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The path to upward mobility is a rocky road of inequality

By: Dom Giordano, Philadelphia talk show host (WPHT)
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WHAT DO a George Will column, a star witness in the Trayvon Martin case and cursive writing have in common?

The George Will column concerned rising inequality in America and the dilemma that we face as a society to continue to have real upward mobility when the path to that mobility is increasingly predicated on possessing the right knowledge to really advance.

Will lays out the challenge for schools to continue to be the path. He cites research from the Cato Institute's Brink Lindsey, author of *Human Capitalism: How Economic Growth Has Made Us Smarter and More Unequal*. In the pursuit of this "right knowledge" to advance, Lindsey cites research showing the advantage some kids have over others. He writes, "By the time of age 3, children of professional parents have heard over 45 million words addressed to them - as opposed to only 26 million words for working-class kids, and a mere 13 million words in the case of kids on welfare." So, already there is a huge head start, and there should be an urgency to catch up.

I was thinking about all this when I saw the reaction to the testimony of Rachel Jeantel for the prosecution in the Trayvon Martin case. Aside from the merits of her testimony in relation to the charges against George Zimmerman, there was heated discussion about her language and presentation. Chris Hayes, an MSNBC host, reflected those who are not helping Rachel and others in her situation by bringing on an expert to say that she was very articulate in Black English and that any criticism about her merely reflects white bias and prejudice.

Is it really about that or is it similar to our reaction to Paula Deen on the Today Show saying "I is what I is?" Did this elevate her or merely stamp her as uneducated?

Rather than those who think they are being kind to Jeantel, I like the reaction of a college professor at his blog *College Miseducation*, who wrote that "there are many people like her who cannot relate important information, cannot be taken seriously, cannot communicate effectively at all with people they find themselves needing to communicate with. The fact that they cannot read, cannot write and cannot speak at anywhere near the effectiveness needed to participate in the parts of American culture that will help them emerge from poverty is a tragedy, but a lot of people are trying to dig them out."

This battle over the best way to "dig out" people flared when Jeantel could not read the letter that had been written for her to document what she had seen on the night of the confrontation between Trayvon and George Zimmerman. The letter was written in cursive, which she cannot read. It's true that cursive writing is starting to be diminished,

but I don't think it's a good idea to tell anyone not able to read it that it is an inconsequential skill.

I've always recommended the works of E.D. Hirsch to parents to make sure that their kids are advancing not only in the subjects they are taking in school, but also in the skills they need to understand and communicate among educated people. Hirsch is the author of *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. Cultural literacy embodies the terms, idioms, quotes, allusions, dates and historical and literary references that every educated American should know and be able to use.

In his first book, he listed terms such as "Achilles' heel," "any port in a storm," "bear market," "When in Rome, do as the Romans do," and thousands of others as essential knowledge and things that schools may not be emphasizing.

When I was teaching English at a South Jersey school, I gave a general-knowledge test to sophomores who were nearing the end of the year. They told me that Ralph Nader was a cowboy, the Pacific Ocean touched Atlantic City and Leonardo da Vinci was a "mob dude." True story.

What Hirsch is proposing is somewhat in sync with the Obama Administration's Common Core template for American schools. I support this idea with some tweaks, and I'll talk about it in an upcoming column.

The takeaway of all this is that, as George Will observed, "The nation's faith in individualism cannot survive unless upward mobility is a fact." I want Rachel Jeantel and every American to be upwardly mobile. Do you?

Teacher-turned-talk show host Dom Giordano is heard weekdays on WPHT 1210-AM Radio from 10AM to 2PM. Contact Dom at www.domgiordano.com.