

# It's Time for Class: Examining Economic Inequality in Fourth and Fifth Grade

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Economic inequality has reached unprecedented levels.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Federal Reserve Data reported ever-widening gaps in income inequality with the greatest impact on immigrants, women, and those with less formal education.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, the combined fortunes of just three men now total more than the combined wealth of the poorest 50% of the entire country, and millions are facing the devastating effects of climate change, credit debt, and rising costs of food, housing, and energy.<sup>3</sup> Yet despite this reality, public understanding of class inequality is fractured by misinformation, dangerous stereotypes, and an underdeveloped sense of how social class works in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

Even as the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) released the 2013 C3 Framework with a commitment to teaching economics to young children, economics curriculum at the elementary level is often difficult to locate, disconnected from the social world, and offered at low levels of critical engagement.<sup>5</sup> Much of what is found comes from organizations with vested interest in banking, capitalism, and personal finance. The Council for Economic Education and the Foundation for Teaching Economics, including twelve Federal Reserve Banks, have published curricular materials for elementary classrooms.<sup>6</sup> Unsurprisingly, much of this curriculum focuses on maximizing individual savings and efficiency,<sup>7</sup> using resources (natural, human, and capital) to

satisfy human wants and needs,<sup>8</sup> and introducing the child as a rational consumer.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, economics curriculum often claims to be independent from racialized structures and systems.<sup>10</sup> While some anti-bias or anti-oppressive stances to education challenge individual biases and stereotypes about low-income people, less attention is paid to the ways teachers combat derogatory stereotypes of the undeserving poor.<sup>11</sup> Teaching about social class can offer children critical ways to challenge the kinds of hierarchies that have compounded since the beginnings of settler colonialism in the United States<sup>12</sup> and to unpack both their understanding of social class and the multiple overlapping levels at which class inequality is produced.<sup>13</sup> In this article, I highlight the work of Jia,<sup>14</sup> a public-school teacher in New York City whose commitment to social justice has led to the design and teaching of a lesson that directly addresses the meanings and manifestations of social class with her fourth- and fifth-grade students.

## Introducing Jia and Her School

While research shows that children as young as three begin to distinguish class differences, and by the age of eight, understand extreme wealth differences to be inherently unfair,<sup>15</sup> when Jia asks her students if they had ever heard of the term *social class*, many students admitted they had either never heard of the word or had an unclear idea of it. Despite this,

Through a short 10-minute film, we take a glimpse into how Jia, a public-school teacher in New York City, teaches a lesson that directly addresses the meanings and manifestations of social class with her fourth- and fifth-grade students. We hope this film about Jia's lesson opens up possibilities for teachers and teacher educators everywhere.

The film is available at <https://vimeo.com/761939810/ec9ab6364a>.

This film was made by Marilena Marchetti and Debbie Sonu. It was funded by the Spencer Foundation and PSCUNY.

she observes with surprise how the same kinds of teasing and judgements that she experienced as a child repeat themselves in her own classroom decades later. As a child of young immigrants from South Korea who grew up low-income herself, Jia locates her lesson within her own experiences. Neither of her parents had college degrees or generational wealth at the time of their arrival, and she recalls being keenly aware of their financial struggles, especially in the face of wealthier peers during the time of adolescence when clothes and name brands became ever more important.

When planning, Jia decides that a lesson on social class must include an unpacking of students' own lived observations and experiences, even as this may lead to feelings of discomfort and vulnerability. She explains, "We started off by talking about where we see [social class] in ourselves, in our interactions with our classmates, and I recognized some kids were kind of uncomfortable or hesitant to share what was on their mind." In an interview, Jia shares that economics for her is not about financial literacy or rational decision-making, but instead includes an understanding of how inequality contours the ways we see ourselves and others and how such relations are couched in institutional policies and practices. "It is really, really important for me," she explains, "that students can name issues, to name the concrete and abstract ideas around something, to point it out and say, 'I know what's happening right here. I'm recognizing it.'" Now in her twentieth year of teaching, Jia is not only actively involved in union matters but is also a strong advocate for working families, committed to dismantling social and economic inequality and unabashed in her view of education as a vehicle for justice and critical care.

