

The Class-Consciousness Raiser

By PAUL TOUGH

By the time Ruby Payne sat down for lunch, she had been at it for three hours straight, standing alone behind a lectern on a wide stage in a cavernous convention hall, parked between two American flags, instructing an audience of 1,400 Georgians in the hidden rules of class. No notes, no warm-up act, just Ruby, with her Midwestern-by-way-of-East-Texas drawl and her crisp white shirt, her pinstriped business suit and bright red lipstick and blow-dried blond hair, a wireless microphone hooked around her right ear. She had already explained why rich people don't eat casseroles, why poor people hang their pictures high up on the wall, why middle-class people pretend to like people they can't stand. She had gone through the difference between generational poverty and situational poverty and the difference between new money and old money, and she had done a riff on how middle-class people are so self-satisfied that they think everyone wants to be middle class.

For the Glynn County Board of Education, Payne's visit was a big deal. It was back in 2005 that Marjorie Varnadoe, the board's director of professional development, called to request a presentation from Payne, and this particular Thursday, two years later, was the earliest available date. Principals had ordered Payne's books and DVDs by the boxload, mostly her ur-text, "A Framework for Understanding Poverty," and they made the books required reading for their staffs. All over the county, which is on the coast, down near the Florida border, schools held small workshops on class and education, using Payne's "Framework" as a guide, and teachers sat down together for informal discussions and lunchroom chats about poverty and wealth. When the big day came, the entire school system was given the day off, and by 8 a.m. almost every single teacher and administrator in the county was packed into the Jekyll Island Conference Center, along with the school board, the Chamber of Commerce and various local dignitaries.

The morning went well. Payne, who is 56, has been giving this presentation for more than 10 years, and she knows how to work it: alternating a funny story with a sad one, mixing anecdotes from her own teaching career with references to the work of learned academics, never lecturing or preaching, keeping up a steady stream of one-liners. At 10 a.m., there was a 15-minute break, but not for Payne. A line quickly formed in

front of her, and she sat on the lip of the stage, leaning on one arm, her legs tucked beneath her, signing books and listening attentively as one audience member after another told her their own stories about class and education and, usually, how her books had helped them understand their students and themselves. A few of the teachers hugged Payne. One woman kissed her hand. Another burst into tears.

And now it was time for lunch, fried chicken and sweet iced tea and white sheet cake for 1,400, served in a second giant conference hall just across the atrium from the first. Payne sat in the middle of a small circle of admirers; across the table was Charlotte Lawson, an instructional coach at a local elementary school. Lawson was a veteran of the Ruby Payne system, a graduate of a four-day in-depth certification course that authorized her to train other teachers in the basics of Payne's framework. But she had never met Payne one on one like this, and she was gushing. "I'm so excited," she said. "This is like a dream."

Payne laughed a friendly laugh.

"I've shared so much of the training here," Lawson said. "People are always telling me, 'It makes all the pieces fit together.' When you work with children and families from poverty, you don't understand it till you hear this piece, and then all of a sudden you're going, 'Oh, that's why they did that.' "

At the heart of Payne's philosophy is a one-page chart, titled "Hidden Rules Among Classes," which appears in most of her books. There are three columns, for poverty, middle class and wealth, and 15 rows, covering everything from time to love to money to language. In a few words, Payne explains how each class sees each concept. Humor in poverty? About people and sex. In the middle class? About situations. In wealth? About social faux pas. In poverty, the present is most important. In the middle class, it's the future. In wealth, it's the past. The key question about food in poverty: Did you have enough? In the middle class: Did you like it? In wealth: Was it presented well?

It may be that the only people with abiding faith in the power of class divisions in America are the country's few remaining Marxists and Ruby Payne. And while Payne may not believe in class struggle, per se, she does believe that there is widespread misunderstanding among the classes — and more than ever, she says, the class that bears the cost of that misunderstanding is the poor. In schools, particularly, where

poor students often find themselves assigned to middle-class teachers, class cluelessness is rampant.

