

The Culture of Poverty Reloaded

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Although the student body in the United States is becoming more and more diverse, the teaching staff is strikingly homogenous: 90 percent of public school teachers are white, a statistic that is predicted to grow or remain constant according to the National Center for Educational Statistics. Equally interesting is that one-third of the racially diverse student body qualifies as low-income. Most of the teachers in these classrooms are not only white, but due to the re-segregation of cities and suburbs, most are products of white, middle- to upper-income neighborhoods and college teacher education programs comprised of predominantly white students.¹ Thus an increasingly diverse student population is being taught by teachers who look remarkably different from their students and who come from remarkably different backgrounds.

Legislators seem to have no problem looking at certain external factors affecting achievement, such as parental involvement and level of education. But, given the demographics of public schools, educator Gary Howard poses a question that they seem unwilling even to consider: “Is there a causal relationship between the overrepresentation of white teachers in our classrooms and the underperformance of children of color in our nation’s schools?”²

Indeed, while many legislators may be unaware of the role of cultural competence, i.e., the ability to relate to diverse cultures, in teaching children in the United States, those who are on the ground in classrooms and schools everyday recognize its importance. Education consultant Ruby Payne represents one particular response to the culture clashes in the classroom. Her widespread success at once highlights the salience of race and class inequities, and speaks to the absence of practical educational strategies to confront them.

Payne, a self-proclaimed expert on the “mindset of poverty” (though herself a product of a privileged, white upbringing) asserts that it is becoming increasingly difficult to educate students in U.S. public schools because more and more of these students come from low-income backgrounds and follow the hidden rules of poverty rather than rules

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of the middle class—which govern how schools and workplaces function. Payne argues that teachers have the responsibility to teach students these hidden rules explicitly so that they may attain academic success.

Payne's work is based on a racialized "culture of poverty" model that attributes the failure of the poor to their lack of middle-class behavior and values, a claim argued for centuries. Research on poverty, however, has found that the poor do not have a separate value or belief system. The question, then, is, Why are theories like those advocated by Payne continually recycled and popularized within educational policies and trends?

The answer is that Payne's depiction, in an endless series of vapid generalities, mirrors the popular discourse regarding the poor, which has become a sort of "common sense" in our society. Payne's work appeals to common sense assumptions of the poor as promiscuous, young, welfare queens and gangbanging, gun-toting drug dealers.

Even as she uses chosen "scenarios" to deemphasize race, Payne reaffirms and promotes stereotypical perceptions of race and illustrates how class is racialized. She locates the cause of poverty in the most convenient place: among poor people of color and their pathological "culture."

According to Payne, people from poverty view "organized" society with distrust, even distaste. Hence, "the line between what is legal and illegal is thin and often crossed. . . . The poor simply see jail as a part of life and not necessarily always bad."³ The assumption is that criminal behavior is inherent in a "culture of poverty." This criminality is directly related to the outlook of the poor on discipline. In a representative passage, Payne asserts:

The typical pattern is to verbally chastise the child, or physically beat the child, then forgive and feed him/her. The hidden rule about food in poverty is that food is equated with love. . . . One of the mistakes educators make is to misunderstand the role of punishment in generational poverty. Punishment is not about change, it's about penance and forgiveness. Individuals in poverty usually have a strong belief in fate and destiny. Therefore, to expect changed behavior after a parent-teacher conference is, in most cases, a false hope.⁴

The basic premise surrounding the culture of poverty paradigm is the belief that *they* are different from *us*. *They*, those from poverty, supposedly behave, feel, and think differently than those of *us* in the "mainstream." This logic was used to justify the brutality, cruelty, and enslavement of Native Americans and Africans who were considered as the "other" in relation to their white counterparts colonizing this nation. This "other" was constructed as "savage, uncivilized, barbaric, evil, lustful, *different*

and deviant in comparison to whites. Whiteness, on this score, served as a metanarrative in terms of which nonwhites functioned as ‘things’ to be exploited and used in the service of white people.”⁵

The idea of an “other” was not only crucial to the economic formation of the United States, but in the formation of a collective American identity as Kai Erikson highlights, “One of the surest ways to confirm an identity, for a community as well as for individuals, is to find some way of measuring what one is *not*.”⁶ Native Americans and Africans represented what European men and women claimed they were not—overly sexual, lazy, sinful, and impetuous—and, more importantly, what the Europeans must not become.⁷ And these behaviors were seen as inherent and irreversible due to race. While the English also rebuked the Irish as having similar characteristics, the Irish were seen as educable. In other words, they could unlearn their vices and be taught the traits of the civilized. For people of color, however, their dark color signified their condemnation as a demonic race, hence; they possessed a “nature” that “nurture” would never be able to change.⁸

Emancipation may have ended slavery but it did not end its legacy of exclusion and exploitation. This legacy of a different and inferior “other” was evidenced by the segregation laws of the Jim Crow era, which kept the races separate. The remnants of these laws can be seen in culture-of-poverty models created during that same period and which maintain their vitality today. In the historical, racist formation of education in the United States, the process of the cultural codification or imputed racial differences translates into the inherent failure of the Native American/African (inherently uneducable) cultural model, when compared to the European/Asian (educable) cultural model—with Latinos somewhere in between. The culture of poverty, then translates into the inherent poverty of certain racial/ethnic cultures, which students must therefore be taught to abandon. Ironically, although Ruby Payne may claim that her framework is not one based on race, the inescapable fact is that it is rooted in the same discourse that has been used to exclude and brutalize people of color for centuries. Simply assigning the inferior behavioral characteristics to a different “other”—poor people—does not dispel this history.

