Equity & Excellence in Education

Peddling Poverty for Profit: Elements of Oppression in Ruby Payne's Framework

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Ruby Payne, CEO of aha! Process, Inc., and author of *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2005), has become one of the most influential figures in the U.S. public education milieu. Payne's framework, built largely upon understanding the "culture" of poverty, instructs educators on the values and mindsets poor students carry into the classroom as well as how to help them develop middle-class values and culture. But despite Payne's popularity, scholars and activists representing a wide variety of disciplines, from critical theory to mathematics education, have been highly critical of her work. In this essay I synthesize the existing critiques, dividing them into "eight elements of oppression" in Payne's work. I then offer a vision for a more authentic framework—one for authenticating anti-poverty education.

Just beneath Ruby Payne's name on the cover *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2005; hereafter referred to as *A Framework*) are these words: "The Leading U.S. Expert on the Mindsets of Poverty, Middle Class, and Wealth." Notwithstanding the fact that Payne self-publishes (Bohn, 2007)—so she is calling *herself* "The Leading U.S. Expert"—all evidence is that many people believe this claim. Payne and her associates are everywhere. Since 1996 they have been conducting roughly 200 workshops per year, training more than of 25,000 teachers and administrators on how to educate students in poverty (Bohn, 2007; Osei-Kofi, 2005). And even when Payne and her associates have not found their way into a school district, *A Framework* often has. According, again, to the cover of *A Framework*, the book had sold more than 800,000 copies as of 2005. Payne is, without question, the dominant voice on class and poverty in the U.S. education milieu (Bohn, 2007; Ng & Rury, 2006).

Despite her popularity, Payne's work, until recently, has received little attention from education scholars and activists (Bohn, 2007). This is due, in part, to the virtual nonexistence of class concerns in the larger educational discourse—a symptom of an increasingly conservative political climate in and out of schools (Gorski, 2006a; Osei-Kofi, 2005). It is due, as well, to the lack of scholarly merit (McKnight, 2006; Ng & Rury, 2006; Osei-Kofi, 2005) and activist credibility (Gorski, 2006a) in her books and essays. But the tide is turning. More and more, Payne *is* winning the attention of scholars and activists, particularly those committed to educational equity and social justice. But she is winning it for all the wrong reasons.

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During the last couple of years scholars and activists representing a wide variety of disciplines, from critical theory to mathematics education, have unleashed a storm of critical analyses upon Payne's work (Ahlquist et al., 2004; Bohn, 2007; Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008; Dudley-Marling, 2007; Gorski, , 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Howley, Howley, Howley, & Howley, 2006; Howley, Howley, & Huber, 2005; Kunjufu, 2007; Livingston & Hiller, 2005; McKnight, 2006; Montaño, 2006; Ng & Rury, 2006; Osei-Kofi, 2005; Sims, 2006; Smiley & Helfenbein, 2006). Although their analyses vary in focus and scope, they share incredulity at Payne's popularity. They also share a sense of urgency to unsettle the uncritical trust bestowed upon Payne by school districts across the U.S. and to counter what they agree to be an uninformed, racist, and classist tool of the educational and societal status quo. The concern expressed by this diversity of voices, it should be noted, is not pointed solely and squarely at Payne herself. Payne's popularity is seen largely as a symptom of systemic classism and racism, evidence of a sociopolitical context in which, despite popular belief, authentic dialogue and action against existing systems of power and privilege grow *less frequent*. According to Osei-Kofi (2005):

> The uncritical embrace of this work by significant portions of the education community suggests a need for critical engagement of the substance of the work, as well as a consideration of the relationship between this historical moment and the conditions that make possible the legitimization of this work. (p. 368)

It is in this spirit of critical engagement and in response to unending requests from educators for resources that counter Payne's framework that I engage with the many critiques of her work, attempting to synthesize them into a series of core concerns. I begin with a brief summary of Payne's framework. I then name and describe what I call "eight elements of oppression" in her framework—the ways, according to existing critiques, that Payne's work contributes to classism, racism, and other inequities: (1) uncritical and self-serving "scholarship," (2) the elusive culture of poverty, (3) abounding stereotypes, (4) deficit theory, (5) invisibility of classism, (6) the "it's not about race" card, (7) peddling paternalism, and (8) compassionate conservatism. Finally, I draw from the existing critiques and other sources to compose a list of essential elements for a more authentic framework for understanding poverty and eliminating classism in schools.

RUBY PAYNE'S FRAMEWORK

According to Payne (2002), the key to unlocking the mysteries of poverty lies in understanding the hidden rules of class, what she describes as "unspoken cueing mechanisms that reflect agreed upon *tacit* understandings" (p. 1) that socioeconomic groups use to survive their different life contexts. She defines, for example, the hidden rules as pertaining to education: while wealthy people think of education as "a necessary tradition for making and maintaining connections" and middle-class people consider it "crucial for climbing the success ladder and making money," people in poverty value education "as an abstract but not as reality" (2005, pp. 42–43). She similarly defines a litany of hidden rules across classes on topics ranging from food and clothing to family structure and world view. The sums of these hidden rules comprise what Payne (2005) calls the "mindsets" or "cultures" of poverty, middle class, and wealth.

By teaching these mindset or culture schemas, Payne hopes to prepare teachers to work more competently with students in poverty. To these ends she attempts, through *A Framework* and her other books and essays, to help teachers better understand the culture students in poverty carry into the classroom with them and to prepare teachers to equip these students with the culture of the middle class. Because middle-class values prevail in schools, she argues, students from poverty cannot succeed academically without learning middle-class world views, language patterns, and behavior norms (Payne, 2005).

