

“Mythbusters”: Dispelling the Culture of Poverty Myth in the Urban Classroom

Jennifer Rogalsky

ABSTRACT

Scholars have provided numerous critical analyses of the structural causes of poverty. Unfortunately, many teachers are still led to believe, via best selling books and mainstream discourse, that behaviors, neighborhoods, and families determine educational outcomes. This “culture of poverty” theory must be disproved; educators need to be informed about the *structural* causes of poverty and gain in-depth knowledge of their students’ lives. Through geo-literacy projects aimed at uncovering children’s perceptions of their neighborhoods and parents’ roles in their children’s education, incorrect assumptions about low-income students can be dispelled. The result is more equitable power relations among students, families, and teachers, thus improving teacher effectiveness and educational outcomes.

Key Words: *urban, poverty, education*

INTRODUCTION

In the 1950s anthropologist Oscar Lewis popularized the concept of the “culture of poverty,” which posits that the poor remain so because their lives and behaviors are determined by and adapted to poverty. This theory claims that the poor share a common culture with low expectations and negative attitudes and behaviors. These behaviors are passed down through generations so that families remain in poverty. While Lewis (1959) understood that poverty can have structural and systemic causes, he argues that over time, the poor become hopeless, dependent, powerless, and convinced that their needs cannot be met.

The culture of poverty theory was severely criticized almost as soon as it was proposed; however, after decades of criticism the theory is still popular in some circles. Many urban school teachers are still led to believe (via best selling books and mainstream discourse) that neighborhoods, parenting, and family structure are the primary determinants of students’ educational outcomes. In Ruby Payne’s (2005, back cover) optimistically titled bestseller, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, she “has been sharing her insights about the culture of poverty—and how to help educators and other professionals work effectively with children and adults from that culture.” Unfortunately, as Osei-Kofi (2005, 367) points out, “we see little informed discussion of class and poverty in mainstream discourse on education today.” Much of this critical engagement is instead overwritten by Payne’s dozens of books and videos.

Therefore, it is crucial to inform educators about the *structural* causes of poverty. Pedagogical interventions should focus on educating teachers about the influences of deindustrialization, decentralization, classism, racism, and disproportionate educational funding upon their students’ educational outcomes. Urban teachers need new strategies to promote more critical engagement of poverty in their classrooms; in many cases, there is a cultural, social, and economic divide between children and their teachers.

Some teachers in Rochester, New York, are seeking a deeper understanding of their students, an explanatory depth that requires understanding how systemic classism and racism play a role in perpetuating poverty. Teachers are beginning to understand that they cannot transform their classrooms without the insights gained through in-depth knowledge of students’ and families’ lives.

After a critical reading of Payne’s (2005) *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, and through various data collection activities (mental mapping, photography, take-home surveys, and one-on-one interviews with students and parents), I encourage teachers to devise curriculum strategies aimed at uncovering, engaging, and demystifying the structural realities of poverty. The goal of such methods is to dispel incorrect assumptions about low-income students and to move away from blaming the individual and “their culture.” The result will be more equitable power and responsibility among children, families, and teachers to develop respectful relationships, thus improving teacher effectiveness and educational outcomes.

A CRITICAL READING OF RUBY PAYNE’S FRAMEWORK

New state and federal performance requirements, particularly No Child Left Behind (NCLB), have left teachers desperate for solutions about how to improve students’ test scores. NCLB requires that schools begin reporting test scores for various subgroups, including minorities and students in poverty (Tough 2007).

Jennifer Rogalsky, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of Geography and the Director of Urban Studies at the State University of New York, College at Geneseo, New York, USA. Her research interests include urban geography and geographic literacy in an urban context.

Under NCLB, economically disadvantaged students are categorized as a “uniform group in need of improvement” (Bomer *et al.* 2008). Payne’s self-published books, including *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, as well as her related nationwide workshops have attempted to fill this need for over a million teachers and administrators (aha! Process 2007). For example, teachers and administrators packed into a conference center on Jekyll Island, Georgia, where “one audience member after another told her [Ruby Payne] their own stories about class and education and, usually, how her books had helped them understand their students and themselves. A few of the teachers hugged Payne. One woman kissed her hand. Another burst into tears” (Tough 2007).

Payne’s “popularity attests to the urgent need for answers to the questions and concerns of teachers and administrators who sincerely want to help children from lower socioeconomic status achieve educational equity” (Bohn 2006). Thus Payne attempts to help teachers who are interested in the learning, achievement, and social development of impoverished students (Bohn 2006); many of these teachers do not connect with their poor students, and Payne claims many students do not connect with their teachers (Kleiner 2000). After reading Payne’s books, teachers often feel more confident in dealing with people who are not of their social class (Kleiner 2000).

Payne is aligned with the current government’s No Child Left Behind policy, and she comes across as confident that she has the answers (Osei-Kofi 2005). As a result, more than one million books have sold, and more than seven thousand certified trainers and seventy-five consultant presenters give approximately one thousand seminars each year to tens-of-thousands of professionals (aha! Process 2007). Because of this strong support, her program and the theories behind it should be critically examined. Can a single framework be applied to an entire subgroup of students? Are her claims reliable? In what direction *should* schools be heading to improve education for the most vulnerable?

