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The Classist Underpinnings of Ruby Payne's Framework

by Paul Gorski — February 09, 2006

Mark Twain said, "When you find yourself on the side of the majority, it's time to pause and reflect."

In today's equity education milieu, particularly in the areas of poverty and class, the majority attitude is one of exaltation toward Ruby Payne and her book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2001; hereafter called *A Framework*). Payne's poverty-related books and workshops are standard fare in staff development programs and teacher preparation classes. But I've heard little critical analysis of her work.

Given the popularity of her work and the well-established impacts of poverty and classism in and out of schools, such critical analysis is crucial. So I took up the challenge, consuming the growing collection of Payne's books, digging into her Web site, and studying her presentation materials. It is my intention here to begin unpacking her poverty framework, to uncover the assumptions and values that underlie her work.

I use as my lens critical social theory, an inquiry paradigm that, by definition, rejects the logical positivism of much of traditional social theory and scholarship. By situating the topic of her or his critique in sociopolitical and sociohistorical context, the critical cultural theorist challenges existing social theories that simplify complexities, disengage from analyses of systemic oppression, and as a result, fail to uncover the power and privilege dynamics of present social conditions. Although I recognize that larger analyses related to globalization, consumerism, corporate capitalism, and the corporatization of schools may be warranted for a more broadly focused essay, my goal here is only to critique Payne's framework as it impacts teacher development and preparation in a U.S. context. In this spirit, I base my analysis on three critiques: (1) Payne's framework fails to consider the class inequities that pervade U.S. schools; (2) Payne draws from a deficit perspective; and (3) Payne's values are fundamentally conservative (as in conserving the status quo), and not transformative, in nature.

Before diving into these critiques, I provide a brief summary of Payne's framework for those not intimately familiar with her work.

Ruby Payne's Framework

Ruby Payne's framework for understanding poverty is built upon several interlocking assumptions. The first of these, as explained on her company's Web site, is that "Economic realities create 'hidden rules,' unspoken cueing mechanisms that reflect agreed upon *tacit* understandings, which the group uses to negotiate reality" (Payne, 2002, p. 1). Payne establishes her understanding of these hidden rules as they pertain to various values and relationships for people in poverty, the middle class, and the upper class. She posits, for example, that while people in poverty understand education as "valued and revered as abstract but not as reality," people in the middle class see it as "crucial for climbing the success ladder and making money," and wealthy people consider it a "necessary tradition for making and maintaining connections" (2001, p. 59). Payne makes similar distinctions across a variety of other life factors such as language use, social emphasis, money, and family structure. In essence, she constructs cultural descriptions of these three broad socioeconomic groups by situating them in relation to these factors.

Payne's primary goal in describing these socioeconomic "cultures" is twofold: (1) to help educators better understand the culture that students from families in poverty carry into school with them, and (2) to instruct educators on the importance of and techniques for teaching students in poverty the hidden rules of the middle class. After all, she argues, these are the rules upon which the U.S. public school system is built. If students from poverty are going to succeed in school, Payne posits, they will need worldview, language, and behavior modifications that move them more in line with the prevailing middle class oriented school culture.

Upon establishing this need, Payne discusses primarily pragmatic strategies for reforming students from families in poverty. She lists a series of support systems schools can put into place to help these students graduate to middle class culture such as homework support, reading programs, help with coping strategies, explicit instruction on "classroom survival skills" (2001, p. 96), goal-setting requirements, and team interventions. She follows these suggestions with a set of strategies for effective discipline, a chapter on instructional and pedagogical strategies, and a chapter on creating relationships, all focused on students from poverty. According to the back cover of her book (2001), "despite the obstacles poverty can create in all types of interactions," the strategies she provides can help "overcom[e] them."

With this summary in mind, we return to the critique.

Failure to Consider Class Inequities in Schools

Education research overflows with studies that show access and opportunity discrepancies between students attending high-poverty and low-poverty schools. A study from the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF, 2004) shows that high-poverty schools are more likely than low-poverty schools to have many teachers unlicensed in the subjects they teach, limited technology access, inadequate facilities, inoperative bathrooms, vermin infestation, insufficient materials, and multiple teacher vacancies. Other studies show that high-poverty schools implement less rigorous curricula (Barton, 2004), employ fewer experienced teachers (Barton, 2004; Rank, 2004), have higher student-to-teacher ratios (Barton, 2003; Karoly, 2001), offer lower teacher salaries (Karoly, 2001), have larger class sizes (Barton, 2003), and receive less funding (Carey, 2005; Kozol, 1992) than low-poverty schools. NCTAF (2004) concludes:

> The evidence . . . proves beyond any shadow of a doubt that children . . . who come from families with poorer economic backgrounds . . . are not being given an opportunity to learn that is equal to that offered children from the most privileged families. The obvious cause of this inequality lies in the finding that the most disadvantaged children attend schools that do not have basic facilities and conditions conducive to providing them with a quality education. (p. 7)

Payne never mentions a single one of these disparities in *A Framework*. How can teachers and other consumers of her work understand poverty and its relationship to education while ignoring the ways in which schools mirror the societal classism that keeps some of our students in poverty?