Your class, Payne says, determines everything: your eating habits, your speech patterns, your family relations. It is possible to move out of the class you were born into, either up or down, she says, but the transition almost always means a great disruption to your sense of self. And you can ascend the class ladder only if you are willing to sacrifice many of your relationships and most of your values — and only if you first devote yourself to careful study of the hidden rules of the class you hope to enter.

Payne's critics say she is oversimplifying the complexities of poverty in the United States, perpetuating offensive stereotypes of irresponsible, disorganized poor people who play the TV too loud and like to solve disputes with their fists. Payne is quick to caution that her portrait is a general one. She would be "heartsick," she said on stage, "if anyone used this information to stereotype." But she also says that if teachers and other professionals don't look below the surface of class — if they don't make an effort to understand the habits and styles and traditions that persist in many poor families — they will never be able to recognize the deep obstacles that poor people, and especially poor children, often face.

Payne's journey into class consciousness began more than 30 years ago, when she met Frank, the man who would become her husband. Ruby was raised in a middle-class Mennonite family in Ohio, while Frank grew up in extreme poverty in Goshen, Ind. As Ruby began to spend time in Frank's impoverished neighborhood, she realized that she didn't understand the first thing about the lives of the people who lived there — and they didn't get her, either. Frank's friends were appalled that Ruby didn't know how to defend herself in a fight; Ruby was stunned that her neighbors would regularly get paid on Friday and, after a weekend of carousing, be broke by Monday.

As Payne studied her new surroundings, she came to appreciate more subtle nuances of class division. She realized that her husband's family's poverty was what she would later come to call "situational": they had been middle class until Frank's father died when Frank was 6, and only then had they slipped down to the economy's bottom rung. Most of their neighbors, by contrast, were in "generational poverty,"

meaning their families had been poor for as long as anyone could remember. Each group, she discovered, had its own distinct set of beliefs and customs.

Payne's next lesson came when her husband took a job on the floor of the [Chicago Board of Trade](#). He wasn't rich, but he was now spending his work life with men who were, which meant that Ruby was expected to socialize with their wives. She didn't fit in with the rich any better than she had fit in with the poor. More miscommunications and social awkwardness ensued, generating more fodder for Payne's growing understanding of class difference.

Payne wasn't quite sure what to do with this new knowledge. As her career in education developed, from teacher to principal to administrator, she found that her understanding of class came in handy. Because of her exposure to her husband's family and neighbors, it seemed, she was better able to communicate with poor students than most other middle-class teachers. Her colleagues began to ask her for help and advice on dealing with their most troubling students, and Payne worked up an informal set of strategies and tips that she would pass along.

Then in 1993, after moving to Texas, Payne read a book that had a profound effect on her: "Creating Money," a New Age-infused guide to "the spiritual laws of money." It's an odd book, ostensibly dictated to the authors by two "spirit guides" named Orin and DaBen. But Payne was inspired. "The book said, Make a list of what you want in your life and ask the universe to bring it to you," she told me. "So I did. I wrote: 'I want a life without financial constraints. I want a life without institutional constraints. And I want to make a difference with children.' And it happened!"

Payne began to give talks on class for small groups of teachers, and they were a hit. Word spread. Soon she was addressing audiences all across the Texas school district where she worked. Over spring break in 1995, she banged out a manuscript based on her ideas and quickly published it herself. This was "A Framework for Understanding Poverty," which, she says, has gone on to sell more than a million copies. As Payne's following grew, she quit her job and became a full-time speaker, author and trainer.

She now owns and runs her own business, called aha! Process, Inc.; it has more than 50 trainers on contract and accrues millions of dollars in annual revenues. Ruby Payne has become a small industry: her company offers training sessions, workshops, DVDs, audiotapes, T-shirts, autographed Ruby Payne coffee mugs and lots and lots of books:

a book about the hidden rules of class in the workplace, a workbook to help people in poverty learn the rules to pull themselves out, a Spanish translation of “A Framework for Understanding Poverty.” In “What Every Church Member Should Know About Poverty,” which Payne wrote with Bill Ehlig, a minister in Baytown, Tex., she not only urges middle-class and wealthy churches to welcome poor parishioners in the door but she also lays out the extra steps they need to take to make the newcomers feel at home. In “Crossing the Tracks for Love,” Payne takes on romance, offering advice for those who enter into a relationship with a person from another class. It’s not easy, Payne cautions: everything from disciplining children to interior decoration is a potential flashpoint for a class-based quarrel. So she provides tips:

“If you’re from middle class and marry or otherwise move into poverty, understand the need of your spouse/partner to protect you,” she writes. “You are his/her possession. Try to see the positives in this.”

