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Poverty and the ideological imperative: a call to unhook from deficit and grit ideology and to strive for structural ideology in teacher education

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ABSTRACT

In this article I explore the educational equity implications of three popular ideological positions that drive teachers' and teacher educators' understandings of, and responses to, poverty and economic injustice in schools: deficit ideology, grit ideology, and structural ideology. The educator's ideological position, I illustrate, determines their understandings of conditions such as socio-economic-based outcome disparities. Those understandings, in turn, determine the extent to which the strategies they can imagine have the potential to eliminate or mitigate those disparities. I then argue that teacher education for equity and economic justice must equip pre- and in-service educators with a *structural ideology* of poverty and economic injustice, based on a sophisticated understanding of relationships between structural inequalities and educational outcome disparities, rather than a *deficit* or *grit* ideology, both of which obscure structural inequalities and, as a result, render educators ill-equipped to enact equitable and just teaching, leadership and advocacy.

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'Raise your hand,' I instructed the students, 'if you believe you have worked hard in your life.' We were in the third meeting of Poverty, Wealth, and Inequality, a class taken predominantly by elementary education students at a public university in the United States. I had just graded their first assignment, an essay in which they described how their socio-economic identities influence their attitudes about their future students whose families are experiencing poverty. I had noticed that virtually all of the students told the same story: *My grandparents worked hard. My parents worked hard. My parents taught me I can become whatever I want to become through hard work. Everything I have accomplished has come through hard work.* Many, including students whose parents or grandparents had experienced poverty, wrote as though their families were exceptional in this regard. *Thank goodness my family was responsible and worked hard. Who knows where I might have ended up.* Every student raised her or his hand.

I was not surprised by this outcome. The students, all well-intentioned enough that they opted to take an elective class about poverty and inequality, merely parroted the dominant US view about 'success' (Gans 1996). The world is a meritocracy, they were saying. What one achieves is directly proportional to how hard one works. My students – people who had

chosen a career path that would require extremely hard work and that, save for the few who were born into wealth or who one day would become upper level administrators, all but assured them a future without class privilege – like most everybody else in the US had been socialised into this view from birth (McNamee and Miller 2009). *Everybody has an opportunity. Work hard like me and my parents and their parents and you can be Bill Gates.*

I invited the students to look around the room at all of the raised hands. ‘What do you see?’ Some appeared startled, their narrative of exceptionality shaken.

‘Everybody works hard?’ one student asked timidly. ‘There must be more to the story than hard work?’ another proposed.

With this we began our exploration on socioeconomically based educational outcome disparities and how to eliminate them.

In this essay, I draw on the principles of equity literacy (Gorski 2016a; Gorski and Swalwell 2015; Swalwell 2011) in order to demonstrate what my students and I began to uncover in class that day. The students were not lacking desire to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to create equitable learning environments for their future students. Nor, thanks to their more methods-oriented coursework, were they short on practical strategies or ideas for solving the ‘achievement gap’. The trouble, instead, was that a majority of the students had been socialised to fundamentally misunderstand poverty and its impact on educational outcome disparities. As a result, despite good intentions, the strategies they were capable of imagining – trendy instructional interventions, the cultivation of grit in students experiencing poverty, programmes designed to encourage higher levels of parent involvement by economically marginalised families – sidestepped completely the causes of the disparities they felt desperate to redress. The trouble was not dispositional or practical. Instead it was ideological, borne of faulty belief systems that, if not reshaped, would undermine their potentials to be the equitable teachers they hoped to be.

With this in mind, my purpose is to argue that when it comes to issues surrounding poverty and economic justice the preparation of teachers must be first and foremost an ideological endeavour, focused on adjusting fundamental understandings not only about educational outcome disparities but also about poverty itself. I will argue that it is only through the cultivation of what I call a *structural ideology* of poverty and economic justice that teachers become *equity literate* (Gorski 2013), capable of imagining the sorts of solutions that pose a genuine threat to the existence of class inequity in their classrooms and schools. After a brief clarification of my case for the importance of ideology, I begin by describing deficit ideology, the dominant ideological position about poverty that is informed in the US and elsewhere by the myth of meritocracy (McNamee and Miller 2009), and its increasingly popular ideological offshoot, grit ideology (Gorski 2016b). After explicating these ideological positions and how they misdirect interpretations of poverty and its implications, I describe structural ideology, an ideological position through which educators understand educational outcome disparities in the context of structural injustice and the unequal distribution of access and opportunity that underlies poverty (Gorski 2016a). I end by sharing three self-reflective questions designed to help me assess the extent to which my teacher education practice reflect the structural view.