Numerous scholars have thoroughly critiqued Payne’s work (Bomer *et al.* 2008; Tough 2007; Gorski 2006; Kunjufu 2006; Ng and Rury 2006; Gorski 2005; Osei-Kofi 2005) because she ignores the underlying structural causes of poverty and furthers class and race stereotypes in an anecdotal manner. With little to no research to back up her self-published claims, and no treatment of the structural causes of poverty, she seems disconnected from the population she is discussing; as a result, she furthers mainstream discourse and stereotypes by arguing that poor children and their families are defective and in need of repair (Osei-Kofi 2005). Payne (2005, 79) argues that if the poor could just follow middle-class rules, they could escape their culture of poverty: “many individuals stay in poverty because they don’t know there is a choice.” Payne attempts to help teachers understand poor families in an effort to help teachers become better educators. Although with good intentions, Payne writes with little to no evidence,

claiming to be an expert based on her personal experiences as a teacher in suburban Chicago years ago. She fails to recognize that student performance is based on much larger social, economic, and political structural issues.

In contrast, many geographers, sociologists, and historians have studied and uncovered structural causes of poverty and related discrimination and segregation. For example, Lassiter (2006) traces the history of the white middle class, many who viewed suburban sprawl as a means to avoid residential and school integration. Lassiter argues that federal public policies that encouraged suburbanization also were structural causes of discrimination, segregation, and the concentration of poverty. Ellis and Odland (2001) examine racial inequality in employment, concluding that local labor markets affect blacks and whites differently, which determines differing rates of participation and thus income. They identify structural factors affecting labor market participation, such as ethnic/racial divisions of labor and discrimination in employment, wages, and occupational structure. Massey and Fischer (2000) further argue that racial and ethnic segregation interact with structural socioeconomic changes (e.g., urban decentralization, the shift from manufacturing to service industries, and growing income inequality) to determine “the spatial concentration of poverty” (p. 670) since the poor are isolated and “the consequences were especially severe for African Americans because they were also highly segregated by race” (p. 671). As a result of discrimination in the housing market and other structural changes in social and economic conditions, the poor subsequently lack access to other economic, social, and educational opportunities (Ellis, Wright, and Parks. 2004; Fischer and Massey 2004). The poor increasingly lack access to businesses that offer jobs and community organizations that provide services and skills for employment (Casciano and Massey 2008; Wilson 1996, 1987).

These structural issues, as related directly to education, have been further analyzed by Charles, Dinwiddie, and Massey (2004), who find that high levels of segregation, which leads to concentrated poverty, results in higher levels of family stress because of the violence and disorder in segregated neighborhoods. Students often respond by devoting more time to family; thus, their academic achievement suffers. Massey *et al.* (2003) found that academic preparation was the strongest predictor of academic performance; however, academic preparation was strongly determined by segregation and socioeconomic status, which is quite a different (structural) view of poverty from Payne.

In sample scenarios of *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, Payne (2005) describes parents as being “arrested four times for prostitution and/or drug possession in the last two years” (p. 29), “unable to finish school” (p. 33), and “caught driving while intoxicated” (p. 35). Additional examples of Payne’s stereotypes include: “John is an 8-year-old white boy. His father is a doctor and remarried but does not see his children. He pays minimal child support. The mother, Adele, works part time and is an alcoholic”

(Payne 2005, 19). Several pages later, she describes a black family that is headed by a “welfare queen” (Osei-Kofi 2005): “Otis is a 9-year-old black boy. His mother conceived him at 14, dropped out of school, and is on welfare” (Osei-Kofi 2005:22). Payne later describes a religious, hardworking two-parent Hispanic family (Osei-Kofi 2005, 27): “Maria is a 10-year-old Hispanic girl. Her mother. . . does not speak English. . . . Mother does not work outside the home. Father works for minimum wage as a concrete worker. There are five children. The family gets Food Stamps, and the mother is a devout Catholic.” Payne constructs these normative “ideal” types of families, which are deployed in such a way to “prove” that the stereotypes are real and that poverty is caused by their culture.

Payne (2005, 37) goes on to state that “in poverty, the clear understanding is that one will never get ahead, so when money is available, it is either shared or immediately spent.” Furthering additional stereotypes, Payne (2005, 37) comments that “fighting and physical violence are part of poverty. People living in poverty need to be able to defend themselves physically.” She continues that “you can also be fairly sure that the males are in and out—sometimes present, sometimes not, but not in any predictable pattern” (74), universalizing the myth of the absent father. These and many other passages from her book repeatedly illustrate the poor as lazy, criminals, bad parents, irresponsible, unmotivated, and addicts.

Payne’s ‘Could you survive in poverty?’ quiz, a check list for readers to assess whether or not they have the skills necessary to live in poverty, also assumes many negative stereotypes about the poor, including that they eat out of grocery store garbage bins, are often in jail, and own guns. Bomer *et al.*’s (2008) extensive critique of Payne’s work attempts to investigate and disprove each of Payne’s “truth claims,” and by consulting current research many of her claims indeed can be disproven.

Her claim that the poor can be fixed by teaching them the “hidden rules” of the middle class simply transfers blame away from the state, teachers, and society in general, and places it upon those who are supposedly the victims of a so-called “culture of poverty.” To accept Payne’s work is unreflective and uncritical, and does a disservice to both teachers and children (Osei-Kofi 2005). Payne avoids responsibility by taking this deficit perspective, rather than helping to eliminate the inequalities that oppress the poor (Gorski 2007).

