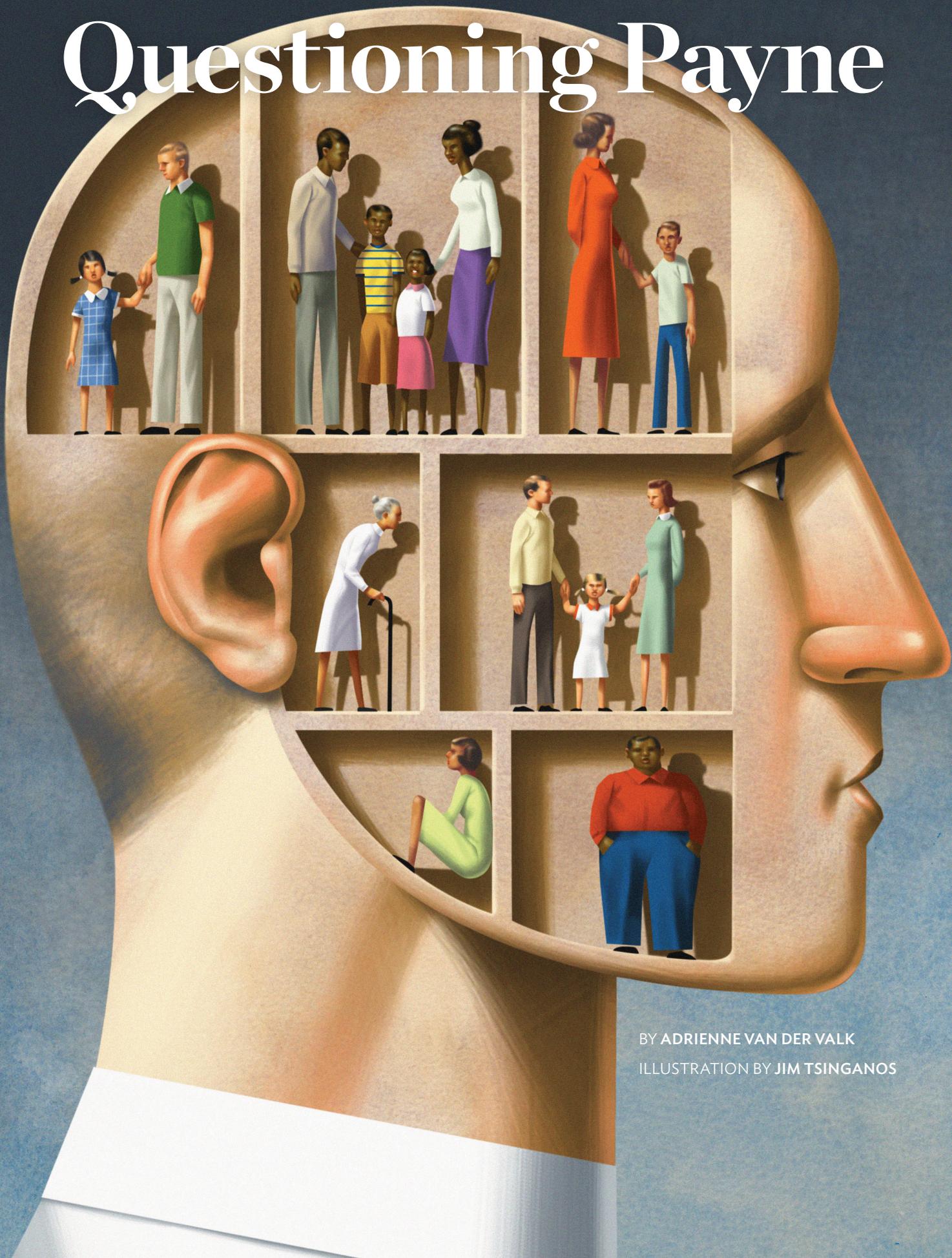


Questioning Payne



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Dr. Ruby Payne’s name is synonymous with professional development on poverty. But is that a good thing?

