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TEACHING AGAINST ESSENTIALISM AND THE ''CULTURE OF POVERTY''

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Grandma tends to stretch vowel sounds, drawing extended air time out of them in her sweet Appalachian twang. Where D.C.-born folk like me give a door a push, she gives it a *poosh*. Where I crave candy, she offers sweeter-sounding *cane-dee*. Her vocabulary, as well, is of a western Maryland mountain variety, unassuming and undisturbed by slangy language or new age idiom. To her, a refrigerator is still a Frigidaire; or, more precisely, a *freegeedaire*; neighbors live *across the way*. Her children, including my mother, say she's never cursed and only occasionally lets fly her fiercest expression: *Great day in the mornin'!*

Despite growing up in poverty, Grandma isn't uneducated or lacking in contemporary wits, as one might presume based upon the ''culture of poverty'' paradigm that dominates today's understandings of poverty and schooling in the United States. She graduated first in her high school class. Later, the year she turned 50, she completed college and became a nurse. I've never been tempted to ''correct'' Grandma's language, nor do I feel embarrassed when she talks about how my Uncle Terry's *gone a'feesheen'*. She doesn't need *my* diction or vocabulary to give meaning to her world. She certainly doesn't need to be freed from the grasp of a mythical ''culture of poverty'' or its fictional ''language registers.'' What needs *a'fixin'* is not Grandma's dispositions or behaviors, but those of a society that sees only her poverty and, as a result, labels her—the beloved matriarch of an extended

family—as a culturally deficient representative of an essentialized (assumed to be monolithic) group.

I have found, in my 15 or so years teaching social justice teacher education courses, that this notion of cultural deficiency—and, in fact, the tendency to locate explanations for all sorts of phenomena in amorphous and stereotypical notions of ''culture'' (Ladson-Billings, 2006)—is prevalent among my students, regardless of what sorts of inequities we are exploring. For example, conversations about racial equity invariably are redirected by concerns about baggy clothing or ''self-segregation'' among students of color. The term *girl culture* has entered the education lexicon, stereotyping and problematizing the ways young women interact and behave. I have struggled to find pedagogical tools to help my students, predominantly teachers-to-be, shake themselves out of a tendency to lean on this ''culture'' default, whether we're discussing race, religion, language, or even sexual orientation or gender.

However, despite growing up with a mother and grandmother of poor Appalachian stock and a father of working-class urban stock, I have struggled mightily to find ways to help my students rethink an increasingly epidemic obsession with the notion of *class* cultures and, in particular, the ''culture of poverty.'' This is due in part, I am sure, to the more general uneasiness people in the United States experience when talking about class (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2007). When it comes to pre- and in-service teachers, though, the mental grip the culture of poverty paradigm maintains on the collective consciousness has been hastened, as well, by the proliferation of a framework for understanding poverty introduced by Ruby Payne (2005), today's most prominent culture-of-poverty torchbearer. A bevy of activists and scholars have identified Payne's books and workshops as among the most influential *and the most dangerously inaccurate* staples of teacher professional development in circulation (Bohn, 2007; Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008; Gorski, 2008a; Ng & Rury, 2006; Osei-Kofi, 2005).

Whatever the reasons for the stubborn persistence of the culture of poverty paradigm, despite decades of research in all sorts of contexts demonstrating that *there is no such thing as a culture of poverty* (more on this later), one thing is certain: my students and I weathered a lot of stumbles, scrapes, and pedagogical slips—years of them, in fact—trying, failing, and trying again to identify experiences to help them rethink the validity of the ''culture of poverty.'' The most formidable challenge in this process has been overcoming a sort of learning bottleneck wherein my students, on average, cling so tightly to culture-obsessed explanations for outcome inequalities (i.e., test

scores or graduation rates) that they struggle to understand these phenomena in their larger sociopolitical contexts, particularly when it comes to matters of economic justice.

I have found over the years that one of the most important concepts— one of the *threshold* concepts—students must grasp to push their way through the bottleneck is "essentialism." The practice of essentialism attributes stereotypical characteristics to large swaths of people based solely on a single identity dimension such as gender, race, or class. As I discuss later, essentialism lends itself to deficit thinking because it encourages us to look for the source of problems, such as the disproportionate dropout rate of low-income students, in stereotyped understandings of the "cultures" of those students rather than in the educational and social systems that repress them. When we fail to "catch" ourselves in this essentialism process, we risk missing the sociopolitical altogether; we risk never accounting for the fact that what looks like a dropout often is a *push-out*. My students tend to "get" this conceptually once we've spent a little time on it. *Of course, it's ludicrous to attribute an individual behavior to an entire community of people*. What they struggle with—and what I struggled for years to help them do—is to find the essentialism in their own thinking.

