Ruby Payne: A Framework for Understanding Poverty

Introduction

This book came to be because so many people were asking questions that, finally, I promised to put things in writing. My name is Ruby Payne, and I never realized that the information I had gathered over the years about poverty, middle class, and wealth would be of interest to other people.

It wasn’t until an assistant principal, Judy Duncan, came to me and asked about a staff-development program for her faculty on discipline—and referenced the number of student referrals they were having—that I even began talking about the differences. She noted how the population in the school had changed over the past three years from 24% low income (as measured by the number of students on free and reduced-price lunch) to 60% low income. As she described the kinds of discipline situations they were experiencing, I would explain why those behaviors were happening. Finally, she stopped me and asked where I was getting my information. It was at that point that I realized that I had been gathering data for 24 years.

Where had I gotten the data? First of all, I have been married since 1973 to Frank, who grew up in poverty because his father died when he was 6. Though it was situational poverty, he lived for several years with those who were in generational poverty. Over the years, as I met his family and the many other players in the “neighborhood,” I came to realize there were major differences between generational poverty and middle class—and that the biggest differences were not about money. But what put the whole picture into bas-relief were the six years we spent in Illinois among the wealthy. It was the addition of the third dimension, wealth, that clarified the differences between and among poverty, middle class, and wealth.

As the principal of an affluent elementary school in Illinois, I began to rethink so much of what I had thought about poverty and wealth. The Illinois students had no more native intelligence than the poor students I had worked with earlier in my career. And I noticed that among affluent black, Hispanic, and Asian children, their achievement levels were no different from the white children who were affluent.
So, at Judy Duncan’s request, I shared the information with her faculty members. They were very interested and thought the information was helpful. One teacher told another, and soon I was doing several workshops in other districts. Sara Hector, a field service agent with the Texas Education Agency, attended a workshop and told many people about it. Then Jay Stailey, another principal, asked me to come with him to the University of Houston-Clear Lake to meet with a grant consortium, of which he was co-chair. This session led to more meetings and conversations.
So this information has spread more quickly than I could have ever anticipated. I just hope this data will be helpful to you, the reader, as well.

**SOME KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER**

1. **Poverty is relative.** If everyone around you has similar circumstances, the notion of poverty and wealth is vague. Poverty or wealth only exists in relationship to known quantities or expectations.

2. **Poverty occurs in all races and in all countries.** The notion of middle class as a large segment of society is a phenomenon of this century. The percentage of the population that is poor is subject to definition and circumstance.

3. **Economic class is a continuous line, not a clear-cut distinction.** In 1994, the poverty line was considered $14,340 for a family of four. In 1994, 7% of the population made more than $100,000 per year. Individuals are stationed all along the continuum of income; they sometimes move on that continuum as well.

4. **Generational poverty and situational poverty are different.** Generational poverty is defined as being in poverty for two generations or longer. Situational poverty is a shorter time and is caused by circumstance (i.e., death, illness, divorce, etc.).

5. **This work is based on patterns. All patterns have exceptions.**
6. An individual brings with him/her the hidden rules of the class in which he/she was raised. Even though the income of the individual may rise significantly, many of the patterns of thought, social interaction, cognitive strategies, etc., remain with the individual.

7. Schools and businesses operate from middle-class norms and use the hidden rules of middle class. These norms and hidden rules are not directly taught in schools or in businesses.

8. For our students to be successful, we must understand their hidden rules and teach them the rules that will make them successful at school and at work.

9. We can neither excuse students nor scold them for not knowing; as educators we must teach them and provide support, insistence, and expectations.

10. To move from poverty to middle class or middle class to wealth, an individual must give up relationships for achievement (at least for some period of time).

SOME CURRENT STATISTICS ABOUT POVERTY

1. In the United States in 1996, one out of four individuals (25%) under the age of 18 was living in poverty (Center for the Study of Poverty, Columbia University).

2. In 1989, one in three Latino children was living in poverty. Key factors contributing to high Latino child poverty rates include: parents' low hourly earnings, parents' low educational attainment, Latino women's smaller likelihood of working outside the home, and widespread employment discrimination (Miranda, 1991).

3. Regardless of race or ethnicity, poor children are much more likely than non-poor children to suffer developmental delay and damage, to
drop out of high school, and to give birth during the teen years (Miranda, 1991).

4. Poverty-prone children are more likely to be in single-parent families (Einbinder, 1993). Median female wages in the United States, at all levels of educational attainment, are 30 to 50% lower than male wages at the same level of educational attainment (TSII Manual, 1995, based on U.S. Census data, 1993).

5. Poor inner-city youths are seven times more likely to be the victims of child abuse or neglect than are children of high social and economic status (Renchler, 1993).

6. Poverty is caused by interrelated factors: parental employment status and earnings, family structure, and parental education (Five Million Children, 1992).

7. In the 1990 census, the following ethnic percentages and numbers of poor children were reported (see chart on next page).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNITED STATES</th>
<th>NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN POVERTY</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN IN POVERTY</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE INCREASE FROM 1980 TO 1990 CENSUS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ALL RACES</td>
<td>11,428,916</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHITE</td>
<td>5,876,267</td>
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<td>13.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>AFRICAN-AMERICAN</td>
<td>3,717,128</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>HISPANIC *</td>
<td>2,407,466</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASIAN-AMERICAN</td>
<td>346,491</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>NATIVE AMERICAN</td>
<td>260,403</td>
<td>38.8%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Hispanics may be of any race.

Note: Chart taken from *Making Schools Work for Children in Poverty*.

8. While the number of white children in poverty is the largest group, the percentage of children in poverty in minority groups is higher.