Founded in 1992 by a group of teachers, Community School focuses much of its curriculum and pedagogy on the social wellbeing of the child, which includes demonstrating a dedication to race, class, and neurodiversity; designing in-depth studies of social issues such as LGBTQ+ history, immigration, and racial justice; and implementing responsive practices

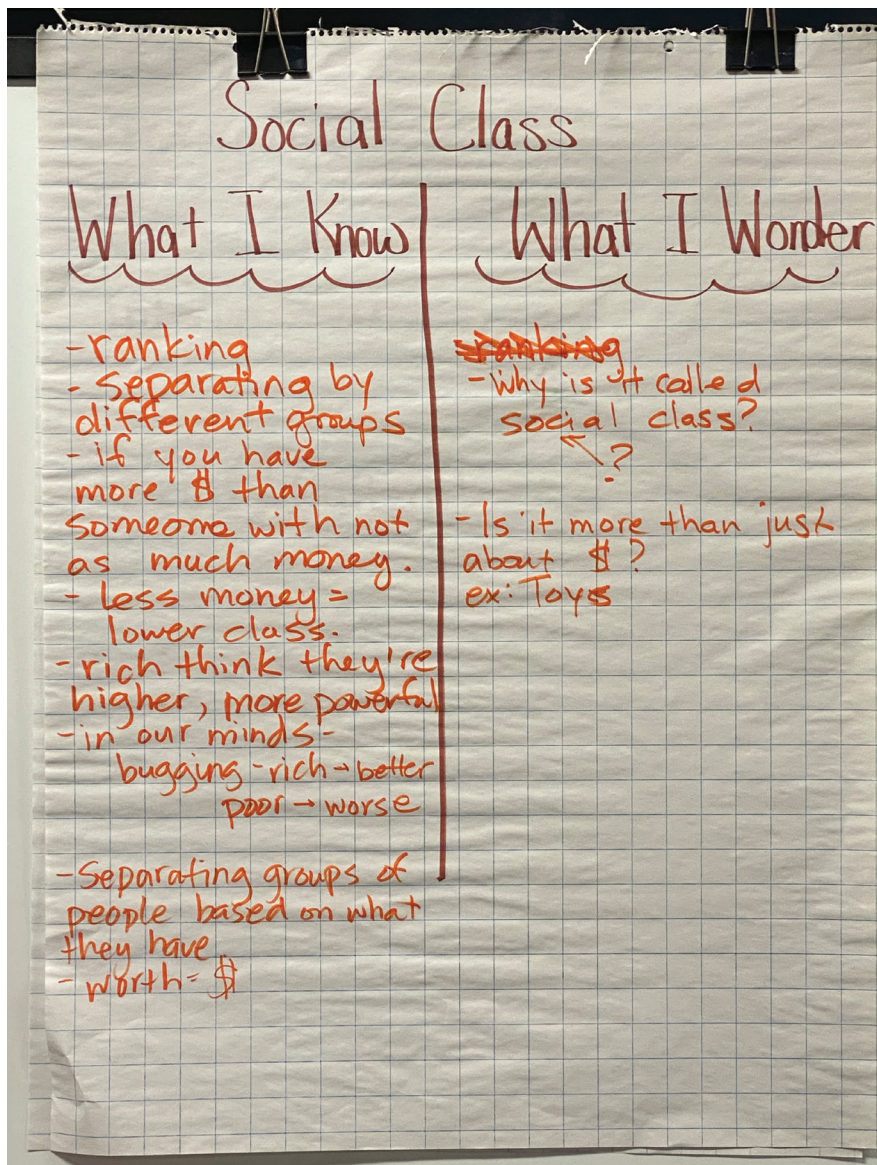


Figure 1. Chart about social class

and the use of restorative circles to discuss conflicts and tensions. In 2015, as a response to gentrification in the neighborhood, the city allowed Community School to set aside 45% of its seats for students learning to speak English and those who qualify for free or reduced lunch. Currently, the school serves about 350 students and combines grade levels such that classrooms are shared by students in both kindergarten and first, second and third, and fourth and fifth grades. Due to COVID-19 restructuring, students are divided into smaller groups for certain times of the school day. There were 15 students in class at the time of this lesson.

