



On grifters, research, and poverty

Respecting a child's background should be part of every educator's teaching strategy.

On a dreary, rainy day last week, I sat in front of my TV aimlessly switching channels. Nearly brain-dead, I did something quite unusual for me. I stopped on the channel showing “Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman.” Somehow the mindlessness of the show appealed to me at that moment. In this episode, a snake oil salesman enters Colorado Springs, home to Dr. Quinn, her love interest — the hunky and enigmatic mountain man Sully — and her three adopted children. The snake oil salesman, a self-proclaimed doctor and self-proclaimed celebrated healer, hawks his wares, as snake oil salesmen do, knowing that his potion would not cure any ailments except that of his empty wallet. Unfortunately, the townspeople jump on the bandwagon and turn away from Dr. Quinn’s legitimate treatments. She warns them, but they can’t resist the promise of a quick cure. Alas, she

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is proven right. The grifter steals away in the middle of the night clutching his ill-gotten gains, heading for another town to employ his scam.

It occurred to me that education, particularly since *No Child Left Behind*, has more than its fair share of modern-day snake oil salespeople. They tend to come in the form of panacea programs, consultants, and testing companies. Each packages its own particular elixir, making big promises and claiming their research proves the effectiveness of their special treatments. Like the travelling doctor of old, these salespeople with their dubious credentials, their big-bang marketing hype, and their pseudo-scientific research claims, swoop into town, sell their wares, and leave town pocketing the profits.

I grew up poor. We were not the romanticized poor but proud family. We struggled. It was hard, harsh, and often ugly. As an Appalachian child trying to make my way through a school system where my culture, values, dialect, and traditions were daily points of jokes, teasing, and pranks, I quickly learned that being poor was an offense to those around me. But being Appalachian, well, that was reprehensible.

My teachers wanted to help me, but they had no real-life experience with people like me. They’d grown up in privilege. Not wealthy,

but privileged nonetheless. They thought, as the helping class often does, the best thing they could do for me was teach me to be like them — or as one teacher actually suggested in her kindest teacher voice, I needed to “learn to act white.” I knew what that meant. If I wanted success, I’d have to adopt their language and culture and deny my own. I did what they asked; I learned to pass. Passing is a treacherous road to travel.

As a teacher, I’ve always thought my experiences with poverty and the choices I made to adopt ways that weren’t my own could serve me in my work with marginalized children. And I vowed I’d never require children to deny who they were. We’d find other roads to success, roads that build on their strengths and use their cultures and experiences as a starting point for learning rather than imposing middle-class values in ways that reinforce the message they receive every day telling them they are less than others and that their dreams should be limited by secret rules. And that’s been my life’s work. That’s why I am so disillusioned by Ruby Payne’s success and by her promises to help teachers serve poor children by teaching them to act middle class.

But she is out there, pulling her medicine show from district to district selling her

elixir — the Framework for Understanding Poverty. And schools buy it. Why wouldn’t they? Teachers are starving for ways to help struggling students. They know they don’t understand the cultures and values of those they teach, and Payne promises

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a quick cure, reporting that schools following her program “in three years make AYP . . . sometimes in a year.”

In an interview on the web site of one school where she works, Payne reports she became an expert on poverty through two experiences. First, during college, she spent a semester in Haiti studying poverty. And second, she married a man who grew up in “extreme” poverty. Payne goes on to explain one of the things she “teaches” teachers about poor people: “When you live in a survival environment, I don’t care where you are in the world, one of the things you do . . . you physically fight. Because that’s how you stay alive.”

Now, I’ve never been in a fight in my life. Nor has anyone in my family. I remember



no fights growing up in my neighborhood, no fights in any of my classrooms. And in all these years of working with people in poverty, I've broken up one fight — two middle school girls in 1975 fighting over a boy. But, I guess it never hurts to bolster stereotypes when you're hyping your wares.

The training, Payne explains, lasts two days — two days to understand and overcome poverty's effects on student learning. On the first day, she explains "the reality of what generational poverty is and how that makes you think." And poverty, she continues, "is not about what the system does. It is about how you think when you are at survival." So, there's nothing wrong with the system, there is only something wrong with the ways poor people think?

Exceptional kids

I work at a tuition-free college that serves only students of limited means — students who exemplify the emptiness of Payne's Framework. Payne sets teachers up to expect negative behaviors — like

fighting — and, as we know, expectations tend to become self-fulfilling prophesies. My students have a remarkably deep well of personal power grown from the strengths of their cultures, among them resiliency, work ethic, and resourcefulness. They have overcome outrageous odds, not the least among them is

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the stereotypes designed to pigeonhole them as violent, unmotivated, and lazy. One might say these kids are the exceptions. I don't think so, but what if they are? If we want to help children in poverty, doesn't it make more sense to look at students

who have overcome hardships based on strength than to perpetuate the same old ugliness we see in the Framework?

Payne laments that critics love to hate her work. "Quite simply," she says, "the work breaks the rules of higher education." Those uppity academic researchers, she suggests, must publish in order to get tenure. That's why they criticize her. Well, I've got tenure and I could hardly be characterized as playing by the rules of higher education. Even beyond the sweeping generalization of her response, her claim seriously mischaracterizes those who find her work objectionable. Many critics, like me, have long experience working for equity in schools. Many are teachers, former teachers, and school administrators who have devoted years to educating children in their schools and communities — not just a two-day pass through. They feel compelled, as I do, to speak out. (See for example, <http://rubypayneiswrong.blogspot.com/>.) Even *Teaching Tolerance*, a publication of the

Southern Poverty Law Center, has refused to endorse Payne's work. But her work is research-based, she reports. After all, she points out, it is "based upon a 32-year longitudinal study of living next to and in a poverty neighborhood . . ." She thinks living next to a community of poverty counts as research? Feels more like voyeurism.

In response to her research claims, I could only scratch my head. Why is it, I wondered, that her "32-year longitudinal research" findings don't jive with my 65-year longitudinal research? I lived in a neighborhood where poor people live. I studied how to get out of poverty by pretending to be middle class, and I learned the terrible toll that strategy takes on personal identity. I didn't spend a semester in Haiti — there was no money for that privilege. And, really, I don't need to go to Haiti to study poverty. I saw it and lived it every day. But I've spent my entire professional life working with families in poverty. By Payne's standards, my research makes me an expert on poverty. And here is my expert opinion: For too long, we have blamed poor people for being poor when serious systemic issues limit too many children's opportunities and possibilities, not the least among them being the stereotypes supported in Payne's trainings. We can continue to buy the snake oil, potions, ointments, and elixirs hoping for the quick cure, or we can deal with the real ailment. I don't begrudge her the money she's made selling the Frameworks of Poverty. I really don't. What hurts so personally and deeply is the way her message distracts from real cures. And meanwhile, so many children are being urged to give up the richness of who they are in exchange for hollow promises. **■**