The foundation of Payne's framework is the idea that class is determined by one's access to a myriad of resources and not solely by her or his financial condition. Among these are spiritual resources, defined as "believing in divine purpose and guidance," and mental resources, defined as "having the mental abilities and acquired skills to deal with daily life" (Payne, 2005, p. 7). We—the readers—have an opportunity to apply this class model to a series of scenarios (discussed in more detail later) in which Payne (2005) describes several families in poverty and asks us to determine the resources to which they have access.

The rest of *A Framework* is comprised largely of pragmatic strategies for reforming students from poverty. Payne recommends support systems that schools and teachers can implement to help these students attain middle-class culture, such as help with coping strategies, explicit instruction on how to survive in school, and goal-setting requirements. She then moves to a string of chapters focusing on effective discipline, curricular and pedagogical strategies, and relationship-building (Payne, 2005).

She concludes: "It is the responsibility of educators and others who work with the poor to teach the differences and skills/rules that will allow the individual to make the choice [to adopt the culture of the middle class]" (Payne, 2005, p. 113).

In order to understand Payne's framework, one must consider two additional points. First, the organization through which Payne publishes and sells her books and conducts workshops, aha! Process, Inc., is a for-profit business making millions of dollars each year (Bohn, 2007; McKnight, 2006; Osei-Kofi, 2005) by promoting her poverty model. She charges $295 per person for attending one of her national tour workshops, and often makes several hundred thousand dollars on multi-year contracts with school districts. Secondly, Payne never has identified educational equity, social justice, or a simple appreciation for diversity as motivations for her work. In fact, she disassociates explicitly with progressive education movements and critical paradigms for sociopolitical analyses of class divisions. For example, in response to a critique of *A Framework* published by *Teachers College Record* (Gorski, 2006b), Payne (2006a) writes: "Gorski states that his lens is critical social theory. My theoretical lens is economic pragmatism. The two theoretical frames are almost polar opposites" (¶1).

Indeed.

EIGHT ELEMENTS OF OPPRESSION IN PAYNE'S FRAMEWORK

As mentioned earlier, the critiques of Payne's framework reviewed for this essay represent a variety of voices from several frames of reference. Similarly, I enter into this synthesis essay with my own frames of reference and the murkiness of my own lenses. With this acknowledgment in mind, we turn to the elements of oppression in Payne's work.

Uncritical and Self-Serving "Scholarship"

In response to an essay by Ng and Rury (2006), who demonstrate the ways in which Payne's conception of poverty conflicts with contemporary social science research, Payne (2006b) clarifies: "*Framework* focuses on the findings of a 30-year longitudinal case study of one neighborhood of poverty, which was the one in which my former husband lived" (¶4). In her introduction to *A Framework*, Payne (2005) provides more specifics about the data and "research" upon which she constructs her framework:

> Where had I gotten the data? First of all, I was married more than 30 years to Frank, who grew up in poverty. . . . Over the years, as I met his family and the many other players in the "neighborhood," I came to realize there were major differences between generational poverty and middle class. . . . But what put the whole picture into bas-relief were the six years we spent in Illinois among the wealthy. (p. 1)

What Payne seems to be saying here is that she has not, in fact, engaged in structured inquiry, that no real data exist, and that her work is based on a collection of casual observations from her individual experience (Bohn, 2007; McKnight, 2006; Ng & Rury, 2006).

To make matters worse, while Payne asserts her findings from this so-called "research," she ignores the valid, reliable, and credible scholarship about the intersections of poverty and classism that does exist (Books, 2004; Carey, 2005; Corcoran, 2001; Kozol, 1991; Rank, 2004). She ignores, for instance, research revealing that high-poverty schools are more likely than low-poverty schools to have inadequate facilities, insufficient materials, substantial numbers of teachers teaching outside their licensure areas, multiple teacher vacancies, inoperative bathrooms, and vermin infestation (National Commission on Teaching America's Future, 2004). She chooses not to reference studies pointing to less rigorous curricula (Barton, 2004), fewer experienced teachers (Barton, 2004; Rank, 2004), higher student-to-teacher ratios (Barton, 2003; Karoly, 2001), lower teacher salaries (Karoly, 2001), larger class sizes (Barton, 2003), and lower funding (Carey, 2005; Karoly, 2001) in high-poverty schools than low-poverty schools.

Payne uses a variety of strategies to maintain an air of credibility despite these omissions. Simply referring to her casual observations as "research" is one such strategy. But another more troubling strategy is Payne's habit of selectively referencing scholarship to support her work in ways that misrepresent scholars' findings (Ng & Rury, 2006; Osei-Kofi, 2005). Ng and Rury detail several examples of these misrepresentations, such as Payne's repeated but selective references to *What Money Can't Buy*, a book by Susan Mayer (1997). While Payne uses Mayer to support the construction of her cultures model, Mayer rejects such a simplification, insisting, for example, that socioeconomic status has virtually no impact on parenting practices. Similarly, in an egregious example of misrepresentation, Payne (2005) references Jonathan Kozol (1991, 1995) five times in *A Framework*, but always in ways that mask his political edge. She refers to Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* (1991) twice, but never mentions the inequalities he describes or his outrage about them.

Such is the privilege of self-publishing. The lack of rigorous peer review of Payne's "research" means, in Bohn's (1997) words, that her work "does not have to be verifiable, reproducible, valid, or reliable in order to get published" (p. 14). But self-publishing also can be a shield against demands for revision; against questions about whose scholarship is drawn upon and how the

author represents that scholarship; against challenges to one's methodologies; against requests for access to one's data. In fact, although several of the critiques of her work have been through a blind peer review (Dudley-Marling, 2007; Gorski 2006a, 2006b; Howley et al., 2005; Livingston & Hiller, 2005; Ng & Rury, 2006; Osei-Kofi, 2005), Payne's framework never has been through such a process.

