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IN PERSPECTIVE

Payne's Pursuit

A former teacher with a message on educating children from poor backgrounds is influencing school leaders anxious to close the achievement gap.

BY BESS KELLER

Educators often blink twice when they first glimpse the woman they have come to hear tell them about the effects of poverty in the classroom.

One morning here in March, for instance, the small blonde steps out from behind the podium of a downtown ballroom in stylish alligator boots. At 55, she shows not a trace of hard living.

And yet it would be difficult to find a thinker on poverty and schools with more credibility among school leaders. Or one who matches her influence over the classroom.

Ruby K. Payne is wildly in demand for keynote speeches and seminars at annual conferences like this one hosted by the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement. A million copies of her book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* are in print. And last year, district leaders looking for solutions paid Ms. Payne's organization to put on slightly more than 1,000 workshops.

More than ever before, reams of test results confront teachers and administrators with what many have recognized for a long time: Poor children are often shortchanged in schools. The interest in the former teacher's ideas reflects educators' craving for a workable remedy, one that is not couched in blame or changes they can't effect.

And while Ms. Payne's work is not without controversy and has a scant research base, it has attracted passionate support from educators in schools around the country. They often say her insights make sense out of their own experience and stick with them long after other pedagogical advice has faded.

Ms. Payne delivers a pointed message. She argues that the lens of economic class, specifically the "hidden rules" that people learn in their family and neighborhood environments, can help educators start consistently connecting with those who do not come from middle-class backgrounds. And she says that teachers need to help students in a less symbol-based home environment learn to process information in the ways formal education demands.

The alternative, she says, are stunted choices for the students and a tremendous waste of human capital. "Communities that do not develop the minds of their children will not have wealth," she declared in Chicago.

Like her nine books, Ms. Payne's talks are loose constructions of facts, theories, practical guidance, and anecdotes. She speaks without notes in a kind of honeyed slur that is all her own. She even makes a joke about the accent—no, it's not Cajun; she was born in Indiana and lives in Texas. But for all the light touch, she is serious about the topic.

To survive in poor communities, Ms. Payne contends, people need to be nonverbal and reactive. They place priority on the personal relationships that are often their only significant resources and rely on entertainment to escape harsh realities. Members of the middle class, in contrast, succeed or fail through the use of paper representations and plans for the future. They value work and achievement.

The worlds collide in school, an institution permeated by middle-class mores, in her view.

But educators who build relationships of mutual respect with students are opening the door to learning even where middle-class resources are lacking, according to Ms. Payne.

On the other hand, teachers must recognize that children from poor families often benefit from explicit instruction and support in areas that could be taken for granted among middle-class students. Those include the so-called unspoken rules, mental models that help learners store symbolic information, and the procedures that it takes to complete an abstract task.

A teacher attentive to the needs of her low-income students fills the day with pointers and checklists. She puts tools for organizing information into her students' hands, and helps them translate it from its "street" version to its school one. She spells out reasons for learning.

Ms. Payne likes to contrast the behaviors—they come off almost as foibles—of poor parents and rich ones. It helps make the point, she says, that one set of rules isn't better than another.

A mother with a background of two or more generations in poverty might react to a problem at school by threatening to "whup" the teacher. A wealthy father tries to pull strings with the school board, using a personal connection.

Lately, Ms. Payne's talks have also addressed the criticism heating up in university circles. Some scholars have taken her to task for playing to stereotypes of the poor, failing to recognize the role that economic and social structures, including schools, play in perpetuating poverty, and ignoring poverty's intersection with race.

They are also riled about the spread of the trainer's influence when, as Iowa State University education professor Nana Osei-Kofi recently wrote, Ms. Payne's best-known book "does not have sufficient merit academically to warrant scholarly critique."

It does not help in these circles that Ms. Payne is an unabashed proponent of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which she sees as a necessary part of honing the nation's competitive edge, or that she has parlayed a pastiche of mostly other people's ideas into a booming cottage industry.

"The majority of people in poverty are absent from her work," charges Paul C. Gorski, an education professor at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minn. "The notion that there is a culture of poverty is questionable at best."

Ms. Payne, who holds a doctorate in educational leadership from Loyola University in Chicago, says much of the criticism revolves around her research base, which is largely her observations—in her words, "a 32-year case study." She tells her audiences that there is nothing wrong with studying poverty as the outcome of exploitation in particular or political and economic structures in general, as many scholars do. It's just not the way she does it.

