

**Poverty and Education: Critiquing the Performance
Reader's Theatre Script**

Cast of Characters:

Gennie Harris	Assistant Professor of Education, George Fox University
Leila Cassel	MAT student, GFU; Because of her interest in the topic, Leila read Donna Beegle's <i>See Poverty . . . Be the Difference</i> and included Beegle's work in the script.
Emily Helligso	MAT student, GFU
Heidi Jenkins	MAT student, GFU
Ruby Payne*	Poverty expert and author of <i>A Framework for Understanding Poverty</i>
Donna Beegle*	Poverty expert and author of <i>See Poverty . . . Be the Difference</i>
bell hooks*	Scholar, Writer, Professor
Bess Keller*	Author of Education Week article
Ng & Rury*	Scholars and critics of Payne's work
Ms. D.	High school teacher and writer
Larry	Student quoted in Beegle's book
Society	Traditional proverbial wisdom about poverty

Narrator

*All sources are directly quoted.

Narrator: *Background Information*

Gennie: As chair of the curriculum revision committee for our MAT program's class that addresses poverty, I was thrilled to adopt *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* as one of the course texts. It just made so much sense: the students could wrap their minds around the concepts, and each chapter ended with some actual teaching tips. Imagine that: actual ideas of what to do with kids. As

fall semester began, a colleague told me about an article in *Teacher's College Record* that criticized Payne's work. I read it somewhat incredulously. However, I found it made some good points. When the course began, I asked students to journal about the book, taking note of what was useful and what was dangerous. Through the process, my students and I examined many discourses of poverty, including our own. This script is a representation of this experience. We do not aim to answer the question, "What is the right way to teach about poverty and education?" Rather, we hope to start a discussion, the beginning imaginings of a better way of teaching about poverty and education.

Narrator: *Personal Introduction*

Leila: As a child, my first grade advanced reading group consisted of four students, one who obviously came from poverty. Even in 1st grade, I knew what poverty looked like without quite being able to put it into words.

Emily: I had read bits of the poverty text before in other classes, and I was really excited about reading it in our cultural diversity course. I told everyone what a great book it was. As we were reading it in class these are some ideas that struck me and I recorded in my reflections.

Heidi: I told everyone about this book. It was an easy read. Written with the idea of teachers as the audience, this book modeled what we do as teachers: give information and then have the learner apply the given knowledge. I think deep down my positive reaction to this book was more than its ease of read.

Leila: This particular boy was the brightest of the students, almost to the point that his intellect undermined teacher-student interaction.

Heidi: The first time I read this book, I felt an almost awakening. Prior to reading this book, I had attributed the behaviors she wrote about to my Native American culture. It was enlightening to find out that other disenfranchised groups of people exhibited the same signs, based not on race but on economic circumstance.

Leila: The first grader lived with his sister in a home with a severely alcoholic father. I'm not sure how often they were homeless, but there was never a doubt that his family life suffered him greatly and influenced his academic development.

- Heidi: My mother is a Native American, who grew up very poor. Her family is still poor and yet she has, through the years, climbed the social ladder to arrive at middle class. Because my mother is Native American, I am also. The behavior the book attributes to social class what my mother has always said was racial. If it is social class, I can be safe from it. If it was racial, I have no control over what happens.
- Leila: There are many, many details involved in this boy's life, but his eventual future was one behind prison bars: This first grade, high-achieving reader went to prison before graduating from high school. His poverty-stricken life had had devastating results.
- Emily: Does our economic status really control that much of our lives?
- Leila: Poverty is a destructive tool that creates some of the strongest distractions from pursuing education.
- Narrator: *Reading the Text*
- Keller: Ruby K. Payne is wildly in demand for keynote speeches and seminars at annual conferences A million copies of her book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* are in print. And last year, district leaders, looking for solutions paid Ms. Payne's organization to put on slightly more than 1,000 workshops.
- Payne: Typically, poverty is thought of in terms of financial resources only. However, the reality is that *financial resources*, while extremely important, do not explain the differences in the success with which individuals leave poverty nor the reasons that many stay in poverty. The ability to leave poverty is more dependent upon other resources than it is upon financial resources. Each of these resources plays a vital role in the success of an individual.
- Emily: The list of resources that an individual may have access to is comprehensive.
- Ng & Rury: Payne argues the cultivation of emotional resources is of utmost importance, defined as being able to choose and control emotional responses, particularly to negative situations, without engaging in self-destructive behavior Emphasizing that emotional resources are the most important factor in the perpetuation of poverty implies it is the poor themselves who bear the greatest

responsibility for their condition, despite the extensive research literature suggesting otherwise.

