

## **Applying Ruby Payne's Theory of Social Class Rules in the Elementary Classroom – Part I**

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*[Editor's Note:* This is the first part of a two-part article on strategies to aid instruction in the elementary-level Language Arts classroom. In it, an elementary-level teacher outlines the work of Ruby Payne and other authors, explaining how it relates to teaching at that level. The second part, to be published in a later issue of *JPACE*, examines a variety of more specific teaching strategies Payne's theory suggests for application in elementary classrooms.]

### **Abstract**

The work of Ruby Payne (2001) examines the “hidden rules” of different social classes in America, and how they create differing assumptions and language usage as children enter the elementary school setting. In Part I, the author examines Payne's theory in detail as it applies to the elementary classroom, offering initial suggestions regarding the learning process and classroom interventions.

### **Introduction – Living in Poverty**

Are we exactly where we choose to be in life? Two years ago I would have argued without question, that indeed our place in life is a choice. I would have said with conviction that moving out of a bad situation is as simple as being determined to leave. These few words make it evident that I grew up with an understanding of middle class norms and most likely an assumption that those norms apply to all.

According to Dr. Ruby Payne (2001a), there is a logical reason for my assumption. Quite simply, it is that we are raised within our social class with rules that we take for granted. These hidden rules are to a large degree what we base our decisions upon, and they subsequently affect how we perceive the decisions of others. That is to say that we assume our rules are given to everyone. It is without question that there is a level of choice that determines my individual success. I don't believe that my future is set in stone; making good choices now can positively affect who I become in the future. However, it wasn't until recently that I realized the concept of destiny was not the same for all people.

According to Payne (2001a), there are three distinct social classes in our country. Each class contains a subtle collection of rules that are not formally taught but learned nonetheless. Though these rules vary from person to person and group to group, there are expectable similarities among people raised within a particular class. The rules of negotiation, for example, are different for someone whose decisions in life are based primarily on survival. For people growing up in poverty, either being able to fight physically or knowing someone who can is an essential aspect of one's existence. In addition, because people in poverty lack the financial resources to acquire material goods, one's personality and ability to entertain become far more valuable. Payne's chart, "Hidden Rules among Classes," is included below as Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Hidden Rules among Classes**  
(Payne, 2001a)

	POVERTY	MIDDLE CLASS	WEALTH
POSSESSIONS	People.	Things.	One-of-a-kind objects, legacies.
MONEY	To be used. Spent.	To be managed.	To be conserved. Invested.
PERSONALITY	Is for entertainment. Sense of humor is highly valued.	Is for acquisition and stability. Achievement is highly valued.	Is for connections. Financial, political, social connections are highly valued.
SOCIAL EMPHASIS	Social inclusion of the people they like.	Emphasis is on self-governance and self-sufficiency.	Emphasis is on social exclusion.
FOOD	Key question: Did you have enough? Quantity is important.	Key question: Did you like it? Quality is important.	Key question: Was it presented well? Presentation important.
CLOTHING	Clothing valued for individual style and expression of personality.	Clothing valued for its quality and acceptance into norm of middle class. Label important.	Clothing valued for its artistic sense and expression. Designer important.
TIME	Present most important. Decisions made for the moment based on feelings or survival.	Future most important. Decisions made against future ramifications.	Traditions and history most important.

EDUCATION	Valued and revered as abstract but not as reality.	Crucial for climbing success ladder and making money.	Necessary tradition for making and maintaining connections
DESTINY	Believe in fate.	Believe in choice.	Noblesse Oblige.
LANGUAGE	Casual register.	Formal register. Language of negotiation	Formal register. Language for networking
FAMILY STRUCTURE	Matriarchal	Patriarchal	Depends on money.
WORLD VIEW	Sees the world in terms of local setting.	Sees the world in terms of national setting.	Sees world in terms of international view.
LOVE	Love and acceptance conditional, based upon whether individual is liked.	Love and acceptance is conditional and based largely upon achievement.	Love and acceptance is conditional and related to social standing and connections.
DRIVING FORCE	Survival, relationships, entertainment.	Work, achievement.	Financial, political, social connections.

