



The Experience of Belonging From a Socioeconomic Lens

By Rosanna Salcedo

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There is, in this country, great stigma around being from a low-income or working-class background. The pervasive rhetoric is that if you are low income or working class, it is your fault. The stereotype includes ideas about being lazy and unintelligent. Worse yet, you are accused of being a freeloader, and it is assumed that you are prone to criminality. Race, ethnicity, citizenship status, and other identity markers are often conflated in the stereotype about class, adding additional layers of bias and discrimination. These ideas are perpetuated in the media and by public figures when they denounce public assistance programs, claiming they incentivize idleness and create a culture of dependency and indigence, and they often associate people of color and immigrants with being the primary recipients of government safety nets. This messaging creates feelings of shame and inferiority for individuals from low-income or working-class households.

This situation is something I am keenly aware of as a first-generation Latina living in the United States, navigating white, privileged spaces. My parents are working-class immigrants, and I am the first in my family to finish high school and attend college. I was a student on significant aid in college, and while the tuition award was generous and allowed me to attend, the school did

little else to recognize my non-tuition needs, nor was there any thought to how I might be able to navigate the extreme affluence and privilege of that environment. This is also the experience of many low-income students in independent schools.

In independent schools, one topic that is addressed even less often than race is socioeconomic class. I suspect the reasons for this are several. First, I believe socioeconomic class is generally taken for granted by the dominant majority which tends to be oblivious to the challenges of the working class, and school policies and practices often reflect this positionality. Second, as I mentioned, socioeconomic class is often conflated with race, and it's possible that people and institutions believe they are talking about one and the same thing when they talk about race. Third, it's

possible that the feelings of shame associated with low socioeconomic status make talking about class especially uncomfortable for everyone. However, not talking about socioeconomic differences reinforces the stigma and perpetuates feelings of shame.

How does an institution achieve inclusion and belonging that includes socioeconomic diversity?

A sense of belonging cannot be cultivated in a school environment where low-income students feel unseen because affluence is taken for granted. Therefore, it's imperative that independent schools take steps to achieve greater equity and inclusion by examining policies and practices, and making sure that every student has access to the full educational program. Beyond tuition, there is a financial cost to attending independent schools that can impede participation and access to programs and experiences. Some of these programs and experiences contribute greatly to the social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development of students, and are crucial to developing a feeling of belonging. Imagine for example that once you are accepted to a school, your family cannot afford a laptop computer or scientific calculator. That you want to play football but the cost of equipment is not within your budget. That there are fees for student activities that prohibit you from attending social events at school. That you want to travel abroad but there are additional costs associated with the program of which you were not aware. These are only a few of the non-tuition costs associated with attending independent schools.

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Boarding students have even more to contend with. As a boarding student you have the cost of outfitting your dorm room, you will have to travel to and from school several times a year when dorms close, and even if weekend activities are free, you may not have pocket money for snacks or for a spontaneous outing with your friends. Clearly the reality of non-tuition expenses impacts a student's ability to fully integrate and enjoy the school experience. Beyond offering financial aid for tuition, schools must consider and mitigate the additional non-tuition cost of attending and fully participating in the program to create greater equity for low-income students.

Schools must also examine policies and practices to safeguard for unintended bias. For example, it is a common practice for schools to begin their college counseling process in the 11th grade. While this may be a reasonable practice for students and families who are familiar and have experience with the college process, it may not be adequate for low-income and first-generation students whose families may not be able to assist. Beginning the college process earlier can help these students anticipate and prepare for a process that may be new to them.

A policy that allows students who drive their own cars to school the freedom to drive off campus at lunchtime, grants that group a privilege that other students who use public transportation to get to and from school do not have. This begins to create two categories: "the haves and the have nots." I am not suggesting that schools must do everything

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to attempt to equalize the experience of students. Socioeconomic difference is, after all, a global reality with which we must all contend. However, it is important for schools to explore how these policies and practices impact their students.

Even when the institution accounts for the cost of full participation and examines their policies and practices, there is still institutional culture to consider. Perhaps the most important thing independent schools can do to raise awareness of socioeconomic diversity and create a feeling of belonging and community for all students is to not take affluence and privilege for granted and normalize discussions about socioeconomic class. It's important for students to understand that their school microcosm includes socioeconomic diversity, and that while the majority of the

world is not affluent by American capitalist standards, it is rich in culture, knowledge, and natural resources.

