

Savage Unrealities:
Uncovering Classism in Ruby Payne's Framework

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Ruby Payne and her book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (referred to hereafter as *A Framework*), are staples of multicultural education classes, staff development workshops, and the education equity milieu. I rarely engage in conversations about poverty or classism in schools without somebody fawning over Payne's framework, exclaiming the virtues of her the work she's doing to inform teachers about the "culture of poverty."

I remember, about six years ago, when I first heard rumblings about the Ruby Payne phenomenon. I had been frustrated by what seemed to be a break in critical national dialogue concerning the relationship between poverty and education since Jonathan Kozol's landmark *Savage Inequalities* (1992). Finally, I was led to believe, a scholar had emerged to lead the fight for socioeconomic equity in schools. And, like Kozol, she had been a classroom teacher. I was thrilled by the possibilities.

Then I read *A Framework*. And I was horrified.

I've written recently about several disturbing trends within education equity work that, together, are pulling the progressive *umph!* out of a once radical movement: a growing focus on changing hearts at the disregard of transforming institutions, a reframing of multicultural education as a philosophy of universal validation instead of a framework for securing social justice in schools, and others. But perhaps the most dangerous way some of us—people ostensibly committed to equity education—contribute to this regression is by latching onto the models of trendy "experts" without sufficient critical analysis of their ideas. The result can be devastating. Popularity, particularly among scholars, breeds a sense of trustworthiness. Trust, when invested uncritically, is dangerous. This is why I'm horrified. It seems that an inordinate number of educators, many committed, at least philosophically, to equity and social justice, have, with little critical analysis, invested this trust in Payne. An entire generation of teachers is being socialized with her framework.

But when I read the growing collection of books and essays written or co-written by Payne, I see regression, stereotyping, and classism. I see a framework for understanding poverty that disregards the "sociopolitical context of schooling" (Nieto, 2000, p. 148), that (despite Payne's claims) frames poverty as a deficit among students and parents, that leans on the myth of meritocracy, that fails to draw from even the most rudimentary data essential for contextualizing her analyses.

My objective is to shake the uncritical trust bestowed upon Payne by exposing the classism in her work, particularly in *A Framework*. I frame my critique around several themes that uncover the oppressively conservative assumptions underlying her work. These themes are:

- (1) a conservative reframing of poverty and its relationship to education;
- (2) a lack of analysis of the systemic nature of poverty and classism and how this systemic nature impacts schools and students; and
- (3) a reliance on the deficit perspective, which problematizes people in poverty instead of problematizing the ways in which classism is cycled in schools and the larger society.

A Conservative Reframing of Poverty

First, and most importantly, *A Framework* is not about understanding poverty, what causes it, how schools and educators perpetuate it, or how the middle and upper classes maintain class privilege through the education system. Payne fails to address endless studies about these issues. For example, a recent study by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) (2004) supports decades of other research on poverty, class, and schooling. It shows that schools with large percentages of low-income students are more likely than schools with large percentages of wealthy students to have an abundance of teachers unlicensed in the subjects they teach, serious teacher turnover problems, teacher vacancies and large numbers of substitute teachers, limited access to computers and the Internet, inadequate facilities (such as science labs), dirty or inoperative student bathrooms, evidence of vermin such as cockroaches and rats, and insufficient classroom materials. In summary:

The evidence ... proves beyond any shadow of a doubt that children at risk, who come from families with poorer economic backgrounds, are not being given an opportunity to learn that is equal to that offered to 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. (NCTAF, 2004, p. 7)

But Payne (2001) doesn't mention this sort of research and its connection to poverty. She also fails to mention that schools with high percentages of students in poverty tend to implement less rigorous curricula (Barton, 2004), have fewer experienced and certified 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; Darling Hammond & Post, 2000; Kozol, 1992) than schools with predominantly wealthy students. How can we understand poverty, particularly as it relates to teaching and learning, without these insights—without understanding how the very structure of schools and schooling in the U.S. replicates the class inequities that keep many of our students' families in poverty (Bowers, 1993; Brantlinger, 2003; Good & Prakash, 2000; Learning First Alliance, 2005; Oakes, 2005; Rank, 2004)?

