

A Framework for Understanding Poverty

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Ruby Payne defines poverty as “the extent to which an individual does without resources.” The resources that are measured in this book include finances, emotional stability, mental abilities, spiritual beliefs, physical health and mobility, support systems, relationships or role models, and knowledge of hidden rules pertaining to economic classes specific to the United States. Payne walks the readers through different scenarios in order to give an understanding of the difficulties of poverty that are faced in our country. She provides grappling examples that force the readers to make paradoxical decisions for the characters which exemplify the hopelessness many people in poverty experience.

One important detail that Payne discusses is the influence that income has on success. The lack of resources highly affects the growth of children in academia and in their professional paths. Educators have the opportunity to expose children in poverty to skills that cannot be acquired at home due to their parent’s economic status and lack of experience in middle class settings. Payne calls specified social norms as “hidden rules,” which are interpreted as customs that differ by economic level or class. These rules are used to determine outsiders which prevent individuals’ acceptance to social circles. Payne describes different registers of language that affect and distinguish the acceptance of an individual. Children of poverty are usually only exposed to casual registers while formal registers are needed to succeed.

Payne describes various teaching methods and approaches to build student-teacher relationships in order to help the student succeed and acquire cognitive learning skills. Students in poverty live inconsistent lives due to their financial instability. This affects their ability to focus, plan, predict, identify cause and effect, and control impulses. Payne discusses Feuerstein’s idea of missing links in children from poverty and encourages mediation in order to reduce the effects of these children’s environment. She elaborates on the importance of relationships between people of authority and the students in order to provide a support system. She also explains how educators should inform the students of acceptable behavior and language while harvesting an appropriate discipline program. It is important that the educator understand the children’s point of view and circumstance she or he may be facing. Frustration from the educator could take a toll on the advancements of the students’ achievements and it is crucial that the educator be understanding towards unknown conditions that the child is facing.

Growing up in a low-income environment, I could relate to what was written about the behaviors of children in poverty. It was upsetting to read because I didn’t want the facts to be true. It was also refreshing to know that people care about the success of children in this habitat. I disagreed with some methods of discipline for unacceptable behavior simply because children will find a way around the reasoning that Payne presented. All in all, I have already recommended this book to my friends in education because “[w]hen students who have been in poverty (and have successfully made it into middle class) are asked how they made the journey, the answer... has to do with a relationship- a teacher, counselor, or coach who made a suggestion or took an interest in them as individuals.” And that was true for me.