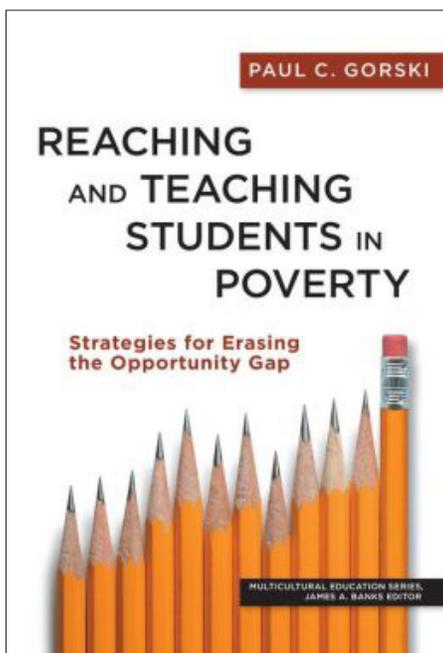


Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty:

Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap
By Paul Gorski, 2013, Teachers College Press

A second book I recommend is **Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap** (Teachers College Press, 2013) by Paul Gorski, part of the “Multicultural Education Series” edited by James Banks, who writes the foreword to this volume. Paul Gorski is a professor of integrative studies at George Mason University (and incidentally founder of EdChange.org, an incredibly rich website with tons of multicultural materials, including several free downloads). He begins on page 1 of the introductory chapter by listing the “savage inequalities” (of which Jonathan Kozol spoke so eloquently in his book of the same title, back in 1992):



“Poor students are assigned disproportionately to the most inadequately funded schools with the largest class sizes and lowest paid teachers. They are more likely than their wealthier peers to be bullied and to attend school in poorly maintained buildings. They are denied access to the sorts of school resources and opportunities other children take for granted, such as dedicated school nurses, and engaging pedagogies. In fact, by these and almost every other possible measure, students from poor families, the ones most desperate to find truth in the ‘great equalizer’ [education] promise, appear to pay a great price for their poverty, even at school.”

Gorski continues in that introductory chapter to describe why he wrote the book and what he intends to address:

“I wrote this book, in part, to nudge educators, including

myself, past those assumptions [poor families are not interested in education] and toward a deeper, more empathetic, and more holistic understanding of the effects of poverty and class bias on the school experiences of poor and working class students. I wrote it to nudge us past the simplification and stereotypes [i.e. “culture of poverty”] that I believe hamper our abilities to be the teachers and leaders we want to be for all of our students.



Paul C. Gorski

“I wrote it, too, because I believe in the transformative power of teachers, perhaps not in the fight to end global poverty (at least not on their own), but in the commitment to walk into classrooms and schools full of students, dedicated, despite all the challenges, to do right by each of them. I believe that we want a more complex conversation about poverty and that we’re capable of digging deeper into questions about what we can do to better facilitate educational opportunity for every family.”

The book is primarily about Gorski’s “Equity Literacy” approach to educational equity. Drawing on four other models and approaches for thinking about equity and diversity in our schools—“resiliency theory,” “diversity pedagogy theory,” the “funds of knowledge” concept, and some of the elements of “cultural proficiency”—Gorski “requires us to understand our own biases and how they are tied to privilege and even to societal inequalities.” In setting up and explaining equity literacy in the second chapter, “Imagining Equitable Classrooms,” Gorski initially points out that “the equity-literate educator cultivates in her- or himself four interlocking abilities.” He urges all of us teachers, administrators, and others involved in education to develop these abilities if they are not already qualities we believe and truly act on:

“1) the ability to recognize both subtle and not-so-subtle biases and inequities in classroom dynamics, school cultures and policies, and the broader society, and how these biases and inequities affect students and their families;

2) the ability to respond to biases and inequities in the immediate term, as they crop up in classrooms and schools;

3) the ability to redress biases and inequities in the longer term, so that they do not continue to crop up in classrooms and schools; and

4) the ability to create and sustain a bias-free and equitable learning environment for all students.”

Gorski then gives examples of what these abilities look like in practice and some of the associated skills and dispositions of each of the four, and continues to illustrate them throughout the remainder of the book. Continuing in that first chapter, Gorski then introduces and briefly explains “Ten Principles of Equity Literacy” which form the framework, the guiding principles of the book:

“Principle 1: The right to equitable education opportunity is universal.

Principle 2: Poverty and class are intersectional in nature.

Principle 3: Poor people are diverse.

Principle 4: What we believe, including our biases and prejudices, about people in poverty informs how we teach and relate to people in poverty.

Principle 5: We cannot understand the relationship between poverty and education without understanding the biases and inequities experienced by people in poverty.

Principle 6: Test scores are inadequate measures of equity.

Principle 7: Class disparities in education are the result of inequities, not the result of cultures.

Principle 8: Equitable educators adopt a resiliency rather than a deficit view of low-income students and families.