Another way Payne conservatively reframes concepts like poverty and class is by muddling the cause-and-effect relationship. She does so by blaming students' and families' poverty on what are actually outcomes of, and not reasons for, poverty. For example, she states, "Poverty is caused by interrelated factors: parental employment status and earnings, family structure, and parental education" (2001, p. 12). But parental employment status and parental education do not *cause* poverty. Instead, they reflect the *impact* of poverty (Rank, 2004).

Payne (2001) flubs the cause-effect relationship in other ways, as well. In a particularly egregious act of recasting, she suggests that people in poverty don't value education—that the failure to value education is a component of the culture of poverty. First, it must be pointed out that the research refutes this claim. Contrary to Payne's

assertion, “research has repeatedly demonstrated that those who fall below the poverty line...hold the same fundamental aspirations, beliefs, and hopes” (Rank, 2004, p. 48), including those related to education, as wealthy and middle class individuals. But even if we look past her unsubstantiated claim, she fails to provide a causal analysis beyond the assumption that people in poverty don’t value education simply because of their poverty. Payne (with Krabill, 2002; 2001) similarly names a distrust of authority as a characteristic arising from the culture of poverty. In *Hidden Rules of Class at Work* (2002), a follow-up to *A Framework*, Payne and Krabill explain, “It isn’t unusual for an individual from poverty to have an innate distrust of corporations. The ‘system’ is viewed as oppressive, and anyone who dances to the ‘company tune’ is not to be trusted” (p. 77). As she does throughout her work, Payne fails to connect such assertions to the inequitable conditions in schools, corporations, and larger society. She fails to describe the hostile learning and work environments faced by many people in poverty and their parents before them. Instead, she leads readers to believe that these characteristics result from poverty and not, if they result at all, from the classist conditions that keep people in poverty.

This, interestingly, is the same sort of cause-and-effect reversal evident throughout President Bush’s No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act. This federal legislation seems to blame schools—particularly those with high-poverty populations—for underachievement while failing to name or address the inequitable access that underlies the achievement gap. The illusion is that Bush’s policy, like Payne’s book, is a tool, a step toward equity. The reality is that Bush’s policy, like Payne’s book, supports a conservative educational agenda by never addressing the root causes of poverty or the socioeconomic achievement gap. It should not come as a surprise, then, that Payne has also written articles in praise of NCLB, similarly lacking in complexity and critical perspective. In one such article (2003) she cites *extreme* right-wing sources such as the Hoover Institution, Hannity & Colmes of Fox News, and Hernando de Soto, to support the legislation.

This conservative reframing allows Payne to build a *framework for understanding poverty* that cleverly, appallingly, avoids larger questions about class privilege (of which Payne is a beneficiary) and the current wave of regressive education policy (like NCLB) that cycles it. For example, it allows her to avoid addressing the fundamental and grave inequities that exist regarding basic components of educational access (such as access to equal funding, qualified and experienced teachers, learning materials, and a clean school environment). And it allows her to avoid the classist reality that this is happening, not in a society that lacks the resources to change these conditions, but one in which we *can but continually fail to* do so (Rank, 2004). As a result, the multitudes of educators consuming her framework are left with an ungrounded understanding of the relationship between poverty and education. As Tozer (2000) observes, an authentic understanding of class inequities in education “challenges the particular economic world-view underlying the contemporary school reform movement” (p. 149). Instead of challenging this world-view, as any framework on poverty should do, Payne’s contributes to it.

