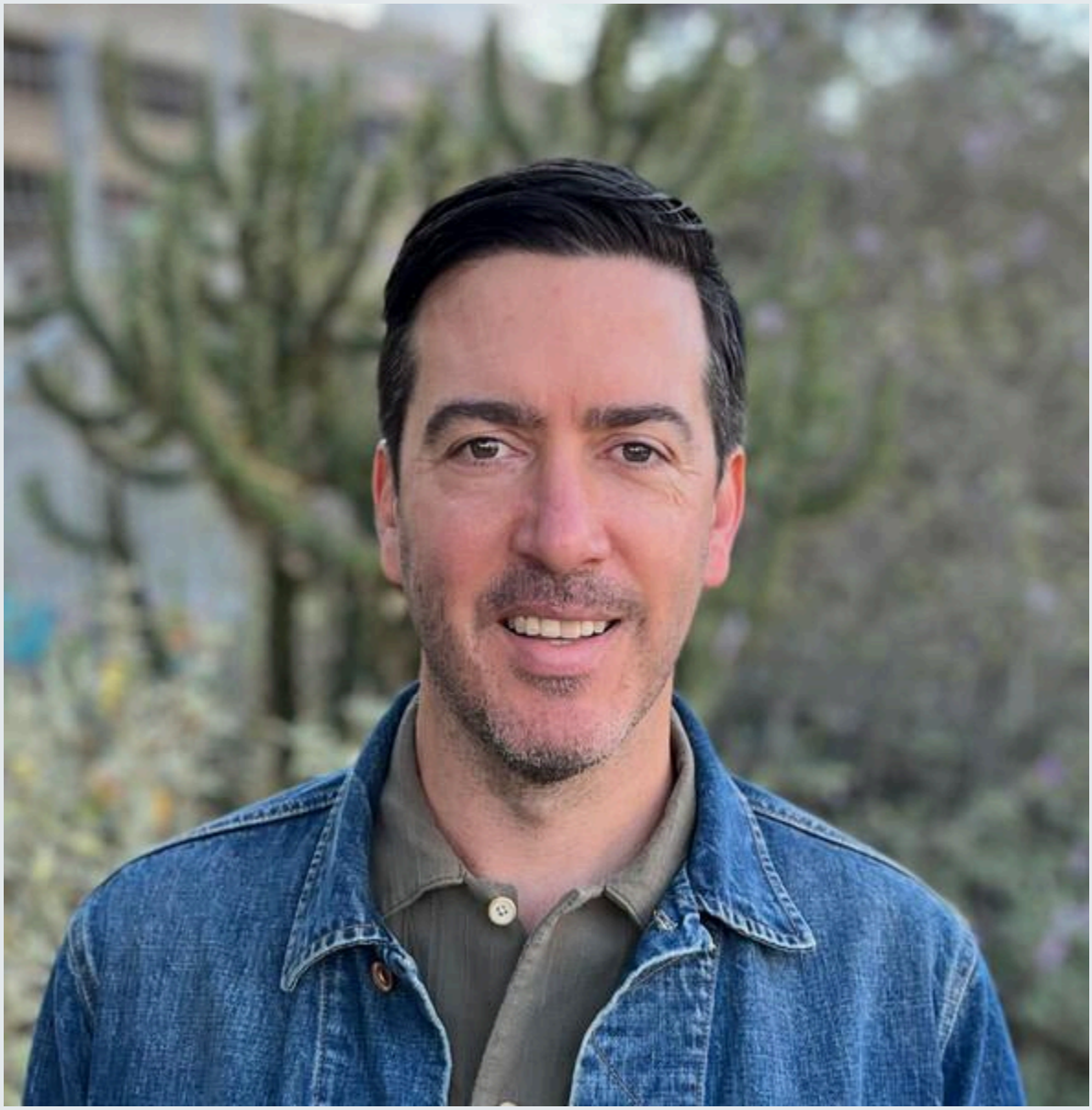
When Confronting Poverty, Think Abundance, Not Scarcity



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Poverty-informed instruction starts with seeing students' intrinsic strengths, despite systemic challenges.

Abstract

PREMIUM RESOURCE

EQUITYSOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNINGCLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

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The teacher stood at the front of the class, pointing with disappointment at a depleted container of markers. "We started the school year with enough yellow highlighters for everyone," she said, frowning, "and now these are the last eight we have as a class. This is why we can't have nice things."

Schools that serve children from low-income backgrounds are chronically, devastatingly, and immorally under-resourced, which is why the scene above might sound familiar to educators who have worked in such schools. The markers are just one example of how educating children from low-income backgrounds requires doing more with less: fewer resources, more limited staff experience, and not enough time to make up the difference. These

resource disparities are persistent, nearly universal, and require systemic efforts to reverse.