Even schools that claim to be socially progressive should be careful about praising choices that may be sustainable, without also discussing the privilege of being able to make those choices. For example, it is not uncommon to hear students talk about their sustainably sourced designer clothes, and being critical about less sustainable, less expensive options. It is not uncommon to hear students express themselves self-righteously about driving electric cars versus driving cars that use fossil fuels. When schools discuss socioeconomic diversity with their students, they can develop the necessary empathy for living in community, and help all students become engaged and thoughtful citizens.

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One response to help create a more inclusive community for students from low-income and working-class households is the creation of affinity spaces that speak to the experiences of these students. Two such groups at The Cambridge School of Weston are SOFA (Students on Financial Aid) and First-Gen (First Generation).

Students expressed a need for these spaces, and the school endorsed and supported the idea by providing space and guidance. In my 20 plus years of teaching, SOFA has been the first affinity group that I have seen created that explicitly names socioeconomic class as the point of affinity.

Initially, the founding members were hesitant to disclose their identity and kept the group private by not listing member names on school platforms. Over time, I have seen members become more open and confident talking about socioeconomic status, not only by disclosing their identities, but by asking for time at assemblies to present their group and raise awareness about their mission and purpose. In the students' own words, SOFA "has brought together students on aid, proving that they are not alone, and has shown students paying full tuition that paying for private education is an immense privilege."

Two years later, SOFA has become a visible presence on campus and a group that actively engages administrators in discussions about policies and practices to continue to improve

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access and equity for low-income students. They run regular book drives to collect gently used books which they make available to the student body, speak at events, and make sure that information about financial aid and non-tuition support is posted on their group page on the all-school platform, creating another place where students can access this information. One student said, "CSW's support for SOFA allows us to advocate for our needs and have an active voice in our education."

It is worth noting that while most of the students who attend First-Gen are students of color, the founding members, and many of the students who attend SOFA meetings, are white identifying. This leads me to believe that SOFA is playing an important role for

low-income white students who might have previously felt invisible. One of the founding members stated, "The idea alone of an affinity group for mid-to-low-income students was enough to build a community at CSW. SOFA's existence is an act of defiance against a system that makes us feel less than other students, and instead makes us feel welcomed and supported."

Should all independent schools have an affinity group that explicitly supports low-income students? I believe the development of such a group should happen organically. Much will depend on the culture and values of the community, and how comfortable it is in talking about socioeconomic diversity. At CSW, affinity spaces play a significant role in the culture of the school (there are currently 15 affinity and alliance groups), time is explicitly allotted for affinity and alliance groups in the weekly schedule, and social justice is a concept that threads through the academic curriculum and all our programs. Our demonstrated support of diversity, equity, and inclusion created an environment where students felt safe enough to claim their space. When all voices feel confident speaking up, it's a sign that the school has moved toward an authentic place of belonging. ●

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What Does It Mean to Truly Matter?

By Nat Damon
Reach Academics

Relational pedagogy centers on the idea that relationships exist everywhere in the optimal classroom. The teacher-student relationship. The student-student relationship. The teacher-administrator relationship. The teacher-teacher relationship. The teacher-parent relationship. The relationship one has with the classroom space. Most important, the relationship one has with oneself venturing into the classroom each day.

I love asking students about the teacher who matters most to them. So often, they initially consider the "nice" or "funny" or "entertaining" one. These teachers are popular and clearly effective. Yet upon further reflection, students consider the teachers whom they respect. This respect develops once a sense of belief is conveyed from the teacher to the student. The student then works hard for that teacher, motivated by this sense of belief.

Yet we all know that respect is earned, not given. One of the key elements of respect is trust. How we build trust with our students involves authenticity. How do we authentically present as the only adult in the classroom? Kids are expert at sniffing out disingenuousness. As teachers, we must always remember that our students constantly look to us as living examples of the adults they will soon become. They will connect with us more readily when we present ourselves as authentically human.

By accepting our humanness in the classroom, we establish a culture of belonging. The relational classroom is an inclusive classroom. As a result, the spirit of learning permeates every square inch. Belonging is critical toward the relational, inclusive classroom because when a stu-

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