

# The Trouble with Ruby Payne: How the aha! Process Works Against Developing Cultural Competency for Educational Success

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In her book, [A Framework for Understanding Poverty](#) (3<sup>rd</sup> revised edition, 2003), and the various materials and activities that constitute the aha! Process, Ruby K. Payne claims to provide schools and schoolteachers with a formula for bringing children of poverty into the fold of academic and social success. In the state of Indiana alone, school corporations have spent countless thousands of professional development dollars on Ruby Payne and her associates. We feel it's time to ask, What is Ruby Payne all about? What have schools and students gotten in return for their investment? And what alternatives might we pursue instead?

## **The Positive Impulse**

Like so many recipes for educational reform, Ruby Payne's work appears to be animated by a number of positive, laudable impulses. Dr. Payne appears to be motivated by:

- an apparently sincere desire to help raise children out of poverty and improve their chances for socioeconomic mobility;
- an apparently sincere desire to help schools meet their educational obligations to ALL children, and provide the tools for academic success; and
- an apparently sincere desire to urge teachers to UNDERSTAND their students' lifestyles and beliefs, their "culture," and to teach effectively based on that understanding.

We share and applaud Ruby Payne's concern to help all students master the codes of academic success, and thereby empower themselves economically and socially. We

appreciate her focus on social class as a complement to schools' usual "multicultural" focus on race or ethnicity. We also share her emphasis on teachers' professional development for better knowledge of their students' backgrounds and beliefs.

## **The Troubling Assumptions**

So how do such positive impulses translate into a problematic model for professional development? We have identified several troubling assumptions that pervade Payne's work, and that we would do well to understand.

Payne's work assumes the objective existence of a condition called "poverty," and a set of beliefs and orientations that people living in this condition invariably hold—a "culture of poverty." There are several problems with this assumption, and anthropologists long ago discredited it.

First, the concept of a "culture of poverty" lends itself to a "blame the victim" mentality; it just shifts the blame from the individual to the "culture." Members of this culture are thought to be responsible for being in poverty, and they are just as responsible for getting out of poverty—with maybe a little help from their teachers! Such a view prohibits us from understanding systemic and structural **inequality**: Economic rules favor some over others, the system requires class distinctions and therefore educational "failure" for some, and we are all equally responsible for each other's welfare.

Second, there is little evidence that those who occupy an economic category like poverty share a set of beliefs and practices, a “culture.” Payne’s quizzes and “case studies” present insulting caricatures of people living in poverty. Such a view *homogenizes* a great deal of diversity; it turns living, dynamic human communities into “things,” and it fails to acknowledge the ethnic, class, and gender diversity amongst those living in so-called poverty. Just as Payne acknowledges that poverty is a relative concept (2003, p. 10), no cultural beliefs or attitudes can be said to “inhere” in poverty.

Third, the assumptions in Payne’s work denigrate the cultural richness of students and families living “in poverty.” Because of well-documented structural racism, Black and Latino families still comprise a disproportionate share of Americans living in poverty. By focusing on their supposed academic deficiencies, and overlooking their cultural strengths, the aha! Process reinforces deeply insulting classist and racist stereotypes.

Fourth, Payne’s work assumes that a one-time professional development experience will catalyze long-term reform of teacher practices and beliefs. In an often challenging and demoralizing educational environment, the aha! Process taps into a deep yearning amongst educators for a kind of magic bullet, a final fix. By playing to this yearning, Payne’s work sidesteps the difficult questions and keeps us from adopting professional development processes that are adequate to the complexity of the challenges we face.

Fifth and finally, Payne’s work fails to question dominant notions of educational success, and defines such success entirely in terms of conventional measures of behavior and academic achievement. Indeed, Payne’s approach could be said to advance an *impoverished* notion of education and success, in which certain narrow indicators of cognitive ability and individual merit prevail over moral, social, and aesthetic dimensions

of education. Guadalupe Valdés (1996) provides a nice counterpoint to this view by articulating poor Mexican immigrant families’ rich concepts of *educación*, and Janise Hurtig has done fascinating work with Mexican immigrant mothers in Chicago (2005), who resent the arrogance of Payne’s definition of “education.”