Unfortunately, the marker story also reminds us that educators can, often unwittingly, reinforce that scarcity mentality when interacting with kids, shaming and embarrassing them in the process. When teachers use classroom time to remind children of what they lack economically, they perpetuate "stereotype threat," the process through which we replicate inequitable outcomes preemptively by adopting and reinforcing them in our practice.

To avoid that outcome, we need a shift in mindset. The first step in that shift requires seeing ourselves living the lives of the children we serve, so that we can fully appreciate their inherent potential and greatness. This can be a challenge in low-income communities where we work, because most of the teachers are white and middle class, and most students are Black or Brown. Even teachers who have extraordinary pedagogical skills may lack the social-emotional capacity to relate to students whose backgrounds are different from their own. The marker story offers a poignant example: By focusing on exogenous resource disparities, the teacher created social distance between herself and her students, emphasizing the ways in which the children were "different" or "disadvantaged."

Teachers and leaders can dismantle stereotype threat, sending an important signal to children in the process: despite all of this, you matter, and realizing your dreams is possible.

Focusing on Abundance

Changing one's mindset alone cannot solve intergenerational resource inequities, and as instructional coaches and former teachers, we know that many factors affecting classroom practice in low-income schools are well beyond the control of individual teachers. Even so, there are practical shifts that educators can make every day to turn scarcity on its head, spurring change not only in their classrooms, but schoolwide. In adopting such practices, teachers and leaders can dismantle stereotype threat, sending an important signal to children in the process: Despite all of this, you matter, and realizing your dreams is possible.

For the last decade, we've been working with teachers to do just that: building an abundance mindset, while replacing harmful scarcity narratives and igniting students' inherent joy for learning in the process. Through that work, we have identified a handful of practices that educators and leaders can start implementing today, without needing to revamp the entire education system in the process.

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1. Engage with Students as Individuals.

Students have a lot to tell us about their experience with schools, but we rarely make enough time to hear what our most marginalized kids have to say. When we consider time to be a scarce resource, one of the first things to suffer is our one-on-one communication with kids. But continuing these interactions is critical. Consider how abundance or scarcity manifests in these two conversation starters:

"Katie, I see that you're behind on reading objectives, so you're going to need to double-down next week to make up time." [SCARCITY]

"Katie, tell me what you've loved about reading in the last few weeks. I know that you can read at a higher level than you've been reading, and I want us to figure out—together—how to make that happen." [ABUNDANCE]

The first teacher-student dialogue starts from the perspective of making up for lost time and shoring up a deficit, while the other focuses on the fact that the teacher has time and energy to support the completion of hard work, which is a hallmark of abundance. There are many frameworks that offer

efficient ways to create opportunities for authentic communication; one that we recommend is the "2x10" approach (Woolf, n.d.). The idea behind the framework is simple and powerful: Take two minutes each day, for ten consecutive days, to connect with an individual student. During just a two-week window, it is possible to dramatically shift your relationship with a child.

2. Validate Your Students' Backgrounds and Leverage Them in Your Teaching.

One of the first lessons that students learn when they begin school is that their teacher is an authority on how to think—not just about academic content but about themselves and their potential. If teachers find ways to weave the cultural wealth of families and communities into their teaching practices, they can mitigate the stereotype threat that tells kids, "Where you came from makes you less than others." Researchers at the University of Texas at Arlington have articulated several ways to honor students' backgrounds in classrooms, including, for example, introducing literature from their home countries, incorporating family traditions into classroom rituals, and conducting dual-language oral storytelling (Amaro-Jiménez & Semingson, 2011). Reaching out to parents is key—through home visits, impromptu phone calls, email, or online instructional platforms—though it can be complicated by the very language and cultural differences whose richness we are attempting to tap. Reflect on the language you use to describe children and their families, and whenever possible, adopt words and ideas that reinforce possibility, spaciousness, and support, while detaching your "teacher talk" from the scarcity story.

3. Design Great Instruction, Then Figure Out How to Deliver

There's no denying that delivering consistently great instruction over time is more complicated in schools that serve high concentrations of marginalized young people. Mobility between and among schools is higher, poverty-driven trauma is more prevalent, and baseline levels of teaching experience tend to be lower. But in our response to those challenges, particularly through remediation, we've often stripped schooling of its most joyful elements in the

interest of preserving time for the basics. Schools serving students of color today have invested less in science, art, music, social studies, and out-of-school experiences, all of which we know are essential to student engagement. Even when students of color attend high schools with an abundance of Advanced Placement courses, those classes tend to exclude historically marginalized kids (Siegel-Hawley et al., 2021).

In our response to these types of inequitable treatment, we need to start from the highest possible instructional standard, then figure out the tactical adjustments necessary to achieve high levels of literacy, numeracy, and self-actualization in a poverty-informed context. We recommend adopting weekly improvement goals as grade-level or departmental teams to make instructional adjustments quickly and effectively. Those adjustments might include new student talk routines, addressing common misconceptions when building lessons, or addressing current events relevant to students and their communities. A strategy for this continuous improvement practice is outlined in the book *Change Agents: Transforming Schools from the Ground Up* by Justin Cohen (2022).

