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**Facts, Statistics, and Theories on Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Diversity**  
**Module 4: Socio-economic Status and Demographics**

An overview and extensive PowerPoint display and a disk.

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For the Alliance, 2002

**FACTS, STATISTICS, AND THEORIES ON RACIAL,  
ETHNIC AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY**

**MODULE 4: SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AND DEMOGRAPHICS**

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**AN OVERVIEW**

There are few variables which impact the behavior and values of a child more than socio-economic class. While we often think of ethnicity as the defining microculture that has the greatest impact on an individual, class may in reality have a greater influence on behaviors. Children who share the same social class background, but different ethnicity, are often more alike than children of the same ethnicity but different class. An African American child living in the exclusive Beverly Hills area of Los Angeles, whose parents are high-level corporate executives, may have little in common with African American children living in the inner city. However, this child may have much in common with his or her Latino, Asian, and White classmates from the same neighborhood. It is important for educators to be aware of how social class can affect behavior and perceptions of students. Children from privileged backgrounds view the world from an entirely different perspective than those who come from poverty. Those who live in poverty may view the children of the middle class as privileged. When comparisons are made, living in a tract home, having an economy car and a bed to sleep in every night may be viewed as a luxury to some children.

A college education is expected for children from wealthy families. Financial resources are typically available, so the cost of an education is seldom a serious consideration for children from middle class families, although public universities may be the only option. Many students will expect to work while earning their degree, and take out student loans, and get family support.

Among the poor, there may or may not be emotional and financial support from the home for the young person to go to college. If no one in the family has ever attended an institution of higher education, there may be no precedent. In addition, there may have been few opportunities in the home to provide the same type of cognitive development that young children from privileged homes enjoy.

In some instances, children from low-income homes will be expected to contribute to family finances and therefore be expected to work. Some of these children will need to begin work as soon as they are able, legally or otherwise. The family may be in need of multiple resources, which can be contributed by all members of the family. Clearly, the “playing field” is not equal for all students.

### **SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS**

One’s socio-economic status (SES) is usually based on three determinants: *occupation, education, and income*. Related to these three determinants are *wealth and power*. Different occupations enjoy varying degrees of prestige. Census data do not measure wealth and power, and they are often difficult to determine.

The U. S. Presidency is an example of an occupation at one of the most prestigious levels in the U. S., if not the world. Because it is so difficult to attain, because only one person in the world can hold that position at any given time, and because of the power that it accompanies, it holds a high level of prestige.

#### **The Wealthy Class**

Those who have higher education and graduate degrees often enjoy more prestige than others. While there are exceptions, the amount of education and where one goes to school often determines one’s prestige. Graduates of prestigious universities tend to have more and higher paying job offers than others. The amount of income one receives is often proportionate to the years of schooling or training required.

Income also is a determinant of one's prestige. Some individuals, who have unusual talent or good fortune, earn much larger salaries than the average individual. Sometimes, their skill level does not require much formal education, but is so highly valued that the individual enjoys both high income and prestige, e.g. individuals in the entertainment field or in athletics. Because their ability to perform as entertainers or athletes is so highly prized by admiring fans and management, they may enjoy much greater prestige and income than fields like medicine that require many years of formal training.

Income and wealth often go hand in hand, but they are not synonymous. Income is the total amount of money that one earns or that comes to the individual through various sources. This may include income from one's job, or investments, or from family sources. An individual may have a large income, but little wealth. Individuals, who earn a large salary, may spend all of it as soon as they receive it, and may not invest it as part of their permanent wealth.

Those with high incomes can lose their jobs and their incomes, as was the case of many in the recent decline of the technology industries. On the other hand, wealth is the accumulation of all that one has in holdings of investments, property, savings, insurance, corporate stocks, etc. Some individuals have little or no regular income from a job, but they hold vast amounts of wealth. Those with much wealth can also lose some or all of their wealth through bad investments or declines in the economy. But generally, those with great wealth often diversify their holdings, and even with downturns in the economy, are able to live comfortably.