In place of this sort of analysis, Payne (2001) suggests that educators learn the "hidden rules" of poverty and teach students in poverty the rules that will help them succeed in middle class culture (p. 8); this is the foundation of her framework. Other scholars, such as Lisa Delpit (1995), have pointed out the importance of empowering the disempowered by helping them learn how to gain access to mainstream cultures and power systems. But an important distinction can be drawn between Delpit's and Payne's frameworks. Delpit contextualizes her analysis within a larger critique of educational inequities. She problematizes the power imbalances, stating, for example, "Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence" (p. 26). Payne never describes poverty or classism as problems related to power or equity. Unlike Delpit, she does not acknowledge that the problem of class in schools is not that students in poverty don't know the hidden rules of the middle class, but that many school policies and practices in the United States benefit middle class and wealthy students at the expense of students in poverty (Darling-Hammond & Post, 2000; Kozol, 1992; Tozer, 2000).

For example, nowhere in *A Framework* or in her other books does Payne confront educational policies, like "choice" and voucher programs and tracking that recycle class privilege (Oakes, 2005). In fact, she has written *in support of* some of these trends—most notably, "No Child Left Behind" (2003). As Tozer (2002) observes, "It is much more attractive for those who benefit most from economic inequality to engage in school reform efforts [such as "choice" and voucher programs] rather than [those that] address economic inequality itself" (p. 155). By ignoring economic inequality, by putting forth a framework for understanding poverty that fails to name the ways in which teachers, schools, and school systems contribute to the cycle of poverty, Payne helps protect the class hierarchy.

The Deficit Perspective

According to the deficit perspective, discrepancies in access and opportunity are explained, not by inequities, but by "deficient" cultures and behaviors of people in poverty (and other marginalized groups). Deficit-approach poverty scholars draw on stereotypes and ignore classism (Rank, 2004; Tozer, 2000), in effect blaming people in poverty for their poverty. Their approach is discredited by research showing that people in poverty actually have similar values as middle and upper class people.

Despite Payne's vehement arguments otherwise (Payne, 2002), *A Framework* is steeped in this perspective. *A Framework* consists, at the crudest level, of a stream of stereotypes and a suggestion that we address poverty and education by "fixing" poor people instead of reforming classist policies and practices. The root of her framework—that poverty persists because people in poverty don't know the rules of the middle class—exemplifies deficit thinking by suggesting that the best way to address class and poverty in schools is to facilitate change in poor students while ignoring the structural inequities of schools.

A casual flip-through of *A Framework* uncovers dozens of deficit-laden statements. According to Payne (2001), people in poverty are bad parents: "The typical pattern in poverty for discipline is to verbally chastise the child, or physically beat the child, then forgive and feed him/her" (p. 37). They are also criminals: "Also, individuals in poverty are seldom going to call the police, for two reasons: First the police may be looking for them. . . . " (pp. 37-38). They are disloyal: "Allegiances may change overnight; favoritism is a way of life" (p. 74). They are violent and "on the streets": "If students in poverty don't know how to fight physically, they are going to be in danger on the streets" (p. 100). And, according to Payne, people in poverty are unmotivated addicts: "And for some, alcoholism, laziness, lack of motivation, drug addition,

etc., in effect make the choices for the individual" (p. 148). Although research indicates some differences in child discipline practices and levels of day-to-day physical violence between economically deprived communities and middle or upper class communities, the fact remains that *most* people in poverty are responsible, hard working, drug and alcohol free, and not "on the streets" (a phrase that may also cycle the stereotype that all poor people live in urban communities, when many live in rural communities). These people—the average, hard working, employed, drug free people in poverty—are largely invisible in *A Framework* and Payne's other books.

Payne repeats these stereotypes in the "Scenarios" she poses throughout *A Framework*. The first scenario revolves around an alcoholic single mother. The second involves an African American, teenage, high school dropout, single mother whose boyfriend has been arrested for assault. Oprah, an African American woman appearing in the third scenario, leaves her daughter in the care of a senile grandmother and an unemployed uncle. In the fourth scenario, we are introduced to a Hispanic (Payne's term) woman who dropped out of school after sixth grade and had five kids in eleven years after marrying at age sixteen. I could go on, but the point is clear: In these scenarios, as in the rest of her book, Payne portrays people in poverty as morally deficient, carriers of all of the class and race stereotypes that already pervade U.S. society, and in dire need of the refinement of middle and upper class cultures. As a result, she helps institutionalize the biases that teachers committed to class equity should be uncovering and destroying.

The deficit perspective pours from the pages of *A Framework* in other ways as well. Payne argues that we must teach students in poverty "classroom survival skills" (p. 96), but she never critiques the reality that some students—particularly students of color, lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, and, of course, students in poverty—experience classrooms in which survival is a challenge for them. She recommends that we provide "training" (p. 95) for parents in poverty (suggesting, again, that they are ill equipped for parenthood) but never recommends anticlassism training for educators. She connects poverty to a lack of "spiritual resources" (p. 16), suggesting spiritual deficiency among people in poverty. In addition, her discussion of language registers and discourse patterns (see *A Framework*, pp. 42-50) supports the classist notion that rigid register and discourse patterns used by certain people are inherently superior to those used by other people.

