

# Chapter 4

## A Framework for Evaluating Children's Books About Poverty

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### ABSTRACT

*Enacting a class-sensitive pedagogy means disrupting negative discourses about social class and affirming the lives and experiences of children and families from poverty and the working class. One step that educators can take toward embracing a class-sensitive pedagogy is the inclusion of books with poor and working-class perspectives in the curriculum. This chapter describes a framework that educators can use to analyze and evaluate depictions of poor and working-class characters in books for children. This framework can support educators with selecting books that are respectful of and affirming to children from low-income families. In addition, the chapter offers book recommendations and approaches for integrating children's literature in elementary and middle grades classrooms.*

### INTRODUCTION

As income inequality in the United States continues to rise (Horowitz et al., 2020; Shuster, 2015), it becomes increasingly important for educators to be responsive to the needs of children and families experiencing poverty and economic challenges. According to Gorski (2013, 2018), some of the most effective instructional strategies for supporting students in poverty include making the curriculum relevant to students' lives and experiences, teaching students about income inequality, and analyzing curricular materials to avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes about social class, poverty in particular. In the literacy classroom, these strategies may be implemented by sharing children's literature about characters experiencing poverty and providing students with opportunities to respond to this literature. Indeed, Jones and Vagle (2013) recommended critical examination of children's books featuring the lives of poor and working-class characters as one way that educators can strive toward a class-sensitive pedagogy.

Given the potential of children's literature to make poverty visible in the curriculum, this chapter presents a framework that teachers and teacher educators can utilize to analyze and evaluate children's

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books about characters in poverty and the working-class. Applying this framework can support educators with 1) selecting literature that is respectful and affirming to children who are experiencing economic struggles and 2) avoiding literature that devalues class diversity. The goals of this chapter align to Hunt and Seiver's (2018) call to provide professional learning "that helps educators recognize and resist deficit views of economically disadvantaged students and families and to support teachers in identifying and changing elements of school culture and curriculum that may marginalize and pathologize class differences" (p. 353). The next section of this chapter addresses why books featuring respectful portrayals of poverty and the working-class are imperative in today's classrooms, how children's books have typically depicted poor and working-class lives, and the role of educators in selecting literature that validates the lives and experiences of people in poverty and the working-class. Then, a framework for evaluating characters from poverty and the working-class within the context of the United States is described, and this is followed by recommendations for using children's literature about poverty in elementary and middle grade classrooms.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Class-Sensitive Pedagogy**

The need to incorporate children's books featuring respectful portrayals of poor and working-class characters in the classroom is situated within class-sensitive pedagogy, a pedagogical and autobiographical perspective that involves interrogating assumptions and dismantling normative and damaging discourses about social class (Jones & Vagle, 2013; Vagle & Jones, 2012). Arguably, class-sensitive pedagogy is much-needed in today's classrooms for several reasons. First, issues related to class in school settings are often overlooked (Vagle & Jones, 2012). Class has been described as the "uncool subject" (hooks, 2000, p. vii), and discussions about class are sometimes considered "taboo" (Warren, 2014, p. 256). Yet income inequality in the United States is growing (Horowitz et al., 2020; Shuster, 2015), and during the 2016-2017 school year, more than 50% of children in the United States were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018), with a child's eligibility for free and reduced lunch often used as a proxy to indicate low family income (NCES, n.d.). Second, most teachers in public schools come from middle-class backgrounds, suggesting a mismatch between educators' experiences and those of their students (Shuster, 2015). With more and more children in the United States experiencing the strain of poverty and economic struggle, adopting a class-sensitive pedagogy should be viewed as an imperative. Semingson (2014) contended that the goals of challenging negative discourses about poverty and exposing the conditions that create poverty are becoming "more urgent" (p. 262) for today's educators.

Class-sensitive pedagogy is about moving past class bias and classism and striving to provide quality education to all children regardless of their family's class (Jones & Vagle, 2013). Educators who engage in class-sensitive pedagogy interrogate their own social class identity and their biases, work to disrupt negative discourses about class groups, and affirm the experiences of students from poor and working-class families in curriculum and instruction (Clements & Vagle, 2020). Class-sensitive pedagogy is also about how educators interact with students from different class locations and the curricular decisions they make (Jones, 2019). While class-sensitive pedagogy includes five principles (see Jones & Vagle, 2013 for a complete discussion), the most salient in relation to this chapter are 1) the disruption of false

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