There are more progressive and liberating philosophies for educating students of color than the “blame their culture” paradigm. The work of Lisa Delpit, a black educator, is of interest because of its apparent similarity to the Ruby Payne enterprise. Yet, on examination, the difference between the two is illuminating. Delpit has often been

criticized for her take on how to educate students of color successfully. She has been credited—or blamed—for much of Payne’s work. In the 1980s and ’90s, when there was a retreat from direct instruction and a concentration on writing fluency, Delpit argued that direct, skills-based instruction was not only effective but also necessary in educating poor black students. Delpit based her arguments on her own experiences as a black student taught to write prolifically by a teacher-of-color, using so-called traditional methods, as well as what she heard and learned from other black educators. She and many other black teachers asserted that black students already wrote fluently and creatively; they only needed to know, understand, and be explicitly taught the codes or rules for participating in the “culture of power”:

The codes or rules I’m speaking of relate to linguistic forms, communicative strategies, and presentations of self; that is, ways of talking, ways of writing, ways of dressing, and ways of interacting. . . . Success in institutions—schools, workplaces, and so on—is predicated upon acquisition of the culture of those in power. Children from middle-class homes tend to do better in school than those from non-middle-class homes because the culture of the school is based on the culture of the upper and middle classes—of those in power. The upper and middle classes send their children to school with all the accoutrements of the culture of power; children from other kinds of families operate within perfectly wonderful and viable cultures but not cultures that carry the codes or rules of power.⁹

At first glance, this seems to be the message conveyed by Payne: poor students of color need to be explicitly taught the hidden rules or codes of the middle/upper class in order to be successful in school, work, etc. When examined more closely, this could not be further from the truth. Both terms, the “culture of poverty” (Payne) and the “culture of power” (Delpit) locate the problem in culture—but in different ways/places. Although Payne and other “culture of poverty” advocates see the problem as residing with the cultural attributes of those living in poverty, the “culture of power” perspective suggests that the middle/upper class hold the power and key to institutional success, partly through their monopolization of educational skills, and that they do all they can to make sure that they and their offspring maintain that power.

When Delpit began her work on “other people’s children” she predicted that her purpose would be misunderstood. People criticized her for “vindicating” teachers who subjected students of color to isolated, meaningless, sub-skills day after day. However, what she was actually advocating when she referred to “skills-based instruction”

was the “useful and usable knowledge that contributes to a student’s ability to communicate effectively in standard, generally acceptable literary forms” and she proposed that this was best learned in meaningful contexts.¹⁰ In other words, Delpit argued that both technical skills *and* critical thinking are essential: a person of color who has no critical thinking skills becomes the “trainable, low-level functionary of the dominant society, simply the grease that keeps the institutions which orchestrate his or her oppression running smoothly.” At the same time, those who lack the technical skills demanded by colleges, universities, and employers will be denied entry into these institutions. Consequently, they will attain financial and social success only within the “disenfranchised underworld.”¹¹

The key distinction between Delpit and Payne is the reason *why* they believe students should be taught the “hidden rules.” Payne argues that their educational and economic success depend on their being able to conform to the rules of the middle/upper class. While Delpit, too, makes this argument, she does not believe that students should passively adopt an alternate code simply because it is the “way things are,” especially if they want to achieve a particular economic status. Instead, Delpit asserts that students need to know and understand the power realities of this country *with the purpose of changing these realities*.

Delpit herself is an activist for change: “I am involved in political work inside and outside of the educational system, and that political work demands that I place myself to influence as many gatekeeping points as possible. And it is there that I agitate for change, pushing gatekeepers to open their doors to a variety of styles and codes.”¹² Thus Delpit advocates a know-thy-enemy, top-down, oppositional approach to change. She asserts that we must first infiltrate oppressive institutions—which can only be done if we are equipped with the skills needed to gain entry (i.e., passing standardized tests, speaking the language of power in interviews, etc.)—and then use our position in a way to deconstruct and dismantle these oppressive systems. This is radically different from Payne’s acquiescent “this-is-the-way-things-are-so-learn-to-live-with-it” mentality. While teaching students and teachers how the world currently operates, Payne implicitly accepts these realities as unalterable, or even desirable. Indeed, Payne advocates for policies that have proven to be especially detrimental to students of color and thus keep the “culture of power” in power.