Ultimately, Payne seems to want students in poverty to assimilate into a system they experience often as oppressive, and she calls on predominantly middle class teachers to facilitate and enforce this assimilation. This, again, is a hallmark of the deficit perspective, and the implications are frightening. At an institutional level, when Payne casts people in poverty as morally or spiritually deficient she reinforces the middle and upper class concept of what Herbert Gans (1995) calls the "undeserving poor" (p. 1). According to Gans, this concept threatens public support for antipoverty public and educational policy. On an individual level, Payne's approach excuses middle and upper class citizens from the responsibility to challenge conditions, such as classist school practices, that privilege them.

Conservative Frame of Reference

As we review Payne's failure to address systemic classism and her reliance, instead, on a deficit approach to understanding poverty, the emerging framework reflects more a compassionate conservative approach than one dedicated to equity and social justice.

In a common conservative reframe, she blames poverty on what are actually *outcomes of* and not *reasons for* poverty. She says, "Poverty is caused by interrelated factors: parental employment status and earnings, family structure, and parental education" (2001, p. 12). In fact, parental employment status and education do not cause poverty. They reflect the *impact* of poverty (Rank, 2004). In other words, we can understand unemployment and increased instances of dropping out of school as factors that cause poverty only if we ignore the classist conditions that perpetuate poverty, such as the scarcity of living wage jobs in poor communities and the disappearance or disintegration of local and federal programs to aid the poor. These and similar conditions cause poverty. And worse, they cause it in a nation in which we have the resources to eliminate poverty, but continually choose not to do so (Rank, 2004).

Similarly, she repeats the often-espoused claim that while people in poverty value education "in the abstract," they don't value it "as reality" (2001, p. 59). She identifies this attitude toward education as a component of the culture of poverty. Research refutes this claim (Rank, 2004). She also argues that people in poverty inherently distrust authority. (Her negative connotation of this distrust also reflects a conservative framework. The real equity concern today, in my opinion, is a *lack of distrust for authority* among students and all citizens.) Misrepresentations and connotations aside, Payne provides no authentic causal analysis; she never discusses the inequitable and hostile environments that many kids in poverty face at school and in the larger society. As a result readers are led to believe that these characteristics result from poverty and not, if they result at all, from educational and other conditions that cycle poverty.

Another example of this cause-and-effect reversal can be found in President Bush's *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), legislation that targets schools with high-poverty populations without addressing the classism underlying achievement gaps. It is not surprising, then, that Payne has written a series of articles in uncritical support of NCLB. In one such article (2003) she cites extremely conservative sources including the Hannity and Colmes of Fox News, economist Hernando de Soto, and Thomas Sowell (senior fellow of the Hoover Institute and one of the chief rightwing critics of progressive education reform; he's also cited in *A Framework*) to support her pro-NCLB stand. This, despite the fact that Payne is from Texas, a state whose education system was decimated by education policies enacted by Bush during his

governorship— policies that were the precursors to NCLB.

Fewer than 15 years ago Jonathan Kozol's (1992) scathing exposé on funding inequities in schools, *Savage Inequalities*, was the talk of the education equity community. Now, despite the strongly conservative underpinnings of Payne's philosophy and inconsistencies between her framework and authentic movements for equity and justice, educators and school systems ostensibly committed to progressive school reform continue to adopt *A Framework* and pay thousands of dollars for Payne's workshops. As a result, uncountable numbers of pre- and in-service teachers are being trained to perpetuate classism, to conserve the educational status quo through well-intentioned ignorance of systemic classism.

Is it possible that the politics of progressive education reform have shifted so far to the right that we now laud Payne's conservatism where we once exalted Kozol's insistence on equity and justice? And if so, what does this say about the state of our schools?

Why We Bought In and How to Buy Out

Although Payne's framework doesn't jive with a vast history of research, it reflects the attitudes of the middle and upper class masses (Rank, 2004). Rank points out that "Americans tend to rank individual reasons (such as laziness, lack of effort, and low ability) as the most important factors related to poverty, while structural reasons such as unemployment and discrimination are typically viewed as less important" (p. 50). It is only logical, then, that most educators, who are primarily middle class, have internalized these attitudes.

In addition, Payne's popularity is partially attributable to the allure of the path of least resistance. In the anxiety-inducing atmosphere of high-stakes testing and other conservative education initiatives, some educators may see Payne's work as a break from Kozol's (1992) call for hardcore reform. For those of us in the middle or upper classes, Payne protects our privilege and gives us permission to do the same. And so the cycle stays in motion.

This is why, if we truly are committed to eradicating classism in our schools, we must mistrust any easily digestible framework. We can not secure equity and justice if we do not authentically confront inequity and injustice. And we cannot confront inequity and injustice by ignoring classism.

A genuine framework for understanding poverty prepares us to be change agents, and not, like Payne's framework, to maintain the status quo—at thousands of dollars per workshop.

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