While her book encourages teachers, administrators, and scholars to discuss poverty, it promotes stereotypes, taking away from meaningful efforts to examine poverty. Thus, the intent of my research is to go beyond this critique of Payne’s work to illustrate how teachers can more fully understand their students’ lives, families, neighborhoods, cultures, and educational contexts. The objective is to show how a critical reading of Payne’s theories can lead teachers to discover ways in which they can better control the educational environment for improved student outcomes,

thus interrupting the culture of poverty discourse through pedagogical intervention.

CASE STUDY: ROCHESTER CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT TEACHER/LEADER QUALITY PARTNERSHIP (TLQP)

The Rochester City School District serves approximately 34,000 students enrolled in thirty-nine elementary schools and nineteen secondary schools. The ethnic makeup of the student population is 65 percent African American, 21 percent Hispanic, 12 percent white, and 2 percent Native American, Asian, and other minorities. Thirty-five different languages are spoken within the student population. Rochester’s population is approximately 220,000 and its school district ranks seventy-ninth in size in the United States; however, it ranks eleventh in child poverty. Nearly 90 percent of the students’ families have an income below the poverty level (Rochester City School District 2007).

Researchers from a local university and the Rochester City School District are coordinating a six-year \$300,000 grant for a New York State Department of Education Teacher/Leader Quality Partnership (TLQP). The goal of the project is to bring together teachers from these high-needs schools with scholars from the university for the purposes of professional development in literacy instruction, and meeting the needs of these urban students. More than thirty teachers per year participate in ongoing intensive professional development centered on workshops and study groups. These participants are attempting to create a community of teachers who come together to engage in interactive teaching, critical conversations about pedagogy and poverty, and hands-on learning.

A core goal of the program is to increase the awareness, understanding, and sensitivity of central-city teachers to incorporate strategies that support learning and achievement of high-needs students. The partnership provides ways for teachers make their instruction more respectful to and integrated with the needs of low-income students and their families. The program also facilitates the development of more meaningful and relevant instruction. The purpose of the TLQP partnership is to increase awareness of poverty and diversity, and decrease the simple acceptance of mainstream beliefs. If teachers can begin to understand changes in cities, urban poverty, and the unique experiences of their students, the needs of those children are more likely to be addressed, and their level of education and literacy will improve.

The workshops include intensive teacher training in reading instruction and assessment modes, as well as a focus on geographic literacy within the urban community context. Aimed at helping teachers bring about change in their instruction in order to improve their students’ academic achievement, the project involves teachers in monthly workshops, conferences with high profile speakers, field trips, and extensive research in their school communities, and a reflection and assessment seminar. The ongoing workshops include time for discussion, review of

Table 1. Perceived needs of urban students in Rochester City schools (*before* TLQP workshops).**Resources in children's homes (life/home experiences)**

- Lack of resources in home
- Chaotic experiences: children need to begin to think outside the box and write about things besides conflicts at home
- Lack of/not all exposed to positive role models
- Accessibility of parents to school

Resources in urban schools

- Lack of money—that is, teachers have to buy their own supplies
- How to better manage with high student:teacher ratios
- Need more time to adjust to the new literacy and standards model; big change for the teachers

Language/literacy problems (based on life experiences)

- Difficulty correcting grammar without offending
- Language: lack of standard English—building vocabulary is a serious hardship for teachers
- Level of potential language skills and literacy skills

professional texts, modeling, and sharing or addressing issues that teachers are facing as they implement new modes of instruction. Also incorporated into the workshops are methods for increasing communication and building parent-teacher partnerships.

To assist teachers in dealing with the challenges their students face, the aim is to inform these mostly white, middle class, suburban teachers about the causes and conditions of poverty—and how it affects their students. At the first meeting, teachers were asked to identify *what they perceived* as the needs of their urban students, as well as their needs as teachers in urban settings. The comments are summarized by three categories: (1) resources in children's homes; (2) resources in urban schools; and (3) language and literacy problems (Table 1). The tendency is for teachers to generalize and otherwise place blame on the students and their families in order to find the easy answers.

The way in which educators teach in the classroom is affected by the assumptions they make about their students. With such a large percentage of students in poverty, Rochester is an excellent example to examine Ruby Payne's claims. Through data collection about students and their families *and* a critical reading of *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, the goal of the TLQP program is to help teachers understand the unique situation of each of their students by respecting and responding to students and their parents.

METHODS AND RESULTS OF DATA COLLECTION

In order to assist the teachers, their awareness of students' situations and constraints needed to be evaluated. The partnership began with interactive approaches and hands-on activities so that the teachers could collect extensive qualitative data. Activities included mental mapping, allowing children to draw their neighborhood as they experience it. Subsequent activities included photographic essays, field

trips, and surveys. These are innovative ways for giving every child a voice, as well as giving teachers much needed information about the lives of their students. Next were serious discussions about poverty, urban decentralization, deindustrialization, classism, racism, and other structural causes of poverty.

