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Mythology, Moral Panic, and the Ruby Payne Bandwagon

There is little argument that poverty remains a pervasive problem in Ontario, affecting about one in seven children (Monsebraaten, 2013). Socio-economic status (SES) affects student achievement in schools: lower SES is correlated to higher frequency of drop-outs, and lower academic performance with many of these children labeled “at risk” (see, for example, Barajas, Philipsen & Brooks-Gunn, 2007; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). It’s no surprise that educators and academics alike are concerned with a solution that would ensure all students have ample access to opportunity and for success.

Much of the talk about solutions boils down to an important question: is academic underperformance¹ a deficiency in the student, or the system?

Before we begin to answer that question, it is useful to have a look at the framing of the issue of poverty, and how that has led to differences in opinion about solution. Hasinoff and Mandzuk (2014, 2015) offer a useful framework to make sense of cycles of educational problems by identifying underlying myths, reactionary moral panics, and problematic bandwagon solutions.

This framework starts with myths: deeply-rooted beliefs that people hold about education and social issues. Myths appear in public and private discourse — ranging from media coverage of social issues,

to political statements, to conversations in school staff rooms. While we are not suggesting that all individuals buy into myths, we concur with Hasinoff and Mandzuk (2014, 2015) that they can and do shape dominant discourses.

Those myths then rise to the level of a moral panic: a movement based on false or exaggerated perceptions about cultural behaviour posing threat to society's values or interests. Moral panics frame social problems — and lead to attempts to address or solve them. Bandwagons develop to solve moral panics. Hasinoff and Mandzuk (2014, 2015) describe bandwagons as typically being led by a so-called expert or guru, leveraging myths in an attempt to solve problems framed as moral panics.

Poverty is ensconced in a number of pervasive myths frequently seen in headlines, popular media, and political discourse. Paul Gorski (2008b) traced the current mythology to Oscar Lewis's 1961 book, *The Culture of Poverty*. Based on the study of small communities, this research was erroneously used to suggest a single, negative "culture of poverty." Some of the enduring myths — and as Gorski clearly illustrates with counter-evidence, they are myths — include stereotypes about poor work ethic, negative attitudes about education, parental disinterest, and drug and alcohol use.

These mythical stereotypes, coupled with a general concern over alleged crises in North American education, have led to widespread moral panic. Since the 1983 release of *A Nation At Risk* in the United States, politicians and the media have rung alarm bells about the supposed educational crisis and the inevitable economic decline it will cause based on a loss of international competitiveness (West, 2012). And who is responsible for that educational crisis? The poor, who allegedly pull scores and educational attainment downwards.

The ensuing moral panic to raise educational standards and achievement in order to avert economic disaster has led to various bandwagons — perhaps the most famous of them led by none other than Ruby Payne.

Payne, a former educator and current entrepreneur, leads the bandwagon with her wildly successful² aha! Process, Inc. The company offers consulting and training to public service providers, as well as a host of resources including books that are based on Payne's book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. The cover of the book overtly

states her guru status, with the phrase, “The Leading U.S. Expert on the Mindsets of Poverty, Middle Class and Wealth” appearing below the author’s name. The book is based on a collection of Payne’s personal, anecdotal observations of the lower class in United States (Gorski, 2008a). Those observations serve as the basis for training programs, which claims to give teachers and other public sector workers insight into the world of the impoverished. Her latest book, *Bridges Out of Poverty* is aimed at even broader array of community service providers beyond education.

Payne’s programs attempt to pinpoint the shortcomings of “lower classes” that live in the “culture of poverty” (their deficiencies with regard the characteristics just mentioned), and change those individuals so that they look, sound and act “middle class.”