Lack of Analysis of the Systemic Nature of Poverty and Classism

According to Gans (1995), “The principal subject of poverty research...ought to be the forces, processes, agents, and institutions [such as schools]...that ‘decide’ that a proportion of the population will end up poor” (p. 127). Payne’s framework avoids this subject entirely. In fact, her framework is wholly devoid of systemic analysis. As a result, it is necessarily inconsistent with an authentically equity-minded approach to examining poverty, classism, and other systems of power and privilege.

Instead of tackling inequity and injustice, instead of describing ways in which schools and a complicit upper and middle class (Brantlinger, 2003) contribute to cycles of poverty through classist policies and practices like tracking, inequitable expectations, and high-stakes testing, Payne (2001) insists that we must understand the “hidden rules” of poverty and teach students in poverty the rules that will help them navigate the system (p. 8). But the problem is not that students in poverty do not know the rules of the middle class or the wealthy. The problems, as the symptoms of classism listed earlier indicate, are that the U.S. education system is designed to benefit the middle class and wealthy at the expense of those in poverty (Darling Hammond & Post, 2000; Kozol, 1992; Rank, 2004; Tozer, 2000) and that those privileged by the present system are unwilling to demand or even support equity reform (Brantlinger, 2003).

But Payne provides no analysis of institutionalized power, privilege, and classism. She even fails to perform a basic analysis of funding discrepancies in the public school system. As Darling Hammond and Post (2000) point out, unlike school systems in Europe and Asia, where funding tends to be central and equal, “the wealthiest 10 percent of school districts in the United States spend nearly ten times more than the poorest 10 percent, and spending ratios of three to one are common within states” (p. 127). It seems amazing that, with the endless streams of research and exposés on these disparities, Payne never so much as mentions them.

She similarly fails to address contemporary trends in education reform, such as school “choice” and voucher programs, that contribute to poverty by institutionalizing classism. As Corcoran (2001), Gans (1995), and others have pointed out, poverty and classism restrict choices of the poor that the middle class and wealthy take for granted. If I can afford to provide transportation for my child to attend an out-of-neighborhood school, I have the luxury of choice. If I can afford to pay the difference between a \$4,000 voucher and tuition at an independent school, I have the luxury of choice. If I cannot afford these things, or if I simply do not have access to information about the full range of options available to my child, I am left with the same limited options with which I began, despite these programs. Meanwhile the range of choices for those who *can afford choice* continues to grow (Miner, 2002/2003). So even the policies, practices, and programs designed to expand access only expand it for those who already have the most choice—those who may even be able to afford to move into an affluent school district or pay for private school (Rank, 2004; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000; Shapiro & Johnson, 2000). As Tozer (2000) 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). And, apparently, it is much more attractive for Payne to fall in line with this systemic classism than to analyze—or even *mention*—it.

The foundation of *A Framework*, and perhaps the most cited and distributed part of the book, consists of lists of “hidden rules” of various economic groups. According to Payne (2001), “Hidden rules are the unspoken cues and habits of a group. Distinct cueing systems exist between and among groups and economic classes” (p. 52). She charts these rules as they pertain to various aspects of life in the context of poverty, the middle class, and wealth. A portion of her chart is included below:

	POVERTY	MIDDLE CLASS	WEALTH
MONEY	To be used, spent.	To be managed.	To be conserved, invested.
TIME	Present most important. Decisions made for moment based on feelings or survival.	Future most important. Decisions made against future ramifications.	Traditions and history most important. Decisions made partially on basis of tradition and decorum.
EDUCATION	Valued and revered as abstract but not as reality.	Crucial for climbing success ladder and making money.	Necessary tradition for making and maintaining connections.
LANGUAGE	Casual register. Language is about survival.	Formal register. Language is about negotiation.	Formal register. Language is about networking.

Adapted from Payne, R.K., *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2001, p. 59).