Principle 9: Strategies for bolstering school engagement and learning must be based on evidence for what works.

Principle 10: The inalienable right to equitable educational opportunity includes the right to high expectations, higher-order pedagogies, and engaging curriculum.”

Then, in the remaining chapters three through ten, Gorski begins each with a re-statement of the three or four principles that form a backdrop to the specific topic of that chapter. For example, at the outset of chapter three, “The Inequality Mess We’re In: A Class and

Poverty Primer” – he notes that this chapter relates specifically to principles two, three, and four. He actually begins that chapter with a ten-question, multiple-choice “Poverty and Class Awareness Quiz,” with such questions as:

“1. According to the Children’s Defense Fund (2010), how often is a child born into poverty in the United states? a) every 32 seconds, b) every 3 minutes & 2 seconds, c) every 32 minutes

2. According to the Center for American Progress (2007), what proportion of U.S. citizens will live at least 1 year of their lives in poverty? a) one-fifth, b) one-third, c) one-half”

(See the bottom of page 14 for the answers.)

Using this Quiz as a starting point, Gorski goes on to give extensively researched specifics about how poverty is intertwined with other identities including gender and sexism, race and racism, and disability and ableism. He then ends each chapter with a brief, summarizing Conclusion, such as this for the above chapter three:

*“The kind of information filling the pages of this chapter might seem, to some readers, far removed from the day-to-day joys and challenges of classroom and school life. We, as educators, have plenty to do without somebody coming along and adding increasing rates of child poverty to our agenda of problems to solve. **It bears repeating that my intention, including a sort of class and poverty primer in this book, is not to argue that every teacher must commit her life to ending global poverty, although it’s amazing to imagine what we could do if we chose to put our collective energies toward that goal. Rather, the purpose of equipping ourselves with deeper understandings of poverty rates and wealth distribution and various other big patterns and phenomena is to better understand poor and working class students and families and the challenges they are up against.**” [emphasis mine]*

The following is a list of the remaining seven chapters, which should provide enough of an overview to see where Gorski is headed: 4) The Trouble with the “Culture of Poverty and Other Stereotypes about People in Poverty, 5) Class Inequities Beyond Schools walls and Why They Matter at School, 6) The Achievement–err, Opportunity–Gap in School, 7) Been There, Done That, Didn’t Work: The Most Popular Ineffective Strategies for Teaching Students in Poverty, 8) What Works (When Adapted to Your Specific Context of Course): Instruc-

tional Strategies That Are Effective, Equitable, and Even Data-Driven, 9) The Mother of All Strategies: Committing to Working With Rather than On Families In Poverty, and 10) Expanding Our Spheres of Influence: Advocating for School, District, Regional, and National Change for the Educational Good. And it is perhaps chapters seven, eight, and nine that will be of most interest to readers of *Connections*, as they address specific things that can/should be done in the classroom, and some that shouldn't. Specifically, here is the small sampling of popular (and no doubt controversial) strategies that research has shown not to be effective in addressing poverty in the classroom: a) direct instruction and other lower-order pedagogies including teaching to the test, b) tracking and ability grouping, and c) charter schools. I encourage you to read the chapter to understand Gorski's arguments.

Turning then to "Instructional Strategies That Work" in chapter eight, Gorski posits the following, first as an easily accessible list, and then he clarifies/expands on each item:

- 1) *"incorporating music, art, and theater across the curriculum;*
- 2) *having and communicating high expectations for all students;*
- 3) *adopting higher-order, student-centered, rigorous pedagogies;*
- 4) *incorporating movement and exercise into teaching and learning;*
- 5) *making curricula relevant to the lives of low-income students;*
- 6) *teaching about poverty and class bias;*
- 7) *analyzing learning materials for class (and other) bias; and*
- 8) *promoting literacy enjoyment."*

It seems important here to note that these "strategies" clearly connect to, and are similar to, much of what Meira Levinson talks about in her book, such as her closing summary copied in the first book review. And there is the connection between Levinson's call for attention to "student voice" and "relationships" as key to working with the students of color, and Gorski's "Mother of All Strategies"—building relationships—noting the research-based finding that "[t]he most successful teachers of low-income students:

1. *"choose a resilience view, rather than a deficit view, of poor and working class families, focusing on student and family assets;*
2. *engage in persistent family outreach efforts;*
3. ***build trusting relationships with students; and [emphasis mine]***
4. *ensure that opportunities for family involvement are accessible to poor and working class families."*

In closing, I recommend this essential and particularly timely new book by Paul Gorski, ending with these lines from his concluding chapter:

"Respect and the extent to which we demonstrate it in our teaching is tied up in those things, those sometimes little bitty things we do or don't do, say or don't say, or even think or don't think. And it's about our willingness to take a stand when one of our students is being shortchanged—not standing in front of or standing in place of, but standing next to, standing with low-income students and families."

Please [email us](#) with your comments. — Dave Lehman



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