



## The Question of Class

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*Paul Gorski calls on fellow educators examine the classist assumptions infiltrating classrooms and schools.*

by Paul C. Gorski

*Paul C. Gorski challenges educators to push beyond a one-dimensional understanding of poverty. Rather than examining a so-called "culture of poverty" -- a term used by the very popular Ruby Payne and others who write and speak about poverty at the national level -- Gorski urges educators to question the culture of classist assumptions that infiltrates our classrooms and schools.*

For too long, educators' approach to understanding the relationships between poverty, class and education has been framed by studying the behaviors and cultures of poor students and their families. If only we -- in the middle and upper-middle classes -- can understand *their* culture, why *those people* don't value education, why *those parents* don't attend our functions and meetings, why *those kids* are so unmotivated, perhaps we can "save" some of our economically disadvantaged students from the bleak futures before them. And so we set about studying what Ruby Payne (author of *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*) and others describe as the "culture of poverty," how poor people see and experience the world, how they relate to food, money, relationships, education and other aspects of life. This, despite that research has shown again and again that no such culture of poverty exists.

It's all too easy, for even the most well-meaning of us, to help perpetuate classism by buying into that mindset, implementing activities and strategies for "working with parents in poverty" or "teaching students in poverty" that, however subtly, suggest we must *fix* poor people instead of eliminating the inequities that oppress them.

The question, of course, for any educator of privilege committed to educational equity is this: Do we choose to study supposed cultures or mindsets of poverty because doing so doesn't require an examination of our own class-based prejudices? By avoiding that question, we also avoid the messy, painful work of analyzing how classism pervades our classrooms and schools, never moving forward toward an authentic understanding of poverty, class and education.

What does it mean, for example, that high-poverty schools have more teachers teaching outside their areas of certification, larger numbers of teacher vacancies, and fewer experienced teachers than low-poverty schools? That they're more likely to lack full access to computers and the Internet? That they have inadequate facilities and classroom materials? Or that students in high-poverty schools are more likely than their wealthier counterparts to be subjected to overcrowded classrooms, dirty or inoperative bathrooms, less rigorous curricula and encounters with vermin such as rats and cockroaches? Or that these students are more likely to attend schools with serious teacher turnover problems and lower teacher salaries than students at low-poverty schools? And why do Payne and other "experts" so often fail to mention these inequalities?

These inequitable conditions -- or, in Jonathan Kozol's words, these *savage inequalities* -- have nothing to do with a so-called mindset or culture of poverty, nor with any other supposedly intrinsic or inherent value held by the people they most impact. They're wholly

disconnected from any measure of intelligence, eagerness to learn, or effort. Yet they deeply influence learning and inhibit our most underserved students' access to equitable educational opportunity.

The reality gets worse. Children from economically disadvantaged families are more likely than their middle class or wealthy peers to suffer preventable illnesses caused by inadequate healthcare, lack of health insurance and contaminated living spaces. They're more likely to experience hunger and homelessness, to go without meals, without shelter and warmth. They're more likely to live in neighborhoods with unsafe levels of environmental pollutants, to lack safe places to play, safe water to drink, safe air to breathe.

Regardless of whether a child living in poverty wants to learn, regardless of whether she's determined to make the best life for herself, she must first overcome enormous barriers to life's basic needs -- the kinds of needs that middle-class people, including most professional educators, usually take for granted: access to healthcare; sufficient food and lodging; reasonably safe living conditions. Again, none of these conditions speaks to the values or desires of students in poverty, although they may speak to the values of a nation that can afford to eliminate these inequities but chooses not to.

So where do we start? What new understandings are at the heart of the anti-classist solution in our classrooms and schools?

First, whenever somebody refers to education as the great equalizer, we must remember the injustices listed above. We must remember that in almost every conceivable way, the very structure of the U.S. education system denies students in poverty the opportunities and access it affords most other students.

We must recognize, too, that people living in poverty are fully aware of these discrepancies. So when we see hopelessness in some of our students' eyes, when we sense a reluctance to engage, a distrust of our intentions, we must recognize that these reactions arise, if they arise at all, from lifetimes of oppression and not from a failure to value education or from an inherent moral deficiency. In fact, we should recognize the resilience of a community that overcomes such insurmountable odds, such *savage inequalities*, and, despite its maltreatment by schools and society, continues to push, to strive, to learn and achieve.

Second, we must recognize that students and parents from poverty simply do not have the same access to material resources that their economically advantaged peers -- and that many of us -- take for granted.

This reality was re-clarified for me several months ago while conducting a workshop for teachers at a high-poverty school in Minnesota. When several teachers began complaining that their students' parents were to blame for their kids' low achievement -- that they don't care about education, that they routinely fail to show up for meetings -- I moved into an activity about taking stock of one's resources. Among several prompts in the activity was one to raise your hand if you drove to work today, to which every participant responded by raising her or his hand. Later, when I asked participants to estimate what percentage of their students' families owned a car, a school social worker responded with the exact figure: 11 percent.

