

Reflection on Getting Ahead: Getting Ahead is sometimes hard to describe...

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Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World is sometimes hard to describe to people unfamiliar with it. It is a facilitated process of discovery where information, concepts, and analytical tools are shared with people to explore the impact of poverty in their lives and the dynamics of economic class. It is not presented as “the truth,” but rather as hypotheses. The concepts are based on examining patterns and with every pattern there are exceptions. Each person is supported in discussing, interrogating, refuting and expanding the ideas based on their own life experiences and understandings. We call people investigators, elevating their role beyond just a participant.

It is a powerful process. And often an emotional one as participants examine their own experience of economic class in America. *Getting Ahead* brings new language and tools to this important but often over-looked conversation. It takes a gifted facilitator and co-facilitator (usually a graduate of the class) to guide the conversation and discovery process. People in poverty are rarely given the time, space, and support to have this conversation even though it can be life-changing and liberating.

Paulo Freire would call this liberatory education, as opposed to the typical “banking” education approach where we attempt to “dump” information into the heads of the students. In fact, Phil DeVol, the author of *Getting Ahead*, is heavily influenced by Paulo Freire and built the curriculum on his ideas and many of the theories of adult education, which understands that each student has tremendous assets and agency for change.

Economic class is frequently the “elephant in the room.” We know it is there and it won’t go away, but we have poor concepts and language to talk about it. It is a risky conversation; so often we ignore the elephant. Bridges trainings for professionals and others not in poverty are based on the same concepts with the goal of having a “rosetta stone” that allows us to inquire more deeply into economic class together so we can find better response to addressing poverty. A core principal of Bridges is that it will take all economic classes at the table to solve poverty and this process makes this a more viable possibility.

Macro issues are interwoven throughout the curriculum. For example, investigators look at research on the making of the middle class, wage differentials in the U.S., and the impact of poverty on language and other areas of our lives. There is also a module devoted to an assessment of the community and its resources, like transportation, education, jobs and leadership. Investigators insights are validated and valuable. Many people describe the excitement that comes from understanding that they are not alone, often confirming or

deepening their own theories that poverty is not something they created or are wholly responsible for.

A distinctive part of the curriculum describes the theory of “hidden rules” of economic class. It basically posits that we develop coping strategies and ways of being based on our economic environment. These strategies allow us to navigate those worlds, often quite effectively, but limit us from moving between economic environments. Of course, most people are interested in learning how to increase, not reduce their economic standing. But that means we put little value on understanding the ways that poverty can impact people, particularly intergenerational poverty where children are absorbing these rules. However, this understanding is critical for people and organizations dedicated to helping people move out of poverty. Without it, we are often judgmental, even when not intending to be.

Other aspects of the curriculum give insights and tools for understanding their own personal journey, revealing where trauma, relationships, poor choices, and other dynamics, sometimes within their control, sometimes not, have impacted their lives. The key is no one is telling them where they went wrong or who is responsible. It is the discovery of each person to put his or her life into perspective. Once that process happens, it can open the door to making a different set of choices.

It is no wonder that the most powerful shift for participants is around motivation and self-efficacy. No matter how grinding and oppressive the experience of poverty has been, there is now the “10,000 foot view” that gives people the opportunity to better understand – and now change – the big picture.

We frequently hear people say: “I feel someone wrote my life story into this book.” “I feel reborn, like I have a new life in front of me.” Getting Ahead graduations are an experience like no other as people share their awakening, their determination, and their new future stories, often tearfully and with a room filled with family and friends.

So what is Getting Ahead? It is not a life skills class, a financial management class, an employment support class. People are rightfully treated as the experts on their own lives, rather than expected to passively soak up information professionals deem as necessary for improvement. What makes *Getting Ahead in a Just Gettin' By World* unique is as much about what is *not* there, as what *is* there. It is an empowering, experiential, facilitated journey of discovery into a future previously seen as impossible.