### Teaching Social Class: The Self, Social, and Society

This 45-minute lesson, an extension of an immigration unit, unfolds in three general parts. The first is grounded in open discussions using a chart (Figure 1) labeled, "Social Class," with two columns underneath labeled "What I Know" and "What I Wonder." The second part expands upon students' beginning conceptualizations of social class to better understand forms of classism. The third phase examines class at four interconnected levels: internalized, interpersonal,



How can you tell the difference between different social classes?

Maybe their hygiene, where they live, clothing (Not trying to be mean)  
You can't always tell the difference though.  
Behavior, the type of transportation they use, where



What is classism?

I think classism is when someone ranks someone based of the amount of money they have and may be have some ideas about them.

How can you tell the difference between different social classes?

Lower: someone without enough money to live a happy life  
Middle: someone with money who isn't rich though  
Higher: someone who has tons of money



What is classism?

Someone who is classist puts people on the "money chart" and if someone is low on it, that means they are mean to the people that are low on the "chart."

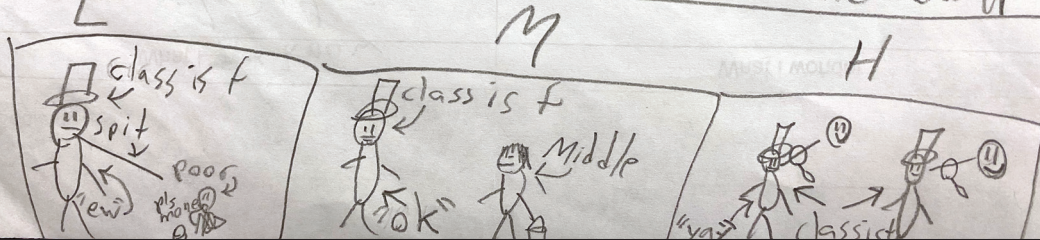


Figure 2. Student work about classism



Artifact # \_\_\_\_\_ Title: \_\_\_\_\_

What do you notice?



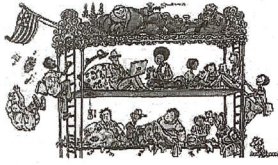
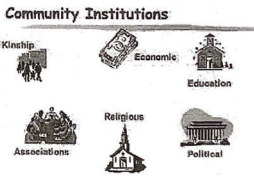
	Internalized 	Interpersonal 	Society 	Institutional 
Classism	What people think about themselves...	What individual people think about others...	What larger groups of people think about others...	What systems (like schools, hospitals, government, etc.) or rules keep social classes in place?

Figure 3. Worksheet on the four levels of inequality

social/cultural, and institutional. Here, students return to primary source photographs from the previous immigration unit and draw class-based findings using the four levels as an analytical tool.

*Exploring the Meaning of Social Class*

Economics and social class are certainly an undercurrent to all historical and societal investigations, but they are most directly referenced in NCSS Theme **PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND CONSUMPTION**. Within this theme, Jia focuses her lesson on the unequal distribution of resources that produce various social classes throughout time, and an investigation of the various factors that affect the availability of basic needs and resources for certain groups of people. At the same time she draws from history, Jia does not avoid the production of class difference that is at play in her own classroom community. Instead, she adopts elements of what can be called a “pedagogy of discomfort,”<sup>16</sup> knowing that critical inquiry is also emotional labor. Teaching about social class can indeed elicit feelings of grief and resistance. However, it can also open new understandings of how inequality penetrates everyday lives and practices: “Radical education is to draw attention to the ways in which we enact and embody dominant values and

assumptions into our daily habits and routines.”<sup>17</sup>

As mentioned, students have already begun thinking about experiences with poverty, labor, and the effects of war and land dispossession as part of a prior unit on U.S. immigration, a core theme of the fourth grade NYC Social Studies Scope and Sequence standards. At the beginning of her lesson when Jia asked the class about the push and pull factors they learned about, students based all their responses on economic reasons: “war and poverty,” “better conditions is a pull factor,” “they’re looking to find better jobs,” and “money.” When presented with a chart (Figure 1) that asks students to consider “What is social class? What do you wonder?” Jia guided students to take some time to think, discuss with their neighboring peer, or write their ideas on paper. In time, students gave the following thoughts aloud:

In a higher class you have more money than a lower class, and you are like more powerful than people with no money.

