An Interview with Dr. Paul C. Gorski
Camilla Greene, Pennsylvania

Dr. Gorski is an assistant professor at Hamline University in Minnesota, and is founder of EdChange, described on its website as being “dedicated to diversity, equity, and justice in schools and society. We act to shape schools and communities, where equitable opportunities to thrive and achieve free from oppression.” Dr. Gorski is also known as a frequent critic of the work of Dr. Ruby Payne, author of A Framework for Understanding Poverty, and her exposed and practiced theory of poverty.

How would you describe yourself?
Activist, educator, writer in that order. My background is in community activism and organizing and it was through activism that I came into education.

When did you first become aware of classism?
I don’t know that I became aware of classism as a system until my teens. My mother’s family had lived in poverty in a mining town in the mountains between Maryland and West Virginia. Even as a kid, when I’d visit, they had no running water, dilapidated housing. I didn’t see these things. But I did wonder why.

In terms of a process for understanding racism and classism, I started seeing systemic and purposefully inequitable conditions once I started asking big questions about the world around me. In school, I don’t know that I became aware of classism as a system until my teens. My background is in community activism and organizing and it was through activism that I came into education.

What have you been able to do to interrupt classism in your work or in your environment or classroom?
At the university, it name it when I see it. But I’m not mostly focused on the university. I am more someone working in the larger community, teaching about and acting against classism. But in my classes specifically, I do this by challenging the myths about class and poverty, by challenging my students to engage in reflective work in preparation for understanding institutionalized classism.

How do you describe your students?
“Politically radical.” I do not see myself as politically radical. “Passionate.” “Engaging.” They would describe me as an activist, and that is threatening to many of them, most of whom are teachers.

What would you like to be your legacy?
That is something I do not think about. I turn 35 tomorrow, so it feels odd to think about a legacy. Maybe my legacy, at this point, would be about helping people together, people immediately around me. I try to work collaboratively, pull people in, build movements. My legacy would be organizing, drawing people together who have resisted the temptation to soften the conversation about racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, imperialism, and other oppressions.

To what extent do you believe educators are capable of examining their own class-based prejudices?
First, I should say that the problem of classism is not specific to educators. We are all socialized to buy into the myth of meritocracy and consumer culture, and to be measured by what we have rather than by who we are. In schools, we (collective “WE”) really think about it at all. We don’t take time to reflect and discuss, such as in work sessions and CGI meetings, I find raising questions about race and inequities brings a lot of silence. It’s a silence that doesn’t seem to be emotionally laden, but rather like there’s no connection. It doesn’t seem to even be a delayed reaction, but rather a lack of comprehension.

This book provides a foundation—through the experiences, I think—that each day means a new encounter and deep personal reflection. I am sorry to say that many, if not most, white people don’t examine tightly held beliefs. I know for a fact that this has an impact on our students, an impact so severe that many, probably most, have suffered and will continue to suffer because of our inability to deal with this issue.

I wonder if we really DO “collectively view ourselves . . . to be inherently non-racist” or if we (collective white “WE”) really think about it at all most days. The urgency of the now has a way of overpowering the important things. Even when we do take time to reflect and discuss, such as in work sessions and CGI meetings, I find raising questions about race and inequities brings a lot of silence. It’s a silence that doesn’t seem to be emotionally laden, but rather like there’s no connection. It doesn’t seem to even be a delayed reaction, but rather a lack of comprehension.

When you read this quote, how do you feel?
I have fallen and do rectify the very ways in which race dramatically impact achievement.” (page xvi)

I have used this quote to help teachers become open to the “race” conversation. I find that the teachers with whom I work find it difficult (as most white people do) to look at race. They go first to class/poverty, family conditions, individual characteristics, etc. I have some teachers who proudly share that they are “color-blind” in their classrooms. Given these experiences, I think that the quote is accurate in that educators do not easily embrace conversations focused on race . . .

This quote hits home for me. I have spent all of my life teaching in one school district. From my perspective, although many educators might view themselves as non-racist, I don’t believe that the vast majority have delved deeply into what we really think and believe about race. As a white person it has taken me years to learn how to have conversations about race. Yet, I know that as I examine my beliefs, I have learned that each day may offer a new opportunity to examine more deeply what we believe and how we think about it. I have spent all of my life teaching in one school district. From my perspective, although many educators might view themselves as non-racist, I don’t believe that the vast majority have delved deeply into what we really think and believe about race. As a white person it has taken me years to learn how to have conversations about race. Yet, I know that as I examine my beliefs, I have learned that each day may offer a new opportunity to examine more deeply what we believe and how we think about it.