So let's begin to ask new questions -- about ourselves: On what assumptions do we base our planning and scheduling for parent-teacher conferences? Do we assume all parents have convenient transportation, that they can afford taxi or bus fare if necessary? Do we take into account that due to a lack of living-wage jobs, many poor people must work two, three, even four jobs just to pay rent and put food on the table? Do we understand that many of these parents don't have paid leave time to attend these events? Do we consider that many parents in poverty can't afford childcare or other services necessary for their attendance?

Third, we must develop anti-classist plans of action, plans that reshape school and classroom practices to counter class inequities and injustices, that put the onus of responsibility for change on *us* and *the system* and not on the students and parents so historically underserved by U.S. schools. On an institutional level, this means fighting for systemic reform, insisting on a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities in and out of schools.

On an individual level, it means transforming our consciousness and practice. We can begin implementing many of these changes immediately. We can:

- 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;
- work with our schools to make parent involvement affordable and convenient by providing transportation, on-site childcare and time flexibility;
- give students from poverty access to the same high-level curricular and pedagogical opportunities and high expectations as their wealthy peers;
- teach about classism, consumer culture, the dissolution of labor unions, environmental pollution and other injustices disproportionately affecting the poor, preparing new generations of students to make a more equitable world;
- keep stocks of school 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 anyone out;
- develop curricula that are relevant and meaningful to our students' lives and draw on their experiences and surroundings;
- fight to get our students into gifted and talented programs and to give them other opportunities usually reserved for economically advantaged students and to keep them from being assigned unjustly to special education;
- continue to reach out to parents even when we feel they are being unresponsive; this is one way to establish trust;
- challenge our colleagues when they stigmatize poor students and their parents, reminding them of the inequitable conditions in our schools and classrooms; and
- challenge ourselves, our biases and prejudices, by educating ourselves about the cycle of poverty and classism in and out of U.S. schools.

Most importantly, we should never, under any circumstance, make an assumption about a student or parent -- about their values or culture or mindset -- based on a single dimension of their identity. There is no more a single culture of poverty than there is a single culture of woman-ness or of African American-ness. And yet, some of us who would be immediately critical of a book or workshop on how to teach to *all* women or *all* African Americans -- as if all women or African Americans learn in the same way -- tend to apply such a narrow lens when it comes to economically disadvantaged students. The truth is, the "culture of poverty" is a myth. What does exist is a culture of classism, a culture most devastating to our most underserved students. And *this* is a culture worth changing.

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### **Professional Development**

Distribute copies of this essay during an in-service or other professional development setting. Allow participants time to read the essay and then break them into 10 small groups. Ask each group to brainstorm ways to implement one of the 10 ideas Gorski presents. Offer questions to help participants get started: To what extent is this already being done in our school? What

do we need to learn to make this happen? With whom would we need to work? What resources would we need? Present findings to the whole group, solicit feedback and create action plans, complete with timelines and assignments.

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## **This Story At Work**

Go (<http://www.tolerance.org/teach/magazine/features.jsp?is=40&ar=777&pa=2>)

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## **Critiquing Ruby Payne**

Savage Unrealities. ([http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/21\\_02/sava212.shtml](http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/21_02/sava212.shtml))

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## **Resources**

recommended by Paul Gorski

*Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Education Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap* (\$17.95), by Richard Rothstein, is a revealing and persuasive analysis of how social class shapes learning outcomes.

ISBN #1-932066-09-8

**[Economic Policy Institute](#)**  
**(202) 775-8810**

*Dividing Classes: How the Middle Class Negotiates and Justifies School Advantage* (\$32.95), by Ellen A. Brantlinger, dissects the power the middle class wields in determining school policy and practice to secure educational advantages for their children.

ISBN #0-415-93298-X

**[Taylor & Francis Books Inc.](#)**  
**(212) 216-7800**

*Economic Apartheid in America: A Primer on Economic Inequality & Insecurity* (\$18.95), by Chuck Collins and Felice Yeskel, ferrets out the root causes of economic inequality and identifies potential solutions.

ISBN #978-1-59558-015-3

**[The New Press](#)**  
**(212) 629-8802**

*The War Against the Poor* (\$19.00), by Herbert Gans, traces our nation's history of stigmatizing the poor.

ISBN # 0465019919

**[Basic Books](#)**  
**(800) 343-4499**

*Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality* (\$19.00), by Jeannie Oakes, shows how tracking reflects the class and racial inequalities of American society and helps perpetuate them.

ISBN #978-0-300-10830-9

**[Yale University Press](#)**  
**(800) 405-1619**

*Poverty and Schooling in the U.S.: Contexts and Consequences* (\$22.50), by Sue Books, can help teachers understand the contexts and consequences of poverty in children's lives.

ISBN #0-8058-9698-8

**Lawrence Erlbaum Associates**  
**(800) 926-6579**

*The Public Assault on America's Children: Poverty, Violence, and Juvenile Injustice*, by Valerie Poskow (Ed.), (\$23.95) reminds us that "children are citizens now, not just when they are grown."

ISBN #0807739839

**Teachers College Press**  
**(212) 678-3929**

*The Shame of a Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (\$14.95), by Jonathan Kozol, documents worsening conditions for impoverished children in our nation's schools.

ISBN #978-1-4000-5245-5

**Random House Inc.**  
**(800) 733-3000**

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