Journal of Educational Controversy

Volume 4
Number 1 *The Hidden Dimensions of Poverty: Rethinking Poverty and Education*

Article 11

2009

A Framework for Understanding Poverty By Ruby K. Payne

Michael Reinke
Western Washington University

BOOK REVIEW

A Framework for Understanding Poverty
By Ruby K. Payne, Ph.D.
Reviewed by Michael Reinke
Originally published in 1996
Revised for the fourth time in 2005

In the summer of 1997, I met Sarah and Jessica Anderson in a very small parking lot serving eight units of transitional housing in Southern Indiana. Sarah was 33 going on 34, had lost all of her teeth, and had been employed for over a year at a local dry cleaner. Jessica, her 14-year-old daughter, was four months pregnant and already starting to show. I met them because of an argument not that dissimilar from any argument a parent might have with a teenager, though the stakes were significantly higher. Sarah and Jessica had been previously living in a homeless shelter for close to a year and the transitional housing was a significant step up in their lives. If the argument continued to escalate and if the police were called, each might lose the stability for which they had been working so hard.

In many ways, Sarah and Jessica embodied one if not several of the scenarios Ruby Payne describes in the first chapter of the book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* published in the previous year. A working mother unable to make ends meet, a teenager pregnant at a very early age, money shared with friends and family that is never available to pay bills, generations of poverty apparently stuck in a never ending cycle—these were some of the many reasons why our agency had felt "transitional housing" might be a good fit for the Andersons and perhaps part of the reason why Ruby Payne wrote her book. We all needed to find a way to put our hands around problems that seemed far too complex for any simple solution.

While an example like Sarah's and Jessica's would present significant challenges in any environment, the mid nineties became especially challenging for people working with poverty related issues. Recent legislation designed to "end welfare as we knew it" had been understood locally to mean a more punitive approach toward the poor. While in the appendix to the fourth revision Philip DeVol describes four rationales for poverty to include individual behaviors, human and social capital, exploitation, and political/economic structures, both Republicans and Democrats in Indiana were much more likely to weigh individual behaviors as the main challenge facing the poor of our state.

In this environment, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* made a significant contribution. For the individual who had grown up in a secure middle class life, poverty was something one witnessed at the highway exit where an individual was asking for change. Consequently, that individual's first assumption was that people needing help had in some way screwed up. The United States of the 1990s was a place where it seemed everyone could make it if they just tried hard.

A Framework for Understanding Poverty provided an introduction to poverty in a way that was easy to comprehend. Payne begins the first chapter defining poverty as "the extent to which an individual does without resources" and examines it from an individual's access to financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical resources, as well as the availability of outside support systems and role models. Payne then goes on to use seven different scenarios to illustrate how one might have access to different kinds of resources and still experience poverty. For Payne, the key to accessing resources are the "hidden rules", crucial to attaining class position. As in *My Fair Lady,* it is her analysis that *culture* is determinative in how resources become available.

For those looking for an introduction to the issue of poverty, the juxtaposition with one's own middle class upbringing helps the reader to identify and perhaps formulate a way to respond to a challenging situation. One doesn't need to become a statistician or a sociologist to work in the field. Rather, a short book, reliant upon case studies and followed with practical suggestions, can help the novice educator or social worker to open the door to a very foreign world.

Given the context of the times and the intention of the author, it is hard to not to feel that criticism of the book only comes with the benefit of ten years of hindsight. Payne is consistent in pointing out the assets and abilities of low-income individuals. When discussing discipline, she stresses the importance of talking to a student as a partner in a relationship rather than a child who must be managed, noting, as in the title of chapter nine, the importance of a trusting relationship on the success of a student. She provides a framework for professionals to understand their backgrounds not as "natural" but as part of the middle class cultural capital from which they benefited and into which we hope to bring the student. From this perspective, the lessons *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* offered back in 1996 are no less helpful today.

Yet, a recommendation for use of this book either in the classroom or the general workplace would only come with some significant reservations. One of the greatest challenges comes from Payne's efforts to describe the faces of poverty. While Sarah and Jessica in many ways exemplify the people described by Payne, they were at the same time very different. They didn't speak in dialect, they didn't turn immediately to violence, and in many ways their problems were exactly the same problems of every parent and teenager with the exception that they didn't have an economic buffer. Like Professor Higgins, Payne makes the assumption that by teaching proper grammar or the hidden rules of class, that one will be able to gain access to class. That Eliza Doolittle is not just taught manners but is given enormous access to *social* capital by Higgins is left out of the analysis.

At the same time, as Payne creates a definition of what it means to belong to "generational poverty," she comes dangerously close to reinforcing existing stereotypes. Perhaps one of the greatest problems for anyone working in the field of social services is when they see the people with whom the work as something different from themselves. Martin Buber writes in *I and Thou* of the importance of looking at each other as fellow human beings and the harm that is done when we treat each other as an "it." Even though the intention is to introduce the reader to the "culture of poverty," it is hard not to see how the manner of the introduction might further reinforce an understanding that the poor are in some way different. When, in chapter four, Payne begins to diagram the family relationships or the narrative styles "typical" in families with generational poverty, she reinforces the stereotypes which perpetuate class. While a satirist such as Paul Fussell may be accurate in pointing out class difference, a significant amount of context and processing is needed in the workplace to keep the observations from reifying the very barriers Payne is hoping to remove.

A greater concern lies with the very thesis of "hidden rules." The conversation about class position allows Payne to take on the role of pop psychologist as when the thirteen year old child "sublimates her needs" to those of her mother in chapter five. By looking to the metanarrative of families in poverty and tying the themes to psychological archetypes, Payne defines an enormous challenge requiring significant resources of time and people. One must ask if addressing hidden rules is the wisest investment or much as Albert Ellis suggested with regard to therapy, if the most helpful recommendations would not be to find immediate actions to address pressing problems.

It is in the chapter where Payne has the most experience, "Instruction and Improving Achievement," that she takes the more immediate approach. Identifying input strategies, designing lesson plans around cognitive strategies, and conceptual frameworks for instruction all provide a starting point for the teacher looking for assistance and for the student trying to learn. It may or may not be true that the concept of "hidden rules" has merit, but the teacher in the classroom--never mind the student--is likely to benefit from more concrete strategies addressing specific concerns.

A Framework for Understanding Poverty is a good start for the uninitiated student or professional working for the first time with a low income population. At the same time, it must be read in the context of a broader conversation on poverty. To view it as the sole source for developing classroom strategies would do a disservice to all involved.