Another way in which Payne practices uncritical and self-serving "scholarship" is by attempting to silence some of her critics. At least three scholars who have criticized her work have received threats of legal action from Payne's attorney. I received such a threat after conducting two presentations (one as part of a five-person team) critically analyzing her work at a national conference. "Cease and desist," the attorney warned during our phone conversation, "or Ms. Payne will sue." Her attorney also called the hosting organization, insisting that its board of directors do a better job monitoring the content and titles of presentations. Although I never heard from her attorney again, I did hear from one of the central members of her consulting team—a man who once worked for the university at which I am employed. When he realized he could not intimidate me into silence he proceeded to seek assistance in curbing my critique from several of my more senior colleagues. When they would not comply he complained to the director of my academic department, then my dean, and continued straight up the power structure all the way to the president of the university. No luck. Finally, in perhaps the ultimate act of anti-intellectualism, he began calling organizations that had invited me to speak or consult, trying to convince them to un-invite me.

The selective and misrepresentative use of scholarship and the lack of research underlying her claims should raise serious questions about Payne's inquiry techniques. At the very least it explains why, despite her popularity in schools, scholarly authorities and research organizations largely ignore her work (Bohn, 2007). But what should raise equally intense concern are the anti-inquiry actions taken by her attorney on behalf of her for-profit company—actions meant to quell scholarly analysis of her work.

The Elusive Culture of Poverty

The "culture of poverty" concept was born out of the work of Oscar Lewis (1961, 1966, 1968). A prominent anthropologist and author during the 1960s, Lewis conducted ethnographic studies of small communities of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent. Through this research he constructed the culture of poverty paradigm, a web of values and attributes exhibited by people in poverty. He introduced approximately 50 of these attributes in his 1961 book, *The Children of Sanchez*, including an emphasis on the present and a neglect of the future, a concrete (as opposed to an abstract) orientation, frequent violence, a lack of a sense of history, and so on.

Lewis, like many of his contemporaries who adopted this paradigm, came out of a progressive leftist tradition (Ortiz & Briggs, 2003). He seems to have considered himself a champion of the downtrodden. Lewis (1963/1998) even chided those who "overlook[ed] the positive aspects" (p. 8) of the culture of poverty, concentrating, instead, on its negative aspects. Although disagreement abounds about the ultimate progressiveness of his work (Ortiz & Briggs, 2003), Lewis, at the very least, *attempted* to demonstrate respect for those he studied. He explained:

> The idea of a culture of poverty that cuts across different societies . . . suggests that the elimination of
> physical poverty as such may not be enough to eliminate the culture of poverty which is a whole way

of life. One can speak readily about wiping out poverty; but to wipe out a culture or subculture is quite a different matter, for it raises the basic question of our respect for cultural differences. (1963/1998, p. 8)

But read on, and one must wonder about the motivations behind the culture of poverty paradigm:

It is conceivable that some countries can eliminate the culture of poverty (or at least the early stages of their industrial revolution) without at first eliminating impoverishment, by changing the value systems and attitudes of the people so they no longer feel so helpless and hopeless. (p. 9)

This sentiment—that the goal of anti-poverty work should be to fix the value systems and attitudes (or, in Payne's language, the "mindsets") of economically disadvantaged people rather than fixing the conditions that require the existence of poverty—is the primary critique of the culture of poverty paradigm (Harris, 1976; Ortiz & Briggs, 2003), and one that will be tackled in more detail later in this essay. But it is not the only critique. Studies have shown that when this paradigm is used to inform public policy, it often leads to the demonization of the poor, and as a result, the elimination of programs that support them. Illustrating this point, Carmon (1985), testing—and disproving—Lewis's paradigm in Israel, found that many social and political leaders referenced the culture of poverty to justify the elimination of government assistance for the poor for fear that such assistance led to dependence and rebellion.

As with any complex topic, poverty and anti-poverty scholars disagree on a myriad of issues. But, like Carmon (1985), they largely agree on one fact: *there is no such thing as a generalizable mindset or culture of poverty* (Abell & Lyon, 1979; Billings, 1974; Briggs, 2002; Gans, 1995; Gorski, 2007; Harris, 1976; Jones & Luo, 1999; Ng & Rury, 2006; Ortiz & Briggs, 2003; Rigdon, 1988; Sherraden, 1984; Van Til & Van Til, 1973; Villemez, 1980). Over the past four decades researchers have tested the concept empirically in a variety of settings in the U.S. and around the world (Billings, 1974; Carmon, 1985; Harris, 1976; Jones & Luo, 1999). Others have reviewed the history of research on the topic (Abell & Lyon, 1979; Gans, 1995; Mayer, 1997; Ortiz & Briggs, 2003; Rodman, 1977; Van Til & Van Til, 1973). Their conclusions: (1) there is no appreciable and consistent cultural, world view, or value difference between people in poverty and people from other socioeconomic groups, and (2) what *does* exist is a set of structural, systemic, oppressive conditions disproportionately affecting the most economically disadvantaged people, such as a lack of access to quality healthcare, housing, nutrition, education, political power, clean water and air, and other basic needs.

Despite this overwhelming evidence, Payne (2005) builds her entire framework upon the culture of poverty myth (Ahlquist et al., 2004; Kunjufu, 2007; Ng & Rury, 2006; Osei-Kofi, 2005; Smiley & Helfenbein, 2006). She draws freely on Lewis's work, especially in her description of the "hidden rules" of poverty (2005, pp. 42–43) and her "characteristics of generational poverty" (pp. 51–53). And, as mentioned earlier, she even crowns herself "The Leading U.S. Expert on the Mindsets of Poverty, Middle Class, and Wealth" on the cover of the 2005 edition of *A Framework*.

