided by the government, would the United States see their economic inequality gap narrow?

## **Is Education the Path for Upward Mobility?**

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Regardless of the type of institution, higher education correlates with upward mobility. Ivy-Plus colleges have the best outcomes with 60% of students in the bottom fifth reaching the top fifth. Additionally, Ivy-Pus colleges move 13% of students in the bottom fifth to the top 1%. <sup>40</sup> However, there are plenty of less-selective, mid-tier colleges, that show similar trends of upward mobility for low- and middle-income children without the high tuition costs. These findings suggest that access to higher education could serve as an equalizer for economic inequality.



Access to higher education varies depending on economic bracket. Children with parents in the top 1% are 77 times more likely to attend an Ivy-Plus college than children in the bottom 20%. And despite reductions in tuition, the percentage of students from low-income families remains low. <sup>41</sup> As illustrated in the figure below, even attendance at the mid-tier colleges is falling due to rising tuition costs.

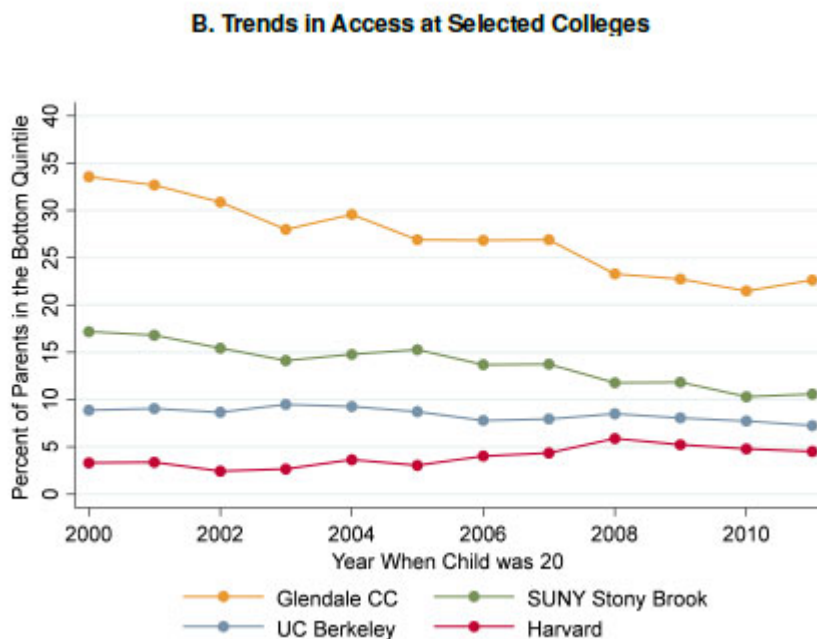


Figure 4. This chart illustrates trends in low-income access to certain colleges and universities from 2000-2011.

While higher education is linked to narrowing the gap in economic inequality, it is becoming more difficult for children from low-middle economic brackets to access schools like SUNY Stony Brook or Glendale Community college, both institutions have high rates in ability. Data such as this can be used by politicians to explore options in education policy to increase access to education. <sup>42</sup>

## Teaching Strategies and Lesson Plans

The lesson plans and activities outlined in this section will take place over the course of a year. Each lesson described will take between 2-3 class periods. The scope and sequence of Social Justice Theatre is inspired by the work of Facing History and Ourselves (FHAO). FHAO is an international nonprofit educational and professional development organization. Their mission is to "engage students of diverse backgrounds in an examination of racism, prejudice, and antisemitism in order to promote the development of a more humane and informed citizenry". <sup>43</sup> Their curriculum units follow the scope and sequence illustrated in the figure below.

<sup>44</sup>



Figure 5. This figure illustrates the cycle and scope of any given Facing History and Ourselves course.

This organization designs units that engage students in exploring the historical roots of the Holocaust and other moments of genocide with the goal of inspiring students to make choices that will contribute to the building of a just world. <sup>45</sup> To borrow Emily Style's metaphor, FHO curriculum serves as both a window and mirror for students. <sup>46</sup> To be sure that the learning environment is equitable for all students, the content must reflect students' experiences. <sup>47</sup> Students need immersion in content that reflects their own experience, a mirror, and content that opens their eyes to the experience of others, a window. <sup>48</sup> This provides students with a holistic learning experience, encouraging empathy. By including a rich selection of materials that cross cultures, students examine other perspectives but are still given the opportunity to see their own identity mirrored in the content. I will draw from this philosophy and implement strategies to teach my students about how their economic station in life shapes their identity and impacts the opportunities that they can access, specifically regarding higher education and career opportunities.

