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Book Review: *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty*

Abstract

In his recently published book, *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap*, Paul Gorski critically addresses concepts that perpetuate stereotypes of those categorized as members of the “culture of poverty.” This review provides a highlight of each chapter to illustrate some key concepts and teaching strategies that Gorski examines in his book.

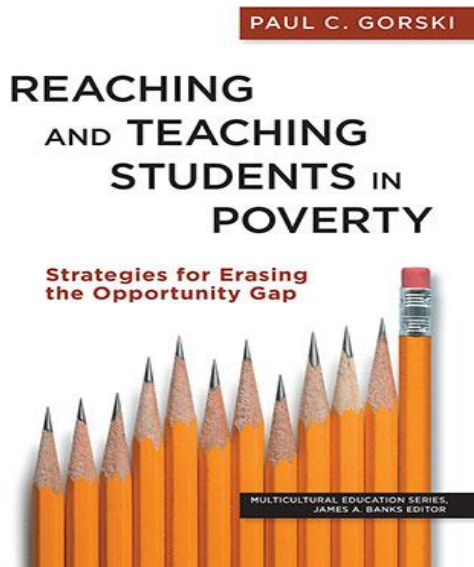
Keywords

poverty, opportunity gap, equity literacy approach, deficit model

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Book Review:
***Reaching and Teaching
Students in Poverty***

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“We *must*, above all else, commit to losing the stereotypes that paint poor people as the problem. That might be the single most important thing that any of us, as educators, can do in our commitments to equity and diversity.” (Gorski, 2013, p. 68)

In this time of dynamic change and shifting landscapes in our culture, the terminology of diversity education needs continual critique and renewal. This is especially the case when it comes to prevailing views of people in poverty. In this recently published book, Paul Gorski is masterful at critically addressing concepts that have served to perpetuate the very worst kinds of stereotypes of those who have been categorized as members of the “culture of poverty.” Writing in a style that is personal, well researched and clearly comprehensible, Gorski offers a timely and practical counternarrative to overdetermined and essentialized views of people in poverty. Several others have recently written on this theme, but Gorski’s work stands out as definitive because he not only critiques problematic concepts, he also provides new terminology and offers a wide range of teaching

strategies without being overly prescriptive. In this review, I provide a highlight of each chapter as a way to briefly discuss some of the key concepts and teaching strategies he brings into view with this book.

DEFINITIONS AND DISTINCTIONS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

In Chapter 1, Gorski addresses the popular maxim that “if you work hard, do well in school and follow the rules, you can be anything you want to be” (p. 1). He further states that it would be remarkable if this were actually the case. However, the actual conditions that he documents run counter to this claim. This is especially so in the field of education, which is typically underfunded for high-poverty school districts yet accountable for attaining the same standardized test scores as schools with the best teachers, facilities, learning materials, and extracurricular programs.

Also in this chapter, the author provides the reader with a well-reasoned set of class definitions not based on dollar amounts, but on actual conditions or employment functions. For example (pp. 9–11), he defines “poverty”

as the condition of not being able to afford basic human necessities and the “working class” as a group that is able to afford only basic necessities. He describes the “middle class” as those having only a few months cash reserves without accruing debt and the “managerial class” as people who run the businesses for the owning class. The “owning class” controls the means of production as well as the means of perception through the media. These five delineations provide a more nuanced view of class structure than the standard, simplistic view of “poverty, middle class, and wealthy” categories. He also distinguishes between income (annual total earnings) and wealth (total value of a person’s assets). These distinctions help us to understand more clearly conditions of poverty rather than sorting by income alone.

AN EQUITY LITERACY APPROACH

In Chapter 2, Gorski provides us with a framework used throughout the book, which he and his colleague Katy Swalwell developed for understanding and creating equitable learning environments for students and families in poverty. They call this an “Equity Literacy Approach,” which can be summarized as the cultivation of the skills and consciousness that enable us to recognize, respond to, and redress conditions that deny some students access to educational and other opportunities enjoyed by their peers (pp. 22–23). This framework borrows from other critical educators’ work and creatively assembles it in a way that provides practical, analytical tools for preservice, novice, and veteran teachers alike. The fundamental outline of this approach includes the ability to recognize and respond—to biases, inequities, and deficit views that come from misinterpreting culture and test score disparities—through individual understanding and group conversations. It also includes the

ability to redress biases and inequities in the long term by advocating against inequitable school practices such as racially or economically biased tracking.