4. Find Joy, All Day, Every Day

Another aspect of designing great instruction is an emphasis on joy in the classroom. Often our sense of urgency around what students haven't yet mastered can lead to a serious, and even negative, tone in our classrooms, particularly those composed of low-income students and students of color. We can lose sight of the fact that learning should be fun. Brain science backs this up. As veteran instructional expert Zaretta Hammond (2014) has outlined, cortisol (a hormone released due to stress) prevents learning. Conversely, oxytocin (which promotes a sense of connection) and dopamine (which builds reward pathways) prime the brain for learning. This means that students learn best when they feel connected in the classroom community and have opportunities to find learning rewarding. The 2x10 relationship building strategy we described earlier can help unearth students' interests during instruction. Instructional games and well-timed jokes are a good idea too, as laughter can activate the brain's reward system and improve learning for students of all ages.

Sometimes we mistake a lack of foundational skills in students for a lack of potential for complex thought, and this misconception drives the stereotype threat of incompetence.

5. All Children Are Capable of Complex Thought. Treat Them That Way.

Sometimes we mistake a lack of foundational skills in students for a lack of potential for complex thought, and this misconception drives the stereotype threat of incompetence. Think of it like this: Most adults don't know the artistic fundamentals of opera or ballet, but it would be a mistake to think that they could not provide a thoughtful answer if you asked them to share an opinion about the recital they just watched. Similarly, advanced reading and writing skills are not antecedents to rigorous content engagement for students. All children can engage with complex texts if they have the right scaffolding, and a failure to recognize this reality becomes increasingly demoralizing as kids age (Fisher & Frey, 2015). Consider high school students who read at an elementary school level yet are experiencing life with the same emotional and intellectual rigor as their peers. Those students need other ways to engage with age-appropriate content: Leveled readers, multiple modalities

for demonstrating learning, and frontloading academic vocabulary, to name a few. If they can only access elementary-level basal readers, we shouldn't be surprised if or when they act out.

6. Engage in Ongoing Self-Reflection Around Issues of Race, Culture, Class, and Power.

Renowned psychologist and educator Beverly Tatum has compared racism to smog in the air that we all breathe in and internalize (Tatum, 2003). The world around us is full of negative messages and stereotypes about people of color and low-income communities, and these impact our perception of the world, whether we are aware of it or not. The good news is that if we have been conditioned by these messages, we can also choose to unlearn them. In doing racial equity work with educators for many years, we have found that it is most powerful to start with ourselves. Unpacking your own identity and biases and engaging in personal work is a long journey but can powerfully shift your lens on the world and, ultimately, your teaching practice. There is no one right way to get started on this work, but there are lots of potential entry points. Read a book on culturally responsive pedagogy, take Harvard's free Implicit Association Test, then reflect openly on your biases within a structured group setting. You can also find a group of colleagues interested in sharing racial autobiographies with each other.

When we take actions like the ones described here to shift our mindsets from scarcity to abundance, we discover that young people, and the knowledge they possess, are the most critical starting points for school improvement. Earlier this year, we convened several Philadelphia schools in a community of practice, during which we held conversations with students about their school experiences, utilizing all of the skills described here in the process. The abundance mindset afforded us the space, time, and energy to really listen. In initial conversations, students noted that a significant part of their self-identity as learners was informed by how much they perceived their teachers to be listening to them. When teachers said they didn't have time to answer a question, students felt "brushed off." When teachers discussed pacing, or explained that students were behind, it had a detrimental effect on students' perception of their own ability.

We invited students to share these experiences directly, which some did, and we also compiled aggregate data as visualizations to make the students' observations easier for educators to see and digest. Educators then committed to shifting their rhetoric from scarcity to curiosity. The kids noticed the difference. Months after launching this process, teachers and students continue to have "aha!" moments from the information gleaned, and we have learned, together, that students' insights, when heard, have the power to shift school strategy.

Listening to kids also helps educators learn about their own blind spots. Left unaddressed, the scarcity narrative offers a convenient excuse to avoid ever confronting the gaps in our own practice, because it's always possible to place the blame on systemic inequities or on students themselves. The most dedicated and inspired educators transcend these systemic barriers, but heroics shouldn't be a prerequisite for teaching. We need to provide more teachers with the tools to make the kinds of decisions we've described in this article, while creating the context for more educators to understand how their own perspectives are alternatively limited or enhanced by their identities and personal experiences.

Scarcity is a perilous cycle that we must break, in reality and in rhetoric. When we think and act from a place of abundance, we realize that many of the challenges that seem too great to tackle are actually within our power to control.

Reflect & Discuss

➛ What are steps you can take to ensure that all students in your classroom feel heard?

➛ How have you seen the "scarcity mentality" play out in your school or district? How might you address such attitudes in the future?

➛ Looking at the six abundance mindset practices outlined by the authors, where does your school or district have the most room to grow?

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