### Strategies for Building a Positive Classroom Environment

After five years of implementing this curriculum, I have found that surest way to find success in rigorous conversations around identity is to set up a classroom climate that is safe for all students. Students will be reluctant to engage in classroom discussions if they feel as if their voice is not being heard or, worse yet, if they feel threatened by their peers or their teacher. There are several strategies that I use daily to create this classroom climate that is safe and productive.

#### Check-in

I begin each class with a check in, asking each student to share out how they are currently feeling. I provide limitations for the students. For example, I ask them to share their feeling in one word. Sometimes, I ask them to share how they are feeling as a color. This is especially helpful for students who are not prepared to be specific about their feelings. On this note, I allow students to pass if they do not feel like sharing out. I have found that when I do a check in each day, the students who decide to pass at the beginning eventually feel comfortable enough to be specific in the days to come.

These check-ins provide me with valuable information. I can take the temperature of my classroom within the first five minutes of class. This helps me to anticipate actions that I may be able to take to help the students who may be having an off day feel more comfortable. It also allows the students to hear how their peers are

feeling.

### **Circles**

If I am fortunate enough to arrive to my classroom before my students, I set the room up in a circle or horse shoe formation. If this is not possible, I ask the students to help me set up the room at the top. Students are used to sitting in rows, so this change is not always easy for them to make. Consistency is key. I have found that by the third week of class they are comfortable in the circle and making eye contact with their peers during conversations.

### **Chunking a Lesson and Reflection**

The lessons outlined below are 90 minutes long. It is challenging for students to focus for that length of time. Furthermore, without breaks, students will struggle to retain the information that they are learning. By chunking a lesson and allowing time for students to reflect on the material, you will increase the likelihood that your students will retain and transfer the knowledge learned. I chunk my lessons using the Primacy-Recency effect. David Sousa describes this phenomenon in his book *How the Brain Learns* as the inclination for a person to remember best that which is taught to them first and last during a learning episode. There are three sections in a learning episode: prime-time 1, downtime, and prime-time 2.<sup>49</sup> It is advised that new information be delivered to students in the first prime-time. Practice with the new information should occur during the downtime and closure should happen in the second prime-time. For longer blocks of time, it is best to divide learning episodes into smaller chunks of no less than 20 minutes. For example, in a 90-minute class period, I divide my lesson into four learning episodes. Halfway through the class, I give my students a “brain break”. It is during this break that I make announcements or collect homework. By breaking my lesson up in this way, the pace of my class moves quickly. It also gives me a structure to ensure that I am not talking at my students for the entire block. I try to arrange it so that only two of the four blocks are teacher lead, with the other two learning episodes consisting of student lead activities. This affords the students with multiple opportunities to interact with information in a variety of ways.

It is important to note that downtime does not mean a student break. For example, during the downtime, I may ask my student to reflect in their journals on the lesson using targeted questions. Sometimes I ask them to comment on the strategy I used to teach the content. Providing time for students to reflect on the strategy and offer feedback helps me determine how I can adjust the strategy to meet the needs of the student. Furthermore, through this reflection students can connect with how they learn by determining their strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, the student can determine which strategies will help them grow their working memory capacity.<sup>50</sup>

### **Ice Breakers**

The first few weeks of class consist of ice-breakers and team building exercises. The purpose of these activities to break down walls between our group and to get students laughing and talking to each other. I participate in all activities. I found that in leading by example, I show the students that I am willing to step outside my comfort zone which encourages them to participate.

An example of an ice breaker that I use is called Blobs and Lines.<sup>51</sup> In this exercise, the group is asked to line up in order according to a prompt. For example, ask everyone to line up in order of birthdays or height. You can also prompt the group to get into blobs of things that they have in common. For example, you can prompt students to group by only child versus siblings. This exercise encourages students to talk to each other around

safe or mundane topics. It is a stepping stone towards conversations that may be more intense.

