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**STANFORD** SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

**The Workings of Class**  
**How understanding a subtle difference between social classes can**  
**promote equality in the classroom – and beyond**

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# the workings

*After 12 years of teaching language arts at a middle school that serves many working-class children, Ellen O'Neil has decided to change careers.*

"I come home every night, bone-tired, feeling like the blood has been drained out of my body," she explains. "It's like we're trying to educate a population that doesn't want to be educated. They show up late or don't show up at all. On a good day, half of them do their homework.

"The parents aren't much better," she continues. "They don't show up for back-to-school night, they don't check their children's work, they don't return my phone calls.

"At the beginning of the school year, I work hard to get everyone involved. But the ones who don't follow through – I just stop wasting my energy. And that feels really bad. I know it's wrong, but I don't know what else to do."

On a slightly lower rung of the socioeconomic ladder lives Ryan James,<sup>1</sup> a prison guard. James is also perturbed by certain unnamed, amorphous, yet very real social class issues that keep cropping up at his daughter's preschool. For example, a teacher met with James to view and discuss his daughter's portfolio – a book of "work" that was supposed to express his daughter's unique self through selected pieces of art, the activities she chose in class, and things she said.

James found this exercise to be ludicrous. "I mean you're psychoanalyzing a 4-year-old kid that is standing there with their hand in paint," he says. "If you ask them to draw a picture of a flower and they drew a weed, maybe you could figure something out there, but I don't think you're gonna figure out hand paintin'. So I told [the teacher] it was just a little too much, and I said, 'You're getting a little too serious with the 4-year-olds.' She said, 'Well, this is the board of education's rules, now, so we have to do it.' And I said, 'Well, I don't want to hear it. This is bullshit.'"

## Class-Based Styles of Individualism

Throughout the social sector, many highly educated, well-intentioned, predominantly white middle-class people like Ellen O'Neil are attempting to reach out across the class divide – to educate, to help, perhaps even to reveal new paths into the middle class. At the same time, many motivated, conscientious, lower- and working-class people like Ryan James are attempting to use these services. All too often, however, these attempts to transcend class differences end in failure, and leave service providers and clients

