In addition, this framework goes beyond merely celebrating diversity to recognizing and redressing equity by teaching about issues like sexism, poverty, and homophobia. Lastly, this framework focuses on one’s ability to create and sustain a bias-free and equitable learning environment in which students feel free to express themselves openly and honestly, combined with high expectations for all students through higher-order pedagogies and curricula.

In the next section of the chapter, Gorski provides us with the vital guiding principles behind this framework that are also used throughout the book. Briefly stated they are as follows (pp. 24–25):

1. The right to equitable educational opportunity is universal. Everyone deserves the opportunities given through education including those in poverty.
2. Poverty and class are intersectional in nature. We cannot understand how class inequities operate without also understanding how these inequities relate to race, gender, language, immigrant status, disability, and other identities.
3. Poor people are diverse. Reducing this diversity to a homogeneous “culture of poverty” will not help us understand individual low-income students or families better and may reinforce stereotypes.
4. What we believe about people in poverty, including our biases and prejudices, informs how we teach and relate to people in poverty.
5. We cannot understand the relationship between poverty and education without understanding biases and inequities experienced by people in poverty.

6. Test scores are inadequate measures of equity. Raising test scores is not the same thing as creating an equitable learning environment.
7. Class disparities in education are the result of inequities, not the result of cultures. Eliminating disparities requires us to eliminate inequities rather than changing students' cultures.
8. Equitable educators adopt a resiliency rather than a deficit view of educational disparities. Thus, they recognize and draw on funds of knowledge accumulated by poor and working class communities and reject deficit views that focus on fixing disenfranchised students rather than fixing the conditions that disenfranchise students.
9. Strategies for bolstering school engagement and learning must be based on evidence for what works, not on what is popular or dictated by bias.
10. The inalienable right to equitable educational opportunity includes the right to high expectations, higher-order pedagogies, and engaging curricula.

A POVERTY PRIMER AND THE STEREOTYPICAL "CULTURE OF POVERTY"

In Chapter 3, Gorski provides us with useful and current information on poverty rates in general (15% of the United States population) and with a brief description of the unequal distribution of poverty by gender, race, disability and region. This is quite significant because so many issues of poverty intersect with issues of identity and place.

Chapter 4 discusses in depth the dangers of overgeneralizing and stereotyping the poor that frequently occur within the "culture of poverty" lens. A few of these misperceptions include views that poor people are lazy, substance abusers who do not value education and are poor communicators as

well as bad parents. These views influence teacher expectations, which in turn have negative self-fulfilling prophecy effects on students.

WHY THE "ACHIEVEMENT GAP" IS REALLY AN "OPPORTUNITY GAP"

Chapter 5 focuses on conditions outside the school that still have a direct bearing on students' lives and educational outcomes. These include access to healthy living and working environments, recreation, community and social services, childcare, adequate learning materials, and most importantly, access to a culture of validation. Teachers in particular need to become well versed in the way these home and community environments are inseparable from the attitude and actions of students within the school environment.

In Chapter 6, Gorski presents a strong case for changing the language and the thinking inherent in the concept of "achievement gap" to what should more accurately be called the "opportunity gap." Along with the items mentioned in the previous chapter, these gaps in opportunity for a quality education include disparities in school funding and access to preschool programs and educational technology. The opportunity gap is also deeply felt in the absence of well-qualified teachers that promote higher-order thinking skills in the learning process.

INEFFECTIVE AND EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING STUDENTS IN POVERTY

Chapter 7 looks at the most common *ineffective* responses to the achievement gap including direct instruction of the kind that Freire (2000) called the "banking concept of education" (p. 72). This method is based on the assumption that students bring little or nothing to the process of education and instead focuses on rote memorization of facts removed from the relevant experience of

students' lives. The banking concept relies on the outcomes of standardized tests. These results are then used to support tracking and ability grouping which, according to Gorski, actually increase the gaps in student achievement. Charter schools are another ineffective response to the "achievement gap" and often end up being "just as segregated as, or more segregated than public neighborhood school students" (p. 115). Ironically, in many cases, charter schools reproduce the unequal distribution of resources in communities that they are designed to help.