And later: “If you come from a middle-class background and marry into wealth . . . learn about extended silverware and silver settings and the different pieces of crystal used to drink different beverages — and take cooking classes. Never, but never, make fun of yourself as a deficient cook. Be extremely knowledgeable about wine.”

In “Crossing the Tracks,” as in all of her work, Payne emphasizes that she is not making value judgments about the relative merits of the different classes; she’s just explaining how they work. “I’m not interested in changing your behavior or the behavior of your spouse or significant other,” she writes. “My only goal is to provide you with options — and awareness. When you know the hidden rules, you have more choices. You can choose whether or not you want to alter your behavior or embrace a different way of doing things. But unless you’re informed, you won’t get the opportunity to decide.”

Despite Payne’s counsel, the reality is that in the nation’s bedrooms and churches, bridges across the class divide are increasingly rare: most Americans worship with and marry people who are just like them. In public schools, though, class divisions are a frequent part of daily existence, sometimes within the student body but also, and more significant, between teachers and students.

The passage of the No Child Left Behind law in 2002 brought a new urgency to the issue of poverty in the classroom. For the first time, schools were required not only to

report their overall test results but also to calculate the scores for various “subgroups,” including racial minorities, students for whom English is a second language and students whose parents’ income is low enough to qualify them for a free or reduced-price lunch. It soon became impossible to ignore that there was a problem: poor students were scoring well behind their wealthier peers. And schools suddenly had a powerful incentive to try to address that disparity. Even otherwise well-performing schools could be labeled failures if their poor students weren’t catching up.

Payne believes that teachers can’t help their poor students unless they first understand them, and that means understanding the hidden rules of poverty. The second step, Payne says, is to teach poor students explicitly about the hidden rules of the middle class. She emphasizes that the goal should not be to change students’ behavior outside of school: you don’t teach your students never to fight if fighting is an important survival skill in the housing project where they live. But you do tell them that in order to succeed at school or later on in a white-collar job, they need to master certain skills: how to speak in “formal register,” how to restrain themselves from physical retaliation, how to keep a schedule, how to exist in what Payne calls the “abstract world of paper.”

At the Jekyll Island seminar, I met Steve Kipp, a science teacher at Brunswick High with a ponytail and a jumpy, eager energy. He looked as if he might be the kind of guy whom the other teachers would call when they couldn’t get their computers to work right. Kipp sat in the front row, dead center, and at the break he was the first person to come up and ask Payne for advice.

In 10th grade at Brunswick High, Kipp told me later, the advanced students usually take chemistry, and the other students, the ones who are more likely to wind up in technical college, take Kipp’s class, which is called General Physical Science. And each year it’s the same, Kipp said: the rich and middle-class kids are tracked into chemistry, and he gets the kids from poverty. Kipp grew up in the middle class, and in the past, he said, before he read Payne’s book, he would get frustrated by his poor students. They seemed unwilling or unable to learn; they laughed when he tried to mete out discipline. And so he found it hard to keep exerting himself. What was the point in teaching them, he thought, if they weren’t going to make an effort?

But after he immersed himself in Payne's work, about five years ago, Kipp's ideas changed. "I realized, these kids aren't dumb," he said. "They just haven't had the enriching experiences that I had growing up." So he pushes himself harder now to provide more experiments in the classroom, more hands-on learning to help his students develop the same kind of instinctive understanding of nature that he got running around in the woods as a boy.

