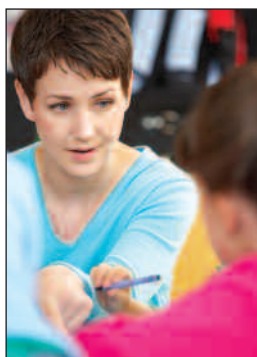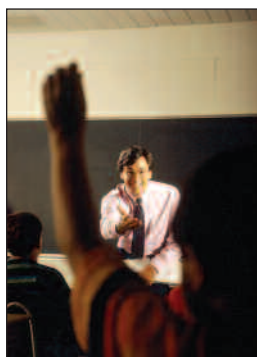# Poverty and Payne
Supporting Teachers to Work with Children of Poverty

Preparing teachers to support students who live in poverty begins by helping teachers understand how their own values and experiences might differ from their students'.

BY MISTILINA SATO AND TIMOTHY J. LENSMIRE

As conversations about students who live in poverty begin to become more commonplace, we are seeing two things. First, on a positive note, teachers and administrators are awakening to the reality that not all students embody white, middle-class values, experiences, and cultural norms. This is leading schools and districts to seek professional development experiences for teachers to help them grapple with yet another form of diversity in their classrooms. There seems to be agreement on many fronts that teachers need better models, practices, and frameworks for teaching students from a multitude of backgrounds, especially if the students represent cultures and social classes that are different from the teacher's.

Second, children from poverty are being identified and labeled with grossly overgeneralized, deficit-laden characteristics that put them at risk of being viewed as less capable, less cultured, and less worthy as learners. While we do not want to underplay the stresses on some children who live in poverty, we do want to advocate for a perspective that sees these children and their families as historied and cultural beings, full persons with dreams and aspirations of success, with abilities to use language with sophistication, and with intelligences that may be underappreciated in schools as institutions.

If we want to help teachers develop awareness and pedagogies that are sensitive to children who live in poverty, we must first challenge the misinformation that is being disseminated and set a new course. This new direction should have three key features: 1) an emphasis on children's competency, 2) a focus on the teacher's cultural identity, and 3) a professional development model based in ongoing collaborative work among teachers.

REJECTING STEREOTYPES OF THE POOR

Ruby Payne (with her company, aha! Process Inc.) is perhaps the most visible educator providing materials and workshops about poverty for teachers and prin-

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cipals. Payne has been featured in high-profile news outlets, including the *New York Times* (Tough 2007) and *Education Week* (Keller 2006), and her materials are used in teacher education programs across the country (Osei-Kofi 2005). According to her web site, Payne and her certified trainers, consultants, and em-

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ployees conduct 800 to 1,000 workshops and seminars a year in the U.S. and Canada; and the book with which she launched her business, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2005; hereafter, *Framework*), now in its 4th edition, has sold over a million copies.

Reviewers of Payne's *Framework* have noted the ways that she stereotypes people living in poverty (Gorski 2006; Ng and Rury 2006; Osei-Kofi 2005). In their recent, painstaking content analysis of *Framework*, Bomer et al. (2008) found that Payne's claims about the poor are unsubstantiated in her text and contradicted by mountains of research in education, anthropology, sociology, and related fields. They conclude that Payne's work is a classic example of "deficit thinking," where "students who struggle or fail in school do so because of their own internal deficits or deficiencies"(Discussion section, para. 1).

To give you a sense of this stereotyping, we share the complete list of what Payne calls "behaviors related to poverty." According to Payne, poor children:

- Laugh when disciplined as a "way to save face in matriarchal poverty";
- Argue loudly with the teacher;
- Make angry responses;
- Make inappropriate or vulgar comments;
- Physically fight because they "do not have language or belief system to use conflict resolution";
- Always have their hands on someone else;
- Cannot follow directions because "little procedural memory is used in poverty" and "sequence is not used or valued";
- Are extremely disorganized because "planning, scheduling, or prioritizing skills" are "not taught in poverty";

- Complete only part of a task because they have "no procedural self-talk" and "do not 'see' the whole task";
- Are disrespectful to the teacher because they "may not know any adults worthy of respect";
- Harm other students, verbally or physically;
- Cheat or steal because of "weak support system, weak role models/emotional resources"; and
- Talk incessantly because "poverty is very participatory" (pp. 79-80).