Mental Mapping

As a first means for collecting data from students, teachers were asked to integrate mental mapping (mapping a place from one's memory and own interpretation, without attention to accuracy or scale) into their curriculum. Mental maps can reveal a tremendous amount of qualitative data, including how life is structured by space, the amount of space

covered, emotions, gender, ethnicity, economic status, social status, and family composition. The purpose of the mental maps was to help teachers to understand that the maps tell stories and also to create awareness of the students' urban surroundings and the issues their families face. These maps were the first step in helping students to think about their own neighborhoods and communities, and in helping teachers to understand children's daily geographies of constraint *and* opportunity. Teachers also were encouraged to link mapping with other literacy activities in conjunction with the overall "Reading and Writing the Community" theme of the workshops.

Through this activity, teachers found that children are amazingly aware of their surroundings and that they did not want to stop drawing and sharing. In addition to mapping being enjoyable for students, teachers learned a great deal about their students from images of their daily lives, such as "the creepy house next door," "broken windows and abandoned houses," "you don't want to see what is on the other side" [of that fence], and "I visit there [jail] sometimes." This activity allowed teachers to discuss neighborhood and family issues with their students. Although these examples uncomfortably mirror the kind of stereotyping Payne promotes, many children also drew positive, affirming images of family, friends' houses, pets, favorite restaurants, and local stores they like to visit.

Neighborhood Prints

Because neighborhoods are so important to students, teachers were asked to further explore with their students the characteristics of home and school communities. The students took photographs in their home and school neighborhoods in order to explore and write about their communities. Each teacher in the partnership was initially given six disposable cameras for their students to share in

collecting data. Students were asked to walk through their *home* neighborhoods and take pictures of:

1. Something meaningful
2. Something they are proud of
3. Something they like
4. Something they do not like
5. Their house
6. Their family
7. A neighbor, and
8. Something that characterizes the neighborhood

Students also were asked to walk around their *school* neighborhoods and take pictures of:

1. Something meaningful
2. Something they are proud of
3. Something they like
4. Something they did not like
5. Something that characterizes the neighborhood, and
6. Anything they think relates to understanding their school community

Although the students were asked for *neighborhood* pictures, teachers often found that students focused on their own homes; many of the “meaningful things” or things they were “proud of” were in their homes (e.g., family, trophy, or a tea set), indicating a family-based community; some teachers interpreted this to be where children felt the safest. Teachers found this activity to be quite revealing regarding their students’ home lives. To gain additional information, many teachers then created literacy activities based on the photos, instructing each student to prepare her or his own bound book with captions or stories. Because the teachers and students enjoyed this activity so much, we facilitated it for each of the first three years of the workshops. In the fourth year we purchased a digital camera for each school and brought in a technology expert for several seminars so that the teachers could facilitate the activity on their own.

Reality Tour

Teachers also attended Rochester’s “Reality Tour,” a program led by various social work and social equity groups that bring participants to homeless shelters, social service agencies, and a defunct subway tunnel that many homeless residents of Rochester call home. The tour, led by both social workers and formerly homeless people, is intended to show participants the real problems faced by the poor in Rochester, as well as to begin discussions about possible solutions.

Reactions to the Reality Tour have been remarkable, as teachers began to truly understand poverty and its causes. For the first teacher Reality Tour, we had the sponsors organize a tour just for our group, rather than participating in the biannual city-wide event. At the close of the tour, we visited a homeless shelter and ate dinner with and talked with the temporary residents. In subsequent years of

our workshops, we have encouraged teachers to attend the city-wide event. Reactions to the tour were emotional for some, especially while discussing the homeless situation in Rochester with two formerly homeless men. The tour also stimulated intense discussions among the teachers regarding the difficulties their students and families face. Teachers said they now understand why a student might come to class with dirty clothes (because their family did not have access to a washing machine, or a car or money to go to a laundromat), why a student is always tired during the day (because their family does not have the time or money to provide a healthy breakfast), or why parents are not attending school events (because they are working multiple jobs to make ends meet or do not have enough money for gas for their car).

Critical Engagement of Research on Poverty in Families

Most importantly, teachers conducted critical readings of two important works regarding poverty and education: Ruby Payne’s (2005) *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, and the much more critical and empirical *Confronting Racism, Poverty, and Power* by Catherine Compton-Lilly (2004). TLQP teachers overwhelmingly agreed with Payne’s critics, stating that her book is:

Stereotypical; officially unsubstantiated; [or] ...simplistic and full of stereotypes ...her work is incomplete at best, and classist and divisive at its worst. Sad to say, this book and its associated workshops are driving public policy.

Teachers realized that “there is more than one side to an issue and that people all over have a lot of misconceptions about things they do not know about.”

Through these careful readings and critiques, teachers were then encouraged to go beyond mental mapping and neighborhood photography to collect more critical data from their students and parents. It was expected, as others have found through ethnographic research of families in poverty (Rogalsky 2008; Gonzales, Moll, and Amanti 2005; Compton-Lilly 2004, 2003; Moll *et al.* 1992; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines 1988), that determination, loving homes, concern for children, and value of education and literacy are prevalent in the majority of homes. Of the twenty-three most active TLQP participants, nine collected data regarding Catherine Compton-Lilly’s twelve myths about families in poverty and eleven responded (before *and* after) to a survey about Ruby Payne’s “framework.” Although there are limitations to these small numbers of cases, the results still have merit and can be used to begin understanding the mindset of teachers in high needs urban schools.