True wealth in the United States is relatively limited. One percent of the population controls approximately 38% of the wealth. Ten percent control 73% of the wealth in the country. However, 40% of the population has a zero net worth, and therefore no wealth (Rose, 2000). The world's 225 wealthiest individuals have a combined wealth of the world's poorest half of the population, and 64% of these wealthiest individuals live in the United States (Smith, 2000).

Wealth is extremely important to some individuals. It provides comfort, security and access to individuals in power. Most of the wealthy families do what they can to perpetuate their families' wealth and life style. They and their corporations often contribute significantly to politicians who favor their interests. They groom their children to follow in their footsteps by sending them to the prestigious preparatory schools and universities, which provide them with a good education, prestigious degrees, and the opportunity to meet children from other wealthy and prestigious families.

Wealth gives these families and individuals access to power. They often sit on boards of large and powerful corporations, universities, and mass media. Significant contributions to universities may ensure the admission of family members and even influence the curriculum in some instances; ownership and positions on the boards of mass media companies can influence the news that is reported.

Many wealthy people are actively involved in philanthropic endeavors. They often give generously to preparatory schools, higher education, museums, and to the arts. Yet few significant contributions are made to the education of the poor and working class. Prestigious private schools have hundreds of millions of dollars in endowments, while public institutions, which serve greater numbers of the poor and working class students, usually have few wealthy graduates and more modest endowment funds.

### The Underclass

The underclass is at the opposite end of the continuum from the wealthy. The underclass group includes “the hardcore unemployed” who lack the skills to secure or maintain jobs. During bad economic times when unemployment is high, they are the last to be hired and first to lose their jobs. Those who are employed often have jobs considered among the dirtiest, most dangerous, the lowest paid, and typically without benefits. Some names of individuals are no longer on the unemployment rolls because they have given up the attempt to find a job. (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002).

Forty percent of the homeless are families, and one third of them live in homeless shelters with children (Shinn & Weitzman, 1996). The Urban Institute (2000) reports that most homeless children attend class regularly, but they are at great risk of school failure. Some live in their cars, some in makeshift shelters. These individuals are often viewed as the cast-offs of society. They have few advocates; they are not a significant constituency for any political candidate.

The middle class has a bias called “blaming the victim” that assumes that difficulties faced by the poor are a result of a lack of middle-class values and motivation. It is their fault and not that of society that they are at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. Some have severe emotional problems, or substance abuse problems, or have been released from institutions. In any case, children can not be blamed for their situation, and it is the responsibility of our society to provide for their safety, education, and general well-being.

### The Los Angeles Riot of 1992

The Los Angeles Riot of 1992 was one of the most devastating events of its kind in the history of the United States. Watching the lootings, beatings, and burning of entire neighborhoods in parts of Los Angeles, most Americans believed that the underlying cause of the riot was the result of the verdict of the infamous trial of Los Angeles Police Department officers for beating Rodney King. While the verdict was the immediate catalyst for the start of the riot, there were numerous underlying causes. A commission appointed after the 1964 Watts Riots in Los Angeles found that in the area of the rioting, there were high unemployment, poor public schools, a history of police brutality, poor living conditions, and a poor public transportation system.

By 1970, South Central Los Angeles (where both the 1964 and 1992 riots began) had a large influx of immigrants from Mexico, Central America, and parts of Asia. Poor and with few marketable skills, they competed with African Americans for the few jobs and limited affordable housing. Still, various industries in Los Angeles provided hope and opportunity for individuals of color living in South Central Los Angeles. If given the opportunity to secure employment in one of the large

industries, the possibility existed to become part of the middle class. In addition, children from these families would have a greater possibility of attaining a college education. However, by the 1980's, some of these large industries began to close. The Firestone Tire plant closed in 1980, Bethlehem Steel in 1982, and there were cut backs in the aerospace industry. By the late 1980's the average price of a home in Los Angeles County was over \$250,000, far out of the reach for the working class. In 1991, General Motors closed its plant, further exacerbating the unemployment problems.