It is important to note that when organizing ice breakers to start with exercises that are easy and safe for students and then move towards ice-breakers that may be more intense. The first activity listed in Lesson one below would be considered an ice breaker that is more personal and perhaps more challenging for students to talk to each other about.

## **Lesson Number 1**

Activity 1: In this lesson, students will identify the factors that compose their identities by creating identity maps that organize the qualities that make up their identity. <sup>52</sup> An identity map is a graphic organizer much like a word web. The students name goes in a circle in the center of the page and then spokes come from the circle that have words to describe the individual. Prior to starting the map, it is useful to have a classroom discussion on the various things that make up a personality. I ask my students to call out these items and I create a list on the board. Students can then use this list to create their identity maps. Some items that are typically called out are: age, gender, race, and religion. Students almost always leave out their socio-economic status as an identifier. I typically volunteer this identifier for the students. And this identifier will serve as the focus for the remainder of the lesson.

Once the maps are created, students share their work with a neighbor. Students are prompted to look for similarities and differences in their identities. This is a powerful tool for building relationships across peers.

Following this share out, students will reflect in their journals by responding to the questions:

- Which aspects of your identity do you determine for you self?
- Which aspects of your identity are determined by other people or society?
- Which aspects of your identity are out of your control?
- Which aspects are within your control?

Volunteers can then share out their responses. This conversation will transition into an investigation on economic status as determined by parental income level.

Activity 2: Students will analyze charted data on the probability of a child earning more than their parents' by explaining the patterns they see in the data and make predictions for their birth cohort's income.

## Fraction of Children Earning More than Their Parents, by Year of Birth

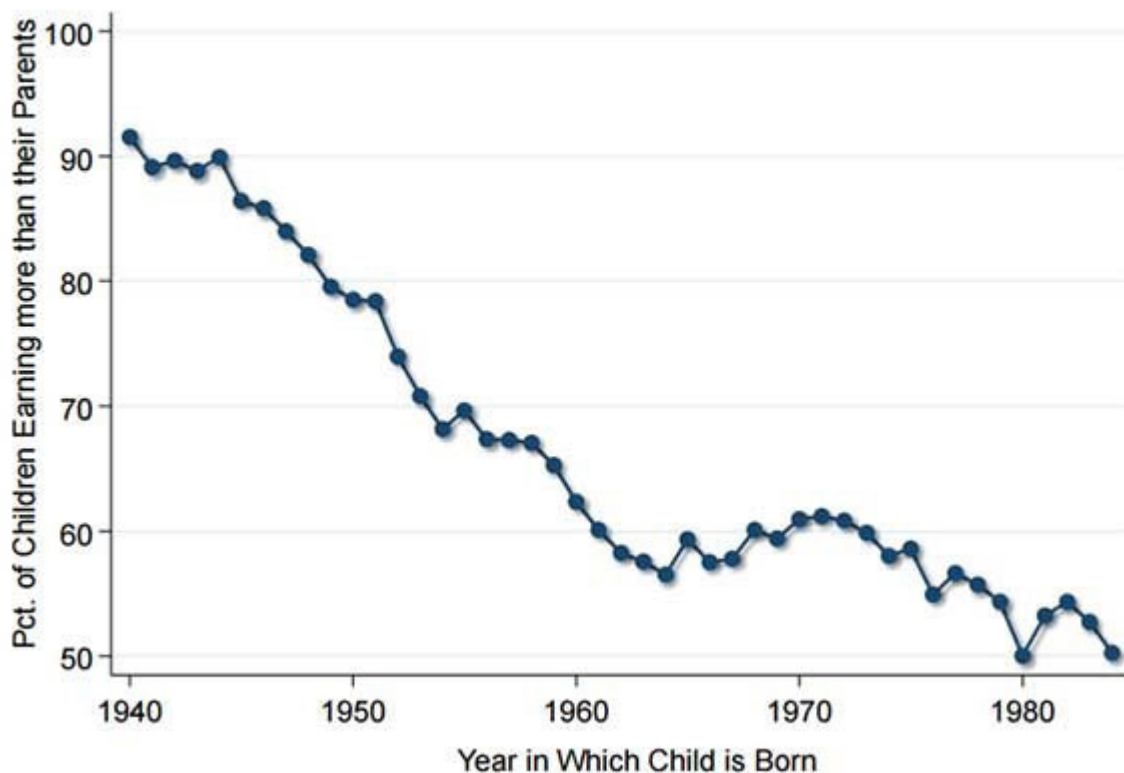


Figure 6. This graph shows the decline in the percentage of children that earn more than their parents. <sup>53</sup>