“MYTHBUSTING” BASED ON COMPTON-LILLY’S TWELVE MYTHS ABOUT FAMILIES IN POVERTY

Teachers often make assumptions about the quality and quantity of the educational experiences and family support

that children bring to school, yet teachers rarely take the time to learn about the lives of their students (Compton-Lilly 2003). It is easy for teachers to blame parents for the problems children face in school, and impoverished parents are often berated for perceived incompetence and apathy; however, upon examination, urban families are interested and engaged in their children's literacy and educational development (Compton-Lilly 2003). In order to increase teacher awareness of this, TLQP teachers were asked to collect data to debunk at least one of Compton-Lilly's (2004) myths about poor and diverse parents. The teachers' excitement over this data collection activity led them to nickname themselves the "Mythbusters." The Mythbusters critiqued the following hypotheses that follow from Payne's (2005) "culture of poverty" orientation:

1. Parents are content to rely on welfare.
2. Parents are caught in a cycle of poverty.
3. Parents are often children themselves.
4. Poor households are vacant of print.
5. Parents have no interest in their own learning.
6. Parents don't care about schools.
7. Parents don't know how to help their children with reading.
8. Parents don't help their children with reading.
9. Parents can't read.
10. Parents don't read.
11. Parents grew up in households without literacy.
12. Parents lack resources to help kids with reading.

TLQP teachers used a variety of data collection methods including talking with students one-on-one in class and with parents at conferences, and take-home surveys. Samplings of results are:

Myth 1: Parents are content to rely on welfare: As in Compton-Lilly's (2004) study, TLQP teachers found that students' parents do not want to be on welfare and want to avoid depending on social services. Teachers found that parents would rather work, and they *are* working as city hall workers, nursing assistants, sales representatives, customer service representatives, or waitresses; one teacher found, for example, that 85 percent of her twenty-two parents have full-time jobs.

Myth 4: Poor households are vacant of print: Results indicate that literacy is widespread in these children's homes; Compton-Lilly (2004) found that households in her study not only had print resources, but also educational/learning games, as well as access to educational TV programs. She found clear evidence that parents read regularly and homes were not vacant of print. TLQP teachers found similar results in their students' households. When students were asked about literacy in their homes, they reported that their homes were full of print, including children's literature, newspapers, school flyers, magazines, maps, students' homework, travel books, and bibles. Some parents reported that they "have hundreds of books," "visit the library weekly," and even have children "write their own books and stories." One teacher reported that only two of

her seventeen students had no books at home, while nearly half claimed to have "a lot" of books.

Myth 5: Parents have no interest in their own learning: In her study, Compton-Lilly (2004) was struck by the number of parents who pursued education beyond high school. TLQP teachers collected similar data. For example, one teacher found that 77 percent of her twenty-two parents graduated from high school and nearly two-thirds have taken some college classes. Another teacher found that 100 percent of the six parents she interviewed have high school diplomas. Another teacher found that of the twelve parents she surveyed, all have their high school diploma and 75 percent have at least a four-year degree.

Myth 6: Parents don't care about school: Although many parents do not consistently participate in school events, it is often because they have limited funds, are working multiple jobs or nontraditional hours, are attending school themselves, or have little experience in participating in these activities. However, they are still involved in their children's education, perhaps just not in conventional ways (Compton-Lilly 2004). One TLQP teacher found that her parents were PTA members, made phone calls to teachers, wrote letters to teachers, and attended school activities such as a grandparents' luncheon, movie night, and family fun night. Another teacher found that within the previous three weeks, 83 percent of the twelve parents surveyed were in direct contact with their child's teacher. Those who found parents not to be regularly active discovered that it was because of working long hours; these parents "make sure kids are here every day and try with homework every day as best they can."

Myth 7: Parents don't know how to help their children with reading: Teachers collected reflective comments regarding this myth. Besides helping them sound out words, parents noted that "her sister reads to her. I'm at work. Wish I had more time," or "I wish I had better ideas." Even parents with constraining work schedules or difficulties in helping their children are participating in weekend workshops or classes at local book stores to learn how to better work with their children. Clearly, they want to help even if they do not feel that they can.

Myth 8: Parents don't help their children with reading: In fact, parents are interested in making reading fun and interesting (Compton-Lilly 2004). Several TLQP teachers found that 100 percent (in classes of twenty-five and twelve students) of the children are read to by their parents, or their parents listen to them read. Another teacher found that 95 percent of her nineteen students get help with reading at home. One teacher found that over one-third of her seventeen students are not read to by their parents; however, upon further investigation, siblings and grandparents are indeed reading with them at home.

Response to Payne's Framework

After a critical reading of Payne's (2005) *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, and collecting data via mental mapping, photography, Reality Tours, and "mythbusting,"

it is clear that the teachers in the TLQP workshops have begun to understand the true causes of poverty and are now avoiding many of the stereotypes they once believed. Not all teachers were changed or convinced because of their own deeply held biases or negative experiences with students and their families; however, the majority now has an understanding of the realities of urban poverty. From a survey given before and after the critical reading of Payne's *Framework* and extensive data collection by teachers, a sample of results are in the appendix.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The educational system will not improve if there are still millions of teachers and administrators buying into the idea of the culture of poverty. Ruby Payne claims to want to eradicate class inequalities that pervade U.S. schools (Payne 2006b). She attempts to do this by "fixing" the poor by teaching them the "hidden rules" of the middle class, rather than focusing on systemic economic, political, and social issues. Instead of focusing on anecdotes and misinformation (Bomer *et al.* 2008), and possibly contributing to classist [and racist] policy and practice (Gorski 2006), there are many other resources for teachers besides Ruby Payne to increase equity in schools. Tough (2007) argues that most of Payne's criticism comes from academia. Indeed, Payne claims that her work is "written primarily for teachers, not researchers, to help them understand the realities of the classroom" (2006a). Payne also claims her critics' lenses are theoretical, while her lens is practical and pragmatic (Payne 2006b). Does this mean that teachers and researchers live in different realities, in which poverty is caused by different forces and manifests itself differently? No; and in the study presented here, both researchers and teachers tested her work, and found it lacking.