More problems arose when Korean immigrants began to open "Mom and Pop" convenience stores in various South Central Los Angeles neighborhoods. There were few, if any, large chain stores in the South Central area, and very few super markets in the neighborhoods. Residents had to rely on the "Mom and Pop" stores, which charge much higher prices than the more competitive supermarkets. Because of their limited English skills, the Korean store owners had limited communication with their customers. With repeated robberies, the storeowners began to arm themselves. Confrontations and shootouts ensued. In the early 1990's, problems intensified when a Korean store owner accused a black teen of shoplifting, then shot and killed her as she turned to leave. When the store owner was brought to trial and found guilty, the court handed down a suspended sentence. The South Central community was enraged that the courts in their eyes, valued a black teenager's life no more than a suspended sentence.

When the King verdicts were announced, the riots began. Fifty-eight individuals died in the riot. In addition, there were 2,383 injuries, 10,000 fire calls, 17,000 arrests, and over \$1,000,000,000 in damages created by the riot. (Los Angeles Times, 1992). Some buildings have never been rebuilt.

Most of those arrested for looting were poor. Only a third of those arrested were employed. Those who were employed had low-paying jobs. Two-thirds were high school dropouts, and most of those arrested were non-white. At the same time, there were individuals in other parts of Los Angeles making millions of dollars each year. It would be safe to say that most of those in corporate Los Angeles had never set foot in South Central Los Angeles. To them, it was just a place on the city map. Worst of all,

history had repeated itself. The Commission appointed after the 1992 riot found that the underlying causes were very similar to those which caused the 1964 riots (Lieberman + O'Reilly, 1993, Los Angeles Times, 1992) The Los Angeles Riot of 1992 clearly points out the problems communities face when a segment of its citizens feel disenfranchised and without hope.

### EDUCATION THAT IS MULTICULTURAL AND SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTIONIST

Carl Grant and Christine Sleeter were perhaps the first to use the term *social reconstructionism* in multicultural education. Social reconstructionism refers to the belief that schools in a democracy can and should prepare citizens to work actively and collectively on the problems facing society (Grant & Landson-Billings, 1997). While much of society ignores individuals they believe to be non-productive cast-offs, social reconstructionists try to mobilize schools to do their share in creating a more fair world with less oppression, discrimination, and poverty. Social reconstructionists believe that, if children learn to care about others when they are young, they can grow into care-activists as adults.

Politically, many people feel powerless to institute social change, believing that change can come from the government alone. One way to get the government to change is by making effective use of the ballot box and electing officials who represent the values and concerns of the country. Unfortunately, few altruistic individuals who campaigns to reduce poverty and improve the living conditions of the lower segments of society are ever elected to high public office. Politicians rely on campaign contributions, and the largest contributions tend to come from special interest groups that seek to promote their agendas, sometimes contrary to the best interests of society. With the massive political contributions made by the tobacco lobby, for example, Congress took decades to make any meaningful changes on laws related to tobacco use. This continues to be the case with other powerful lobbies.

Other than the home and perhaps the church, schools are the primary socializing institutions for a young person. Schools are the ideal place to teach social change. Schools typically have student

governments. Here students can learn a democratic process, conflict resolution, and how to make things better. Social reconstructionism is more than teaching students to vote and obey the law. It is teaching democratic living and preparing students to assume political responsibility and activism as adults. Multicultural and social reconstructionist education addresses social issues of greatest concern in a democratic society. Issues include social inequality based on:

- Race
- Social Class
- Language
- Disability
- Sexual Orientation
- Gender
- Age

While there is some evidence that racism, sexism and ageism are declining in some quarters, there are too many incidents occurring daily throughout the county which suggest otherwise. Even in corporate America, incidents of racism are far too common, as evidenced by continuing litigation. The Southern Poverty Law Center in Alabama provides evidence of the problems, and reports the presence of 500 plus hate groups.

Few Americans share the racist views of hate groups. Most view racist behaviors with disgust, but few are proactive in bringing about meaningful change. While the main goal of our schools is to provide sound academic preparation, goals should also focus on developing character in our youngest citizens.