- hooks: As a nation we have become passive, refusing to act responsibly toward the more than thirty-eight million citizens who live in poverty here and the working masses who labor long and hard but still have difficulty making ends meet. The rich are getting richer and the poor are falling by the wayside. At times it seems no one cares.
- Leila: It is so sad that kids in poverty situations are stereotyped when they aren't the ones to blame for their situations. I'm not saying that parents *are* to blame, but there are many situations where poverty is just *one* of the issues of the family. I don't mean to have a 'bootstrap' mentality, but there are many situations where resources are truly available through family, friends and community, yet parents choose their own pleasures over their children.
- Society: God helps those who help themselves.
- Payne: To better understand poverty, one must understand three aspects of language: registers of language, discourse patterns, and story structure. Many of the key issues for schools and businesses are related to these three patterns that are often different in poverty than they are in middle class.
- Leila: This is very interesting to note. Through neglect and also little knowledge of the formal register, kids often seem 'behind' in their development.
- Emily: As I am reading this book, I am having mixed feelings. The book has a hierarchy built into it. I feel like it is maintaining that the way middle class society interacts is best. Specifically, in chapter two there is much emphasis on teaching the language of middle class society. However, the casual register is interesting and informative as well.
- Payne: Ability to use formal register is a hidden rule of the middle class. The inability to use it will knock one out of an interview in two or three minutes. The use of formal register, on the other hand, allows one to score well on tests and do well in school and higher education.

- Emily: An obvious attribute of the formal register is the use for getting and maintaining a job and all students should be instructed in its use, but I think that it is really important to not let children feel unintelligent or belittled if the casual register is the one that they primarily use.
- Heidi: I just re-read the beginning of her book. She attributes her knowledge to her husband, who has lived in poverty for 30 years, her broad experience in the educational setting, and her wealthy neighbors. This cannot be the extent of it. There must be more.
- Payne: Hidden rules are the unspoken cues and habits of a group. Distinct cueing systems exist between and among groups and economic classes. . . . The ones examined here are those that have the most impact on achievement in schools and success in the workplace.
- Emily: I think it is useful to note for educators that we are not trying to replace the rules that students have learned to use outside of school that might be necessary to survive, but we are trying to help students learn an alternative set of behaviors that will help them succeed in a school setting.
- Payne: . . . in one school district, the faculty had gone together to buy a refrigerator for a family who did not have one. About three weeks later, the children in the family were gone for a week. When the students returned, the teachers asked where they had been. The answer was that the family had gone camping because they were so stressed. What had they used for money to go camping? Proceeds from the sale of the refrigerator, of course. The bottom line in generational poverty is entertainment and relationships.
- Heidi: I had decided to check Payne's credentials. Someone who made such broad sweeping statements should have reached the pinnacle of educational achievement. On her book it refers to her as Dr. Payne. She must, of course, be a doctor of poverty studies or have a PhD in research regarding the disenfranchised. Her web site, aha! *Processes*, says she has been a teacher, principal, consultant, and administrator. In no way does it mention her extensive studying of this area.
- Gennie: What? [checks book jacket] Why haven't I looked?
- Emily: I was grateful for the information that some things that are valued in poverty are entertainment and relationships. It really helps me to

understand some of the behavior I have seen in the classroom. How do we bring students together that have such different priorities and ways of expressing themselves? How do we create meaningful learning experiences that multiple students can relate to and that will benefit them in the future?