Mainstream discourse about poor families, including the "culture of poverty," position and portray parents in ways that deny and devalue their interest in children as students (Compton-Lilly 2003). However, the home environment is subject to much wider forces that affect children's access to resources. Children bring different experiences into the classroom and different ways of making sense of the world; teachers must begin to understand them in order to be effective. This research has provided methods to assist teachers in understanding the lives of their students to improve the educational outcomes of vulnerable impoverished populations. TLQP workshop teachers are accessing the evidence and research results that Payne fails to consider; through a critique of her work, they are not

simply accepting her stereotypes of poor families. Instead, they are finding that poor urban families do have resources within their homes and communities that they can learn about and embrace in their teaching.

"Research tells us that teaching quality is the most important school factor in determining student success" (Cortese 2007, 6). TLQP teachers are collecting data, not just to prove Payne and the "culture of poverty" wrong, but to understand their students and thus teach them more effectively. There are many challenges and obstacles associated with living in poverty; many impoverished children do not have access to supposedly typical, but actually privileged, ways of life that many take for granted, including safe communities, safe homes, living-wage jobs, and a good education (Compton-Lilly 2003). We cannot ignore the social and political dimensions of people's experiences, and the contexts in which and by which they learn. Thus, it is imperative that teachers in high-needs urban schools develop a greater awareness of the literate and urban lives of their students by paying attention to the complexities of poor children's daily geographies that too often go unrecognized. By understanding and integrating these complex factors that contribute to children's educational experiences, teachers can become much more effective at fostering education in a way that is responsive to and respectful of students' homes, cultures, and urban lives.

The next step is translating this research into classroom instruction. Teachers are currently struggling with the data they have collected and are beginning in-depth discussions regarding improvements in their classrooms by distributing power among teachers, students, and parents. The teachers now need to get out into the school communities to gain a greater perspective in order to be able to relate concepts they are teaching in the classroom to their students' neighborhoods through adaptive, context-sensitive teaching techniques. These efforts also will include home visits and interviews with parents and guardians in order to connect with and understand students' families. TLQP teachers now understand the importance of learning from the students' families—to look into their neighborhoods and listen to members of the community (Compton-Lilly 2003). Home and community visits will include discussions about the importance of education in the lives of the students and their families; teachers also will attempt to understand, through experience, the socioeconomic pressures and constraints of living in poverty in order to create a more equitable space in/of learning among students, families, and teachers.

APPENDIX: SAMPLE OF RESPONSES BEFORE AND AFTER SURVEY OF TEACHERS (X) IDENTIFIES THE RESPONDENT

	Before Workshops	After Workshops
What are the causes of poverty?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trapped in cycle, addiction, priorities. (A) • Born into it, accepting that this is the life one will lead/no way out, why bother trying, no desire to find a job. (B) • Parents having children young, not a supportive family background, uneducated. (D) • Generational cycle. (G, I) • Lack of motivation. (H) • Education, cycle of poverty, choice. (J) • Intergenerational, illiterate. (K) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living in crisis, job training, opportunities. (A) • A result of a bad situation (financial, etc.). You could be wealthy or middle class, have a stable job, but if something happens that can affect your living situation. (B) • Working dead-end jobs and cannot make a go of it. One parent works full time at a Dunkin Donuts and has three children and is only in her mid-twenties. I give her so much credit because she does the best she can. (D) • Lack of education, loss of job, illness, lack of family resources, mental health issues, incarceration. (F) • Lack of resources other than monetary. (H) • Loss of jobs, lack of a network [of] support, not one answer, not culture. (I)
What are the main determinants of your students educational achievements?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Priorities: education, culture, exposure to cultural activities. (A) • Intrinsic motivation, family support. (C) • I think that a lot of our children do not read at home or have access to a lot of books. (D) • Ability to attend/ready to learn. (G) • Don't value literacy, which is passed on from family. (H) • Parent education, income level. (I) • Widespread and consistent deficiencies. (J) • Lack of interest/effort. (K) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability of the family to support students (working long hours, etc.). (C) • I never thought that reading and literacy were not valued, but now. . . I have a better understanding to what the reasons might be. (D) • Asking for greater parental input on home behaviors and working with them to create plans to increase literacy (tutoring, additional in-school resources). (E) • Poverty (ex: maybe they're hungry, not a good night's sleep, etc.). (F) • Parent support, ability to focus on child's education needs versus the daily survival. (I)
What are the main barriers to your students educational outcomes?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of intrinsic motivation and family support.(C) • Willingness to work harder and have familial support to complete learning tasks at home. (E) • Lack of structure in the home; limited assistance at home; limited resources that promote literacy (i.e., they have Xbox, but not books). (G) • Unconventional home life. (H) • Lack of parent support/materials, not caring. (I) • Minimal home support, poor effort in school, unfocused, poor self-control. (K) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crime, racism, families who work multiple jobs to just make it, and don't have the time or ability to spend with their children, drug abuse, domestic abuse, teen pregnancy, and I could go on. . . many of our kids grow up in tough circumstances. (C) • A lot of families do value literacy and take their children to the library and read to them at home. (D) • Parent work schedules, primarily. (E) • Some of my parents tell me they have trouble reading to their children. (I) • Parental workloads impede traditional involvement. (J)
Do your students and their parents value education? Explain.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not so much. (D) • Most did, but always some who thought school was cheap babysitting. (E) • Many of them talk the talk but do not walk the walk. (G) • Many parents didn't care or feel education was a priority. (I) • Often blame teachers (and school) for student shortcomings. (J) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trying their best to encourage their children to take school seriously. . . but are juggling so much. (C) • Do value their education and do work diligently to achieve. We have put forth much effort as a school to create a culture of learning and discovery. (C)