Payne's work in the schools has attracted a growing chorus of criticism, mostly from academia. Although Payne says that her only goal is to help poor students, her critics claim that her work is in fact an assault on those students. By teaching them middle-class practices, critics say, she is engaging in "classism" and racism. Her work is "riddled with factual inaccuracies and harmful stereotypes," charges Anita Bohn, an assistant professor at Illinois State University, in a paper on Payne's work. Paul Gorski, an assistant professor at Hamline University in St. Paul, writes that Payne's central text "consists, at the crudest level, of a stream of stereotypes and a suggestion that we address poverty and education by 'fixing' poor people instead of reforming classist policies and practices." ("LeftyHenry," a recent poster on a political blog, was less subtle in his criticism; he called Payne "the [Hitler](#) of American academics.")

Payne's critics seem less aggrieved by what she includes in her analysis than by what they say she has left out: an acknowledgment that the American economy and American schools systematically discriminate against poor people. In this way, Payne finds herself in the middle of one of the central debates about poverty today. On one side are those, like Payne, who believe that poor people share certain habits and behaviors that help keep them in poverty. Recognizing and changing those behaviors, Payne and those who share her views believe, will help poor people to succeed. On the other side are those like Payne's critics, who think that the game is so thoroughly fixed that most poor people can't succeed no matter what they do. To them, locating any of the causes of persistent poverty among poor people themselves is, in effect, blaming the victim.

Academics in the latter group can't stand Payne. And academics in the former group find it hard to defend her. There are plenty of sociologists, psychologists and economists who have reached conclusions similar to Payne's: poor parents are more inclined to use corporal punishment; poor students are more eager to work hard in a teacher's class when they feel a personal relationship with a teacher; poor homes are

more often chaotic and loud. The problem is Payne's methodology, or rather her lack of one. She does have a Ph.D. in social policy, and her book does have a few pages of footnotes. Her seminars include occasional references to popular scholarly works of sociology and history, like Robert Putnam's "Bowling Alone" and Jared Diamond's "Guns, Germs and Steel." But clearly, Payne's preferred unit of research is the anecdote. Her talks are nothing like university lectures. They're a blend of cracker-barrel wisdom, Tony Robbins-style motivational speaking and a Chris Rock comedy routine. And that means that among academics in good standing, saying something nice about Ruby Payne is a good way to invite the disapproval of your peers.

You would think that Payne wouldn't fret about a few angry assistant professors whose collective audience is a tiny fraction of the size of hers. But somehow, like gnats at a backyard barbecue, they drive her to distraction. Each time a progressive education journal publishes a detailed Foucauldian critique of her book (which she wrote, don't forget, in a single week), Payne feels compelled to write in with a paragraph or two in her own defense. It doesn't work, of course; the author invariably blasts back with another extended volley of withering scorn. In the pages of the Teachers College Record, the rich blond-haired white lady from Corpus Christi is never going to come out ahead.

Still, Payne won't give up. She told me that she plans to spend a good part of this summer bolstering the scholarship behind her work, digging into the latest research, adding footnotes and references to her 11-year-old book.

For now, though, she's got her stories, one after another, some from her own life, some from her trainers or from teachers and principals she has worked with. They can seem rehearsed, a little neat; some she repeats almost verbatim from one or another of her books. But for the teachers in the Jekyll Island conference center, that didn't seem to matter much. For many of them, the real struggle of teaching wasn't about keeping up with the latest in the debate on phonics versus whole language. It was about figuring out how to teach, how to help — even how to connect with — students who sometimes seemed as if they weren't just from a different neighborhood but from a different planet.

As the afternoon drew to a close, Payne cut out the jokes and grew serious. "I think the hardest part about teaching is the stories that kids tell you that just pull your heart

out,” she said, gripping the sides of the lectern and scanning the audience. “There isn’t a person in here who doesn’t have a student whose stories still haunt you.” Her voice was quiet, and her accent had softened. Every pair of eyes, it seemed, was on her. “What I’ve learned to say to kids is this: ‘You know, I respect you so much that you can handle this situation. I don’t know that I could. But if you don’t want to live that way the rest of your life, then I can give you the tools that will help you do things differently. It’s your choice. I can’t change your situation right now, but I can certainly give you the tools to help you change.’ And I think that’s the gift we bring. It’s a huge gift.”

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