The goal is to educate students who live in a purported “culture of poverty” so that they understand what Payne calls the hidden rules of the middle class. This is supposed to enable students to free themselves from the cycle of poverty by mimicking Payne’s account of the culture of the middle class. She describes the culture of poverty in relation to the cultures of the middle class and the wealthy via observations about food and clothing, family structure and world view, and interactional and speech patterns (Gorski, 2008a). In other words, Payne’s programs attempt to pinpoint the shortcomings of “lower classes” that live in the “culture of poverty” (their deficiencies with regard the characteristics just mentioned), and change those individuals so that they look, sound and act “middle class.” This is very much a Pygmalion narrative: the teacher become a Dr. Higgins of sorts to the student’s Eliza Doolittle: “You see this creature with her kerbstone English: the English that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days,” he says, “Well, sir, in three months I could pass that girl off as a duchess at an ambassador’s garden party.” This is not unlike the narrative underpinning *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*.

Payne’s program structure includes coping strategies for those who live the purported culture of poverty, instruction on how to survive in

school, and approaches to goal-setting (Gorski, 2008a). Various chapters then instruct teachers on effective discipline, curricular and pedagogical strategies, and relationship-building strategies (Gorski, 2008a).

The *Framework's* simplicity seduces thousands upon thousands of teachers, principals, and school districts internationally into an oversimplified "solution" to a "culture problem" that Payne-as-a-bandwagon-guru constructs. School districts and public service agencies across North America have turned to Payne to educate their employees. In 2008, Hamilton Wentworth District School Board brought in Ruby Payne to train teachers. Other Ontario public-sector institutions who have provided Aha-Process employee training include Dufferin-Wellington-Guelph Public Health, Sarnia's Lambton College, and York Region District School Board. In light of these developments, our goal here is to critically analyze the popular bandwagon, and explore alternate (and arguably more equitable approaches) to addressing the needs of students struggling with poverty in the context of Ontario schools.

Overcoming myths

The proclamations and vague statistics on the aha! Process Inc. website and in Payne's books appear well-intentioned and promising. Closer scrutiny reveals a lack of evidence that feeds into the mythology underpinning her work. Gorski (2008a) points out that the *Framework* is based on anecdotal observations disguised as research, and self-published without the benefit of peer review. In defence of her methodology, Payne asserts that "there is not a good research methodology for social ecologies." This assertion does not stop her, however, from proclaiming unequivocally that her own data collection proves that her methods work. (Payne, 2009). The program's flaws have been discussed relatively widely in the academic literature — in fact, the July 2009 issue of the prestigious *Teachers College Record* published several critiques of Payne, with responses to those critiques penned by Payne herself. We would encourage readers to view Payne's published responses, as well as the original authors' responses to her responses.

Mythology within deficit thinking

Deficit thinking is the myth that underachievement is caused by deficiencies in students, their families, their culture, or their communities (Dudley-Marling, 2007; Gorski, 2006; Pinto, 2013). This is the dominant framework for understanding student underperformance in schools (Pinto, 2013). According to Dworin and Bomer (2008), Payne's narratives about students and how to treat them legitimizes deficit thinking, and this takes shape through recommendations that students living in poverty require "reductive or remedial curricula and pedagogy that ignore the linguistic, cultural, and intellectual resources students actually bring to school" (p. 117). Similarly, Gorski (2006) and Osei-Kofi (2005) have outlined how aha! Process Inc. workshops contribute deficit thinking in meticulous detail.

In one of her published responses to critiques, Payne refutes these accusations by pointing out that she believes in all students' potential cognitive abilities and that the deficit model is a merely unproven theory, or a way of looking at the glass "half-empty" (Payne, 2008). In fact, she claims that her program has elements of an "additive model" that "honors internal assets of people from all economic classes" (Payne, 2008, p.372). This view creates convenient separation within an individual as a learner: separate cognitive and cultural parts where the deficient "cultural" identity needs fixing in order to value the same things that middle class students do.