Ideology matters

In the US, as in many parts of the world, discourses about the ‘achievement gap’ are thick with references to parent involvement. Those discourses tend to revolve around establishing

and bemoaning this fact: parents and other caregivers from economically disadvantaged families are less likely than their wealthier peers to participate in family involvement opportunities that require them to visit their children's schools (Desimone 1999; Hickman, Greenwood, and Miller 1995; Noel, Stark, and Redford 2013). Although research has shown that the same parents and caregivers may be just as likely as their wealthier peers to be engaged in their children's learning at home (Williams and Sanchez 2012), their lower rate of at-school involvement often, particularly in the popular press, is presumed to be one of the core causes of the socio-economic 'achievement gap' (see, e.g. Barton 2004; Bridges 2013).

There is no debate; this is a fact: parents and caregivers from families experiencing poverty do not visit their children's schools for family involvement opportunities at the same rate as wealthier parents and caregivers. The question from a policy and practice intervention perspective – from an equity literacy perspective – is, how do we interpret this fact? How does our ideological position influence what we define as the problem to be resolved? After all, how we interpret the disparity drives our understanding of the problem. Our understanding of the problem drives the solutions we are capable of imagining. Our choices of solutions determine the extent to which the strategies and initiatives we adopt threaten the existence of inequity or threaten the possibility of equity (Gorski 2013, 2016a). It all tracks back to ideology.

When asked why these sorts of disparities exist – why, indeed, poverty itself exists – people tend to attribute them in ways that reflect one of two big ideological positions. On one end of the continuum are people, including educators and policy-makers, who see people experiencing poverty as the agents of their own economic conditions. They adhere to deficit ideology (Gorski 2008a; Sleeter 2004), believing that poverty itself is a symptom of ethical, dispositional, and even spiritual deficiencies in the individuals and communities experiencing poverty. This is the dominant view in the US (Gans 1996) and, in my experience working with educators in more than 20 countries spanning five continents, a common view among people most everywhere who have not experienced poverty. Its adherents are likely to believe that in-school involvement disparities, like other disparities, are a reflection of these deficiencies. They might assume, despite decades of research demonstrating otherwise (e.g. Compton-Lilly 2003, Grenfell and James 1998), that low-income people do not value education, for example, and point their initiatives at attempting to fix this supposed deficiency.

On the other end of the continuum are people who tend to understand poverty and issues such as the family involvement disparity as logical, if unjust, outcomes of economic injustice, exploitation, and inequity. Adherents to a structural ideology (Gorski 2016b), they are likely to define gaps in in-school family involvement as interrelated with the inequities with which people experiencing poverty contend. So, recognising people experiencing poverty as targets, rather than causes, of these unjust conditions, they might understand lower rates of in-school involvement as a symptom of in-school and out-of-school conditions that limit their abilities to participate at the same rates as their wealthier peers. These conditions, such as families' lack of access to transportation or schools' practices of scheduling opportunities for in-school involvement in ways that make them less accessible to people who work evenings (as economically marginalised people are more likely than their wealthier peers to do) are rendered invisible by the deficit view.

To be clear, deficit and structural ideology are at the far ends of a long continuum of ideological positions. They do not constitute a binary. Still, as I have described elsewhere (Gorski 2016b), I generally can predict the extent to which a school's policies and initiatives related to poverty and educational disparities reflect a more or less deficit or structural view by asking the person in the institution with the most power a single question: *Why, on average, do parents from families experiencing poverty not attend opportunities for family involvement at their children's schools with the same frequency as their wealthier peers?* Based on the response I generally can predict the effectiveness of the school's policies and initiatives meant, at least ostensibly, to eradicate educational disparities across socio-economic status. This is why, in my view, any evaluation of a school's or school system's commitment to equity begins, not with an accounting of this or that policy or practice intervention, but rather with an accounting of the ideological positions of the institutional leaders – the views that determine the policies and practices those leaders are likely to adopt.

It also is why as a teacher educator I attend to ideology. No set of curricular or pedagogical strategies can turn a classroom led by a teacher with a deficit view of families experiencing poverty into an equitable learning space for those families (Gorski 2013; Robinson 2007).

The dangers of deficit ideology and its cousin, grit ideology

As described earlier, deficit ideology is rooted in the belief that poverty is the natural result of ethical, intellectual, spiritual, and other shortcomings in people who are experiencing it. Adherents to deficit ideology point to educational outcome disparities – differences in test scores or graduation rates, for example – as evidence of these shortcomings (Sleeter 2004; Valencia 1997). Low rates of in-school family involvement among parents experiencing poverty or higher relative rates of school absences among students experiencing poverty is interpreted, in their view, as evidence that people experiencing poverty do not value their children's education. People experiencing poverty are the problem; their attitudes, behaviours, cultures and mindsets block their potential for success.