	Before Workshops	After Workshops
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I do believe that our parents want better for their children and try the best they can with what they have. (D) • Yes, they mostly do the best they can under circumstances. (F) • I feel both value education, but sometimes lack the support. (I)
<p>How do you gain in-depth knowledge of your students and their families and their neighborhoods, access to resources, and constraints?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Never thought of this before. (C) • Cumulative records, chats with previous year’s teachers, back-to-school nights, and parent-teacher conferences. (E) • I don’t really know—besides their stories. (F) • Mostly from what the students and parents share with me in school and at conferences and stereotypical assumptions based on prior experience. (G) • I often assumed I knew, or I don’t think I really wanted to know. (I) • ?? (J) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When I had them use cameras to take pictures. (B) • I continue to relate to my students on a real level. I respect them and value them . . . and they know it, so they share with me. Get out there, explore it. Take pictures of it, celebrate it. Use their environment and experiences in poetry and projects. Connect learning to their life. (C) • Phone calls, home visits . . . I let parents know that I’m a parent too and that . . . things can be hard at times. Just listening to what people say. (D) • Home visits, talking informally with kids (at lunch, on the playground), visits to their neighborhood. (E) • The Neighborhood Prints and opportunities to send cameras home have broadened some of my knowledge of home life. I think I am more interested and considerate of neighborhood factors as a result of TLQP. (G) • I try to get involved in community affairs, etc. Clean Sweep and service projects. (H) • Talking to parents very honestly in a very nonjudgmental way. I try to listen more, offer less. (I) • Research. Understanding. (J)
<p>What strategies do you use to promote more critical engagement of poverty and increase student performance in your classrooms?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I need more time to think about this. (A) • Not sure what this means. (D) • . . . try not to punish the child for the sins of their home life— this includes lack of resources to complete homework, practice new skills, get enough sleep . . . (G) • N/A (I) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A (A, D, and K) • I am more aware and sensitive of what conditions they may be living under. (B) • I now incorporate their experiences from their neighborhoods into my instruction. It has been successful so far.(C) • I think TLQP has helped me with awareness and caused me to give this area more consideration. (G) • I try to meet individual needs of students. Ex: if a parent can’t read or have time for homework, I get a volunteer to work with that student. (I) • Understanding poverty . . . and . . . limitations. (J)
<p>How can you transform practices of schools and educators to ght, not replicate patterns of poverty and classism?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t know. (B) • No idea . . . which is why I’m not an administrator. (C) • We want our students to value education and want better for themselves. (D) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We, as educators, need to change our delivery and method of teaching. (A) • Being aware and open-minded. (B)

	Before Workshops	After Workshops
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I wish I knew!! (G) • You can't do this without losing your job (especially when you don't have a union). (H) • Didn't think about it. (I) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Like any transformation, there must be awareness and education first. We need more people to expose the truths and educate the masses before any change is possible. (C) • Now I have a better understanding about where they came from. (D) • Empower families, validate their life experiences and make it a point to invite them into the educational life of their child. Teachers REALLY need to know the families to make this successful and not patronizing. Ask questions, show respect. (E) • Awareness, contemplation, and conversations have helped me to be more aware of limitations and opportunities. (G) • Educate the assuming public; assist parents in meeting their needs. (I)
What are the solutions to urban poverty and who is responsible?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People have the opportunity to look for jobs and get themselves out of poverty or homelessness. (B) • This is too big to answer. I think that poverty is a cycle. (D) • Responsibility lies with both government policies and individual culpability. (E) • I wish I knew. (F) • I wish I knew the solutions—but I don't . . . I need the families to send children to school ready to learn. (G) • Up to the individual themselves. (I) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is something our society (local government, school district, community groups, parents, etc.) needs to address. We are all responsible for the causes and solutions. (A) • To not be so ignorant to why people are homeless or living in poverty. I made a lot of assumptions about homeless people before this. (B) • Education, tolerance, and acceptance, reduction of crime, honest and caring government officials (although I'm not holding my breath on that one), end to segregation. We are all responsible. (C) • As a teacher I have no control over the root causes of poverty, BUT I can affect change by setting high expectations, differentiating instruction and assessment, and challenging others to do the same. Current education structures are outdated and do more harm than good. Dissolve large urban school boards and large urban factory-schools and return to community-based schooling and embrace the small schools movement and reform models that turn school on its head. Parents want school choice, but the current choice is between bad and worse. DEMAND real school accountability beyond the test score snapshot. (E) • Society's responsibility. Everyone! (I) • Scrap No Child Left Behind. (J)