What she neglects to do is mention the many critiques of the culture of poverty paradigm. "Payne seems to be unaware," write Ng and Rury (2006), "of the many studies dating from the late 1960s that challenged the culture of poverty thesis" (¶24). Ultimately, Payne's framework does less to provide readers with an authentic understanding of poverty than it does to reify their

stereotypes—the kind that justify social and educational policy, such as "welfare reform," that are hostile to the people for whom she claims to advocate (Gans, 1995).

Abounding Stereotypes

Payne's (2005) framework overflows with these stereotypes, essentializing the values and behaviors of economically disadvantaged people (McKnight, 2006; Ng & Rury, 2006). She portrays these values and behaviors unvaryingly as negative (Ahlquist et al., 2004; Bohn, 2007; Gorski, 2006b, 2007). The resulting framework, according to Osei-Kofi (2005), "presents families in poverty through homogenizing, stereotyped caricatures, as stick figures lacking any complexity, depth, or 'realness'" (p. 370).

Many of Payne's (2005) assertions are so blatant in their classism that they sound more like satire than scholarship:

> The poor simply see jail as a part of life and not necessarily always bad. Local jails provide food and shelter and, as a general rule, are not as violent or dangerous as state incarceration. (pp. 22–23)

> The typical pattern in poverty for discipline is to verbally chastise the child, or physically beat the child, then forgive and feed him/her. The hidden rules about food in poverty is [sic] that food is equated with love . . . How do you show people that you love them? You give them food so they can continue to live. (p. 23)

> Also, individuals in poverty are seldom going to call the police, for two reasons: First, the police may be looking for them; second, the police are going to be slow to respond. (p. 24)

> And one of the rules of generational poverty is this: [women] may need to use [their] bod[ies] for survival. After all, that is all that is truly yours. Sex will bring in money and favors. Values are important, but they don't put food on the table—or bring relief from intense pressure. (pp. 24–25)

> If students from poverty don't know how to fight physically, they are going to be in danger on the streets. (p. 77)

In these few short passages Payne (2005) exploits virtually every common stereotype of economically disadvantaged people: bad parenting, violent tendencies, criminality, promiscuity, and questionable morality.

Payne (2005) organizes these and other stereotypes into what she calls "a little quiz" (p. 37), a series of three checklists ostensibly designed to measure whether the reader knows the "hidden rules" of class, whether she or he "could survive" in poverty, middle class, or wealth. (Could I *survive* in wealth?) From the "Could You Survive in Poverty?" portion of the quiz:

- I know how to get someone out of jail . . .
- I know how to get a gun, even if I have a police record . . .
- I know how to physically fight and defend myself. (p. 38)

Here again, Payne (2005) contributes to assumptions of violence and criminality among people in poverty. No such negative items appear in the "Middle Class" or "Wealth" sections of the quiz; no "I know which firms will help me lie about my company's finances to fool investors and defraud employees"; no "I know which politicians to pay off so that my company can continue dumping toxic chemicals into waterways"; no "I know how to hire high-priced prostitutes discreetly." Bohn (2007) responds: "I didn't know whether to laugh at the sheer stupidity of some of [the hidden rules] or to rage at the offensive stereotyping of people in poverty" (p. 14).

Payne (2005), like Lewis (1961, 1966, 1968), attempts from time to time to acknowledge what she believes to be positive aspects of the culture of poverty. But she quickly belies these sentiments in her scenarios and case studies, which are full of stereotypical depictions of actual individuals and families (Bohn, 2007; Gorski, 2006b, 2007; Osei-Kofi, 2005). Gorski (2006b) summarizes the scenarios:

> 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 unemployed uncle. In the fourth scenario, we are introduced to an 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. (¶15)

Here again Payne (2005) inculcates readers with common classist stereotypes: violence, criminality, irresponsible parenting, and questionable morality, among others.

But Payne (2005) does not limit her stereotyping lens solely to class. For example, she addresses the class/gender intersection (Ng & Rury, 2006; Osei-Kofi, 2005). A *real* man, Payne (2005) argues, is a lover and fighter, always on the run. A *real* woman, on the other hand, is a caretaker, feeding her man and stroking his ego. (Apparently Payne believes that all economically disadvantaged people are heterosexual.) While the man takes care of business through toughness, by fighting, the woman relies on her body, trading sex for favors. In both cases, Payne paints the classic gendered picture of the overly-simplistic, hyper-sexualized, morally inferior (Livingston & Hiller, 2005) *other* pitted implicitly, according to Osei-Kofi (2005), against an imagined, but similarly nonexistent, middle-class, two-parent, heterosexual norm.

Racial stereotypes abound, as well, in Payne's (2005) framework (Gorski, 2006a, 2007; Kunjufu, 2007; Ng & Rury, 2006; Osei-Kofi, 2005; Sims, 2006). The severity of these stereotypes merits a separate discussion about racism in Payne's work (see "The 'It's Not about Race' Card" below). Suffice it to say, for now, that despite Payne's claims that her framework is solely about class, not race (see Payne & DeVol, 2005), her depictions of African American and Latina(o) families are unmistakably racialized (Gorski, 2007; Kunjufu, 2007).

