Power + Wealth + Structural Reinforcement of the Norm = Myth of Poverty
sj Miller
University of Missouri Kansas City

[Interview with sj Miller](#) (Audio Only)

Print PDF

"The burden of poverty isn't just that you don't always have the things you need, it's the feeling of being embarrassed every day of your life, and you'd do anything to lift that burden."

-Jay-Z

There is a common myth that spans the globe about America, which presents us as the ultimate privileged country offering promises of wealth, power, stardom, and a solid, innovative and even cutting-edge education. Many immigrants and undocumented workers come to the United States seeking these rivers of gold. The young, immigrant man mentioned in this year's Conference theme, *Education and Poverty: Theory, Research, Policy and Praxis* was no different. In his college application letter to Stanford he acknowledged the powerful seduction promised by these falsehoods and as echoed by Jay-Z. He writes: "I thought America was a land of riches and pleasures because of what I had seen in the movies. It proved to be the opposite." His reality however, while not of financial wealth, taught him a valuable lesson, "I only have one weapon: a desire to learn…," so that, "I can help others."

While his pursuits are quite noble, and aligned with the "norm," what he has bought into is deeply troubling and we must look at ourselves in academia

as culpable for our own complicity in perpetuating such disillusionments. We tell our young people that there is a certain type of knowledge, a knowledge that Michael Apple (2002) would call, official knowledge, a hegemonic knowledge, and if you bide by the rules, work hard, don't question too much, and are compliant in school, the reward is that you'll succeed in life. Unbeknownst to our youth is that school at all levels continues to be a form of indoctrination into the values of the status quo, driven by economic incentives, while banking students with a new iteration (e.g., Common Core) of standards-driven literacy practices. This growing generation of deskilled young-bots are becoming laborers who embody compliance because they have acquired a particular cultural capital that can help sustain and maintain the norm or the dominant culture as status quo. How can this young immigrant man let alone any young US born-student become change agents when they live in a construct that has shackled, hypnotized and anaesthetized their minds to believe that if one works hard in school and goes to college, then one can achieve the American Dream: Wealth, broadly defined.

Our culpability in perpetuating past beliefs around poverty must be reframed for our youth through stimulating debates that enable them to reflect and possibly reconcile how poverty is a prejudiced construct sustained by those who are led to believe that "venerated" institutions are the *preferred*, superior and normative legislator for values and morals because of their power to grant and reproduce intellectual, academic, able-istic, gendered, classed, religious, environmental, ethnic, linguistic and heternormative capital within dominant culture. Such debates in classrooms with students and teachers and even amongst us in academia might lead to larger contexts for ways to rupture binaries of normal/abnormal, superior/inferior, desirable/undesirable, and

inclusion/exclusion, that enable poverty to exist (Miller, 2012). These dichotomies have great social power institutionally to reinforce hierarchies of poverty and to sustain them.

We might consider poverty this way: it is as much of a mindset and a construct as is any other construct, each bearing the fruit of their own struggles and triumphs. How can we teach ourselves and embrace where we are/recognize the terrain for what it is, and as a map that can be remapped, redrawn, and redefined? Poverty, needn't remain the bastard child of education, nor as rife with deficits, but can be embraced for its rich complexities, definitions, and as we interrogate and disaggregate data that speaks the word *poverty*, we can be mindful to reflect on the social, historical, and cultural contexts out of which it comes so that we can represent those who may not be able to speak for themselves. This is a way to create systemic change around perceptions of poverty.

While we know that not every child is afforded the same opportunities, luxuries, or spaces to live and dwell, and that there is no parity in a flawed democracy, we must be transparent with our youth about what has and is still being sold to them and the tropes and myths they are vulnerable to digesting and embodying. This isn't to say that hard work and excellent schooling can't change circumstances, but rather than deem that as the penultimate goal or only pathway, we can empower them to understand their own contexts, and help them see the power and beauty that resides within each of their circumstances. Chasing the myth of "rags to riches" will only lead to disillusionment of a fanciful reality that they may think eclipses their own. We can flip Jay-Z's epigraph around and help students feel proud and pride-filled as we become

more pride-filled through the work we do to rupture, reframe and reposition the oft negatively associated connotations of poverty. Students need truths, and concrete tools that can help them navigate and travel whatever terrain they want. As academics, it is up to us in part, to puncture and rupture those policies that wield the power to make our youth believe that standardization and enslavement to norms will lead them to the rivers of gold they seek: poverty needn't be a vice, it can be a virtue.

References

Apple, M. (2002). *Official knowledge*. New York: Routledge.

Miller, s. (2012). Mythology of the norm: Disrupting the culture of bullying in schools.   *English Journal*, *101*(6), 107-109.

Bio

sj Miller is Associate Professor of Urban Teacher Education and Secondary English and Language Arts at the University of Missouri Kansas City. sj is co-author of the forthcoming book *Bullied*, to be published by Teacher's College Press, and co-editor of *Change Matters: Critical Essays on Moving Social Justice Research from Theory to Policy*(Peter Lang).