In Chapter 8, we are finally offered hope through Gorski's research on effective and equitable instructional strategies that he has gleaned and synthesized through over 300 sources. Admittedly these are not new but, when placed in the context of the entire book, they are inspiring to ponder and do not require a king's ransom to implement. These strategies with a few examples are as follows:

1. *Incorporating music, art, and theater across the curriculum.* For example, Gorski suggests using Picasso's art to teach basic geometry. I might suggest using recordings such as *We Shall Overcome* and *Keep your Hands on the Plow* to teach the history of the Civil Rights Movement as well as many other more contemporary sources of music and art.
2. *Having/communicating high expectations for all students.* Gorski writes that "students learn more, and more deeply, when we demonstrate that we believe in their abilities to do so" (p. 121).
3. *Adopting higher order, student-centered, rigorous pedagogies.* These include peer tutoring and teacher-student group dialogue.
4. *Incorporating movement and exercise into teaching and learning.* Gorski mentions the work of Hatch and Smith (2004) who have used physical education with math

and physics concepts. Recess should not be considered a luxury; children need the benefit of movement after sitting most of the day.

5. *Making curricula personally relevant to the lives of low-income students.* An example, taken from a standardized math test word problem, is the use of "portage," which "is the act of carrying a boat overland between navigable waterways" (p. 126). This test is culturally irrelevant and biased for students in both urban and rural settings that have never seen or carried a boat in real life.
6. *Teaching about poverty and class bias.* This can begin even at the preschool level with picture books, which positively portray poor and working class families, such as *Somebody's New Pajamas* by Isaac Jackson and David Soman or *Voices in the Park* by Anthony Brown.
7. *Analyzing learning materials for class (and other) bias.* Students can be taught to analyze the way various forms of media depict poor and working class families. This chapter lists many wonderful resources and websites to help teach about poverty and class.
8. *Promoting literacy enjoyment.* Here Gorski cites Mary Kellert (2009) as a way to "acknowledge that literacy proficiency can be a route out of poverty" (p. 399). But, this must be more than merely reading for efficient information gathering to perform an academic task. Reading should be aligned with student interest and enhanced with small discussion groups, multimedia, and the use of drama.

WORKING WITH RATHER THAN ON FAMILIES OF POVERTY AND EXPANDING OUR SPHERES OF INFLUENCE

In Chapter 9, Gorski astutely hammers home the idea that we have to "build strong, positive relationships with low-income families" (p.

132) for any of these teaching strategies to be successful. This must start with self-reflection within the teacher to examine personal attitudes toward poor and working class people and to cultivate the ability to recognize student and family assets rather than deficits. The author also sees this as the key to teacher morale and job contentment. Out of this approach, it is much easier to create an environment of trust between teacher, students, and parents. Gorski succinctly sums up this approach as “working *with* rather than *on* families in poverty” (p. 132).

The last chapter outlines an agenda for advocating for students in poverty that includes cultivating relationships with community agencies that can provide services such as health screenings, clothing, and food. We must also work toward reducing class sizes and take a stance on keeping recess and art education. Gorski concludes with suggestions for hosting professional development opportunities as a practical way for acting upon what is covered in this book.

PERSONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

As someone who grew up on the lowest rungs of the working class, I personally resonate with the central themes of this book. Dismantling the effects of deficit views of education has been a process that took me decades to overcome. It is absolutely true that students in poverty can never be treated as one homogeneous group. Each student is unique, and perhaps our most important task as educators is to help students in poverty discover what assets they possess through an environment of trust and by working *with* instead of *on* them. After reading this book, I am adding it to the list of books for my preservice teacher education courses. Understanding and responding to “opportunity gaps” in quality education through the lenses of equity principles

and strategies, Gorski notes, is imperative for reaching and teaching students in poverty.

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