The sum of all of this stereotyping is less a framework for understanding poverty than, in the words of Livingston and Hiller (2005), "a cookbook example of how to *other*" (¶35) economically disadvantaged people. And research is demonstrating how well teachers exposed to Payne's work are learning the *othering* skill (Howley et al., 2006; Smiley & Helfenbein, 2006). Smiley and Helfenbein, who interviewed and observed student teachers who had studied Payne's framework, found that they constantly applied her stereotypes. One interviewee, who had particularly appreciated Payne's work, echoed her association of poverty and violence: "A lot of kids could explode and go off at any time. You never know what to expect from anybody"

(p. 19). Another mimicked Payne's take on poverty and parenting: "They may go home and their parents may not care about their homework and teaching them right from wrong" (p. 18). Similarly, Howley et al. discovered that teachers trained with Payne's framework attributed a litany of vices to poor people including substance abuse, violence, sexual promiscuity, lack of ambition, and ignorance. These attitudes may reflect, at least in part, participants' dispositions before their exposure to Payne's work. But professional development on class and poverty ought to be about dispelling these myths, not reinforcing them.

Deficit Theory

As Gans (1995), Rank (2004), and others have pointed out, the dangers of Payne's brand of stereotyping extends far beyond individual biases and prejudices. When these stereotypes are ingrained in the mainstream psyche, they result in middle class assumptions of moral, spiritual, and intellectual deficiency among economically disadvantaged people. These assumptions, in turn, reinforce the notion of the "undeserving poor" (Gans, 1995)—a concept that deteriorates public support for authentic anti-poverty policy. This process, which Rank (2004) calls "labeling," is a powerful tool for policymakers determined to roll back funding for programs designed to support the most vulnerable citizens.

In order to make these justifications stick, those who hope to reinforce the "undeserving poor" image must convince the public that class inequities result, not from imbalances in access, opportunity, and power but from deficiencies among economically disadvantaged people. They do this, in part, by propagating "deficit theory," the idea that oppressed people are responsible for their relative lots in life due to their individual and collective deficiencies (Collins, 1988). Deficit theorists make such an argument by drawing on unsubstantiated stereotypes (Osei-Kofi, 2005; Rank 2004; Tozer, 2000)—the very stereotypes Payne exploits—in order to pathologize oppressed communities rather than the individual or systemic perpetrators of their these communities' oppression (Villenas, 2001).

Despite her insistence otherwise, Payne's (2002) work epitomizes deficit theory (Ahlquist et al., 2004; Dudley-Marling, 2007; Gorski, 2006b, 2007; Howley et al., 2006; Livingston & Hiller, 2005; Montaño, 2006; Osei-Kofi, 2005; Sims, 2006). 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 (McKnight, 2006). But that is only the beginning; deficit theory can be found in myriad ways throughout her work.

In her brief essay, "Reflections on Katrina and the Role of Poverty in the Gulf Coast Crisis," Payne (2006c) reflects:

> To survive in the situation in New Orleans required the ability to plan, but for the most part in generational poverty, one does not plan, one reacts. (¶2)

> The violence was to be expected. Words are not seen as being very effective in generational poverty to resolve differences; fists are. . . . Furthermore, to resolve a conflict, one must have the ability to go from the personal to the issue, and the words largely are not there to do that [for people in poverty]. (¶3)

She continues:

> Additionally, in neighborhoods of generational poverty, two of the primary economic systems are prostitution and drugs. After Katrina struck, both of these economies were virtually wiped out overnight. Furthermore, individuals in jail were released because there was no plan about how to handle them. (¶4)

Again, the common stereotypes about economically disadvantaged people are prevalent: violence, drug use, criminality, and so on. Meanwhile, Payne remains silent on systemic racism and classism, failing to mention government inaction before, during, and after the hurricane. If only *those people* were more capable, more moral, more intelligent, she implies, the Katrina tragedy might have been avoided (Gorski, 2007). This is the hallmark of deficit theory—the suggestion that we address poverty by fixing poor people instead of eradicating classism.

The most damaging examples of deficit theory in Payne's (2005) work appear in her scenarios and case studies (as described above) because they represent her only depictions of actual people in *A Framework* (Gorski, 2006b, 2007; Ng & Rury, 2006; Osei-Kofi, 2005). By painting such deficit-laden portraits of families in poverty, Payne (2005) reifies the message that we must fix *those people* instead of the conditions—such as unequal school funding—that maintain poverty (McKnight, 2006; Montaño, 2006). Meanwhile, she renders the average person in poverty— the drug-free, nonviolent, hard-working, education-valuing, non-criminal, responsible person— invisible. Such people simply do not exist in her scenarios and case studies (Gorski, 2007).

Payne's (2005) work exemplifies deficit theory in a myriad of other ways, as well. For example, her discussion of language registers (see *A Framework*, pp. 27–35) is fraught with deficit thinking. She mockingly describes the discourse pattern of people in poverty as "beat[ing] around the bush," "circl[ing] the mulberry bush" (p. 30), and "meander[ing] almost endlessly through a topic" (p. 28). In addition, Payne supports the notion of language deficiency in economically disadvantaged students by arguing, in complete disregard for existing research, that students of color and poor students "cannot use formal register" (p. 28). In fact, all language varieties have formal and casual registers, and a continuum of registers between (Montaño, 2006). Similarly, linguists have known for years that all language varieties are highly structured with their own sets of grammatical rules (Hall & Dore, 1980; Hess, 1974; Labov, 1972; Labov, Cohen, & Robbins, 1968). Yet Payne (2005), determined to frame difference as deficit, suggests that students from poverty do not have "knowledge of sentence structure and syntax" (p. 28).

In another application of deficit theory, Payne (2005) argues that teachers must fix students in poverty by teaching them "classroom survival skills" (p. 73). But she never problematizes the reality that some students experience classrooms in which survival is a challenge. And worse, she suggests, as many deficit theorists in the education milieu do, that we provide parental training for economically disadvantaged parents. But she neglects to recommend anti-classism training for teachers and school administrators, again placing the blame for inequities in academic achievement outside of the school, and squarely on the shoulders of poor students and parents (Bohn, 2007).