I offer in this chapter a synthesis of these trials and tribulations and how they eventually led me to construct an effective process for helping students spot and reconsider their tendencies to essentialize low-income families.

The Trouble With the "Culture of Poverty"

By now many people know that the "culture of poverty" hypothesis was introduced in the 1950s by Oscar Lewis (1959). Lewis (1961) expanded on the notion in the early 1960s, arguing, based upon an ethnographic study in one Mexican village, that poor people, by virtue of being poor, can be assumed to share a common set of beliefs, behaviors, and dispositions, many of which appeared several decades later in Lewis's (2005) list of attributes of the "mindset of poverty." These include a lack of orientation toward the future (or a need for instant gratification), substance abuse, a propensity for violence, and disinterest in education.

Sometimes, however, it's what we *don't know* that renders us susceptible to fallaciousness. For instance, did you know that by the late 1960s, the culture of poverty paradigm largely had been dismissed by social scientists, some of whom were troubled by Payne's extrapolation from a single village

to the global population, and others who tried unsuccessfully to replicate his findings in other regional contexts (e.g., Ryan, 1971; Valentine, 1968)? Did you know that the idiom ''blaming the victim'' was coined in 1971 by William Ryan *as a criticism of the culture of poverty hypothesis*? Ryan (1971) explained that such paradigms ''concentrate on the defects of the victim . . . and ignore the continuing effect of victimizing social forces'' (p. 8).

The trouble with the ''culture of poverty,'' beyond the fact—*and shouldn't this be enough?*—that four decades of research have shown that *it does not exist* (Adeola, 2005; Baetan, 2004; Gorski, 2008b), is twofold. First, it *essentializes* poor people, suggesting that all we need to know is that my Grandma is poor and, equipped with that information, we somehow can ''know'' virtually everything else about her (Bomer et al., 2008). Second, it misdirects class equity efforts by mistakenly identifying the problem to be remedied, as in the case of the socioeconomic ''achievement gap,'' as existing within a shared ''culture'' of poor people (which, again, does not exist).

Such diversions serve privileged communities well, ensuring inattention to the conditions that underlie economic injustice, such as inequitable access to high-quality schooling. And they are an easy sell based, as they are, on stereotypes that, thanks to the myth of meritocracy in the United States (Borrego, 2003), already are embedded in the popular consciousness. Certainly, most of my teacher education students enter my classes convinced that the culture of poverty, or at least the general assertion behind it, is real.

Trial and Error and Trial Again

The difficulty, of course, is that scholarly attempts to debunk common understandings generally prove to be of little mitigating consequence against mass perception. This is particularly the case, in my experience, when it comes to matters of class. It's even *more particularly* the case among people who overwhelmingly do not know the strain of economic hardship, when they are socialized, as most of my students are, to associate their inexperience with poverty as the evidence of their merit (Adeola, 2005; Weigt, 2006; Williams, 2009).

Unfortunately, when I think I lack the pedagogical tools to engage students constructively around a concept or problem, my impulse is to perform a fact-dump. For years I used this approach with class and poverty. I required reading after reading: anything I could find that challenged the false assumptions with which I predicted a majority of students would enter the conversation. Some students—the few who respond with intrigue to this sort of

passive-aggressiveness—might be energized by being buried in quantitative studies assigned primarily to reveal to them their ignorance. *Most* of my students, however, do not respond well to a fact-dump. What that approach fails to do, even when followed by in-class processing, is to encourage students to participate openly and fully in the construction of deeper understandings about poverty and their positionalities relative to economic justice. In fact, many students responded by entering class defensively, hackles up, or tentatively, afraid to offend.

Many of the common stereotypes that comprise the culture of poverty paradigm—*poor people are lazy*; *poor people don't value education*—are embedded too deeply into popular perception to be overturned in this manner. These stereotypes, and the fairly ridiculous notion that we can know how a student learns or what supports he or she needs or how his or her family communicates based upon a single dimension of the student's identity, have become part of the "common sense" of teaching. Like most people, including me, my students want to believe whatever confirms their existing mental models, and, like most people, they prefer to do so without acknowledging that they have mental models. What I needed were strategies to help reveal to my students their mental models rather than strategies meant to "correct" their thinking.