There have been a few attempts to size up statistically the worth of some of Ms. Payne's ideas. A systemwide plan based on approaches she and her consultants devised has been tried in the 10,000-student East Allen, Ind., schools with generally positive results, as measured by a study made for aha! Process Inc., Ms. Payne's business. Other in-house studies have measured the effects of Payne-style undertakings in an Arkansas charter school and that of a supplemental reading program that aha! Process bought and markets.

Still, Ms. Payne says she is mulling a lawsuit against Mr. Gorski for allegedly violating her copyright. Mr. Gorski, for his part, calls talk of a suit "saber rattling" and denies any possible copyright infringement.

Despite what her audiences usually assume, Ms. Payne grew up middle-class and Mennonite in Indiana and Ohio. She had her first brush with poverty as a student at Goshen College: The Mennonite school's service requirement landed her in Haiti for three months.

But a more significant exposure came when the high school English teacher married at 23 into a family of straitened circumstances. The marriage, which produced a son and lasted until two years ago, also introduced her to the society of the wealthy when her husband took a job in Chicago as a bond trader.

In the suburbs of Chicago, Ms. Payne eventually went to work as an elementary school principal in the affluent Barrington, Ill., district.

Returning to Texas in 1992, she signed on as the director of professional development for the 18,000-student Goose Creek district in Baytown, near Houston.

In 1995, she penned the first version of *Framework* in a month, after an assistant principal asked her to put down the ideas that had been so helpful to her teachers. Using a credit card, Ms. Payne paid for the book to be printed and started giving the volumes away. A year later, the requests for training were so numerous she took a leave of absence.

Today, the business she founded in 1996 and continues to head publishes 40 different books, videos, and related products and occupies five low-slung buildings in Highlands, Tex. Five of the books have been co-written by Ms. Payne with experts who have extended her basic ideas into the realms of the workplace, social welfare, charitable giving, and education for the gifted. She employs 25 and provides work for 50 consultants.

The dispute over the value of Ruby Payne's ideas seems to be taking place far from the trenches of public education. There, the opinion is largely pro-Payne.

When the Hamilton County, Tenn., district launched a project five years ago to turn around its nine lowest-performing elementary schools, local school leaders chose Ruby Payne as the first of several A-list consultants to speak to a gathering of the faculties. Since then, two administrators in the district, which includes Chattanooga, have joined the ranks of the 1,400 trainers Ms. Payne's group has certified.

One is Natalie Elder, the principal of Hardy Elementary School, where in the past four years students have shown among the greatest improvement on state tests of any school in the state. Teachers in her school are studying Ms. Payne's *Framework* together.

"It is the most powerful thing to me that you can give a teacher who has not really worked in an urban setting," says Ms. Elder, who, like almost all of her students, is black. "It brings into focus the kids they are serving."

Kathleen Flanagan, a teacher at an elementary school in Columbia, Md., was so excited by what she heard at a 2004 seminar conducted by Ms. Payne that she called her sister and urged her to drop what she was doing and get to the talk.

Ms. Flanagan had been puzzling over why a mother would

storm into school and berate a teacher over what seemed like a minor incident. What if the mother had been unable to protect her child from abuse meted out by, say, a live-in boyfriend? She might show she does love her baby by coming into school and reaming out the teacher because it's a safe environment, Ms. Payne suggested.

It was an "aha" moment for the teacher, who is white and grew up in a middle-class house. "Once you are able to look at even a few of these events and say, 'Oh my gosh, I'd do that also; this makes sense,' you have a kind of empathy you couldn't have before," Ms. Flanagan said.

A workshop on Ms. Payne's ideas seven years ago near the start of his career had a similar effect on John M. Holland, a Head Start teacher in Richmond, Va.

"For a teacher to move from seeing their students as having no 'home training' to seeing their students as better at some skills than they are themselves because of their 'home culture' is a really powerful experience," the nationally certified teacher wrote in an e-mail.

But the enthusiasm is not universal among teachers.

Deborah Bambino, a longtime Philadelphia teacher who is studying for her doctorate in education, says Ms. Payne's analysis bothered her, though she found "kernels" of truth there. While teachers need to start doing right by poor students in their own practice, as Ms. Payne suggests, it can't stop there, Ms. Bambino argues.

"If, in fact, all of our kids scored at 'proficient' and above, the jobs aren't there for them," she says. "To me, that's a fundamental question."

Another veteran teacher now in graduate school, Nancy Flanagan (no relation to Kathleen Flanagan), says she has heard colleagues at Michigan State University disparage Ms. Payne's work as "simplistic and judgmental."

And yet, "I think that speaks more to the disconnect between theory and practice," Ms. Flanagan asserted in an e-mail.

"Her insights help teachers deal with real situations." ■

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