

# An Interview with Dr. Paul C. Gorski

Camilla Greene, Pennsylvania

**D**r. 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)*

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 injustices. 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 work, 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 all 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 I mentioned 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 Minnesota 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.

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 clas-

ism 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 Sommers, one of her trainers, called different people at my university in 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 critique 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 racism and classism.

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 (continued on page 25)

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](http://www.EdChange.org).

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