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I have been prompted to reflect on your learning and, in particular, to assist in facilitating effective dialogue about the racial issues that impact student achievement. As you progress through each chapter, you will be prompted to reflect on your learning and, in particular, to assist in facilitating effective dialogue about the racial issues that impact student achievement. As you progress through each chapter, you will be prompted to reflect on your learning and, in particular, to assist in facilitating effective dialogue about the racial issues that impact student achievement.

Our conversation has slowed down during this peak vacation and travel season, but we are not calling it to a close. We share this sound bite from our chat in the hopes that our reader-colleagues will begin to have similar conversations in their local contexts. In the next issue, two colleagues have agreed to share their thoughts about “white talk and color commentary” as it is posed in the text and in their lives. Stay tuned!

Debbie Bambino can be contacted at dbambino@earthlink.net

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fall into that trap more often than not. I am conscious of that and try to work on not falling into the allure of the path of least resistance, but the allure is always there. It has been helpful to surround myself with a group of people committed to change who are relentless about challenging class inequalities. I have surrounded myself with a group of people who are not shy about calling me out when I begin drifting to the path of least resistance. This is difficult and sometimes confrontational, often because people tend to confuse peace with social justice. If we want justice, we, in the activist community, must be relentless with our feedback to each other and with other well-meaning people who are actually contributing to injustices through what they perceive to be social justice work. We must stop worrying about hurting each other’s feelings. This brings us back to Ruby Payne because, despite the egregiousness of her work, so few people have been willing to stand up to her and say, “This is classism and racism.” We do not want to hurt anyone’s feelings, despite the hurt that results from allowing the injustices to go on unchecked.

How have your experiences with classism in America influenced your views on Ruby Payne’s poverty framework?

As an example, earlier, my mother grew up in the Appalachian Mountains between West Virginia and Maryland. Ruby Payne stereotypes poor people in ways that do not fit my experience with my own family or with people of poverty. I worked in the D.C. area with people in poverty and again, her stereotypes of poor people did not fit the poor people I knew.

For example, here in Minneapolis there are large and very poor Somali and Hmong refugee populations. When I compare the cultures of these communities with those of the Appalachian side of my family, they have absolutely nothing in common other than the experience of classism. This challenges Ruby Payne’s assertion that there is a singular “culture of poverty” exists.

What is the “culture of poverty”? What do you think of this?

So, first and foremost, I know that the “culture of poverty” simply doesn’t exist. And decades of research clarifies the fact that no “culture of poverty” exists. But what I have seen, and what Payne never addresses, are the systems and structures of classism that create and maintain poverty. If poor people have health care at all, it is not very good; many poor people are forced to live in buildings that are structurally and environmentally unsafe; poor children often are sent to the worst-equipped, dilapidated public schools. There is example upon example of the inequities experienced by poor and working-class people, and I can’t understand why, in a book titled Framework for Understanding Poverty, there is no mention of these inequities.

My academic background is sociology, and I can tell you that her work is not new. In the early 1960’s Oscar Lewis, a sociologist and anthropologist, coined the term “culture of poverty” based on small studies of Puerto Rican and Mexican families. Immediately, the social science community tore into Lewis’s theory. Literally dozens of empirical studies had dispelled the “culture of poverty” myth before Ruby Payne put her framework out there. This is why Ruby Payne’s work is mocked and dismissed in social science circles and by activists doing serious anti-poverty and anti-classism work.

What feedback have you received from readers of your articles on Ruby Payne?

I have received a range of feedback. Some of the feedback has been very angry. Ruby Payne threatened to sue me. I received a call from her attorney. Bill Sommer, one of her trainers, called different people at my university at an attempt to silence me. In fact, several times when I’ve been scheduled to speak at an event, Sommers has called the event organizers to try to convince them to uninvite me.

I have received several other angry responses. What’s been interesting, though, is that none of these angry responses critiques my specific criticisms of Ruby Payne’s framework. Instead, they attack me, like how dare I criticize Ruby Payne. Payne’s framework is popular because it does not challenge the status quo. The majority of the folks who agree with Payne’s framework do not recognize that what they are buying into is racist and classist.

I have received a lot of positive feedback as well from teachers, administrators, fellow activists, people who are horrified that their school districts are paying up to hundreds of thousands of dollars to have somebody come in and talk about.

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Connections appreciates Lynda Robinson’s contribution to our expressed desire to hold “Courageous Conversations” across difference as adults in order to better serve students across difference in our classroom.

Hi Kim,

Thank you for gathering your thoughts on paper for this important piece. Even in reading your piece again, I found my chest tighten up a bit and a warmth sweep over me. Every time I relive that experience it makes me feel my “otherness” in the room and in the work. It is not a good feeling. It is a shameful feeling. The feeling makes me acutely aware that I have been tricked before again. I am not acting as if my presence means anything when white people are “conducting their business” in educating kids – mainly poor kids, but mostly kids of color. What does it mean for educators of color in the room and at the table with their privileged sisters and brothers?