By focusing on "fixing" the cultural identity of the student, educators diminish individual and community worth. Such attempts to reform individuals can result in alienation from their family, or simple rejection

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of school (thus exacerbating the problem of low achievement) (Pinto, 2013). Alienation, broadly speaking, can range from lack of interest to a feeling of disconnectedness, to outright aversion and hostility towards schooling. But the term also can refer to the ways in which education separates the student from his or her home and community in ways that are potentially damaging (Pinto, 2013).

When teachers view the problem as the individual student's shortcoming, there's not much to be done other than to tolerate students' presence or try to change the student. However, consideration of the important role systems play in failing to meet the needs of students who struggle reveal an obligation to take a different course of action. An engaged student is one who feels a sense of belongingness and community (McInerney, 2009). Engaged students participate fully in learning in the classroom without necessarily experiencing painful alienation. This, however, requires profound changes in the way that classrooms operate, arising out of respect and integration of students and their communities, not by trying to change the student to fit a system (Pinto, 2013).

Mythology within classism

Although Ruby Payne vehemently denies perpetuation of classism, her framework is based on the argument that (a) three classes exist (lower or poverty, middle, and upper); (b) these classes have distinct, monolithic values and behaviours; and (c) the values and behaviours of the middle class must be emulated for school and workplace success.

Payne portrays families living in poverty in a negative light — and this is where the allegations of classism sit. She describes lower class approaches to communication (“the informal register”) as not as abstract as the “formal register” used by the middle class to communicate. The *Framework* depicts behaviours that she associated with the so-called culture of poverty: arguing with the teacher, students placing their hands on others, an inability to follow directions (“because little procedural memory is used in poverty,” Payne, 2003, p. 2). Scholars have described Payne's reliance on damaging stereotypes that the poor not only have inadequate language, but inadequate brains (Sato and Lensmire, 2009; Gorski, 2008b, Ng&Rury, 2006, Dworin & Bomer, 2008). Widespread confirmation and acceptance of these

sorts of stereotypes deepens classism in schools, while reinforcing privilege (Gorski, 2008b).

Mythology of meritocracy

Bandwagon approaches such as Payne's framework have a goal of pulling people out of poverty by changing their behaviour (thus locating the "problem" with the individual), and take for granted a false assumption that once the deficiency is changed, the subject will somehow acquire a well-paying job. This type of reasoning is common within discourses of the myth of meritocracy — a belief that "merit" pays off. Myths of meritocracy suggest that with enough hard work, everyone can achieve the same ends. The problem with this myth is that it makes little or no mention of the role of luck (Kingwell, 2012), and more importantly, fails to acknowledge that capitalism as an economic system guarantees poverty alongside massive wealth (Arthur, 2012). Simply put, even if Payne's followers succeeded in reforming every Ontarian to look and sound "middle class," have a certain sort of work ethic, and thus receive advanced education, the province simply does not and will probably never contain the requisite amount of well-paying jobs to keep everyone out of poverty (Hyslop-Margison, 2001). Rather, systems (not individuals) would have to change in significant ways to ensure the kinds of prosperity that might eliminate poverty.

Deficit thinking is dangerous — a view that the student is deficient because of class is a damaging (not to mention classist and racist) statement. The problem is not a "deficiency" in the student. Rather, the deficiency is in the system.

Towards a more equitable approach: dispensing with the bandwagon

An equitable approach to addressing poverty simply cannot be rooted in beliefs that people from low SES home are fundamentally deficient in their ways of knowing and being. Deficit thinking is dangerous — a view that the student is deficient because of class is a damaging (not to mention classist and racist) statement. The problem is not a “deficiency” in the student. Rather, the deficiency is in the system. Thus, a more equitable approach would have to focus on how *systems* fail children, not how children fail within the system.

Payne’s framework and workshops completely ignore systemic disadvantages: insecure incomes, disparities school, access to nutritious food, and the equal to health care as those whose families have greater means to navigate such systems. Many so-called “neighbourhood effects” (where the geographic factors lead to a lack of resources — not deficiencies in families and individuals; Raffo, 2011) are ignored.