This has been most evident during in-class conversations about family involvement. Many students enter my classes indoctrinated with a belief in the dire significance of "parent involvement." For the most part, though, because they have been led to believe—incorrectly, it turns out (Jennings, 2004; Li, 2010; West-Olatunji, Sanders, Mehta, & Behar-Horenstein, 2010)—that single dimensions of identity (low socioeconomic status, for instance) predict rates of family involvement, many assume poor families simply are not invested in their children's education. So I can present them with facts: "Well, so and so (e.g., Li, 2010) found that poor families are just as involved in their kids' learning as wealthier families." Or I can go straight to the systemic: "Well, so and so (e.g., Holcomb-McCoy, 2010) found that the problem isn't a lack of desire to be involved, but that events like Back to School Night are constructed around assumptions that all families have transportation and access to affordable childcare." Whichever way I cut it—and believe me when I say I have cut it in innumerable ways—these approaches, based on the faulty assumption that a lifetime of social conditioning can be erased with the right combination of convincing data, have not worked.

What I came to understand is that many of my students retain and defend two conflicting views at once: (1) that there are socioeconomic-based inequities in access and opportunity, and (2) that meritocracy is real. It wasn't until, prodded by students' repeated references to the ''culture of poverty,'' that I understood how many of them manage to hold these views simultaneously. *Of course inequities existed*, they concede. Overwhelmingly, though, these inequities are attributed not to economic injustice, but instead to the behaviors of individuals. The implication is that the inequities are *deserved*, reflecting Herbert Gans's (1995) notion of the *undeserving poor*.

Through this long process of trial and error, I learned, among other things, that my students and I needed a new pedagogical approach, an opportunity to reflect on the ways we were socialized to see and experience class.

A Process for Encouraging an Essentialism-Free Class Consciousness

In this section, I discuss the pedagogical process I developed for helping students understand the notion of *essentialism*, particularly as it relates to low-income people. The process includes five steps: (1) exploring common perceptions of poor people; (2) reflecting on our perceptions and where we got them; (3) analyzing perceptions as symptoms of ideologies; (4) applying new lenses to the school environment; and (5) spotting insidious discourses of class privilege and economic injustice.

Step 1: Exploring Common Perceptions of Poor People

I begin by posing a question to the class: Why are poor people poor? Usually I ask students to respond in small groups, perhaps after a short free-write. Following 10 or 15 minutes of discussion, I open the floor, asking them to describe their perceptions as well as what they discussed in groups. Responses vary, of course, on a continuum between the deficit-laden (e.g., ''they don't work hard'') and the systemic (e.g., ''capitalism requires poverty''). However, on average, they reflect the conflicted double understanding I described earlier: an ideology that acknowledges some level of inequity *qualified by* suggestions that inequities are deserved.

At this point in the process I resist the temptation to challenge students' essentialist thinking. I do so because the objective is to help students *reveal to themselves* where they are in their thinking, a crucial step on the path

toward deeper consciousness. Instead, I ask them to consider what might account for divergences in their perceptions of why poor people are poor, implicitly raising a question about the objectivity of personal lenses.

Explaining that we are transitioning into an exploration of class bias, I then ask students to brainstorm a list of common stereotypes about poor people in the United States. To "permit" them to share prejudiced ideas without the threat of being labeled prejudiced, I clarify that they don't need to *believe* a stereotype to share it; rather, they only need to be familiar with it *as a stereotype*. I've done this activity dozens of times and never have found a group whose members couldn't fill a chalkboard with stereotypes. Students almost invariably identify "laziness" first; I am sure to point out this pattern because, in my view, this stereotype is the root of the culture of poverty mentality. Many responses are predictable: poor people don't value education; they use drugs; they have kids out of wedlock.

The most important aspect of this activity is that students are naming what they know; *they* are generating the fodder for reflection. Again, I do not use this activity to challenge essentialist thinking. I have written in the past about popular stereotypes regarding poor people (see Gorski, 2008b); I have studied and tested them. I know, for instance, that poor people have the exact same attitudes about education as their wealthier counterparts, despite the fact that they are cheated out of comparable educational opportunity. I believe, however, that the essentialism bottleneck is more vulnerable when students are facilitated through making that connection rather than when I impose it onto them.