## Goals and Objectives of Social Reconstructionism

Social reconstructionism should:

- *Help students make substantive decisions and engage in creative decision-making.* Students should be taught how to analyze situations, to examine alternatives and consequences, and to make valid decisions with consideration for equity and fairness.
- *Teach students to respect structure and authority, and learn why this is necessary.* Students need to be aware that there are appropriate rules and procedures in the daily functioning of responsible citizens, and the need to understand why it is necessary to create a society established with order.

Students should learn that a well-functioning society must have rules and that its members must abide by rules that govern an orderly citizenry. Therefore, while there should be a degree of individual choice, one cannot always do whatever one pleases.

Students need to learn to analyze the inequities in society. Teachers should ask probing and thought-provoking questions such as,

- “Why does it appear that the general public cares little about the conditions in the inner city?”
- “Why are the least experienced and qualified teachers typically sent to the inner city schools?”
- “Why are the streets in the inner city often poorly maintained as compared to those in expensive neighborhoods,”
- “Why is there a visible lack of banks, supermarkets and other businesses in many of the inner city areas?”
- “Why did it take so long to raise awareness about the HIV problems of the inner city?”
- “Why is there so little concern about the salaries and working/living conditions of migrant workers?”
- “Why is there often inadequate medical care and exposure to pesticides with the migrant workers?”

- “Why has society allowed coal miners to work in unsafe conditions and be subjected to black lung disease?”
- “Why are the salaries of men typically higher than women in comparable positions?”
- "Why is there differential representation between the rich and the poor within the judicial system?"
- “Why is there differential treatment by law enforcement between majority group and minority group individuals?”

Teachers may ask students to develop their own questions related to social justice in their society. Students should be encouraged to involve themselves in social action, but should not be asked to do things contrary to family beliefs or practices, or that would place them at risk of their personal safety.

Students should be encouraged to pay attention to the media, particularly newsworthy items on television and in the newspapers. They can try to find out the problems currently facing their community and try to ascertain what improvements or changes the people in their community would like to see. They can try to find out what resources their community currently has, and what resources are needed. They can then invite community leaders to speak to the class, or they can make appointments to meet with these leaders to ask questions and to express their concerns. Students can be encouraged to write letters (e.g. to the editors of the local newspapers), as a class or individually. They can engage themselves as a class or individually in community service. They can produce and distribute materials on community problems.

The most important lesson that students can learn is that they too can make a difference.

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## **Suggested Readings**

Kozol, J. (1991) *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*, New York: Crown  
This book, considered by some to be a seminal work, provides a description of rich and poor Schools. It paints a powerful statement of class and racial inequalities, which exist in the United States.

## **Recommended Simulation Training**

*Star Power* is a simulation training developed and marketed by Simile II or Simulation Training Systems. This is the same organization that markets Bafa Bafa. Star Power is an exercise, which enables participants to understand the use and the abuse of power. The following is a description provided by the organization's website. It can be accessed at:  
[http://www.stsintl.com/business/star\\_power.html](http://www.stsintl.com/business/star_power.html)

***Star Power*** helps participants:

- Understand that power must have a legitimate basis to be effective.
- See and feel the effect of disempowerment.
- Realize that sharing power can increase it while hoarding or abusing power can diminish it.
- Understand the effect that systems can have on power.
- Be aware of how tempting it is for well-intentioned people to abuse power.
- Understand that there are different kinds of power.
- Personally experience and discuss the excitement of power and the despair of powerlessness.

As part of management training, *Star Power* illustrates how power affects performance, motivation and behavior. In diversity training, ***Star Power*** provokes discussion surrounding bias and gender, and helps examine how power manifests itself within a diverse organization.

### **What Happens in *Star Power*?**

*Star Power* participants are challenged to progress from one level of society to another by acquiring wealth through trading with others. The first two rounds are very sociable. People are laughing, talking, and having a good time exchanging chips. Then the wealthiest group gains power.

Barriers spring up between the various levels of society. Communication gets strained. The group that has the power often tries to protect their power through illegitimate means. The others respond by giving up, organizing, or overthrowing the power group. After the simulation winds down, participants discuss power in safe, yet revealing ways.