Using the Think Pair Share strategy, students will analyze the patterns they see by answering the following questions in their journals:

- What story is being told in this chart?
- What predictions can you make about your generations future income?
- Why is it valuable to be aware of trends in children's income given parent's income?
- How does this information change the way you think about your identity?

Students will share their Responses in small groups and then participate in a whole class, teacher lead discussion on the questions.

At this point it will be valuable to introduce the concept of intergenerational mobility, a child's chances of moving up the income ladder relative to that of their parents' income. <sup>54</sup>

For the closure, have students respond to the following questions on a slip of paper.

- What did we learn today?
- Why was this learning useful or relevant to you?
- How does this new knowledge change the way you think about your identity?

## Lesson Number 2

Activity 1: The Penny Boat Challenge. This lesson opens in a small group activity that is a variation of the Penny Boat Challenge.<sup>55</sup> Science teachers use this activity to explore buoyancy. I have adjusted how the materials are distributed to give students a real-world experience with inequality. The materials needed for this activity are:

- Roll of foil
- Masking tape
- Popsicle sticks
- A small bucket of water
- At least 100 pennies

I begin by dividing the students into groups of three or four. Once the groups are divided, I explain to the class that they will be participating in a competition for a prize. Each group will have ten minutes to build a boat using foil, tape, and popsicle sticks. The objective is to build a boat sturdy enough to hold more pennies than the other groups boats. At this point, I go around and distribute the materials. As I go around, I give some groups more materials than other groups. For example, I may give one group just a sheet of foil while I give another group foil, popsicle sticks, and tape. I also vary the amount of supplies I give to each group. I make this distribution as obvious as possible because I want the students to recognize that I am not distributing the materials equally. Typically, at this point students are commenting on how it is not fair. On my computer, I keep a document open where I record these comments. I continue to record students' comments as the move forward with the boat building, I do not attach student names to these comments. This document will be projected following the activity for a class discussion. Once the ten minutes is up, each group brings their boat to the bucket of water. I add the pennies to each boat until the boat sinks. Whichever groups boat holds the most pennies wins.

After this exercise, I project the document of students' comments and we discuss their experience. I use the following questions to guide this discussion:

- How did you feel as I distributed the materials?
- How did your feelings affect your group's process for boat building?
- How much control did you have over the materials you received?
- How does this connect to our previous discussion on children's incomes relative to parents' incomes?

Activity 2-Identity Map: At this point, I use an identity map to unpack the concept of inequality. As a whole class discussion have students call out words and phrases that they connect to the word inequality reminding students to consider the boat exercise to help trigger words and phrases. I record responses on the whiteboard. Once the web is complete, work as a class to develop one definition. You can then compare the students generated definition to Webster's definition of the word and adjust if necessary. I have found that constructing knowledge in this way helps make the work more meaningful to the student. It is important to guide the students in this process to develop a definition that is accurate.

Activity 3-Examining Inequality Charts: Introduce students to wealth and income inequality. Students will then examine graphs on income and wealth inequality in the United States and discuss the trends that they notice. Guiding questions for this discussion:

- What do you think it means to win the birth lottery?



- What types of opportunities do you think the 1% has access to that the bottom 50% may not have access to?
- How does income and wealth inequality affect upward mobility?
- Predict the types of interventions that may help close the inequality gap.

Closing activity-Chalk Talk: Students will participate in a Chalk Talk. A Chalk Talk is when questions are posted around the room. Students go to each question and respond with their answer. Students can create their own response or build off someone else's response. Questions:

- How does this information about economic inequality change the way you identify yourself?
- How does this information on economic inequality change the way you think others/society view you?
- Has this information changed the way you think about your future? Why or why not?