Step 2: Reflecting on Our Perceptions and Where We Got Them

The second step in the process also begins with a question: Where do these stereotypes come from? This step helps students reveal to themselves their class lenses.

Generally I find that students answer this question in very broad terms: *the media*, *my parents*, *my church*. The key to scaffolding my students to more complex understandings of essentialism, I have learned, is encouraging them to answer this question with more specificity. If a student responds that the stereotypes come from the media, I ask that student to provide specific examples. "What are some of the explicit messages you see?" I might ask. Then, "What are some of the more implicit patterns?" This second prompt is crucial because explicit examples—what students see on shows like *Cops*, for

instance—are easy to dismiss as sensationalized nonsense. The insidious stuff is much harder to dismiss, so I push for insidious examples: ''What day-to-day messages did you receive from your family about poor and working-class people? What kinds of programs related to poverty, if any, does your synagogue (or church or mosque) sponsor? What do the objectives of these programs suggest, implicitly, about the 'problem' they are attempting to resolve?'' I often conclude this step by asking students to do a short free-write about what they know about poor people in the United States and how they came to know it. I might ask them to choose one or two of the brainstormed stereotypes with which they grapple—perhaps those they actually believe. ''How did you come to believe them?''

Step 3: Analyzing Perceptions as Symptoms of Ideologies

Another strategy I've used to help students reveal *to themselves* their socializations is to assign *them* the task of seeking evidence for their own stereotypes. In small groups, students identify the stereotype from the brainstormed list that they believe has been most present in their collective socializations. Most groups, educators-to-be that they are, choose ''poor people don't value education,'' but others commonly choose laziness or substance abuse. Their homework for the next class is to use scholarly sources—journal articles, research reports, and the like—to determine the extent of the stereotype's accuracy. They are instructed to find at least three sources and not to include sources from for-profit or partisan organizations.

The truth is, there is a bit of manipulation at play here because I know what they are going to find: virtually none of the common stereotypes about poor people can withstand analysis. But the point, again, is that *they* discover this on their own.

I begin the next class by asking each group to report its findings. What sources did they find? How, if at all, did they adjust their perceptions based on the information they found? What I have found particularly interesting in this process is the humility many students demonstrate when sharing findings that conflict with what they thought they knew—humility and, in some cases, embarrassment or shame. A student in a recent class explained, ''I was shocked. I always thought that poor people were mostly drug addicts. We learned, in reality, that wealthy people are more likely to be addicts than poor people, even though wealthy people can afford detox programs.'' I also find—and this has tested my humility—that students assign greater credibility to information when it comes from peers than when it comes from me.

Initially I found this unnerving; now I see it as a gift, an opportunity to share more power in the classroom.

As I mentioned, some students display shame or embarrassment during report-outs. Some even talk about being ashamed of how they've treated homeless people or of their assumptions about poor people in their own families. Certainly some educators would disagree, but experience tells me that some level of shame and embarrassment can be constructive. After all, disenfranchised communities, like those from the poor Appalachian region where my grandma grew up, receive near-constant messages from society that they ought to embody these feelings. I also know, however, that, absent any form of intervention, some people can be cognitively paralyzed by shame. To mitigate the potential for cognitive paralysis, I acknowledge the shame and try to reframe it as a cognitive triumph. I might say, "I sense some shame and embarrassment in the room. If that's where you are, I encourage you to feel what you're feeling profoundly, and then let it go. In the end, it's not about shame, but about knowing and responding. Now you know. And that's a triumph. The only question is, what will you do differently now that you know?" Some social justice educators might read this as coddling the privileged. I see it as setting the bar of expectations higher than it ever has been for students who are learning to grapple with their privilege. So if it is coddling, it's strategic coddling, and I will offer it to every student at some point, if not during this discussion, then during our exploration of ableism, linguicism, sexism, racism, heterosexism, or intersectional combinations of two or more of these oppressions.

Once all of the groups have reported their findings, we transition into a conversation about *perception*. "How," I ask, "have we become so misinformed? What does it mean when the most common understandings are based on false assumptions?" Students generally respond to these prompts by talking about the prevalence of bias and discrimination in fairly general terms. A common response: "It affects people's attitudes about poor families."