REFERENCES

- aha! Process, Inc. 2007. aha! Process Products. <http://www.ahaprocess.com/store/Books.html> (accessed September 15, 2007).
- Bohn, A. 2006. A framework for understanding Ruby Payne. *Rethinking Schools* 21 (2). http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/21_02/21_02.shtml (accessed August 22, 2008).
- Bomer, R., J. E. Dworin, L. May, and P. Semington. 2008. Miseducating teachers about the poor: A critical analysis of Ruby Payne's claims. *Teachers College Record* 110 (11). (ID 14591). <http://www.tcrecord.org/content.asp?contentid=14591> (accessed September 6, 2007).
- Casciano, R., and D. S. Massey. 2008. Neighborhoods, employment, and welfare use: Assessing the influence of neighborhood socioeconomic composition. *Social Science Research* 37 (2): 544–558.
- Charles, C. Z., G. Dinwiddie, and D. S. Massey. 2004. The continuing consequences of segregation: Family stress and college academic performance. *Social Science Quarterly* 85 (5): 1353–1373.
- Compton-Lilly, C. 2004. *Confronting Racism, Poverty, and Power: Classroom Strategies to Change the world*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann.
- . 2003. *Reading Families: The Literate Lives of Urban Children*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Cortese, A. 2007. Get real: Here's the boost that poor children, their teachers, and their schools really need. *American Educator* Spring: 4–9.
- Ellis, M., and J. Odland. 2001. Intermetropolitan variation in the labor force participation of white and black men in the United States. *Urban Studies* 38 (13): 2327–2348.
- Ellis, M., R. Wright, and V. Parks. 2004. Work together, live apart? Geographies of racial and ethnic segregation at home and work. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 94 (3): 620–637.
- Fischer, M. J., and D. S. Massey. 2004. The ecology of racial discrimination. *City and Community* 3 (3): 221–241.
- Gonzales, N., L. Moll, and C. Amanti, eds. 2005. *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Erlbaum.
- Gorski, P. C. 2007. The question of class. *Teaching Tolerance* Spring: 26–29.
- . 2006. The classist underpinnings of Ruby Payne's framework. *Teachers College Record*. (ID 12322). <http://www.tcrecord.org/content.asp?contentid=12322> (accessed September 6, 2007).
- . 2005. Savage unrealities: Uncovering classism in Ruby Payne's framework. *EdChange*. http://www.edchange.org/publications/Savage_Unrealities.pdf (accessed April 15, 2007).
- Kleiner, A. 2000. Book review of *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. *Whole Earth* 22 (December). Reprinted at www.ahaprocess.com/files/Review-Framework2.pdf (accessed August 22, 2008).
- Kunjufu, J. 2006. *An African Centered Response to Ruby Payne's Poverty Theory*. Chicago: African American Images.
- Lassiter, M. D. 2006. *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Lewis, O. 1959. *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*. New York: Basic Books.
- Massey, D. S., C. Z. Charles, G. F. Lundy, and M. J. Fischer. 2003. *Source of the River: The Social Origins of Freshmen at America's Selective Colleges and Universities*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Massey, D. S., and M. J. Fischer. 2000. How segregation concentrates poverty. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23 (4): 670–691.
- Moll, L., C. Amanti, D. Neff, and N. Gonzalez. 1992. Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice* 31 (2): 133–141.
- Ng, J. C., and J. L. Rury. 2006. Poverty and education: A critical analysis of the Ruby Payne phenomenon. *Teachers College Record* (ID 12596). <http://www.tcrecord.org/content.asp?contentid=12596> (accessed September 6, 2007).
- Osei-Kofi, N. 2005. Pathologizing the poor: A framework for understanding Ruby Payne's work. *Equity & Excellence in Education* 38 (4): 367–375.
- Payne, R. 2006a. A response to "Poverty and education: A critical analysis of the Ruby Payne phenomenon." *Teachers College Record* (ID 12597). <http://www.tcrecord.org/content.asp?contentid=12597> (accessed September 6, 2007).
- . 2006b. A response to "The classist underpinnings of Ruby Payne's framework." *Teachers College Record* (ID 12593). <http://www.tcrecord.org/content.asp?contentid=12593> (accessed September 6, 2007).
- . 2005. *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. Highlands, Texas: aha! Process.

- Rochester City School District. 2007. *District Profile*. <http://www.rcsdk12.org/district/profile.htm> (accessed September 26, 2007).
- Rogalsky, J. 2008. *The Realities of Urban Transit and the Working Poor: Bartering for Basics*. Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag.
- Taylor, D., and C. Dorsey-Gaines. 1988. *Growing Up Literate: Learning from Inner-city Families*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann.
- Tough, P. 2007. The class-consciousness raiser. *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/10/magazine/10payne-t.html> (accessed September 6, 2007).
- Wilson, W. J. 1996. *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. New York: Random House.
- . 1987. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Copyright of Journal of Geography is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.