Equally egregious is Payne's contention of a connection between poverty and a lack of spiritual resources (Gorski, 2006b; McKnight, 2006). She describes spiritual resources as "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" (2005, p. 8). In *Hidden Rules of Class at Work*, Payne and Krabill (2002)

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.

Ultimately, Payne (2005) seems to want economically disadvantaged students to assimilate into social and educational systems that they often experience as oppressive, to overcome their moral and intellectual deficiencies, and strive for the culture of the middle class (Howley et al., 2005; McKnight, 2006). And she calls on teachers, predominantly white and middle-class, to facilitate and enforce this assimilation, to help students overcome these "deficiencies." This orientation to poverty—again, based not on research, but on stereotypes already embedded in the mainstream consciousness—is the epitome of deficit theory.

Invisibility of 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). But while blaming people in poverty for their poverty, Payne (2005) never mentions classism, the system of structural inequities experienced by people in poverty (Bohn, 2007; Gorski, 2006b, 2007; McKnight, 2006; Ng & Rury, 2006; Smiley & Helfenbein, 2006). *A Framework* is wholly devoid of concepts like power, privilege, class conflict, and oppression, leading Osei-Kofi (2005) to call Payne's framework "an exercise in gross analytical reductionism" (p. 371).

Payne (2005) ignores and diverts attention from the streams of research that demonstrate gross inequities between high-poverty and low-poverty schools (Ahlquist et al., 2004; Gorski, 2006b, 2007). She ignores findings, like those of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF, 2004), that clarify these classist conditions:

> 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. (p. 7)

She similarly fails to address contemporary trends in education reform, such as school "choice" and voucher programs, that recycle class privilege by restricting the options (Corcoran, 2001; Gans, 1995) of economically disadvantaged people while the range of choices for those who can afford to pay the difference between a $5,000 voucher and tuition at a private school, continues to grow (Miner, 2002/2003). Nor does Payne (2005) mention tracking, high-stakes testing, re-segregation, or other dimensions of schooling that disproportionately oppress economically disadvantaged students (Gorski, 2007; Ng & Rury, 2006; Sims, 2006). She neglects to provide even a basic review of school funding discrepancies (Ahlquist et al., 2004) despite an abundance of research on the topic (Carey, 2005; Darling Hammond & Post, 2000; Kozol, 1991).

Instead, consistent with the deficit approach, Payne (2005) focuses on individual character traits in complete disregard of classism. She goes so far as to identify a distrust of authority as

a characteristic arising from the culture of poverty (Payne, 2005; Payne & Krabill, 2002). 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 this assertion to the inequitable conditions in schools, corporations, and the larger society. She fails to describe the hostile learning and work environments faced by many people in poverty or to name the reasons—including classist educational policies and practices—why people in poverty might rightly be distrustful of people representing institutional power and privilege. Instead, she leads readers to believe that these characteristics result from poverty itself and not, if they result at all, from the classist conditions that keep people in poverty (Gorski, 2006b; McKnight, 2006).

According to Bohn (2007), Payne's failure to name systemic classism encourages consumers of her work to continue the "culture of denial" around poverty and classism in the U.S. It paints schools as benign and politically neutral (Montaño, 2006; Sims, 2006). As a result it serves the interests of the economically privileged by protecting their privilege; by leading us to believe that we can address poverty authentically in and out of schools without eradicating classism. And although some may argue that Payne does not intend this larger analysis, that she intends *A Framework* for classroom teachers more immediately concerned with the students before them than larger social or educational reform, equitable classroom practice can be understood effectively only within a larger context. 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 (Gans, 1995).

The "It's Not about Race" Card

Another way in which Payne (2005) encourages misunderstanding about poverty and class is by avoiding sociopolitical intersections, such as the relationship between poverty and racism (Gorski, 2007; Ng & Rury, 2006; Osei-Kofi, 2005; Sims, 2006). In response to repeated criticism about this omission, Payne and DeVol (2005) insist, "One *can* be examined without the other. . . . Class exists around the world with many different races. It can be examined separately, and we do so" (p. 5). Although they are correct in their assertion that class exists around the world, they are wrong on both other counts (Gorski, 2007; Ng & Rury, 2006).

If we are to understand class authentically, we must examine its intersections with racism, sexism, ableism, linguicism, and a host of other oppressions that limit educational, political, and economic access for some groups of people. So in refusing to discuss the poverty-racism intersection, Payne disregards a crucial dimension of exploitation that has contributed to poverty (Ng & Rury, 2006). In fact, race and racism as they exist in the U.S. always have been related to socioeconomic exploitation. Housing discrimination, racial resegregation of schools, slavery, Jim Crow—these are all examples of how racism has been used to maintain an economic and political status quo.

And although Payne ignores the relationship between poverty and racism, a review of her scenarios and case studies reveals that she does manage to incorporate a variety of racist stereotypes into her framework. Not only does Payne (2005) name the racial identities of each of the families in the scenarios (and why do this if she intends to focus solely on class?), but she also paints

glaringly racist portraits of her African American and Latino characters (Gorski, 2007; Osei-Kofi, 2005). Gorski explains:

> Payne identifies violent tendencies, whether in the form of gang violence or child abuse, in three of the four families of color . . . but not in any of the three white families. Each of the families of color, but only one of the three white families, features at least one unemployed or sporadically employed working-age adult. Whereas two of the three white children have at least one stable caretaker, three of the four children of color . . . appear to have none. (p. 19)

Payne (2005) refers to race a few other times in *A Framework*, each in a deficit context. She mentions that students of color, like students from poverty, lack the sentence structure and syntax of formal register. She provides in the introduction and conclusion of *A Framework* a few charts that show the percentage of people in poverty by race (but oddly never references these in the text itself), but does not link this reality to racism. So although Payne (2005) fails to consider the intersection of poverty and racism explicitly, she succeeds in implicitly *contributing* to racism through racist depictions of people of color (Gorski, 2007; Osei-Kofi, 2005).