WHEN FOSTERING EQUITY in schools is part of your mission (as it is for Teaching Tolerance), you pay close attention to conversations about poverty. It’s a pressing topic for educators: One-fifth of children under 18 in the United States live below the federal poverty line, while more than half of public school students are designated low-income. Across the country, teachers are desperate for strategies to address the academic achievement gaps between low-income children and their higher-income peers.

Writer and educator Ruby Payne has been offering strategies for teaching students in poverty for almost 20 years. Since 1996, when she founded her business, aha! Process, to train educators on “the critical role schools can play in helping children and teens exit poverty,” Payne and her affiliates have, according to her website, “trained hundreds of thousands of professionals.” Her self-published book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, has sold more than 1.5 million copies. Chances are, if you’re a K-12 educator who has received professional development on working with students in poverty, the training was associated with Ruby Payne.

TT has long been aware of Payne’s work. A number of our staffers took aha! Process trainings during their teaching careers, and when a revised edition of *Framework* came out in 2013, we passed it around the office. But for the last 10 years, another conversation about Payne has been building among researchers, classroom teachers and education advocates. They question the theories that underpin *Framework* and raise concerns about the methods espoused by aha! Process. Some of her most vocal critics are Paul C. Gorski of George Mason University (an ally in TT’s equity work), Randy Bomer of the University of Texas at Austin and Paul Thomas of Furman University.

After reading some of the academic papers critiquing aha! Process, we decided to look more closely at how Payne’s most commonly encountered professional development materials align with our own work. We focused on her introductory offering, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, and we spoke with several educators who have participated in aha! Process workshops. We also talked with Payne about the questions critics have raised about her work focused on K-12 schools.

TT’s Philosophy of Teaching and Learning

Many of the practices TT promotes are based on instructional theory that is broadly referred to as culturally responsive pedagogy. This means we understand that children learn most effectively when educators know and support their unique strengths and validate the multiple aspects of their identities. The resulting practices arise from years of research on effective teaching and learning. Some of the foundational practices include:

- ➔ Holding all students to high expectations
- ➔ Finding and focusing on students’ cultural assets rather than their perceived deficits
- ➔ Providing curricular “mirrors” so students can see themselves in classroom materials
- ➔ Getting to know students’ families and communities and acknowledging the multiple facets of their identities
- ➔ Allowing space for students to share narratives about their lives and hear or read narratives about the lives of others
- ➔ Encouraging educators to continually examine their own power, privilege and bias—and to include discussions of power, privilege and bias in their teaching.

Basically, understanding the specific cultures and circumstances that shape students’ experiences allows educators to make connections and help students if they are struggling. And, because poverty affects so many young people, understanding the causes, effects and multipliers of poverty is critical to culturally responsive pedagogy.

The Criticisms

In our conversations with scholars, educators and other stakeholders, five main criticisms of Payne’s K-12 materials emerged:

- ❶ They focus on individual interventions and ignore the systems that cause, worsen and perpetuate poverty.
- ❷ They overgeneralize about people living in poverty and rely upon stereotypes.
- ❸ They focus on perceived weaknesses (or deficits) of children and families living in poverty.
- ❹ They are theoretically ungrounded and offer little evidence that they work.
- ❺ aha! Process workshops—and their price tags—capitalize on the needs of children in poverty.

We focused our inquiry on the critiques most closely tied to culturally responsive pedagogy—stereotypes and deficit thinking—and on the lack of evidence base, a critical concern when identifying best practices.

Operating on Stereotypes

Payne’s framework relies heavily on decoding a set of “Hidden Rules Among Classes.” The rules are organized as a table broken into three columns—poverty, middle class and wealth. Each column lists attitudes, actions and beliefs by category: family structure, food, time, money, personality and education, among several others. Education, for example, is “valued and revered as

abstract” by the poor, considered “crucial for climbing [the] success ladder” by the middle class, and “necessary ... for making and maintaining connections” by the wealthy.

Payne describes her approach as cognitive, meaning that it focuses on how the experience of scarcity (or plenty, or excess) affects thinking. The Hidden Rules, she says, capture the patterns created by these experiences (such as perceiving education as abstract because you interact with few highly educated people) and serve as a jumping-off point for interventions that disrupt or redirect unproductive patterns (help students see education as concretely useful, for example).