### **Where’s the Research?**

Payne claims that her approach is supported by research, but when examined more closely, her “research” consists largely of personal anecdotes and highly selective data. Her research references seem like post-hoc confirmations of ideas that she developed based on her own intuitive experience as an educator. To our knowledge, no independent evaluation of the Ruby Payne professional development process has been conducted. We don’t doubt that some teachers and administrators have found the Ruby Payne process to make a positive difference in levels of school engagement and school achievement amongst students; what we question are the broader ramifications, and longer-term consequences, of such an approach.

### **Alternative Approaches**

The history of American school reform (Tyack and Cuban, 1997) shows an unfortunate tendency to adopt fashionable, programmatic “solutions” to deep educational problems. The recent enthusiasm for Ruby Payne’s work follows this pattern, and the aha! Process only reinforces a quick-fix mentality. Yet any solution to America’s “achievement gap” and the problem of equitable learning must involve earnest self-questioning amongst educators, and recognition of the depth of the problem. Good teaching requires educators to move well outside their comfort zones and to develop authentic cultural competency through ongoing inquiry and critical reflection. We believe that certain national reform trends, such as small schools and the

creation of democratic learning communities, can best foster this kind of work, but any school configuration can advance the work.

The attainment of cultural competency and the ability to thereby teach responsively and fully is a deep, long-term process. It requires a commitment to fostering a culture of inquiry in the schools. It can be facilitated by implementing alternative forms of parental involvement, in which teachers and administrators travel out into their students' neighborhoods and communities, to see what life is like there.

One viable and well-supported alternative to Ruby Payne's "Framework for Understanding Poverty" is the "funds of knowledge" idea of Luís C. Moll, Norma González, and Cathy Amanti. For nearly two decades Moll, González, and Amanti have developed and put into practice theories centered on the basic premise that people are knowledgeably competent, and that their life experiences have given them that knowledge (Moll et al. developed their approach mainly through their work with Mexican-origin working class families in Arizona). Further, Moll, González, and Amanti propose that educational processes can be enhanced when teachers actively learn about the life experiences and knowledge their students and families have. They propose that through reflection and ethnographic research methods, such as observations and interviews with students' families, teachers can come to understand how students and their families make sense of their lives. They can identify and document the resources, or "funds," of knowledge that exist in students' homes. For example, teachers might visit the homes of students to gather details about the knowledge base of students' families rather than for disciplinary purposes or in order to teach families "best practices" for school preparation. This means that rather than think only of students as learners, teachers should also think of themselves as learners,

taking active steps to familiarize themselves with the daily lives of students and their families.

Clearly, the "funds of knowledge" approach can be valuable for teachers working with language minority students such as newcomer Latinos. Indeed, much has been written by Moll, González, Amanti, and others on using the "funds of knowledge" approach with linguistic and ethnic minority families. Teachers and researchers who work from this approach point out that the existing knowledge of socio-economically and culturally marginalized students and families is not often academically validated in schools. Using a "funds of knowledge" approach challenges the notion that students from these groups are socially and culturally homogeneous, and "lacking" cognitive and social assets valuable for classroom learning. Rather, this approach claims that linguistic and ethnic minority families possess valuable social and intellectual resources, particular to their personal lives, upon which classroom instruction can effectively be built.

By encouraging teachers to actively seek out and utilize the rich experiences and knowledge base that *all* students and their families have, the "funds of knowledge" approach positions students and their families as active participants in educational processes. Because it takes household and community knowledge as worthy of pedagogical notice, "funds of knowledge" challenges deficit models of education, such as Ruby Payne's *aha!* Process, which position socio-economically marginalized students as "deficient."

Lastly, using the "funds of knowledge" approach aids teachers in creating connections between the home and school communities, and potentially transforms home and school relations by building reciprocal relations and *confianza*, or mutual trust, between teachers and families.

## Resources and Citations

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