

An Interview with Dr. Paul C. Gorski

Camilla Greene, New Hampshire

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 in which all people, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, class, (dis)ability, language, or religion, have 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 espoused and practiced theory of poverty.



Dr. Paul C. Gorski

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 this as classism, but I did begin to wonder why.

In terms of a process for understanding racism and classism, I started seeing systemic and purposeful inequitable conditions once I started asking bigger questions about the world around me. In school we would talk about what it was like to be poor. But we didn't ask why people were poor. Very few people talk about why poverty exists in the wealthiest country on the planet. For whose benefit does poverty exist? For whose benefit is the world around me working as it works right now? It's only when I learned to ask these questions that I began to see classism.

What have you been able to do to interrupt classism in your own university environment or classroom?

At the university, I 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 your students describe you?

“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 pulling 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. So if you believe that if you work hard enough you will succeed, then you probably believe poor people must not work hard enough. Therefore, you probably believe poor people must be deficient.

This is where Ruby Payne and her popularity come into play. She draws on these assumptions, already present in most people attending her workshops. She's contributing to the lack of understanding—to the classism.

Everyone is capable of examining their class prejudices only when they're willing to engage in rethinking everything they thought they knew about the world around them.

This is difficult, and not something with which I'm always successful. One of my biggest challenges in doing this work is struggling with my own ignorance. I certainly do not have it all figured out.

How in your own life have you not fallen into the trap of “the allure of the path of least resistance?”

I have fallen and do *(continued on page 24)*

poverty in very oppressive ways.

Quite frankly, I am tired of talking about Ruby Payne. I am an activist. I do not particularly like to spend my time critiquing someone else's work. But so many of my colleagues were buying into her work that I felt I had to present another perspective. The values Ruby Payne espouses conflict with the values we say we uphold.

Plus, Ruby Payne runs a for-profit business. She charges school districts tens of thousands of dollars for a workshop. Many of these school districts paying Ruby Payne's business have families who cannot afford housing and meals on a daily basis. Somebody has to stand up and point out the lunacy of this.

What do you believe to be the most important actions needed to change the "savage inequalities" in American public schools that serve poor children?

Policy makers need to understand the issues (of poverty) in a broader context. It is unfair to give schools the responsibility to correct all inequities. We need to fix the larger inequities instead of focusing merely on the symptoms. In schools we need to look at the ways in which poor children and children of color do not have access to quality education, starting in preschool. We need to start addressing these issues—in Jonathan Kozol's words, these "savage inequalities"—and stop thinking we can fix poverty by "fixing" poor people instead of eliminating what oppresses poor people.

What do you believe to be the best strategy to dispel the middle-class myth that people of poverty are bad parents?

I've done a bit of consulting at some affluent private boarding schools where tuition and fees can be close to \$40,000 per year. Some parents have two and three children at these schools. We dispel myths by telling the truth. The myth is that poor people are bad parents. But what I see at these boarding schools are kids who are sent away from home so somebody else can take care of them—neglect by wealthy parents who can afford to mask their neglect.

There are other myths out there, as well. According to Ruby Payne, alcohol and drug addic-

tion and prostitution are more prevalent in poor communities than wealthy ones. This simply is not true. Drug and alcohol addiction and prostitution are as prevalent, if not more prevalent, in wealthy communities. So we dispel myths by countering them with truth and with evidence of that truth.



Dr. Gorski

If you 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 perceived victim but has a strong sense of self and a grasp of the reality of the shams in this world, who would you put in the show? Where would you place 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 classism and racism for a month. ■

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 classism as it relates to our mission and your notions of the equity conversation.

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

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