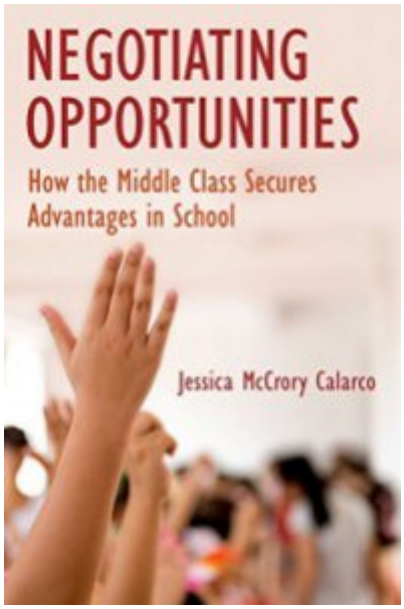
Middle-Class Influence vs. Working-Class Character

Posted on September 17, 2018 by Jack Metzgar

"Jesse" is one of a cohort of 80 students sociologist Jessica Calarco observed from the 3rd through the 5th grades and then revisited in middle school for her new book, *Negotiating Opportunities: How the Middle Class Secures Advantages in School*. Calarco also interviewed the students' parents. Her research reveals that middle-class children practice "strategies of influence" in school because their parents prioritize academic success, while working-class kids generally follow "strategies of deference" because their parents care more about developing long-term character.

In middle school Jesse lost a homework packet and simply accepted a "0" grade when the assignment was due. Several weeks later his mother found the packet and made Jesse complete it. When Jesse turned it in, his teacher "firmly, and a bit incredulously" returned the packet ungraded, saying: "It's a little too late for that now. I mean, that [assignment] was like a month ago." Here's how Calarco describes Jesse's reaction:

> "Jesse does not look up. He nods slowly, but he keeps his shoulders hunched forward and his head low. As Ms. Cartwright heads back to her desk, Jesse glances up at me, his face and shoulders heavy with resignation. He murmurs quietly, almost sadly: 'It wasn't to get a better grade. It was to make me a better person.'"



Negotiating Opportunities, How the Middle Class Secures Advantages in School

Jesse later explained to Calarco that his mother had told him to complete the late assignment not to improve his grade but because it was the right thing to do – "to work hard and take responsibility for his actions."

Jesse is from a working-class family, and Calarco recounts in heart-breaking detail how the working-class kids she observed are disadvantaged in grade school by their inability and unwillingness to push teachers to give them more time on a test, help them with answers, and allow them to turn in homework late. Middle-class kids, on the other hand, often treat teachers' instructions as but opening statements in a game of negotiating that these kids become amazingly good at as early as the 4th grade.

According to Calarco, middle-class kids are taught to question and negotiate with the authority of their teachers, who are there to serve and help them. They learn that children

should ask for help and seek special accommodations when they need them. Working-class kids, conversely, are taught to defer to teachers, to do what they're told, and not to burden teachers with unnecessary questions but to work out their problems on their own.

Calarco argues that it is not only teachers' own middle-class predispositions that disadvantage working-class students (a "hidden curriculum" noted by other scholars like Annette Lareau), but middle-class kids' own crafty agency, and their knowledge that they can count on their parents to intervene if necessary, that makes it nearly impossible for teachers to give the same time and attention to working- as to middle-class kids. In Calarco's observation, teachers are often frustrated with the demands middle-class kids make on them and appreciative of the working-class kids' deference and respect. But the middle-class students are so confident, persistent, and often humorously, good-heartedly creative in seeking attention that as a practical matter, teachers have to give them more time just to get through their day. This dynamic is further aided by working-class kids' commitment to not being a bother to teachers and to working out things on their own, and many of them see what the middle-class kids are doing as undignified begging at best or even cheating, which they disdain ever doing. At a Working-Class Studies conference where she presented some of this research, I asked Calarco whether the working-class kids' disdain for middle-class negotiating might be based in a commitment to personal integrity. She said, "Oh, for sure, though nobody used those words, of course."

As for remedies, Calarco argues against both teaching working-class kids to negotiate better or urging middle-class parents to restrain from teaching their children strategies of influence. Rather, she advocates for teachers and schools to enforce sharper boundaries against negotiating the special deals middle-class kids are so good at bargaining for and to stick to those boundaries when parents complain and threaten to go to the school board.

I found her arguments for that approach sensible and cogent, but as with many remedies for addressing our growing inequalities, it puts too much responsibility on only one of our institutions and on teachers, whom Calarco so vividly shows want to treat all their students equally and often work ingeniously if unsuccessfully to do so. I wish Calarco had pulled back a bit to a larger frame that built on one of her most insightful paragraphs:

> "All the parents . . . regardless of class or mobility, wanted to support their children's academic success. At the same time, parents worried that too much support could undermine their children's development of good character (i.e., respect, responsibility, and work ethic). Middle-class and working-class parents alike struggled with how to balance those seemingly competing priorities.

> Ultimately, middle-class parents prioritized good grades, and working-class parents prioritized good character. Both groups, however, made those choices with reservations."

She doesn't spell out the reservations, maybe because they're pretty obvious. As Jesse's story suggests, he just wanted to be "a better person," not to be too much of a bother, and for sure not a beggar or a cheater. He could do with some negotiating skills, and with some more willingness to speak up for himself so he can be treated more fairly. But no matter what he does, he'll never catch up to the increasingly manipulative influencing skills the middle-class kids are developing – partly, and importantly, because neither he nor his parents want him to. By prioritizing good character, however, he is gradually undermining his academic competitiveness and eventually his competitiveness in a bifurcated labor market that increasingly has only low-wage and high-wage jobs that track education levels. His parents may sense that, and thus their reservations. Middle-class parents' reservations are likely based on the same perception – that if their kids have to sacrifice a little character and integrity to achieve academic success, it will be worth it in the long run because it will improve their chances of getting one of those increasingly rare jobs with good wages and conditions. But is this really what middle-class parents want: Finagling, transactional grade-hounds constantly seeking competitive advantage so they can find a career, not just a job, a career that may value those same finagling, manipulative transactional skills they're honing in school?

I doubt that is what any parent wants, but those are the pressures being put on us by the increasing distance between good jobs and bad jobs based on educational attainment. Parents should not have to prioritize between good grades and good character. We need to attack our growing inequalities with higher wages and better conditions for all the bad jobs that do much of the work we all depend upon. In the long run, even most winners can't really win in a winner-take-all society.

Negotiating Opportunities is full of carefully observed interactions among kids, parents, and teachers nearly all of whom are trying to do their best most of the time. But they're doing it within a socioeconomic structure where trying to build character and maintain personal integrity can increase your chances of having low wages and lousy working conditions, while in order to gain decent working and living environments and some discretionary income, you may have to trim your concern for character and integrity and to get really good at treating human relationships as simply transactional.

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