Peddling Paternalism

Scholars have bemoaned the motivations for and effects of paternalistic approaches for addressing a host of social ills, from poverty among people with disabilities (Stapleton, O'Day, Livermore, & Imparato, 2006) to racism (Proweller, 1999) and sexism (Rainford, 2004) to disparities in educational access (Epstein, 1987). In the case of class and poverty, such approaches flow from two interlocking, and often conflictual, attitudes among the socioeconomically privileged. First, paternalism assumes moral and intellectual superiority, which is why it sometimes is called the "messiah mentality" or the "savior syndrome." Secondly, paternalism arises out of a desire among the privileged to control public policy for individual or group benefit. Either way, the underlying problem of paternalism is that capitalism does not allow for a privileged class, systemically speaking, to act in the best interests of an oppressed class due to its own class interests (Howley et al., 2006). And this is what paternalism does by arming the privileged with the power to control social policy while rendering the oppressed, labeled incapable of advocating for themselves, silent and powerless. Think welfare reform.

By portraying economically disadvantaged people and people of color as morally, intellectually, and spiritually inadequate, then teaching predominantly white, middle-class teachers how to fix them, Payne (2005) peddles a particularly oppressive form of classist paternalism (Osei-Kofi, 2005; Smiley & Helfenbein, 2006). For example, in her chapter titled "Role Models and Emotional Resources," Payne explains that students in poverty are mired in dysfunctional family systems, and thus lack access to "appropriate" role models. As a result, they fail to mature "developmentally from being dependent to being independent to being interdependent" (p. 64). She even states, in characteristic stereotyping form, that this failure to mature leads economically disadvantaged people to remain dependent on others into adulthood "through pregnancy and going on welfare" (p. 65).

Given these circumstances, Payne (2005) calls on teachers to be saviors (Osei-Kofi, 2005); to, in effect, save poor people from themselves. According to Smiley and Helfenbein (2006),

this message has a profound impact on preservice teachers who study Payne's framework. One such interviewee, particularly excited about teaching in an urban, high-poverty environment after reading *A Framework*, reports, "I think those are the kids I'd be more geared toward to help. . . . I just want to help people, fix things, and make a difference" (Smiley & Helfenbein, 2006, p. 16). Another refers less implicitly to her sense of moral superiority in relation to economically disadvantaged students: "I'd rather be out there helping them, making a difference, and teaching them right from wrong" (pp. 16–17).

Although this mentality has run rampant among white, middle-class teachers and administrators (Howley et al., 2006) since before she entered the scene, Payne (2005), with her reach and name recognition, adds a dangerous layer of credibility to the paternalistic approach—a classic illustration of class privilege.

Compassionate Conservatism

A deep consideration of the seven previously discussed elements of oppression in Payne's framework raises important questions about her motivations and political positionality. Despite various points of reference and frames of analysis, the scholars who have analyzed her work find a distinctively conservative undertone, more concerned with maintaining the present social order than eradicating poverty and classism (Ahlquist et al., 2004; Bohn, 2007; Gorski, 2006b, 2007; Kunjufu, 2007; McKnight, 2006; Montaño, 2006; Ng & Rury, 2006; Osei-Kofi, 2005; Sims, 2006; Smiley & Helfenbein, 2006). Many of the elements of oppression—leaning on deficit theory, peddling paternalism, spreading the "culture of poverty" myth, ignoring systemic classism—are classic right-wing strategies for justifying the ongoing war against the poor and further securing the power of the privileged few (Gans, 1995). Even a cursory critical review of her work reveals a philosophy more in line with George W. Bush's compassionate conservatism, wherein one feigns the appearance of advocacy before calling out for oppressive policy, than with Jonathan Kozol's and others' calls for authentic reform.

It should come as little surprise, then, that Payne is, indeed, a supporter of President Bush and, if her campaign donation patterns are any indication, a fairly right-wing conservative. According to the Federal Election Commission (FEC, 2006), Payne has contributed thousands of dollars over the past several years to the Bush-Cheney campaigns and the Republican National Committee. As recently as June 2006, Payne contributed $1,000 to the campaign of Texas senator John Cornyn (FEC, 2006), a right-wing Republican whose voting record is at best hostile to people in poverty and labor rights, as well as women's rights, civil rights, gay rights, and public education. According to Project Vote Smart (2006), Cornyn has received a grade of "A" from the National Rifle Association for his voting record but has received scores of "0 percent" for the same record from NARAL Pro-Choice America, the Human Rights Campaign, the National Education Association, the Children's Defense Fund, the National Organization for Women, the Global AIDS Alliance, and the United Auto Workers, among dozens of others.

In addition, Payne (2003) remains an outspoken advocate of No Child Left Behind (Gorski, 2006b; Osei-Kofi, 2005) despite living in Texas, where its precursors under then-governor Bush proved devastating to economically disadvantaged students. She has written a four-part series of essays supporting the legislation as essential to the future of the U.S. (Payne, 2003).

But more troubling than the series itself is to whom she gives voice within the essays. Among her sources are Hannity and Colmes of Fox News and Hernando de Soto, right-wing economist.

But the scholar she cites most heavily is Thomas Sowell, senior fellow of the Hoover Institution and ultra-conservative critic of all progressive social and education reforms (Payne, 2003).

In short, Payne's work is inspired by many of the right-wing pundits and politicians who are most hostile to economically disadvantaged families. The result, as the elements of oppression in her work demonstrate, is a framework more concerned with conserving the status quo than with eliminating inequities.