I examine some of the assumptions and stereotypes in these lists in the next section of this essay. What may be more disturbing, though, and what further illustrates the lack of systemic context in Payne’s framework, is the way she introduces the “hidden rules.” Beginning on page 53 of *A Framework*, Payne offers three quizzes to help readers identify their own class identities. The quizzes are titled “Could You Survive in Poverty?”, “Could You Survive in Middle Class?”, and “Could You Survive in Wealth?” (2001, pp. 51-58). Could I *survive* in wealth?

As with these quizzes, Payne consistently fails to provide historical or sociopolitical context for the characteristics she attributes to people in poverty. For example, she claims that people in poverty “are not emotionally reserved when angry,” “do not use conflict-resolution skills,” “are very disorganized,” and “dislike authority” (p. 76-78), but does not explain these observations in a larger context of alienation, oppression, and classism. In fact, she makes the latter observation several times in *A Framework* and her other books (Payne, DeVol, & Smith, 2001; Payne & Krabill, 2002), but never acknowledges that many people in poverty have reason to be distrustful and suspicious of those representing institutional power and privilege (hooks, 2000), including educational policies and practices that cycle classism (as well as Payne’s own work). She even fails to make meaning of the burden faced by students in poverty—already alienated and repressed by the school system—who must find the energy and motivation to code-switch (adapt to a school culture that is hostile to their own) even while the school system does not demonstrate a willingness to meet their needs (Good & Prakash, 2000).

Payne goes so far as to argue that, “Many individuals stay in poverty because they don’t know there is a choice” (p. 79)—a ridiculous statement at face value. If some people in poverty believe they have no way out of poverty, it is likely because they are aware of the institutional barriers before them (Brantlinger, 2003; hooks, 2000). But

Payne fails to acknowledge this or, again, how the very structure of schooling reinforces such barriers through tracking, privatization, inequitable funding, voucher programs, and other practices and policies that benefit the middle and upper classes at the expense of students in poverty.

A final example of Payne's failure to provide an analysis of the systemic nature of poverty can be found in her list of support systems schools use to help students in poverty (see *A Framework*, pp. 94-96). Although her list includes some useful short-term strategies for supporting students in poverty, these supports are add-ons—practices that help students from poverty acculturate into the system that oppresses them instead of transforming the system to eliminate the reasons these programs and practices are necessary. (Or better yet, and on a grander scale, to eliminate poverty altogether.) The crucial and urgent question—and the one left unasked by Payne—is, *How must we transform the policies and practices of schools and educators so that we fight, and don't replicate, patterns of poverty and classism?*

Some may argue that Payne never intended this larger analysis; that her book is a tool for classroom teachers more immediately concerned with the students before them than larger social or educational reform. Even so, equitable classroom practice can only be understood effectively in a larger context. If I want to understand students in poverty, I must understand poverty. If I want to understand poverty, I must understand the classism inherent in the way that our society, and by extension, our schools, “create[s] and tolerate[s] poverty” (Gans, 1995, p. 126).

Tozer (2000), critiquing Payne's brand of “scholarship” on class and poverty, summarizes:

Without...attention to relations of domination and subordination as they reside in economic class, the attention to ‘cultural backgrounds’ of students is inadequate on two counts: First, culture is importantly influenced by economic class in contemporary society, and second, school cultures devalue the knowledge and practices of the working and poverty classes while privileging the knowledge and practices of the propertied classes. (p. 156)

Brantlinger (2003) adds:

Most scholars do not conjecture about the class structure, recent intensification of social class distinctions, or proliferation of tools designed to solidify and reify distinctions. They do spend time trying to explain the class-correlated differential educational outcomes in ways that are not attributed to their own desires or actions. (p. 21)

Payne, by failing to contextualize her analyses with this structural frame, allows people from the upper and middle classes (including herself)—people privileged by the educational system—to avoid responsibility for systemic classism and how it plays out in schools (Brantlinger, 2003; Tozer, 2000). We can teach students the “hidden rules” of the middle class, offer add-on supports, and make other “minor adjustments” (p. 97), as Payne (2001) calls them. But as long as we don't address the classism underlying discrepancies in teacher expectations, school funding, educational resources, effective

instruction, and other systemic concerns, the class hierarchy remains in place (Brantlinger, 2003; Gans, 1995).