### Lesson Number 3

Objectives: Students will deduce a variety of interventions to increase access to opportunity regardless of economic status by gathering information from J.D. Vance's story in his Ted Talk *America's Forgotten Working Class*.

Students will hypothesize when it is best to implement interventions by comparing J.D. Vance's experience to a visual representation of the vicious cycle of inequality.

Activity 1: The lesson opens with a discussion on the concept of the birth lottery starting with an identity map for the term. Children do not have control over the economic status that they are born into and this facet of their identity is one influencing factor of the opportunities that a person can access.

After this discussion, students will Think-Pair-Share using the following guiding questions:

- What do you think it means to win the birth lottery?
- How can winning or losing the birth lottery shape your life? What types of opportunities do you win or lose access to?

Variations on this exercise: Students can work in groups to create visual representations of a person who won the birth lottery versus someone who lost the birth lottery. When doing an activity such as this, I allow my students to choose if they would like to draw, collage or use technology to create their visual. This can be a teaching moment to discuss stereotypes associated with various stations in life.

Activity 2: Students will now view the Ted Talk *America's Forgotten Working Class* by J.D. Vance.<sup>56</sup> The purpose for watching this video is for students to see an example of a person who "lost the birth lottery" but through a variety of interventions was able to make educated choices for himself to climb the income ladder. The transcript of this Ted Talk will be printed and distributed to all students so that they can follow along with the video and take notes or highlight important information. While watching the video, students will take notes using a graphic organizer that is sectioned off in the following categories: Factors of his life that oppressed him, interventions that increased success, describe social capital, what do you know now that you didn't know before this video.

In his Ted Talk, Vance discusses his birth lottery and his journey towards upward mobility. He touches on the various aspects that oppress a child born into a family that is at the bottom of the income ladder, specifically social capital. Social capital is the informal network of people in your community and the

knowledge that they can pass on to you. Social capital is valuable when it comes to making decisions about education or finances. He explains that his community in Ohio near the Appalachian Mountains taught him how to shoot a gun going on to explain that their knowledge "was not built for the 21<sup>st</sup> century." He concludes by sharing the interventions that helped push him upward, touching on the opportunities his grandparents helped him access early in life and the various mentors and programs that expanded his social capital.

Closing Activity: In small groups, students will look at a graphic of the vicious cycle of economic inequality and label where they feel specific interventions can be placed to increase opportunities to people born at the bottom of the income ladder. These visuals will be displayed, and students will do a Gallery Walk.

A Gallery walk is when students look at their peers' visual representations and using Post-It notes comment on the work they see. I use sentence starters to guide feedback such as:

- I was surprised to see \_\_\_\_\_ on your chart because \_\_\_\_\_.
- I did not think of \_\_\_\_\_ when planning my interventions.

#### **Lesson Plan 4**

Objective: Students will reflect on how economic inequality shapes their identity by considering the power money has over the range of choices that they can make regarding their future.

Activity 1: Text-to-Text, Text-to-Self, Text-to-World: This strategy works especially well with texts that have universal themes that students experience. It gives students a purpose for reading and gets them to practice making connections to text. <sup>57</sup>

There are three sections in this strategy, all with a different purpose.

- Text-to-Text: How do the ideas in this text remind you of another text (book, song, movie)?
- Text-to-Self: How do the ideas in this text relate to your own life, experiences, or ideas?
- Text-to-World: How do the ideas in this text relate to the larger world-past, present, and future?

The resources section of the Facing History website provides a useful worksheet for students. It is separated into the sections outlined below and provides three guiding questions for each section.

The text that I am using for this activity is Lyndon B. Johnson's commencement address for Howard University in 1965. <sup>58</sup> In his speech he discusses the need to redefine the word equality. He touches on the ideas of equality of opportunity and the lottery of birth. I like to speeches in Social Justice theatre because it gives a student who enjoys acting an opportunity to take on a character and read aloud. For this activity, I will give the speech to a student in advance so that they can practice it at home before reading aloud to the class. Students will hear the speech and then re-read the text to answer the questions on their worksheet.