It is important for educators to understand the rules of social class and how they affect our perspectives as teachers. Payne argues that as a society, we operate our businesses and schools on the standards and rules set by the middle class and yet many of the students and people we employ are oblivious to these standards and consequently their ability to succeed is severely challenged. Therefore, knowledge of these rules is equally important to better identify with all students as learners, and ultimately to tailor a program that increases their ability to succeed.

First and foremost, Payne underscores that the notion of poverty is a relative term. If everyone in one's social group has a similar set of circumstances, the concept of poverty (and wealth, for that matter) is indistinct. It becomes apparent only when one has knowledge of known quantities and expectations. To further complicate matters, to define poverty one must consider more than financial resources. Payne defines poverty as the degree to which one does without the following resources: Financial, Emotional, Mental, Spiritual, Physical, Support Systems, Relationships/Role Models, and Knowledge of Hidden Rules. The additional resources are acknowledged primarily because their presence plays a vital role in enabling someone to leave poverty. Just as a decrease in a family's finances would not affect their principles and ideals, an increase alone will not change them either (Payne, 2001c, pp. 16-18).

Although we all grew up with certain values and expectations and many of them are deeply rooted in our being, it is difficult to verbalize their existence. Equally difficult is the ability to understand how someone can be lacking such basic knowledge. This can be particularly daunting for teachers who work with students from different classes. A student that lacks organization, for example, can cause a great deal of frustration for an organized teacher. It is difficult to understand why the student refuses to follow the system that the teacher has established. It appears to the teacher that it is a fool proof system in which everyone should be successful. Students just need to put the work in the specified, color coded folder when they are finished. For some reason this task is too difficult for some students, and the teacher may conclude that such a student is just lazy. This may seem like a reasonable conclusion and indeed it could be just, but what if that student has not been taught to value a system of organization. Perhaps the teacher doesn't realize that having file cabinets, baskets of similar items, and other methods of orderliness is not typical of people in poverty. Therefore, this false assumption of laziness could not only be erroneous but detrimental as well.

It goes without saying that it is important for educators to familiarize themselves with a student's educational background, but becoming aware of each student's personal circumstances can be just as beneficial in developing a program that encourages not only academic achievement but emotional growth and development as well. Preserving a student's identity while at the same time exposing him or her to rules which will promote achievement will prove to be the greatest, and perhaps the most significant, challenge that a teacher will encounter.

### **The Learning Process**

Is it possible to have a brain and not have a mind? Payne incorporates Dr. Reuven Feuerstein's interpretation that "a brain is inherited; a mind is developed." (Payne, 2001c, 4). For many decades theorists have debated whether it is nature or nurture that has the greatest influence on the learning process. Today, most cognitive scientists agree that it is a 50-50 relationship; half is determined by genetic make-up and the other half by environment. This conclusion has not necessarily simplified matters regarding the learning process. If half of who a person becomes is determined by environment, then teachers need to recognize that environment, in this case, is not only physical but mental as well. People are unable to communicate telepathically, and therefore we process information based on abstract representations of external reality (Payne, 2001c, 6). This is where the learning process becomes complicated. Every individual develops abstract structures based on an interrelationship between language and experiences within his or her environment. That is to say that when we were children, our parents and caregivers, acting as mediators, gave us the what, the why, and the how to help us understand the world around us. "In

other words, they pointed out the stimulus (what we were to pay attention to), gave it meaning (the why), and gave us a strategy (the how)." (Payne, 2001c, 6).

Every child enters school with a unique background and set of experiences. Many children carry the tools and skills that will enable them to be successful. The transition to school for these children is likely to be a smooth one. Other children need more intense mediation to achieve success. The question is what factors in their family and community lives and experiences have the greatest impact on their ability to succeed in school? It is clear that children who experience difficult adjustments to school in the early years have long-term ramifications of achievement in the future. Since public education in this country is available to all children and is regarded as a place of opportunity for all; we, as educators, need to examine these issues more closely to enable all children, regardless of their economic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, to maximize their potential in school.