Any attempt to solve an achievement gap must begin by looking at the root causes of poverty. We must concern ourselves with how social systems beyond education fail students, and advocate to systemic change. Poverty is not an issue of speaking or dressing the wrong way, or having divergent values, as Payne might suggest — rather, it is an issue of low wages (Ivanova and Klein, 2014), long working hours, and lack of access to social goods (Raffo, 2011). For example, over 19% of all Ontario workers earn \$10 an hour or less (Murray & Mackenzie, 2007). This leads to lack of access to ample healthy food, the need for both parents and students to work instead of deeper participation in the school community, and in some cases lack of immediate access to healthcare.

Second, educators must strive to become aware of their own biases and how those biases operate in the classrooms in the form of classism as deficit thinking — in other words, a lack of cultural recognition. Teachers who are aware of their own and others’ values, culture, abilities, and privileges can keep them in check (Pinto, 2013). School districts must undertake measures to disrupt myths in the form of deficit thinking (for an example of this operates and how school leaders might approach it, see Pollock, Lopez & Joshee, 2013).

In order to overcome deficit thinking Lois Weiner (2006) encourages a process of reframing student-teacher interactions to check teacher bias. When teachers re-consider students’ actions and reactions through more objective language, it brings teachers to a different

understanding that shifts attention away from so-called deficiencies in the student, community or parents, forcing the teacher to reflect on the possibilities based on strengths in the student. Often this new frame opens a window onto the student's life and personality, permitting a view that might have been obscured by cultural assumptions, school culture, or the blinding effects of deficit thinking (Weiner, 2006). Weiner recommends the following process (Weiner, 2006; Pinto, 2013):

- Reframe the problem behavior in neutral, observable terms
- Identify the positive characteristics or contributions the individual makes
- Create a new, positive perspective on the individual
- State the new frame to the person and act on it

Gorski (2008b) also points to a list number of approaches that can address inequities in schools. First, he encourages making schools accessible for all parents, including those whose circumstances might include multiple jobs or shiftwork. Schools need to reach out to these parents, without deficit-minded assumptions about them. Second, he encourages educators to be advocates for all students, including those who might be living in circumstances of poverty. Advocacy would include fighting to prevent unjust assignment to special education or lower academic tracks or streams (e.g., applied-level courses; see Wishart, Taylor & Shultz, 2006), and meaningfully discussing poverty and inequality in classrooms so that all students (not just those marginalized) develop a collective understanding of how systems affect people. Examples of such action might include the social justice mathematics movement (see, for example, Bartell, 2013; Gutstein, 2012; Stinson, Bidwell & Powell, 2012; Stocker & Wagner, 2008).

If we accept that a central aim of education is to transform, equalize and democratize, then we simply cannot buy into the myths, moral panic, and current bandwagons about poverty. Viewing our students through a framework of myths and deficits closes the doors to transformation and meaningful change for some of our most vulnerable learners. An absence of open and honest discussion about these issues with all students blindly reinforces the damaging myths

that permeate popular discourses. “Education as the great leveler,” as Curt Dudley-Marling (2007) remarked, will continue to be “the enduring [North] American myth”.

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In the original version of this article, we reported on p. 46 that various public sector organizations had participated in Aha-Process training earlier in the year. York Region, in fact, had provided some employee training prior to 2010, not 2014

ENDNOTES

1 We acknowledge that academic performance is a narrow measure of success, but for the purpose of this paper, we are responding to the dominant discourses of this construct in Ontario and elsewhere.

2 According to the publication *Rethinking Schools*, aha! Process, Inc. is a “multimillion dollar corporation,” while aha Process, Inc. website boasts sales of 1.5 million copies of *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. Gorski (2008a) reports about 200 workshops per year provided since 1996, resulting in the training more than of 25,000 educators.

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