Following this exercise, students can share out their connections to the class. When orchestrating large group discussions, I draw names from a hat to determine who shares out. Using this process ensures that I am not calling on the same students repeatedly.

Activity 2-Gallery Walk: A gallery walk is when various items are displayed around the room. Students walk from piece to piece analyzing the item and taking notes. The items can range from visual art, quotes, or student work. It is valuable to provide students with a purpose for note taking, for example, a guiding question or graphic organizer. The guiding questions for this gallery walk are:

- What conclusions can you draw about equality of opportunity based on the data in the charts?
- How does knowing this information change the way you think about the choices you can make regarding your future?

The Brookings Institute compiled a series of 14 charts from Raj Chetty's *Equality of Opportunity Project*.<sup>59</sup> I will be using these charts as the material for my gallery walk. If it is possible, its more impactful if you can blow the images up. I plan to do that with this series of charts as they are easier seen when enlarged and in color. The charts I plan to include are:

- The Fading American Dream?
- The Geography of Upward Mobility
- Housing Vouchers Work, for Younger Children
- A good Kindergarten Teacher=Higher Earnings
- College Education Levels the Playing Field

Closing Activity: Students will write a journal entry that displays their understanding of equality of opportunity by responding to the following questions:

- How could your economic status hold you back from opportunity?
- Describe three things that could help you climb the economic ladder. Use evidence from previous lessons and the gallery walk to support your ideas.
- Develop a Theory of Action for yourself. A theory of action is a sentence that clearly states steps that can be taken to obtain a goal. For example, If I research accessible colleges that I can afford, then upward mobility will be more likely.

## Lesson 5

Objective: Students will create neo-futuristic theatrical pieces using texts, data, charts and case studies from this unit.

This lesson serves as the summative assessment for the year. The purpose of this assessment is for students to take what they have learned and find a creative way to present it to a public audience. In a way, they could potential increase the social capital of their audience who may not know that economic inequality is a cycle, a cycle that can be broken by leveling the playing field using various interventions.

I will provide students with a packet of materials to help frame their presentations and performances. It will include charts, excerpts of texts, and images explored throughout this course. It will also include a list of five ingredients that must be used in their presentation. Students will also receive a time limit for their presentations. Providing these limitations is helpful, especially for a novice theatre artist. Some students find it particularly challenging to create work when given an open-ended theme because the possibilities could be endless, which could be overwhelming.

These projects will be presented to a public audience and count as their final exam grade.

## Teacher Resources

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1. Facing History and Ourselves website: A robust collection of materials, resources, and teaching strategies for teachers.
2. Raj Chetty's *Equality of Opportunity Project* : Many of the charts used in my lessons come from this website. The papers on the site are organized in a way where you can find a non-technical summary of his work. Depending on the reading levels of the students in your classroom, you may be able to use these texts as they are written.

## Reading List

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1. Commencement Address at Howard University by Lyndon B. Johnson
2. J.D. Vance's Ted Talk *America's Forgotten Working Class* . A transcript of this presentation is available on the website.

## List of Materials

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1. Projector and audio equipment
2. Large Post-It Paper
3. Small Post-it Paper
4. Markers
5. Access to a printer that creates poster sized images (optional)
6. Various art supplies for collaging (glue, poster board, magazines)
7. A classroom that can be transformed to accommodate circles and rehearsal areas

## Satisfying the Standards

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CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

Students will examine multiple charts that illustrate income, wealth, and opportunity inequality as well as charts on interventions that seem to level the playing field. They will use these charts to see the problem of inequality and consider possible interventions for closing the gap.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

Students will listen to and read Lyndon B. Johnson's commencement address for Howard University and respond to the text using the strategy Text-to-Text, Text-to-Self, Text-to-World in order to summarize and make connections to the speech.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8 Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

Students will consider the data charts illustrating inequality in collaboration with the first-hand account by J.D. Vance in his Ted Talk *America's Forgotten Working Class* in order to propose possible interventions to close the inequality gap.

TH:Cn11.1.HSIII Develop a drama/theatre work that identifies and questions cultural, global, and historic belief systems.

Students will create pieces of theatre that inform their audience about the problems of economic inequality and the possible choices that can be made to increase the likelihood of upward mobility.

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