Furthermore, by failing to critique systemic classism and by choosing, instead, to problematize a manufactured “culture of poverty,” Payne contributes to stereotypes of deficiency—to, as Gans (1995) describes, the notion of an “undeserving poor” (p. 6). (After all, if the system isn’t broken, the people who don’t “fit” into that system must be.)

The Deficit Perspective

Payne adamantly denies, in workshops and on her Web site (Payne, 2002), that her framework builds on notions of deficiency. This is a matter of credibility for somebody purporting to advocate for people in poverty.

The “deficit perspective” is an approach through which scholars explain varying levels of opportunity and access (educationally, professionally, and in other spheres) among groups of people by identifying deficits in the cultures and behaviors of the underprivileged group. Scholars using the deficit perspective blame oppressed people for their own oppression by drawing on stereotypes and assumptions usually unsupported by research and disconnected from a larger systemic analysis (Rank, 2004; Tozer, 2000). They reduce the causes of poverty “to individual inadequacies” by “localizing” it “to the individual’s household or...neighborhood” (Rank, 2004, p. 11). This approach has been discredited by decades of research that reveals both that people in poverty have similar aspirations and values as people from the middle and upper classes and that the disadvantages they face are linked directly to the sorts of inequities described earlier in this essay (Brantlinger, 2003; Gans, 1995).

Despite her insistence otherwise, *A Framework* and Payne’s other books exemplify the deficit perspective. Her work contains a stream of stereotypes, providing perfect illustrations for how deficit-model scholars frame poverty and its educational impact as problems to be solved by “fixing” poor people instead of the educational policies and practices that cycle poverty (Brantlinger, 2003; Gans, 1995; Rank, 2004; Tozer, 2000). The root of her framework—that people in poverty must learn the culture of the middle class in order to gain full access to educational opportunities—is steeped in deficit thinking. But that’s only the beginning; this perspective can be found in myriad ways, explicitly and implicitly, throughout her work.

Payne demonstrates the deficit model in dozens of staggeringly stereotypical and classist statements in *A Framework*. She writes:

- 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)
- 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)
- ...if the family is in generational poverty... You can be fairly sure that the males are in and out—sometimes present, sometimes not, but not in any predictable pattern. (p. 74)
- Allegiances may change overnight; favoritism is a way of life. (p. 74)
- If students from poverty don’t know how to fight physically, they are going to be in danger on the streets. (p. 100)

- And for some [people in poverty], alcoholism, laziness, lack of motivation, drug addiction, etc., in effect make the choices for the individual. (p. 148)

In other words, people in poverty are bad parents, criminals, irresponsible, unreliable, violent, lazy, and unmotivated addicts. Like most of her claims, these are not backed by research. Instead, they seem to be based primarily on Payne's conjecture or sources that describe individual experiences and not the results of structured inquiry. These statements alone demolish her claims that she does not draw from the deficit perspective.

These stereotypes are repeated throughout Payne's work. They appear most explicitly in a series of "Scenarios" she uses to illustrate many of her points. Take, for example, the first six "Scenarios" that appear in *A Framework* (2001). The first centers on John, an 8-year old white boy with an alcoholic single mother. The second involves Vangie, an African American woman who dropped out of school, had a kid at 14, and now collects welfare. Her boyfriend has been arrested for assault. In Scenario #3, Oprah, another African American woman, leaves her daughter, Opie, in the care of Opie's senile grandmother and unemployed uncle. Noemi, a Hispanic woman who left school after sixth grade, married at 16, then had five kids in eleven years, stars in Scenario #4. Neither she nor her husband, who works sporadically, is familiar with the term "encyclopedia." Eileen, the ten-year-old girl in Scenario #5, lives with her grandmother. She doesn't know who her father is, but he's likely a former "client" of her drug-addicted prostitute mother, Wisteria. In the sixth scenario, Ramón, a 25-year-old Latino drug dealer, cares for his nephew, Juan, whose father was killed by a rival gang. Juan's mother is in jail for gang-related activities. These characters exhibit all of the stereotypically moral and intellectual "deficits" of economically disadvantaged people, strengthening the underlying message that the real change must happen within people in poverty and not within the systems that create and maintain poverty, such as education. Moreover, the most dysfunctional characters in Payne's scenarios tend to be African American or Latina/o, adding a racist element to her deficit model. (Racism, like classism, underlies Payne's work—a topic for another essay.)