As I remember the event, I think what really embarrassed – and yes, hurt me was that I went to the CFG training with an open heart. The teachers at my table were also open-hearted – asking me questions and engaging in dialogue with me both personally and professionally. I felt pretty comfortable in responding to the questions and comments. In other words, I felt that the interactions at the table were positive and productive. My identity as a black educator was intact – and in fact honored by their questions, responses, and demeanor. I think one of the teachers was Mexican-American, so she would respond to questions from her cultural perspective, as well. I was aware that I was the only black person in the room, but that did not curtail my enthusiasm or curiosity about the CFG training. Since all the white educators were convinced that the CFG process was the best thing since sliced bread, I felt I needed to find out what they knew so I would be “down with the program.” Too. So I let my guard down and was prepared to be open to learning as I could be. So imagine my surprise and disin- sonance when the facilitator warned me to curb my “airtime” in the training! I felt that I didn’t need to be there if I was not completely comfortable in the protocols from feeling stifled and uncomfortable to valuing and embracing the structures. The protocols force us to think in new ways – breaking us out of our assumptions and our everyday practice of telling people what they should or shouldn’t be doing. And while this is true, the question still lingers in my mind. When white people come to the training and feel uncomfortable within these same structures, I’ve never heard them try and attribute it to another racial culture. If people of color often need to adjust the way they speak and act in dominant cultures, it seems like an easy leap to connect one more uncomfortable form of dialoguing to that same source. But what if there is something deeper in how the protocols are structured that helps support dominant culture thinking and keeps us from hearing a truly diverse set of perspectives? What if the protocols really do reflect and promote a dominant culture perspective?

I realize that many of my colleagues of color have had to develop keener ears and eyes to respond to and survive the discrimination that lies at the center of many of their experiences. As a person in a position of more privilege, I don’t have to pay nearly as much attention to the difference between what people say, and what they do. And I feel pretty confident that when I speak I will be heard.

I am learning that when my colleagues of color sit in protocols with me, they are listening not only to the things that are being said, but to the things that are not being said and those silences often ring louder than the words. More and more, as I work in education, I feel pretty confident that when I speak I will be paying nearly as much attention to the difference between and the silences often ring louder than the words.

If I could put together a reality show to demonstrate the clashes between someone who believes the fault lies in the victim and someone who is a per- ceived victim but has a strong sense of self and a grasp of the reality of the shams in this world, where would you put them and how long would you have them interact?

I would place Ruby Payne in this reality show for her own good. Plus, because so many people know who she is, there would be a large audience. I would have poet Gwendolyn Brooks on the show, too. Brooks wrote a poem called “The Lovers of the Poor” about wealthy white do-gooders who do their charitable giving, but go running back to their wealth at the first sign of discomfort. I use it in my classes. I would add Paris Hilton and Jonathan Kozol. The location: a remote island where they have nothing to do but sit around and discuss class- ism and racism for a month.

Dr. Gorski

What do you believe to be the most important actions needed to change the “savage inequalities” in American public schools that serve poor children? “Fixing” poor people is not a good feeling. It is a shameful feeling. The “otherness” in the room and in the work. It is something deeper in how the protocols are struc- tured: from feeling stifled and uncomfortable to valuing and embracing the structures. The protocols force us to think in new ways – breaking us out of our assumptions and our everyday practice of telling people what they should or shouldn’t be doing. And while this is true, the question still lingers in my mind. When white people come to the training and feel uncomfortable within these same structures, I’ve never heard them try and attribute it to another racial culture. If people of color often need to adjust the way they speak and act in dominant cultures, it seems like an easy leap to connect one more uncomfortable form of dialoguing to that same source. But what if there is something deeper in how the protocols are structured that helps support dominant culture thinking and keeps us from hearing a truly diverse set of perspectives? What if the protocols really do reflect and promote a dominant culture perspective?

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My attention to and interest in Dr. Gorski was sparked by Debbie Bambino when she asked if I would like to do an interview with Dr. Gorski, who is a staunch critic of Dr. Ruby Payne. I took on the challenge. In preparation for the interview, I read Dr. Ruby Payne’s book A Framework for Understanding Poverty and I read several articles written by Dr. Gorski. I learned a lot and I hope this interview has enriched your knowledge of clas- ism as it relates to our mission and your notions of the equity conversation.

For more information, go to www.EdChange.org.

Dr. Gorski can be reached at pgorski01@gwu.hamline.edu

Camilla Greene can be reached at camillagreene@att.net