Gorski (2006) argues that Payne is participating in what Herbert Gans (1995) has called the "war against the poor." That is, even as Payne advertises herself as seeking to help people living in poverty, she actually contributes to the larger effort to persuade society that the poor are undeserving of society's help. In this list and elsewhere, Payne evokes the Reagan-era "black welfare queen," she asserts that poor people cheat and steal, and she claims the poor just are not organized enough to make things work out for themselves or their children. As Bomer et al. put it:

> Payne repeatedly selects elements of daily life that represent the lives of the poor as characterized by violence, depravity, and criminality. Payne's selective representations are negative stereotypes that essentialize poor people as immoral, violent, and socially deficient. These representations do not account for the majority of low-income people, who work hard, obey the law, and do not exhibit the behaviors and attitudes that Payne has described. (2008, Immediate Environment of Poor Children section, para. 4)

Finally, even as we read Payne against the backdrop of the current "war against the poor," we must also recognize that she is dredging up older stereotypes. According to Payne, the poor have inadequate language and inadequate brains, they fight, they're loud. In the Western tradition, to be human is to use your head. Payne is defining the poor in terms of their body and lack of cognitive power.

CHILDREN'S COMPETENCE

But, if not Payne's *Framework*, then what? How can school districts address issues of poverty? Based on the prevailing recommendations of the best minds in teacher development, we begin with the assumption that professional development opportunities should allow teachers sustained time to work together on substantive and important issues. Rather than dwelling on children's perceived deficits, we believe teachers should be encouraged to focus instead on children's competence as cultural and intellectual people.

If, indeed, we recognize students who have lived a

life in poverty as having different cultural norms (through language, custom, tradition, and experience) than those expected in a school classroom, then

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drawing on well-theorized and empirically grounded work that investigates culture can be particularly helpful to classroom teachers. Several scholars have written about culturally relevant pedagogy. This work can be foundational to helping educators understand the cultural mismatches that happen in classrooms every day whether the cultural issues are associated with race, ethnicity, life in urban or rural settings, or social class including poverty.

Research on the role of cultural relevance in classroom teaching identifies how students' culture — the values, beliefs, practices, and experiences they bring with them from their homes, communities, and her-

itage — can be an integral part of a student's successful academic experience when teachers know how to relevantly build on them (Delpit 1995; Ladson-Billings 1994, 1995*a*, 1995*b*; Lee 1995). Geneva Gay has argued that "a very different pedagogical paradigm is needed to improve the performance of underachieving students from various ethnic groups — one that teaches *to and through* their personal and cultural strengths . . ." (2000, p. 24). According to Gay, dimensions of culturally responsive teaching include:

- Acknowledging the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups as content to be taught in the formal curriculum;
- Bridging home and school experiences;
- Finding meaningful connections between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities;
- Using a variety of instructional strategies aligned with student learning styles; and
- Incorporating multicultural information, resources, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in schools.

Within these principles, we see a complex treatment of culture that speaks to the variety of individ-

ual realities, rather than viewing culture as a monolithic and static feature of groups of people because they share the same skin color, social class, or country of origin. We also see a complex pedagogy that attends to students' home life, their everyday lived experiences, and the relationship of understanding built between the teacher and students. Culturally responsive teaching is a mindset and way of being in the class-

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For example, work done within a "funds of knowledge" framework (Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005) offers a practical model for developing professional practice that is culturally relevant and socially responsible to the students' home communities. The approach to professional learning in this work is grounded in action research in the local community. Teachers conduct home visits in quest of understanding and appreciating the lives of the families they serve. By putting the teacher in the position of learner (researcher), the family and community are viewed as resources and assets who have "funds of knowledge" that are integral to the lives of the students but that may not be readily apparent when the child is in the classroom and not surrounded by the family or home culture. Viewing a student's home culture as robust, historical, and worthy stands in stark contrast to deficit models.

When we believe there is value in what a child brings into the classroom from their home culture, we listen for that value and build formal educational experiences on what the student brings with them. Carol Lee (1995) demonstrated how listening to students with a mind toward recognizing intellect and thoughtfulness can translate into productive classroom interactions between teacher and student and among students. In her work, she used a cognitive apprenticeship model in which the invisible complex processes of thinking, comprehension, and problem solving were made visible (Collins, Brown, and Newman 1989). A variety of teaching strategies can be used within a cognitive apprenticeship environment, such as reciprocal teaching, think-alouds during a cognitively demanding task, constructing heuristics, and creating criteria to judge the quality of work with students.

Lee combined the cognitive apprenticeship pedagogies with curriculum materials grounded in the home cultures of students. By doing this, she found that students engaged in sophisticated analyses of the texts they were reading, articulated their understanding in both the academic discourses of the classroom and the traditional styles of their home culture, and attended to each others' ideas.