Payne draws on the deficit perspective in myriad other ways, as well—some less explicit, but all equally oppressive to people in poverty and misleading to consumers of her literature and workshops. Her discussion of language registers (see *A Framework*, pp. 42-50) is fraught with deficit thinking. For example, she mockingly describes the discourse pattern of people in poverty as "beat[ing] around the bush," "circl[ing] the mulberry bush" (2001; p. 45), and "meander[ing] almost endlessly through a topic" (p. 43). But more importantly, instead of challenging the classist and elitist notion that a rigidly defined register and discourse pattern used by one group is superior to that used by another group, Payne supports assumptions of language deficiency among students in poverty. Further, she calls for students in poverty to assimilate into a classist system and for predominantly middle class teachers to facilitate and enforce this assimilation.

Similarly, Payne (2001) argues that teachers must teach students in poverty "classroom survival skills" (p. 96). And worse, she suggests, as many deficit theorists in the education milieu do, that we provide "training" (p. 95) for parents in poverty. Her assumption, that students and parents in poverty need to learn the skills and values of the middle and upper classes, is one of deficiency. And to clarify her deficit stand, she fails

to consider the obvious equity question: *What is going on in these classrooms that make them places where students in poverty must learn to “survive”?*

Equally egregious, though perhaps subtler, is Payne’s contention of a connection between poverty and a lack of spiritual resources. She describes spiritual resources as “Believing in divine purpose and guidance” (2001, p. 16) or “the belief that help can be obtained from a higher power, that there is a purpose for living, and that worth and love are gifts from God” (p. 17). In *Hidden Rules of Class at Work* (2002), Payne and Krabill take this a step further, explaining, “In poverty, the belief system is often centered around fate and luck” (p. 124). In their rubric for “spiritual destiny,” they argue that as one moves toward a belief “in a higher power” (p. 125) and affiliation with a religious group, they move away from the culture of poverty. These claims are laced with assumptions of spiritual deficiency among people in poverty. Moreover, they underscore the Christian-centric tone apparent throughout her work (yet another topic to be explored in a differently focused analysis of Payne’s books and essays).

Despite these fairly concrete examples of deficit thinking, Payne (2002) insists, “To reference this work as a deficit model is analogous to saying that when an individual comes to take courses at a university, he/she is a deficit” (para. 2). But this contention reveals the lack of complexity in her understanding of equity and justice. Considering the evidence, to *not* reference her work as a deficit model is analogous to saying that when an African American woman attends a predominantly white university with a history of hostility toward students of color, the university’s sole responsibility is to teach her how to act like a white person so she can “survive.”

It’s difficult to imagine why equity-minded educators, upon reading or hearing the deficiency-laced assumptions so readily observable in Payne’s work, have not dismissed—or at least more thoroughly critiqued—*A Framework* and her other books and workshops. The implications of not doing so are frightening. As Gans (1995) explains, frameworks built upon these assumptions reinforce the image of people in poverty as morally deficient. This image, in turn, reinforces the middle and upper class notion of the “undeserving poor” (p. 1)—a concept that deteriorates public support for effective anti-poverty policy. Rank (2004) refers to this process as “labeling” (p. 180), which has become a particularly powerful political tool among conservative policy-makers. As a result, Gans warns,

... American policy will continue to be the present subsistence level, which seeks to keep the undeserving poor functioning at the subsistence level, although that policy may start deteriorating to a survival mode, in which help to the poor is supplied only at the level that avoids politically embarrassing increases in extreme misery and death among them... (p. 103)

The federal government’s response to Hurricane Katrina illustrates this point.