- Leila: My mom provides a story of a 4th grade boy who, when giving words of “thanks” during the Thanksgiving holiday explained his gratitude for having a house. His homeroom teacher later revealed that he had been living in a car with his mom. In that moment, it becomes apparent just how much of a child’s home life is reflected in their internal and external thoughts. The fourth grader couldn’t leave his family situation at home; it was part of who he was as a person and student.
- Narrator: *Racialized Discourses*
- Ng & Rury: [The scenarios presented in Payne’s book] do convey a fairly consistent view of the attitudes and behaviors presumably shared amongst those who are poor. It is useful, for this reason, to carefully examine the descriptive case scenarios Payne provides in her effort to help educators better understand poverty, its effects on children, and its implications in school settings.
- Payne: These scenarios have been written to portray the cases with which I have become acquainted. These scenarios have deliberately omitted most of the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse that can be present so that the discussion can be about resources.
- Heidi: When I re-read the book, I noticed that Dr. Payne isn’t so fair about how people are represented in her book. She is not entirely raceless. In fact, I would say she is racist and classist in her portrayal regarding scenarios.
- Payne: Otis is a 9-year-old African American boy. His mother conceived him at 14, dropped out of school, and is on welfare. Otis has two younger siblings and one older sibling who is a gang member. Juan is a 6-year-old Hispanic boy who lives with his uncle Ramon. Juan’s father was killed in a gang-related killing. . . . The uncle makes his living selling drugs but is very respectful toward his mother.

- Emily: Are negative situations characterized by Latino or African American names? Are more positive situations characterized by Caucasian names?
- Payne: Sally is an 8-year-old Caucasian girl whose mother, SueAnn, has been married and divorced twice. Her mother works two jobs and does not receive child support.
- Heidi: Scenario One – A white boy named John. His father and mother are divorced. His father is a doctor. John’s family is not responsible for their misfortune. His sister is handicapped, and his mother is an alcoholic.
- Gennie: I can’t believe I’ve never noticed this!
- Ng & Rury: Payne, however, suggests that race is largely unrelated to poverty. In doing so, she sidesteps the critical issue of systematic, historical patterns of discrimination and exploitation that have contributed to the persistence of widespread poverty in the United States.
- Gennie: But the scenarios would not imply this. The scenarios are racially loaded.
- Larry: I had a teacher tell me not to participate in a class discussion because she wanted to hear from the females and minorities. ‘You White males always get to speak.’ She had no clue that I came from the ghetto. I had never had a voice and no one ever listened to me.
- Leila: This is a frightening account of discrimination. It is *crucial* that our training and education systems of support staff and teachers be aware of all student backgrounds and not just focus on assumed stereotypes. The example above shows how the march to embrace “minorities” can be misguided and damaging.
- hooks: Poverty in the white mind is always primarily black. Even though the white poor are many, living in suburbs and rural areas, they remain invisible. The black poor are everywhere, or so many white people think.
- Ng & Rury: [Payne] ignores the very research upon which her book purportedly relies. A study cited by Payne reports that African-American families in 1980 were more than seven times more likely to experience ‘persistent’ poverty (more than six years) than Whites. African-Americans also were more likely to live in a

neighborhood where more than a fifth of the residents were persistently poor by about the same margin. (Citing Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Maritato, 1997).

- Heidi: Payne's web site also says her broad experience in education consists of the three states: Indiana, Michigan, and Illinois. That is certainly not a fair representation of North America, where she is the 'Leading U.S. Expert on the Mindsets of Poverty, Middle Class and Wealth' according to her book.
- Leila: My hometown of Port Orford, population of about 1,000, is majority White. When I was in elementary school, there may have been around five minority students in the over 200-student school. According to recent data, 77% of the elementary school is on free and reduced lunch. Port Orford is considered a "high-need" district. There has been a small Latino influx since the late 80's/early 90's, but the demographics remain the same: majority White with high needs. Racial distinctions do not always represent socioeconomic distinctions. Beegle wisely includes how stereotypes can become damaging, even when they are assumed to be helpful methods for understanding people groups.
- Narrator: *Making Sense of the Experience*
- Emily: Why does this book resonate with so many people? I was telling my husband and his family, who have lived in poverty much of their lives, about it. They thought it was great, as well. They said it was characteristic of the lives they had lived.
- Gennie: It's useful . . . It's dangerous.
- Leila: The most important perspective to draw from both Payne and Beegle's texts on poverty is that it takes effort to build an authentic relationship with individuals in order to begin the process of healing the *roots* of poverty. As a teacher, I hope to approach my students with an open mind, no assumptions made.
- Ng & Rury: Studies challenging the culture of poverty thesis have cast serious doubt on the proposition that a clearly distinguishable 'culture of poverty' in fact exists. By and large, it is a term that has fallen out of use in the social science literature today. For example, Payne overlooks the predominant social and economic causes of poverty highlighted in social science literature such as deindustrialization,

discrimination, unequal educational resources, and socioeconomic segregation. (Citing Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1996).