But Laura Jackson, a district office administrator who calls herself a “reformed Payne participant,” takes issue with the assumption that the cognitive effects of living in poverty can be generalized.

“The strategies that were learned within that particular workshop ... didn’t lead to scaffolding students as individuals,” Jackson says. “It created that idea that ... everybody living in poverty reacted, responded and did things the same way.”

Kate Shuster, an independent consultant who specializes in program evaluation and works closely with TT, points out that the Hidden Rules are also “rife with common stereotypes about the poor” (e.g., that they are disorganized, their homes are noisy and unkempt, they come to school with lower vocabularies). She worries that the list of beliefs and behaviors homogenizes a diverse class of people and reinforces common biases that many Americans, including teachers, *already hold* about people living in poverty.

“We are wired to accept ideas that confirm our existing beliefs and reject those that don’t,” Shuster says. “It’s essentially stereotype confirmation.”

From Payne’s perspective, offering educators the rules benefits their

abilities to connect with children. “The brain is good at sorting patterns,” Payne explained in our interview. “You can have informed or uninformed patterns. What numerous teachers have basically told me is that the more information you have, the more understanding of the reality of that survival environment, the less judgmental you are.”

But school social worker Kayci Rush, who has taken aha! Process workshops and worked with many teachers who have been trained by Payne, observes something very different.

“Teachers seem to find relief that the responsibility for student failure is the ‘culture of poverty’ and not teacher instruction,” Rush says. “New teachers will use the *Framework* concept language—i.e., speak of the need to be concrete because ‘poor kids struggle with abstract concepts’; they ‘don’t understand the rules and codes’; they ‘have no formal language’ and ‘use slang and informal speech patterns.’ ... It goes on and on. All of this becomes a rationalization for incredible racial bias and reinforcing of white normative values and expectations.”

Payne chooses not to delve deeply into how class intersects with race, gender or other identities, explaining that *Framework* was never intended to address those topics. But her singular focus on poverty elevates class above everything, fundamentally undermining the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy and ignoring the harm that can arise from seeing only one aspect of a child’s identity.

“Would you assume an African-American girl, a white boy with a disability and a Somali immigrant child all need the same supports,” asks TT director Maureen Costello, “even if all three were living in poverty?”

Payne’s emphasis on individual behaviors, skills and relationships spotlights personal responsibility over other causes of poverty. For educators who haven’t studied income inequality

or the impact of race on opportunity, the likely takeaway is an oversimplified vision of who their students in poverty are, why their families are poor and what they need to succeed—a takeaway that, from TT’s perspective, undermines justice and equity in schools.

Deficit Thinking

Another criticism levelled against Payne is that she emphasizes skills and experiences students in poverty allegedly lack, such as language proficiency, cognitive and behavioral skills, and respect for authority. It’s not only that the rules of poverty Payne identifies are *different* from those of the middle or upper classes, critics argue; it’s also that the rules of poverty are *not as good*.

Paul Thomas of Furman University finds fault with Payne’s work in large part because, as he wrote in a 2009 article titled “Shifting from Deficit to Generative Practices,” she stresses student deficits relative to “unspoken norm[s] of what people should have and be.”

“It puts all the focus on the learner,” Thomas told TT. “It creates a model where the individual child is flawed and has to be fixed.”

Payne denies that her work relies on deficits. “Deficit doesn’t have to do with learning,” she says. “People go to school because there’s something they don’t know how to do, and that’s why you go to school to learn it. If you grew up in a farming community, you probably may not know how to swim. That doesn’t mean you [have a] deficit; it just simply means that’s not in your environment. You know other things.”

But almost every chapter of *Framework* unpacks a different life arena (e.g., family life, role models) in which students are not getting what they need to function in the middle class—an undeniable focus on what’s missing or dysfunctional as opposed to what’s there and working. Rush and other educators we spoke with point to Payne’s emphasis

on chaotic families as especially damaging, particularly since connecting with families is critical to cultural responsiveness and student success.