This, then, leads to a key moment of the process. I ask the students what I have come to see as a central question in any conversation about social justice: *To whose benefit?* I inquire, for instance, "Who or what do these 'culture of poverty' stereotypes protect? We know who they hurt, but who do they benefit?" Generally I divide students into small groups to grapple with these questions. The intention is to shift into a conversation, not about the "problem" of poor people's cultures, but about the "problem" of an inequitable educational system. In other words, by asking these questions, I

am helping students through a cognitive shift, from focusing on ''those poor people'' to focusing on *that which represses* poor people. In many ways, this shift encourages students to practice raising ideological questions about an education system that, according to most of their socializations, is the ''great equalizer.'' Again, students tend to respond in fairly general terms: *It protects rich people*. So the next step involves exploring how, particularly in regard to educational policy and practice, the culture of poverty paradigm and its essentialist nature protect the powerful at the expense of the disenfranchised.

Step Four: Applying New Lenses to the School Environment

As I described earlier, many of my students appear to hold two conflicting views simultaneously: that class inequity exists (at least on an interpersonal level), but that, given the meritocratic nature of U.S. society, class inequity is largely deserved by people who simply haven't worked hard enough. The work I do with my students in the first three steps of this process is meant to unsettle the essentialist stereotypes that underlie the myth of meritocracy and to reflect on how they've been socialized to uphold a stereotypic ideology regarding poverty. In the fourth step I engage students in applying their shifting lenses to a school environment.

I call the activity ''Socioeconomic Class and School Opportunity.'' Students are divided into groups of four or five peers, and each group is assigned one of five characters, each a K–12 student from a unique socioeconomic situation. All five ''characters'' must complete the same school assignment, which is described on a handout. (Character and assignment descriptions are provided in the appendix to this chapter.) However, based upon each character's socioeconomic situation, connoted by the fact that she or he has also been given access to a specified amount of (fake) cash and has a variety of tasks to complete before starting work on the assignment, each character is afforded a certain level of privilege or hampered by certain drains on time. Privileges might include having a ride to the store to purchase materials or having a quiet place to work. Challenges, on the other hand, might include having to care for a younger sibling or having to walk to purchase materials. Each group is given only the information and financial resources for its character, so it doesn't know that other groups are receiving more or less ''opportunity.'' They have 30 minutes to complete the project.

I set up a ''store'' in a building outside of the classroom so that students need to spend time acquiring their materials. The store includes a range of arts and crafts resources: construction paper, glue, crayons, and so on. It also

includes snack items, which characters caring for younger siblings might need. Once they complete their other tasks—requiring some of the lower socioeconomic groups to spend time running make-believe errands—groups use their "money" to purchase items they need to complete the assignment. Of course, because the groups receive different amounts of money, they have access to different material resources; because they have different levels of privilege and challenges, they also have different lengths of time to complete their projects.

Once the groups return to class with their projects, I ask them, starting with the low-income group, to describe their characters, discuss the resources with which they began the activity, and share their projects. I use prompting questions to help them along: "What were you able to purchase with your allotted resources? How much time did you have to complete your project once you took care of other responsibilities? What challenges did you face?" Most students grasp the point of the activity after a couple of group presentations: opportunity matters. But more important, they begin to understand that access to financial resources facilitates access to other advantages, such as quiet places to work and time.

I largely focus the discussion following this activity on a single question: "How might this experience help us think differently about meritocracy?" The aha moments are plenty. A couple of semesters ago I recorded responses to this activity from student reflection papers. Several mentioned a broader understanding of "opportunity." One student noted, "I didn't realize that not having to care for siblings could be seen as a sort of privilege." Others zeroed in on the notion of "hard work." One student, a future early childhood teacher in the "wealthy" group, wrote,

> I grew up hearing "effort, effort, effort." But in reality, it didn't matter how much effort the group with the least resources put into their project because they couldn't even afford the materials that my group took for granted and they had all that extra stuff to do before beginning the project. I think I see what you mean now by the "myth of meritocracy."

I also believe it is important, when teaching against essentialist frameworks like the "culture of poverty," to provide a cognitive bridge that helps students understand the *implications* of the myth of meritocracy. After all, my understanding of its fallaciousness cannot undo the hold it has on mass consciousness. So I ask students to consider its implications in a school setting: "Assuming you believed that meritocracy was real, how might you,

as a teacher, make sense of the varying quality of these projects? How, based on that assumption, might you treat lower-income students?'' I also encourage students to think about other ways the assumption of meritocracy drives school policy and practice. ''What role does it play in standardized testing? How does it affect teachers' expectations of students? How might it inform the sorts of pedagogies commonly used with specific groups of students?''