Again, this oversimplified expectation of educators does not address the complexity of achieving such directives. One must consider the role that culture plays in an individual's ability to achieve success in environments where diverse cultures conflict and collide and often don't match those of the mainstream society. To understand this concept better we need to examine the process that new learners experience when confronted by a new skill or process. This is particularly useful when we accept that children from different economic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds come to school with different, but equally legitimate experiences for which contexts are developed.

Payne explains that research on new learners by Bloom and Berliner indicates that there is a process that an individual goes through. It is summarized in Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2. Levels of Learning**  
(Payne, 2001c, 10-12)

NOVICE	Has no experience with information, skill, process, etc. Needs terminology, models, and procedures. Needs context-free rules.
ADVANCED BEGINNER	Has some experience and begins to collect episodic knowledge (stories) and strategic knowledge (strategies). Begins to see similarities across contexts or situations that he/she is in.
COMPETENT	Can make conscious choices about what will and will not work. Can distinguish important from unimportant. Takes personal responsibility for his/her own learning because he/she knows what he/she did to make a difference.
PROFICIENT	Sees hundreds of patterns and sorts information quickly by pattern. Uses intuition and know-how to make judgments. Has wealth of experience from which to make generalizations and judgments.
EXPERT	Makes his/her own rules because of extensive experience. Performance is so fluid it can happen virtually without conscious thought; this is called automaticity.

Using the information in Figure 2, Payne explains that a beginning learner in anything needs the three components of mediation – the what, the why, and the how. Often the expert has difficulty helping the novice because so many of the expert’s actions are at the level of automaticity, and the expert has a great deal of difficulty articulating what he/she is doing.

Essentially what this means for educators is that any new learner needs to be mediated in order to develop contexts for learning. It is the contexts that relationships are built upon and new learning thus occurs. Unfortunately, often what is focused on in schools is content learning only. “The how” and “the why” are often neglected and subsequently diminish the ability for many children to make connections, and therefore significant learning is diminished.

For many decades researchers have recognized a language component that acts as a barrier to student's success in schools. Research by Dutch linguist, Martin Joos, indicates that there is a strong relationship between the amount of vocabulary an individual has and social class (Payne, 2001a, 18-19). There are five primary registers of language that can be found in any spoken language around the world: Frozen (repetitive), Formal (language of businesses and schools), Consultative (Formal and Casual combined), Casual (language between friends), and Intimate (language of lovers.)

People in poverty tend to be exposed primarily to Casual register which has very few abstract words and requires non-verbal assists to convey meaning. It is also limited to a vocabulary of 400-800 words (Payne, 2001c, 19). As one can assume, this severely limits a student's capacity to build connections in schools which are heavily weighed on an understanding of Formal register. The inability to understand abstract processes eliminates the potential for students to understand "the how" and "the why," which is where strategies for future learning are attained. In other words, it is as if the focus was solely on content, and the process for developing the content was ignored. The gaps in knowledge would not allow for enhanced learning and subsequently would impact the student's ability to construct new learning.

Another aspect to consider is that children exposed primarily to Casual register need to be taught how to answer or think in terms of "the how" and "the why." Though this becomes natural for a competent, proficient, or expert learner, it requires exposure and experience to develop abstract thinking for the novice or advanced beginning learner. Dr. Reuven Feuerstein concluded that often in schools, teachers direct-teach the content, rather than direct-teach the processes that are necessary for abstract learning. With mediation, there are three strategies that are necessary for developing awareness of abstract processes: input strategies, elaboration strategies, and output strategies. Teachers tend to start at the elaboration level because they assume that the input strategies are present in everyone (Payne, 2001c, 26). Unfortunately that is not the case, and teachers need to direct-teach these strategies in order for children to move into higher level forms of thinking.