CONSIDERING THE ELEMENTS OF OPPRESSION

People often ask me, "Isn't there *anything* of value in Payne's work?" "Teachers love *A Framework*," they say, "because it's so understandable and unintimidating." Or they insist, often from a place of class privilege, "I can relate to the hidden rules. They ring true for me."

What is clear from the critical analyses of Payne's work is this: Even if it were not laced with classism and racism—and it *is*—her work is mired in inaccuracies and inconsistent with entire bodies of research and knowledge. In essence, it reflects more a right-wing political ideology than a structured approach for equity-based education reform. She is the science pedagogy consultant pushing intelligent design, the history curriculum specialist still insisting that we are in Iraq to fight terrorism. And yet she is hired, again and again, often by district-level multicultural education specialists, directors of equity and diversity, and others ostensibly committed to educational equity.

It is easy, although still troubling, to understand how people who have given little thought to class and poverty subscribe to Payne's work. She legitimizes the stereotypes they carry into the classroom with them. She does not challenge their privilege or ask them to reflect on their classism. That is why they are not intimidated. They relate to the hidden rules because the rules paint them as moralistically and intellectually superior to people in poverty. What is infinitely more troubling than this simple reflection of capitalistic socialization is the extent to which supposed champions of educational equity and social justice have bought into her work. It is difficult to imagine a multicultural education professor assigning *The Bell Curve* or a similarly racist text, and yet many of us continue to assign *A Framework*, equally egregious in its oppressiveness. So, although this review of critical analyses focuses on Payne's work, it also can be seen as a critique of those of us who have stood by and watched as her popularity soared, never naming the problems so evident in her work.

AUTHENTICATING ANTI-POVERTY EDUCATION

In order to move toward a more authentic vision of anti-poverty and anti-classism education, according to Bohn (2007), "we need to critically examine the culture of denial that has become institutionalized in our society and has caused the study of poverty . . . to be more concerned with . . . individual culpability than . . . institutionalized inequities" (p. 15). Gorski (2006b, 2007), Ng and Rury (2006), and Osei-Kofi (2005) agree: Anti-poverty education begins with a commitment to eradicate systemic classism.

One way to begin this eradication, according to Bohn (2007) and Books (2004), is by ensuring basic human rights, such as access to adequate food, housing, healthcare, and, of course, quality

education. But it also means engaging in serious critical analysis of corporate capitalism and corporate welfare, globalization, the corporatization of schools, consumer culture, the ongoing war against the poor, and how all of these systems contribute to perpetuating class structures in the U.S. and around the world (McKnight, 2006; Ng & Rury, 2006; Osei-Kofi, 2005).

Authentic anti-poverty education requires that we:

- Eliminate the ways in which schools perpetuate these systems and structures, including track-ing (Oakes, 2005), segregational redistricting (Orfield & Lee, 2006), some voucher and "choice" programs (Farrell & Matthews, 2006; Paquette, 2005), corporatization (Gabbard, 2003), the elimination of bilingual education (Adams & Jones, 2005), and so on. In this era of neoliberalism, as corporate interests grow to control more and more of what happens in our schools (Chomsky, 2003; Gabbard, 2003), we must transcend identity politics and examine the ways in which these sorts of policies and practices help to concentrate power in the hands of the corporate elite.
- Demystify these policies and practices, many of which have been framed publicly in ways that portray them as progressive school reforms, such as happened with No Child Left Behind (Wood, 2004). A critical element of this demystification is a refusal to adopt the propaganda-laced language of neoliberalist education, such as speaking about the "achievement gap" in simplistic terms, based solely on test scores.
- Acknowledge the interconnectedness of poverty, classism, racism, sexism, linguicism, ableism, and other forms of oppression (Kunjufu, 2007; Osei-Kofi, 2005).
- Demand equitable access to high-quality education for all students, including higher-order pedagogies, multicultural curricula, up-to-date learning materials, and so on (Books, 2004; Kozol, 1991, 1995).
- Prepare teachers and administrators to fix classist structures, policies, and practices instead of the people oppressed by them.

As for more immediate, practical strategies, we can:

- Make parent involvement affordable and convenient by providing transportation, on-site child-care, and time flexibility;
- Assign work requiring computer and Internet access or other costly resources only when we can provide in-school time and materials for such work to be completed;
- Give economically disadvantaged students access to the same high-level curricular and peda-gogical opportunities and high expectations as their wealthier peers;
- Teach about classism, consumer culture, the dissolution of labor unions, global corporate domination, imperialism, environmental pollution, and other injustices disproportionately affecting people in poverty;
- Keep stocks of supplies, snacks, clothes, and other basic necessities handy for students who may need them, but find quiet ways to distribute these resources to avoid singling out anybody;
- Fight to keep poor students (as well as students of color) from being assigned unjustly to special education;
- Eliminate ability grouping and other practices that often, in the name of differentiation or efficiency, mirror inequities in access and opportunity by replicating stratification;
- Challenge our colleagues when they demonize poor students and their parents; and

• Challenge ourselves, our biases and prejudices, by educating ourselves about the cycle of poverty and classism in and out of U.S. schools.

We must challenge ourselves, too, to remember that poverty is not politically neutral. It is not a culture. Poverty *is* classism, especially when the resources exist to eliminate it, but those who control the resources continually choose not to do so. We must reject the quick fix, the easily digestible framework, the neatly-packaged poverty paradigm, and immerse ourselves in the complexities, the difficult questions, and the messiness of transformation. And we must never stop raising questions about "scholarship," from Payne or anyone else, that peddles classism and racism under the guise of authentic change.

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