Obviously, some students continue to resist this reframing of meritocracy, insisting that people with fewer resources *just need to be creative*. I have found, though, that by this time in the process, the larger cognitive tide begins to turn—a shift evident by the fact that I no longer am the one raising questions about what most of my students thought they knew. Students, equipped with newly forming lenses, start to challenge each other to think more deeply.

Step 5: Spotting Insidious Discourses of Class Privilege and Economic Injustice

This is the point at which we work on spotting more implicit forms of economic injustice in the everyday discourses of education. This, I believe, is a particularly important competency. I know, after all, that students are subject to these discourses—the ''culture of poverty,'' deficit ideology, and other essentialist messages—in and out of their teacher preparation programs, and that, given the popularity of Payne and other deficit ideologues, the barrage will continue when they become teachers. It's one thing to ''see'' that explicit inequities—charging fees for extracurricular activities, for instance—exist and are problematic. I argue, though, that most class inequity in schools is less explicit, buried in ''the way things are.''

Over the years I have used a variety of tools to help students practice ''spotting'' implicit, insidious class inequity and economic injustice; for helping them strengthen their abilities to see what they're socialized not to see. I have collected a dozen or so texts in a variety of media that demonstrate elements of dominant class discourses in more or less explicit ways, such as Bill O'Reilly's interview of Diane Sawyer about an ABC News feature on Appalachian children (available at http://therevivalist.info/bill-o'reilly-appalachia-is-hopeless/). Without question, though, the most effective tools for this have been excerpts from Payne's work.

In the first of these, a one-page essay titled ''Reflections on Katrina and the Gulf Coast Crisis,'' Payne (2006) manages to draw on virtually all of the common ''culture of poverty'' stereotypes, essentializing the people most

affected by the hurricane. She states, for instance, "To survive in the situation in New Orleans required the ability to plan, but for the most part in generational poverty, one does not plan, one reacts" (¶2). Later, she explains,

> The violence was to be expected. Words are not seen as being very effective in generational poverty to resolve differences; fists are. . . . Furthermore, to resolve a conflict, one must have the ability to go from the personal to the issue, and the words largely are not there to do that [for people in poverty]. (¶3)

She continues, "In neighborhoods of generational poverty, two of the primary economic systems are prostitution and drugs. After Katrina struck, both of those economies were virtually wiped out overnight" (¶4).

I start by asking for volunteers to read the essay aloud, paragraph by paragraph: an opportunity for students literally to *hear* essentialist language. I ask students, in groups, to read the essay again, underlining examples of essentialism. After they have an opportunity to reflect on what they find in light of our earlier discussion of class stereotypes, I pose a question meant to continue the "implications" thread of our conversation: "On whom does Payne place responsibility for the devastation following Katrina?" (By posing this question, I introduce, even if implicitly, deficit ideology and its relationship with essentialist frameworks, a topic covered in greater depth by Dudley-Marling's chapter in this book.) I prod, "How does she do this?"

As we grapple with these questions, I try to focus students' attention on two primary forms of analysis. First, I want them to reflect on whether they previously would have noticed the essentialist nature of Payne's claims. "What makes these sorts of messages difficult to spot when we are not intent on spotting them?" The point here is that, because we are socialized to experience the world in particular ways, we must *work* to free ourselves from the constraints of "common sense." Second, I want to provide students an opportunity to reflect on the "null" content of Payne's texts: the messages she sends by suggesting that teachers need to "fix" a fictional "culture of poverty" while failing to address the systemic conditions of economic injustice. To this end, I point out that popular discourses are characterized by what they *include*, but also by what they *omit*. I might ask, "By focusing on what she identifies as deficits in poor people, what does Payne fail to address about Hurricane Katrina and its effects?"

I admit that I continue to struggle to some degree to help students make this transition smoothly. Some catch on quickly: "What about all the hiccups in the state and federal governments' communications leading up to

and following Katrina?" Others seem cognitively stuck when it comes to examining the implications of "null" or omitted content. This, perhaps, is the next threshold concept with which I will grapple. In the more immediate term, I ask students what they perceive to be the relationship among the myth of meritocracy, their own class socializations, and deficit ideology's tendency to ignore systemic conditions: "Imagine a group of educators is tasked with developing a school-wide strategy for redressing class inequities. Given this web of influences, what are they likely to identify as the 'problem' to be fixed? How might this affect the policy and practice strategies they recommend?"

