

**Savage Unrealities:
Uncovering Classism in Ruby Payne's Framework**

(This is a shortened version of a longer essay of the same title. Download the full version by visiting <http://www.EdChange.org> and clicking on *Publications*.)

September 23, 2005

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Mark Twain said, “When I find myself on the side of the majority, it’s time to pause and reflect.” He was challenging us to think most critically when our attitudes reflect prevailing attitudes.

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 books and workshops are standard fare in staff development programs and teacher preparation classes. But I’ve heard little critical analysis of her work.

So I took up the challenge, consuming the growing collection of Payne’s books, digging into her Web site, studying her presentation materials.

I never actually found a framework for authentically understanding poverty. Instead I found classism. (I also found racism and Christian-centrism—topics for another essay.)

It is my intention here to begin unpacking classism in Payne’s framework. I base my analysis on three critiques: (1) Payne’s framework fails to consider 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.

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)

Apparently this “obvious cause” is not so obvious to Payne. She never even *mentions* these disparities in *A Framework*. How can we understand poverty and its relationship to education if we ignore 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. In addition to the patriarchy of this perspective, Payne fails to contextualize it with an acknowledgement of classism. The problem of class in schools is not that students in poverty don’t know the hidden rules of the middle class. The problem is that many school policies and practices benefit middle class and wealthy students at the expense of students in poverty (Darling-Hammond & Post, 2000; Kozol, 1992; Tozer, 2000).

Nowhere in *A Framework* or her other books does Payne confront educational trends, like “choice” and voucher programs, that recycle class privilege. 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). Similarly, it seems more attractive to Payne to contribute to this classism than to expose—or even *mention*—it.

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). 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, *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 understand the rules of the middle class—exemplifies deficit thinking.

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 addiction, etc., in effect make the choices for the individual” (p. 148).

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, another African American woman who appears in the third scenario, leaves her daughter in the care of a senile grandmother and unemployed uncle. In the fourth scenario we are introduced to a Hispanic (Payne's term) woman who dropped out after sixth grade and had five kids in eleven years after marrying at age sixteen. I could go on, but the point is clear: Payne, in the ultimate act of classism, portrays people in poverty as morally deficient, needing the refinement of middle and upper class cultures. She helps institutionalize the stereotypes that teachers should be destroying.

The deficit perspective appears throughout *A Framework* in other ways as well. Payne argues that we must teach students in poverty "classroom survival skills" (p. 96) but never critiques the reality that some students experience classrooms in which survival is a challenge. She recommends that we provide "training" (p. 95) for parents in poverty (suggesting, again, that they are ill-equipped for parenthood) but never recommends anti-classism 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 superior to those used by other people. Ultimately, Payne wants students in poverty to assimilate into a system they often experience as oppressive and she calls on predominantly middle class teachers to facilitate and enforce this assimilation.

The implications of Payne's deficit perspective are frightening. When she 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 anti-poverty 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 compassionate conservative thinking rather than 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).

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.) 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 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, Hernando de Soto, and the Hoover Institution to support the legislation.

Despite the strongly right-leaning underpinnings of Payne's philosophy and inconsistencies between her framework and authentic philosophies of 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. Less than fifteen years ago Jonathan Kozol's scathing exposé on funding inequities in schools, *Savage Inequalities*, was the talk of the education equity community. Is it possible that the politics of this once radical community has shifted so far to the right that we now laud Payne where we once exalted Kozol? And if so, what does it mean 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 confront authentically 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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