“If an educator is already predisposed to not want to make contact with families or parents, it gives them permission to continue not doing that,” Rush says. “Parents are cast as part of the problem.”

In the introduction to *Framework*, Payne tells readers, “We can neither excuse people nor scold them for not knowing,” signaling to educators that they are in the superior position to either cast or withhold judgment. *Framework* never takes the next step of transcending—or even examining—those judgments by encouraging teachers to question their biases and seek out the unique resilience and resourcefulness of students and their families.

Lack of Evidence Base

In the first few editions of *Framework*, Payne cited a single source to support her claims: observations she made while married to a man who grew up in generational poverty. These observations, she explained, informed the Hidden Rules she developed. Considering the pressure schools are under to implement evidence-based interventions, the absence of a substantial theoretical or empirical framework troubled many educators and scholars.

The 2013 edition of *Framework* does include a substantial reference section and cites research studies that support her assertions about, for example, the number of students living in single-parent households and the ways in which people in poverty discipline their children. However, the revisions do not indicate a research-to-practice model; instead, she selectively cites research to prop up individual assertions or sections of the book. The heart of *Framework* itself remains based on her early personal observations.

The latest edition also includes a footnoted reference to a positive evaluation of Payne’s work conducted by the little-known Center for Study of Economic Diversity. The Center is not an independent third-party investigator but—as its tax records reveal—a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization established by Payne herself and since disbanded. The aha! Process website also offers “Data Speaks” reports on schools that implement Payne’s comprehensive school model. Most show improvements, but offer no evidence of valid comparison groups or effects sizes.

Neither the Center for Study of Economic Diversity evaluation nor the “Data Speaks” research holds up to scrutiny. Teaching Tolerance retained Dr. Joseph Taylor, an independent program evaluation specialist, to review these materials. His findings? “All studies provide weak evidence of effectiveness and none meet What Works Clearinghouse standards” (the gold standard for intervention research). To read his review in its entirety, visit tolerance.org/payneresearch.

Payne has said that the popularity of her book and workshops is a measure of their quality, a claim that also holds no empirical value. As we’ve noted, educators are hungry for information and support about poverty, and *Framework* offers a familiar, accessible story couched in language that legitimizes pre-existing beliefs. It’s also the only major option on the market.

Fundamentally at Odds

If the aha! Process program transformed teaching and learning in ways that empowered students and demonstrably improved their academic outcomes, we probably wouldn’t question it so closely. But 20 years and “hundreds of thousands” of teachers later, that hasn’t happened.

Payne has been on the defensive for years now. *Framework* includes an appendix responding to critics, and

her rebuttal boils down to two basic statements: ❶ Social justice is not her area of focus or expertise, and ❷ the complexity of poverty does not allow *Framework* to address all of its components in depth. Humans, she argues, naturally apply rules and patterns, and she has harnessed that tendency to help educators understand why children in poverty struggle to succeed in a world of middle class norms and how they can help. What is so bad about that?

And not all of her individual recommendations are bad. In fact, some of Payne’s suggestions do align with curricular design and practice recommendations TT has made over the years, specifically her emphasis on nurturing adult relationships, relational learning and student-driven inquiry. But these recommendations are not unique to children in poverty, nor are they unique to Payne. When presented in a larger context that reinforces biased assumptions about students, the value of Payne’s recommendations diminishes radically, leaving her framework fundamentally incongruent with TT’s beliefs about teaching and learning.

Thomas points out that focusing exclusively on poverty—or any aspect of identity in isolation—distracts from the skills that teachers need to truly connect with all students, foster equity in schools and engage in culturally responsive practice.

“A teacher’s job is to teach a specific set of students,” he says. “As long as we keep acting like there’s this monolithic way to address any group of students, we’re not spending time helping a teacher teach the group of kids he or she has at the moment. I think schools that know they have challenging populations would do better to have sustained study groups [on] ‘How do we better serve our students?’ Not ‘How do we teach children in poverty?’ ‘How do we better serve *our* students?’” ♦

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