It reminds me that you have this bugging feeling, like better is rich and worse is poor.

It's like separating different groups of people based on what they have.

I feel like the rich person might say that my life is better.

While students were less apt to use the term *social class*, it is clear that they perceive money and wealth as tools of ranking that position individuals and groups of people within hierarchies of value.

#### *Expanding into Classism*

Pushing this idea even further, Jia moves her lesson into the realm of classism, an important aspect of the lesson. She observes, “The students started to recognize the ways in which they exercise class, or the way that they felt when kids talk about the things they own or have in comparison to each other, how people have said hurtful things in order to delineate the *haves* and *have nots*.” Here, students were candid about how conflicts would sometimes erupt based on comparisons of each other’s shoes or the kinds of video game consoles they owned. Even with active use of restorative circles and a classroom culture that tackles difficulty head on, Jia was alarmed at the extent to which students continued to mobilize social class in ways that position others as less than or lacking, particularly on the playground and in recess spaces.

The use of handouts also proved vital to this exploration, especially as students sometimes expressed hesitancy to share their thoughts aloud or used drawings as a way to articulate their ideas (Figure 2). With a developing idea of what social class means, Jia asks her students to think about the kinds of criteria they might use when judging social class differences, encouraging students to consider how beliefs about social classes other than their own are revealed in real life. “How can you tell the difference between social classes?” Jia questions her students. Answers included the following:

Sometimes it's what people are wearing.

There might be a connection to hygiene, or where people live.

Where people eat, like in restaurants.



(Lewis Wickes Hine/National Archives)

**Figure 4. Children with afternoon papers in New York City, ca. 1910—1912. This image is part of the National Child Labor Committee photographs at the National Archives, College Park, Maryland. This primary source is similar to a primary source image of newsboys used in this activity.**



(Margaret Bourke-White/Wikimedia)

**Figure 5. Residents of Louisville, Kentucky, waiting in line for relief supplies after the 1937 Ohio River flood. This primary source was used in the preceding unit on immigration and in this activity.**

Higher class people think they are better than other people.

Both the chart and individual student work demonstrate that children understand social class as an imbalance of power that has affective consequences. Notably, some students illustrated their ideas with images of people in various states of emotion, with expressions of happiness more often associated with wealth (see examples in Figure 2).<sup>18</sup> In one image, a larger figure donning a top hat is identified as *classist* and is seen spitting on a smaller figure that has the word *poor* above it. Students not



only observed the uneven distribution of wealth, but also saw how such unevenness establishes antagonistic forms of comparison that lead to mistreatment of those on the bottom. When asked to define classism at the end of the discussion, one student summarized, “I think it’s when someone ranks someone based on how much money they have.” The various ways in which this is reinforced as a societal norm is explored in the next segment of the lesson.

#### *Four Levels of Inequality*

Foundational to her beliefs, Jia references Richard Wilkenson and Katy Pickett’s *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger* which draws on thirty years of research to shift the focus from poverty to economic inequality as the core of societal ills.<sup>19</sup> As a participant at an anti-racist workshop facilitated by the Center for Racial Justice in Education,<sup>20</sup> formally known as Border Crossers, Jia adopts their framework and creates a modified diagram that analyzes inequality at four interconnected levels, expanding upon the self to include societal and institutional manifestations (Figure 3). While there are various other frameworks available, Jia designs her handout to include the following levels:

- Internalized: What people think about themselves
- Interpersonal: What individuals think about others
- Societal: What larger groups of people think about others
- Institutional: What systems or rules keep social classes in place