TEACHERS' CULTURAL IDENTITY

Study around such concepts as funds of knowledge will enable teachers to rewrite their often stereotyped views of poor students. But if this is going to work, educators will also need to put themselves under the microscope. What do we, as educators, bring to our work with students living in poverty? What role do we imagine for ourselves?

Usually, when we are concerned about stereotyping, we worry about the functions and effects of stereotypes in relation to those being stereotyped.

Osei-Kofi (2005) thinks that Payne's stereotypes provide the well-meaning educator with a certain "guilty voyeuristic pleasure" as they get to affirm their own normalcy against the "comfortably familiar" image of the poor as pathological. Payne plays on our sense of ourselves as normal, the norm, as well as on our sense of the poor as different, other. Furthermore:

> Based on this depiction of the poor, educators become perfectly situated to take on the role of *middle-class, primarily white, saviors of children in poverty* by being "good" role models, and teaching these children the so-called hidden rules of middle-class. Through the objectification of the poor, educators are implicitly positioned as the true historical subjects with ability to act in creating social change. (Osei-Kofi 2005, p. 370; emphasis added)

Payne offers educators the role of savior. It is an offer we need to reject, and to reject it, we need to bring the same sorts of assumptions and concepts to bear in relation to ourselves that we bring to our rewriting of who we imagine the poor to be. That is, we need to imagine and examine ourselves, as educators and citizens; as complex, cultural, and historical beings; as human actors born into a web of meanings and values of which we are only partially aware and not in complete control.

The current teaching population in the U.S. comprises mostly white, middle-class women. An important starting point for making sense of who we are as educators of students living in poverty is an engagement with the emerging body of work called *critical whiteness studies*. The white historian David Roediger, with his book *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991), is often credited with beginning this work. But Roediger al-

ways defers and points to people of color as the "nation's keenest students of white consciousness and white behavior" (1998, p. 4). Teacher study groups could begin an important journey of cultural under-

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standing by taking up Roediger's edited volume, *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White* (1998).

A second, powerful way into critical whiteness studies is through the work of the Rev. Thandeka, in her *Learning to Be White: Money, Race, and God in America* (2001). Thandeka is interested in making better sense of how white racial identify develops, because she sees religious, educational, and political efforts meant to mobilize white people for social justice failing — failing over and over again. She believes these programs are failing, in part, because they are based on an inadequate concept of who white people are and how they got that way. Thandeka presents a fascinating account of the development of white racial identity as grounded in how both race and social class

have played out and continue to play out in U.S. society. Hers is a story both devastating and hopeful — and generative. We have used Thandeka's work in our education courses, and it has enabled amazing examinations of self in relation to others by future and practicing teachers and activists.

If, as Gramsci thought, the "starting point of critical elaboration is . . . 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory" (1971, p. 324), then we need to create inventories, understand traces, so that we might do critical and creative work on ourselves, in preparation for and as part of our critical and creative work with our students. The engagement with critical whiteness studies by teacher study groups is an important component of re-imagining ourselves as educators and our relationships to students living in poverty.

BECOMING TEACHERS OF CHILDREN FROM POVERTY

Living in poverty lies far outside of the realm of most teachers' experience. Our best guess as to why Payne's work is so popular is that she is comforting to white people, to white educators. She offers simple and simplistic solutions to complex problems; she al-

lows white educators to think of themselves as normal and even saviors of poor pathological children and their parents. When we think about America and its sacred belief that all people are created equal, and then we are perhaps troubled by the massive and increasing inequalities we see all around us, Payne comforts us with her soothing repetitions of centuries-old stereotypes of the poor. We can then get on with being white and privileged and free from responsibility for the well-being of our neighbors and fellow citizens.

While we know teachers crave new ideas for teaching and want access to "ideas that work," we also know teaching is a complex and uncertain endeavor. To imagine that we can create a list of strategies and assign them to whole groups of children because of who their parents are or where they live is a gross oversimplification of what it means to teach or to be a teacher. As teachers begin to embrace issues of social class differences among their students and themselves, pedagogical shifts will need to be more than the addition of a few technical strategies.

Teachers will need support in developing a better understanding of themselves and their own worldviews in order to better engage with children who bring different experiences, cultures, values, and ways of understanding the world into the classroom. New ways of being in the classroom must be taken up by teachers. Part of that being is to be present in the moment with students, while listening to them and respecting their ideas. Part of that being is a willingness to ask students questions, to get to know them as thinkers, as children, and as people. And part of that being is patience and grace in response to uncertainty, in response to the everyday classroom's pervasive demands for wise decisions and action.

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