Unfortunately, although Payne's essay on Katrina was, until recently, available on her website, it appears as though she has removed it from circulation. However, among education folks, it shouldn't be hard to find an enthusiastic Payne fan from whom to request a copy.

Another useful excerpt from Payne's work, and one that *is* still available on her website (www.ahaprocess.com/files/Quiz-HiddenRules.pdf), is her series of checklists to "test your knowledge of the hidden rules of class." This one-page handout includes three checklists: "Could you survive in poverty?"; "Could you survive in middle class?"; and "Could you survive in wealth?" I like to have a bit of fun with that last one. "Before even looking at the checklists," I might say, "raise your hand if you believe you could survive in wealth." I always think about Grandma in that moment, and the ludicrousness of comparing her experience, in which survival could be a challenge, to whether a wealthy person can "survive."

I ask students to focus initially on the "surviving poverty" checklist, which includes fairly benign items ("I know how to find the best rummage sales") as well as fairly egregious items ("I know how to get a gun, even if I have a police record"). By this time, students generally "get" that the checklists exemplify essentialism, in their suggestion that all poor people have the same experiences. Nevertheless, to encourage students to connect their analysis of the checklists with previous conversations, I ask them to identify the items that reflect the stereotypes we discussed earlier. We talk about each item they identify. I might ask, for instance, "What percentage of poor people would you guess owns a gun?" My intention is to encourage them to consider the implications of their socializations. And so I prod, "For what percentage of a particular identity group must something be true for us to consider it part of their 'culture'?" I find these questions particularly instructive, not only for deepening our interrogation of the culture of poverty paradigm, but also for helping us reflect on popular essentialist discourses in schools, like those related to identity-specific "learning styles."

We turn, then, to the other checklists: "Can you find in the 'surviving in middle class' or 'surviving in wealth' checklists any similarly demonizing items, items that suggest moral deficiencies in middle-class or wealthy people?" Notwithstanding the occasional student who thrills me by pointing to items that suggest out-of-control consumption on the part of wealthy people ("I have at least two homes that are staffed and maintained"), students generally respond that no items on these lists demonize middle-class or wealthy people in the way that poor people are demonized in their checklist.

Again, I introduce the notion of null or omitted content: "What does the *omission* of these items suggest about the comparable morals of poor, middle-class, and wealthy people?" Here again, I challenge students to consider whether they would have noticed the demonizing nature of the "surviving in poverty" checklist before our engagement with these issues in class.

I generally end this activity by asking students to describe other ways they have witnessed essentialism in schools. Who are the targets? Those who have spent any amount of time in schools during their teacher preparation programs likely have witnessed the essentializing of low-income families and families of color, often in day-to-day chatter in teachers' lounges or during interactions with administrators. Others might describe gendered or racialized discourses about who is supposed to be talented in particular subjects. Alternatively, I sometimes ask students to describe ways they have been essentialized as students; in doing so I equip myself with a couple of dozen examples I can use as we discuss other equity concerns.

Final Reflections

I am not suggesting that these strategies are foolproof. I, as one fool, have managed to piece together a process that, with much tweaking, has helped my students and me analyze the culture of poverty paradigm and unpack "essentialism" as a threshold concept. I find by using this process that I have an easier time engaging students around several other threshold concepts: the insufficiency of the three-tiered (poor, middle-class, wealthy) class model (and the five-tiered one I use in the educational opportunity activity); corporatization of public schools; and the general imposition of neoliberalism on schools. This, I believe, is because they are better prepared to consider the possibility that inequitable conditions are purposeful—that they originate in discourses driven by those at the top of the power hierarchy rather than the supposed deficiencies of those at the bottom. Meanwhile, the process provides ample opportunities for self-reflection and for strengthening students'

awareness about how their socializations inform their assumptions about, and expectations for, their future students.

Speaking more generally, I have culled some critical lessons from the years of trial and error that helped me hone this process. I am reminded of how important it is to be aware of my own triggers; of how, for example, my fondness for Grandma and my process of grappling with my own Appalachian identity makes it increasingly difficult to avoid imposing my ideologies on my students' learning experiences. Additionally, I have learned, once again, that if I remain dedicated to pedagogical mindfulness—to scaffolding and listening and coconstructing with students—I can trust not only the learning process itself, but also that my students will engage with an equal mindfulness and, semester after semester, wow me with their commitments to being equitable and just teachers.

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