At the beginning, students were easily able to see how economic inequality and social class can be internalized into a sense of self-worth, and through their own classroom experiences, they located the ways that classism appears in the judgments of others. As examples of the social and cultural level of class, Jia reminds students of how social class can also shape the quality of education for various groups of people, how certain neighborhoods are wealthier than others, and how social class shapes geographic and political boundaries. While these three levels seemed more accessible for students, she admits that for institutional forms of inequality, “maybe the students weren’t quite there yet.” In anticipation of this, she returns to primary source photographs (see Figure 4 and Figure 5) from their unit on immigration and asks students to think about what they already know about the history of immigration, such as the 1942 Bracero Program, through which millions of Mexicans were admitted as short-term farmworkers, as well as Chinese immigration, NAFTA, and Ellis Island. Students then fit their analysis of the photographs into the chart (Figure 1) and shared their

observations aloud in class:

STUDENT. This makes me think of when we were doing the Irish immigration thing and on the boat there was a lower level, like the steerage.

STUDENT. On an airplane there is like the first class, the business class and you have to pay more money.

STUDENT. Mexicans being allowed to travel to the United States.

JIA, TEACHER. What made it so that the farmers in Mexico couldn’t afford to farm anymore? What was that agreement? ...Yes, the Bracero program, that’s an institutionalized policy that developed social class. Remember the NAFTA Trade Agreement?

### **Lessons on the Teaching of Social Class**

Teaching about social class and economic inequality is complex indeed. This lesson exemplifies not only the possibility of broaching these issues with young children, but how their viewpoints, observations, and experiences make the teaching of social class central to any social justice stance in education. These are important beginnings. Aligned with current research, young children are internalizing a world fraught with rampant economic inequalities. They are witnessing the perils of extreme wealth adjacent to lives in poverty and homelessness and are developing nascent theories of why this is so. Studies show how middle-income children hold stereotypes that wealthier peers are hardworking, intelligent, and responsible, and that low-wealth peers lack these qualities, perpetuating discriminatory impressions that poor people are lazier, more prone to criminality, and uninterested in school.<sup>21</sup> While those with more social power tend to protect this meritocratic ideal,<sup>22</sup> racially-minoritized groups are more apt to acknowledge systemic inequality, expressing skepticism about the promises of opportunity, social mobility, and work ethic. At its worst, students adopt a myth of meritocracy that sees inequality as a result of individual effort and resilience without a critical analysis into how power and privilege are consolidated to produce inequitable outcomes with low-income communities of color continually bearing the brunt of such systems and structures.

In this lesson, Jia draws from her own observation that the ways in which children judge and value each other has not changed much since her years as an elementary school student. Such incidents carry an emotional and affective toll, shaping how children internalize their own classed positioning, how they socialize with others, and how they understand

class-based struggles as part of both history and the making of a different kind of future. Reflecting on her lesson, Jia expressed surprise at how reluctant some students were to share their thoughts aloud, even as they wrote amply in their handouts. This could be attributed to many things, some of which may include the sense of embarrassment and shame that is often tied to the status of working-class families or the very raw, heartfelt emotions that erupt when children play out the discriminatory effects of social class. In the future, she will consider using comfort level surveys or anonymous writing activities that would perhaps enable students to openly share their thoughts without the risk of repercussions or the weight of address. While teachers observe a lot about their students, Jia was also unaware of the extent to which the machinery of video games was wielded as symbolic power among her students. Certainly, students are not the only ones who learn from teaching.

At the end of the school day, Jia walks her students outside to meet their parents. As they linger together, she asks the students how they felt about the lesson. Students gave an overwhelming thumbs up. The next day, she learns that several of her students went home and spoke to their parents about what they learned; they wondered if they were going to talk about social class again. Although difficult, Jia shares that teaching about social class can “feel sad, but then there is also a feeling of relief that they’re recognizing it. It can feel good to be able to talk about it, because it was never talked about when I was in school, and there was a lot of bullying. It made me hopeful, during the lesson, that naming it would bring greater consciousness.” Teaching about the links between children’s own experiences and its broader historical and contemporary context has far-reaching implications for critically thinking about social class and economic inequality. Jia’s lesson demonstrates one way in which we can begin this conversation in elementary schools. ■

#### Notes

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