Feuerstein has defined input strategies as the quantity and quality of data gathered. The first strategy is to use planning behaviors such as goal setting, identifying procedures and parts of the task, assigning time to the task, and identifying the quality of the work necessary to complete the task. The next components are to focus perception on a specific stimulus using all five senses and to control the impulse to move on before completing the task. Another strategy is to explore data systematically using procedures such as numbering or highlighting, input strategies that require the use of appropriate and accurate labels to identify or explain new processes or skills that they encounter. If the vocabulary for these new processes is not present then the student's ability to store and retrieve this new information will be severely limited. Students need to

understand how to organize items in space. That means that up, down, across, right, left, horizontal, vertical, diagonal, east, west, north, south, etc., are understood. It is also important for students to understand how to orient data in time, past, present, and future. The ability to identify constancies across variations, such as what makes a square a square, is a critical input strategy. The ability to gather precise and accurate data, comparing two sources of information at once, organizing data, and visually transporting data require the use of all of the previous strategies combined (Payne, 2001c, 24-30).

What does this mean in the classroom? Ultimately, teachers need to translate the concrete information into the abstract. In order to achieve this goal, students need to establish mental models that will represent the information using visuals, stories, metaphors, or analogies. In order to gain understanding in any field, a mental model must be developed.

For example, when an individual builds a house, much discussion and words (the abstract) are used to convey what the finished house (concrete) will be. But between the words and the finished house are blueprints. Blueprints are the translators. Between the three-dimensional concrete house and the abstract words, a two-dimensional visual translates.

(Payne, 2001b, 28)

If it is true that a brain is inherited and a mind is developed as Feuerstein suggests, a teacher has a great deal to work with in his students. Ultimately, the teacher's only job is to develop "the what," "the why," and "the how" in each one of his or her students; and with commitment, patience, energy, and enthusiasm the teacher can help them grow emotionally, socially, and intellectually.

## **Teaching Strategies**

Many in the United States are reaping the benefits of being an affluent nation; however, in 2000, 12.4 million children (one out of six) lived below the poverty line (US Census 2000 Supplemental Survey). This is particularly daunting for the thousands of teachers who find them in their classrooms ill-equipped with the tools, skills, and support necessary for success. Since the 1950's when a team of educational psychologists, including Benjamin Bloom, developed an organizational system that categorized the levels of intellectual behavior of learning, teachers have been cognizant of the importance of developing higher levels of thinking. These higher levels of thinking essentially require the ability for students to think abstractly. Since students who grow up in the culture of poverty, statistically, are exposed to very little abstract thought, they require significant mediation to address their lack of experience with language.

The complexity of the factors that contribute to the difficulties of poor students often leads teachers to lose focus on the strengths of these children and their families. It is important for teachers to be ready to find those sometimes hidden strengths. It is with those strengths that a child's success is built upon.

You are valued in this program because of your academic potential regardless of your current skill level. You have no more to fear than the next person, and since the work is difficult, success is a credit to your ability, and a setback is a reflection only of the challenge.

(Steele, 1992, 75)

Before a teacher begins to plan for academic lessons, it is important to recognize the importance of developing students emotionally. One way that teachers can help those children faced with the disadvantages of being poor is to provide experiences that not only build skills, but attitudes as well, that are essential to the development of resiliency. Developing resilience goes hand in hand with developing a positive sense of self. Qualities that reflect resiliency are having good social skills, positive peer interactions, being socially responsible, expressing empathy, being socially sensitive, having a good sense of humor, and being able to problem solve. With positive teacher-student interactions and the structure of the school environment, teachers can help develop these skills (Helm and Beneke, 2003). Resilient students will be better equipped with the skills to overcome the many challenges that they may face as a result of being poor.

Another major factor that needs to be addressed is the importance of establishing a system of motivating students to learn. Often teachers who work with students from disadvantaged homes are presented with students who lack motivation to work in school. Many have parents that did not have positive experiences with their own schooling, and therefore have expressed a distrust or distaste for the educational process altogether. First and foremost, teachers need to establish rapport with their students which ideally will lead to an element of mutual respect. This may take time, but with persistence and insistence, doors might be opened that allow for emotional, social, and intellectual growth. Once rapport is established teachers need to maintain a balance between extrinsic and intrinsic rewards that will motivate their students to work. Ideally, this would allow for students to receive the necessary feedback without becoming dependent on external motivators. Ultimately this would encourage students to see learning itself as the reward.

