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.

How would you describe yourself? Activist, educator, writer in that order. My background is 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 it, but I knew it was there and I wanted 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 big questions about the world around me. In school we would talk about what it was like to be poor. Maybe my legacy, at this point, would be about talking 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. One of the barriers to understanding poverty is educators’ tendency to avoid talking about this issue. -W

What have you been able to do to interrupt classism in your school or community 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 talking 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.

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 rectify the very ways in which race dramatically impacts achievement.” (page xxv)

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 most educators do not easily embrace conversations focused on race... -E

What do you do to open the conversation about race? (continued from page 6)

Courageous Conversations...

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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!
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 actually contribute to injustices through what they perceive to be social justice work. We must stop worrying about hurting each other’s feelings.

This brings me 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?

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. 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 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 Ruby Payne.

(continued from page 25)
I was Day Two of a CFG training and the only African-American participant had been taking more airtime than others, partially to better explain her cultural perspective. Her facilitator referred to a norm around equality of airtime to bring this to her attention. “Oh, she responded, “I thought that since I’m the only person of color in the room it meant you needed to hear from me more often?” The group had a short discussion about the differences between equitable and equal and moved on.

Later in the training, this same participant wondered aloud if these protocols weren’t geared towards white ways of interacting, since people of color don’t use such structured dialogue. It wasn’t the first time I’d heard that question. “No, wouldn’t be comfortable 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 this to another racial culture. If people of color often need to adjust the way they speak and act in dominant situations, 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 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 once again, into 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-heart ed – 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 my table were positive and productive. My identity as a black educator was intact – and in fact honored by the people I was with. It was a rich learning experience.

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 are treated, not just the actual statistics, 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.

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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Interview with Dr. Paul C. Gorski... (continued from page 24)