By concentrating on the deficiencies of particular cultures, Payne and “culture of poverty” ideology not only demonize people of color, but also fail to indict the corrupt system responsible for making and

keeping people poor. Paul Gorski says it best: “If I want to understand economically disadvantaged students, I must understand poverty. If I want to understand poverty, I must understand the classism inherent in the ways in which our society, and by extension, our schools, institutionalize poverty.”¹³ People are poor because there are not enough jobs paying decent wages and because there are structures in place to ensure that this remains the case.¹⁴ And as long as this is the case, “all the right behavior in the world” will not eradicate or even ameliorate poverty.¹⁵ While Payne argues that failing schools are the results of an influx of students who do not conform to the hidden rules of the middle class, the fact is that failing schools are a logical consequence of the U.S. macroeconomy and the federal and regional policies that support it.

Payne has amassed a multimillion dollar empire by pimping poverty for profit. While she has a long history in education, today she is less in the classroom than the marketplace. She has now written books and conducts workshops for community and religious leaders, those in law enforcement, even dating couples. Her books (priced up to \$25) include, *The Framework for Understanding Poverty*, *Bridges Out of Poverty*, *Crossing the Tracks for Love*, *Hidden Rules of Class at Work*, *Living on a Tightrope* (a manual for principals), *Removing the Mask* (identifying giftedness in students from poverty), *Tactical Communication* (a guide for law enforcement), *Under-Resourced Learners*, *Understanding Learning*, *What Every Church Member Should Know About Poverty*, *Working With Students*, and *Working With Parents*. And there are workbooks that go along with some of these books ranging from \$7 to \$10. What is pernicious about these publications is precisely the fact that Payne owns and is CEO of her own multi-million dollar publishing corporation called aha! Process, Inc. This is important for two reasons. First, it means that the (dis)information she disseminates is neither peer reviewed by other educational researchers, nor put out in public intellectual forums for debate or dialogue. Rather, her books and workshops are marketed directly to predominantly white administrators and educators, telling them what they want to hear—that there is an easy way out: the cultural whitening of children of color. And one can purchase this knowledge by buying Ruby Payne’s books. It is as simple as that. In this way Payne is able to market her opinions, biases, and assumptions for considerable profit, without being subjected to the wider world of criticism. All proceeds from her books go directly back to her. And this is true of not only the books, but also the training workshops/conferences, DVDs, and the plethora of other products distributed by her enterprise.

It is important that we interrogate Payne's work and her motives in this larger context. She is making a fortune advising those with power how to manipulate and control the children of the poor, while, of course, claiming to want to help them. By situating the problem and solution for poverty at the feet of those oppressed by it, she leaves current power structures intact—the same power structures that have caused and maintained poverty in the first place. Not only does she not challenge these structures, but by allying herself with folk like Thomas Sowell who call for the total elimination of welfare and affirmative action programs—she actively fights to keep them in place. She thus protects her own privilege and gives teachers permission to do the same.¹⁶ We must be wary of solutions that seem too easy and cause no discomfort to the comfortable. Inequity, injustice, and the structures that keep them in place are woven into the fabric of our society. Just as people have died trying to dismantle these structures, others have struggled equally as hard to keep them in place.¹⁷ If we are truly committed to bettering the lives of our students, we must join them on the road of struggle and avoid the path of least resistance.

Notes

1. Gary R. Howard, *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools* (New York: Teachers College, 2006); Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994); Geneva Gay, Jeannine E. Dingus, Carolyn W. Jackson, "The Presence and Performance of Teachers of Color in the Profession, Community Teachers," retrieved February 19, 2006, <http://communityteachers.org/documents/PresPerfTeachersofColoringProfess.pdf>.
2. Howard, *We Can't Teach*, 4.
3. Ruby Payne, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Highlands, Texas: aha! Process, 2001), 36.
4. Payne, *A Framework*, 37.
5. George Yancey and Tracey Ann Ryser, "Whiting Up and Blacking Out: White Privilege, Race and White Chicks," *African-American Review* 42, no. 3-4 (2008): 731-46, see page 1.
6. Yancey and Riser, "Whiting Up," 41.
7. Ronald Takai, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 2008), 40-43.
8. Takaki, *A Different Mirror*, 44.
9. Lisa D. Delpit, *Other Peoples' Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (New York: New Press, 1995), 25.
10. Delpit, *Other Peoples' Children*, 19.
11. Delpit, *Other Peoples' Children*, 19.
12. Delpit, *Other Peoples' Children*, 40.
13. Paul C. Gorski, "Peddling Poverty for Profit: Elements of Oppression in Ruby Payne's Framework," *Equity and Excellence in Education* 41, no. 1 (2008): 141.
14. Jean Anyon, *Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, and a New Social Movement* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2005), 17.
15. Michael Eric Dyson, *Is Bill Cosby Right?: Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 6.
16. Paul C. Gorski, "The Classist Underpinnings of Ruby Payne's Framework," <http://tcrecord.org>, retrieved September 8, 2006.
17. Paul C. Gorski, "Savage Unrealities: Uncovering Classism in Ruby Payne's Framework," <http://edchange.org>, retrieved May 10, 2006.



We need to remember that teaching, especially elementary school teaching, is largely 'women's work.' What we may be actually witnessing is the recurrence of a long line of attempts to gain outside control of women's labor.

—MICHAEL W. APPLE, Series Editor's Introduction,"
in Ira Schor, *Culture Wars* (1986), xiv.