On a more personal level, the deficit perspective relieves people in the upper and middle classes of responsibility regarding poverty and the inequities that recycle it (Rank, 2004; Tozer, 2000). We need not reflect on our own habits of consumption, stereotypes and prejudices, lack of knowledge and understanding about issues related to the labor movement, or complicity with school policies and practices that support the conditions for poverty (in other words, our own and the system’s deficiencies). All we need to do,

Payne seems to suggest, is to invest a limited amount of energy in helping fill the spiritual, moral, skill-related, intellectual, social, and cultural voids that plague the least privileged among us. This assertion of superiority, this practice of blaming the victim, is the epitome of classism.

Why Have We Bought In?

Considering these critiques, how have so many educators, school districts, and educational leaders, ostensibly committed to equity and diversity, adopted *A Framework* or hired Payne or her colleagues to conduct their workshops? How has her work become standard fare in multicultural education classes and related professional development opportunities despite its egregious lack of consistency with philosophies of equitable and just education?

One possible reason, according to Rank (2004), is that the type of information Payne conjectures, while inconsistent with immense amounts of research (Brantlinger, 2003; Gans, 1995; Rank, 2004; Tozer, 2000), mirrors the classist assumptions of the middle and upper class public. Speaking to this deficit-laced reversal, Rank (2004) explains:

...poverty has been conceptualized primarily as a consequence of individual failings and deficiencies. Social surveys asking about the causes of poverty have consistently found 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 or discrimination are typically viewed as less important. (p. 50)

In addition, I believe the Ruby Payne phenomenon illustrates the temptation of the path of least resistance. Her work allows us to content ourselves by learning a set of cultural rules and helping a dominated group fit into a dominating system. She never insists that we secure social justice or eliminate educational inequities. She never challenges us to confront classism. In today's anxiety-ridden education milieu, many of us may experience *A Framework* as a reprieve from the difficult reflective and transformative work called for by Kozol (1992), hooks (2000), and others. Their work challenges us to be part of institutional reform. Payne's demands shallow awareness and no commitment to authentic reform. In other words, if I am from the upper or middle socioeconomic classes, Payne protects my privilege and gives me permission to do the same.

The cycle of poverty remains.

Conclusion

Whether we're consuming Payne's ideas or those of another trainer, book, article, film, motivational speaker, or any other contributor to education equity consciousness, we should be most suspicious of the easily digestible ideas, the quick fixes, and the simple

solutions. Frameworks for educational equity cannot be easy, quick, or simple (Neito, 2000; Sleeter, 1996). Equity and social justice cannot be secured if we are unwilling to confront inequity and injustice authentically, if we are unwilling to confront the underlying issues—such as systemic classism—that Payne ignores.

What I find most disturbing about the growing popularity of Payne's work is that it may be a sign of the collective unwillingness of education leaders to challenge the system that empowers many of them, even if it does so at the expense of others. It may also be a sign that those of us committed to equity and justice in schools rely too heavily on the reputations and presentation skills of scholars and speakers while failing to examine critically the theories and frameworks upon which they build their work.

As child poverty in the U.S. continues to rise; as our government continues to cut programs for people in poverty; as conservative educational policy continues to gut public schools, particularly in poor areas, the need to understand the relationship between poverty and education grows increasingly urgent. An authentic framework for understanding this relationship must challenge us to think systemically. It must prepare us to be change agents, dedicated to rooting classism out of our classrooms, schools, and society, and not, as Payne's work prepares us to do, to be maintainers of the status quo, at thousands and thousands of dollars per workshop.

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