There are three basic components that lay the groundwork for effective learning environments with a diverse group of learners. First, it is important to actively engage the students so that they are more likely to make sense of what they are learning. Second, give students the opportunity to see the relationship of parts to whole. Third, allow students to make connections between new information and their previous knowledge. A classroom that is centered on these three

components is in a better position to be a highly productive learning environment; where students not only complete assigned tasks but also clearly enjoy being and learning (Knapp, 1995).

### **Interventions that Improve Behavior**

It goes without saying that every teacher faces disruptions at some point in time or another. What distinguishes a teacher in a well managed classroom from a teacher in a less effectively managed classroom is the ability to ensure a balance between consistency and flexibility of routines. The teacher must establish consistent routines throughout the day so that expectations of performance are clear and little time is wasted during transitions. Both, the reaction of the teacher and the consequences for the behavior infraction need to not only be predictable and logical, but they must allow for the ability of the offender to make the connection as to why the behavior was unacceptable in a school setting. Typically, children in poverty are taught that punishment is about penance and forgiveness, and not necessarily change (Payne, 2001c). It is important for children to understand that there are different sets of rules for behaviors that are appropriate for a school setting. The ultimate goal is for the students to achieve self-governing behavior. Effective and expert classroom managers mentally, or in writing, answer the following questions about a student's behavior:

1. What kind of behaviors does the child need to be successful?
2. Does the child have the resources to develop those behaviors?
3. Will it help to contact the parents?
  - Are there resources available through them?
  - What resources are available through the school/district?
4. How will the behaviors be taught?
5. What are the choices the child could make?
6. What will help the child repeat the successful behavior?

(Payne, 2001c, 104)

The next step of an effective manager is to engage the child in analyzing their own behavior as well. This can be done by providing the child with the opportunity to fill out the questionnaire found in Figure 3 below:

**Figure 3. Questionnaire**  
(Payne, 2001a, 104-105).

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. *What did you do?*
  
2. *When you did that, what did you want?*
  
3. *List four other things you could have done?*
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
  - 4.
  
4. *What will you do next time?*

*Once the child has had the opportunity to complete the questionnaire, then the teacher and student discuss it together. The child may need help in determining other choices that would have been more appropriate.*

Figure 4 from Payne (2001c) indicates some possible explanations of behaviors related to poverty, along with suggested interventions.

**Figure 4. Behaviors and Interventions**  
(Payne, 2001c, 103)

BEHAVIOR RELATED TO POVERTY	INTERVENTION
<b>Laugh when disciplined:</b> A way of saving face in a matriarchal poverty.	Understand the reason for the behavior. Tell students three or four other behaviors that would be more appropriate.
<b>Argue loudly with the teacher:</b> Poverty is participatory, and the culture has a distrust of authority.	Don't argue with students. Use the four part sheet. Model respect for students.
<b>Cannot Follow Directions:</b> Little procedural memory used in poverty. Sequence not used or valued.	Write steps on the board. Have them write at the top of the paper the steps needed to finish the task.
<b>Extremely Disorganized:</b> Lack of planning, scheduling, or prioritizing skills. Not taught in poverty. Also, probably don't have a place at home to put things so that they can be found.	Teach a simple, color-coded method of organization in the classroom. Use the five-finger method for memory at the end of the day. Have each student give a plan for organization.
<b>Complete Only Part of a Task:</b> No procedural self-talk. Do not "see" the whole task.	Write on the board all the parts of the task. Require each student to check off each part when finished.

Classroom management can be a distinguishing factor of a teacher's effectiveness. The freedom that comes from having a responsive and respectful approach can create the groundwork for offering the flexibility to change routines when new approaches are needed, and consequently leading to an effective learning environment.

As a teacher the challenges are great, and in order for teachers to meet the needs of a diverse set of learners, it is imperative that we raise the bar for teacher accountability; to shift the failure of children in school from poor preparedness on behalf of the student to perhaps inadequately trained teachers. It is time to make a commitment to better understanding the cultures of the children we educate, and decisions about instruction need to be guided by elevating expectations, insistence that they can set and achieve goals, and offering the much needed support to help all of our students meet or exceed their potential.

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