- Ms. D.: When do we indict a society that causes people to live in emergency situations?
- Leila: The issue of poverty is deep and even discouraging at times. It is my desire to acknowledge my own ignorance in situations and to build and acquire the necessary resources to overcome my lack of experience or perspective.
- Emily: When reading this book it is very important that those of us who do not have much experience in poverty do not let this or any book define our view of poverty. It is a multi-faceted issue that affects many people's (students') lives on a daily basis.
- Beegle: Often, individuals from a certain social class interact exclusively with each other.
- Leila: This is very true of the middle class. It is a rare time when those in the middle class come into *meaningful* interaction with those in poverty. I would even say that the most consistent environment for cross-class, meaningful interaction is in the schools. If this is the most common gathering place of children from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, shouldn't it be the most common place to find multiple levels of support for the entire person?
- Emily: What systems can we put in place that give people from all economic levels an equal playing field when it comes to education?
- Beegle: . . . the U.S. has the highest percentage of those who become permanently trapped in poverty, suggesting that the United States has fewer effective mechanisms in place to pull these people out of poverty once they have fallen in it.
- Leila: I propose that part of the answer is creating a co-support system that involves schools working with other community organizations with trained individuals to counsel and mentor *within* the walls of the school. It is a partnership that releases some of the pressures from teachers. The outside organizations wouldn't just have a school office, but would become interwoven into the classrooms and extra-curricular activities.

- Ng & Rury: It is important to note, however, that the underlying logic of Payne's conception of poverty is not well-supported by contemporary social science research, and her straightforward explanations and conclusions may hold problematic implications for poor children and those educators who serve them.
- Narrator: *Final Thoughts*
- Emily: I think that this book helped me a lot to just open my eyes to the fact that there are people who come from completely different situations than I do that hold different ideas and concepts up as the idea. I really like the quiz to see which economic class we were in because it helped me to see how much I assume others have the same basic knowledge that I have. It was humbling to see how many different things I didn't know in the other categories, which if I were in another situation, I would be judged by.
- Leila: There are a lot of people who believe that there is a way out of poverty, but it is learning how to become part of the pathway for a person that makes the difference. There are many things to consider from time commitment to building a relationship with personal communication. I don't blame teachers that feel helpless when faced with students of poverty. There is barely enough time and few resources to reach students beyond the standards curriculum requirements. As my sister-in-law mentioned to me, however, students can't learn if they can't concentrate because they aren't being fed at home. Somehow, the larger system needs to be reworked. . .
- Payne: Yet another notion among the middle class and educated is that if the poor had a choice, they would live differently. The financial resources would certainly help make a difference. Even with financial resources, however, not every individual who received those finances would choose to live differently. There is a freedom of verbal expression, an appreciation of individual personality, a heightened and intense emotional experience, and a sensual, kinesthetic approach to life usually not found in the middle class or among the educated. These patterns are so intertwined in the daily life of the poor that to have those cut off would be to lose a limb. Many choose not to live a different life. And for some, alcoholism, laziness, lack of motivation, drug addiction, etc., in effect make the choices for the individual.
- Society: The poor are always with us.

Emily: Do we like this book because it makes most teachers (mainly middle class) feel safe? Does it give us the truth or just the answers that we really want to hear?

Ng & Rury: . . . Payne may be popular simply because she echoes common place assumptions why some individuals appear to succeed in American society while others do not. . . . it is also possible that a good deal of the interest her perspective draws from educators is rooted in their own middle-class conceptions about the poor and the causes of poverty. Most educators, after all, are unfamiliar with the extensive research literature on poverty and its effects on children, and if Payne's citations seem to support their own views about the poor, they would hardly be in a position to challenge the interpretation of research that Payne offers. If they are predisposed to believing that the poor are lazy and impulsive as well as unreliable and temperamental, they are more likely to agree with Payne's analysis than to question it.

Emily: This book is important not because it has all the answers or necessarily gets it all right, but it is a good reminder that we need to be consistently dwelling with these thoughts and developing ideas as to how we can improve the learning situations of many of our students.

Ms. D.: How do we come to know children as people and not as situations?

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