Sometimes these deficit ascriptions are explicit. For example, Payne (2005), the most active purveyor of deficit ideology in North America, explicitly ascribes a wide variety of negative attributes to people experiencing poverty as part of her argument that we alleviate educational outcome disparities by adjusting the mindsets of economically marginalised people. She describes people experiencing poverty as ineffective communicators, promiscuous, violent, criminally oriented, addiction-prone and spiritually under-developed, and explains in her description of a generalised and universal 'mindset of poverty' that they do not value education the way middle class and wealthy people do (Payne 2005).

A majority of her claims about the mindsets of people experiencing poverty have been debunked (Gorski 2008a), her core book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2005), exposed for containing innumerable factual errors meant to paint the cultures of people experiencing poverty as the determining factor in educational outcome disparities (Bomer et al. 2008). People experiencing poverty, as it turns out, are just as diverse as any other group defined around a single identity. Unfortunately, reality is of little mitigating consequence against ideology. Payne, like other deficit ideologues, speaks to the existing misperceptions and biases of her primarily classroom-teacher audience. *People in poverty are broken. Here's how to fix them.*

This is the power of deficit ideology and why it poses the most danger in sociopolitical contexts in which people are socialised to believe equal opportunity exists. Despite the debunking, despite the inaccuracy and oppressiveness (Bomer et al. 2008; Gorski 2008a, 2008b) of her approach, Payne remains the most far-reaching voice about poverty and education in North America.

This also is why it is important to build teacher education processes related to equity concerns around the goal of ideological shifts. If a teacher believes people experiencing poverty are inherently deficient, no amount of instructional strategies will adequately prepare that teacher to see and respond to the conditions that *actually* underlie educational outcome disparities (Berliner 2006, 2013), from structural issues like housing instability to building-level issues like policies – for example, harsh punishments for school absences – that can punish students experiencing poverty for their poverty. As a teacher, can I believe a student's mindset is deficient, that she is lazy, unmotivated, and disinterested in school *and also* build a positive, high-expectations relationship with her?

Just as importantly, what realities does deficit ideology obscure and to what are we *not* responding when we respond through deficit ideology? Can we expect to eradicate outcome disparities most closely related to the barriers and challenges experienced by people experiencing poverty by ignoring those barriers and challenges – the symptoms of economic injustice?

Returning to the example of family involvement, the natural inclination of the educator who ascribes to deficit ideology is to believe that parents experiencing poverty do not show up because they do not care. The logical response to that interpretation is to try to convince people experiencing poverty to care. Across the US schools invest time and resources into initiatives designed to solve a problem that does not exist, not only wasting time and resources, but also risking the further alienation of the most marginalised families. What they too often fail to see are the barriers that make opportunities for family involvement less accessible to families experiencing poverty, so those barriers go unaddressed. This is deficit ideology, the inverse of equity.

As advocates for a more sophisticated examination of educational outcome disparities have grown louder about the trouble with the deficit view (Dudley-Marling 2007; Ullucci and Howard 2015), an enticing but equally troublesome alternative has emerged. Growing out of the notoriety of grit theory (Duckworth et al. 2009), the idea that there are particular personal attributes that enable some people to overcome adversity that might overwhelm others, grit ideology differs from deficit ideology in one important way. Unlike people who adhere to deficit ideology, who must wholly ignore structural barriers in order to attribute outcome inequalities to the mindsets of the targets of those barriers, adherents to grit ideology recognise the structural barriers. However, rather than cultivating policy and practice to eradicate those barriers, they enact strategies to bolster the grit of economically marginalised students (Gorski 2016b).

The most obvious trouble with grit ideology is that, of all the combinations of barriers that most impact the educational outcomes of students experiencing poverty, which might include housing instability, food insecurity, inequitable access to high-quality schools, unjust school policies, and others, not a single one is related in any way to students' grittiness. As Kohn (2014) has noted, adherents to a grit ideology are grasping for amoral solutions to inequity and injustice, which are moral problems. Kundu (2014), who warned of the 'relentless focus on grit' as a remedy to educational outcome disparities, explained how the grit view

is a cousin to deficit ideology. 'By overemphasizing grit', Kundu wrote, 'we tend to attribute a student's underachievement to personality deficits like laziness. This reinforces the idea that individual effort determines outcomes' (80). It also ignores the fact that the most economically disadvantaged students, who show up for school *despite* the structural barriers and the inequities they often experience in school, already are, by most standards, the most gritty, most resilient students (Gorski 2013).

Like deficit ideology, grit ideology is no threat to the existence of educational outcome disparities. In the end, it only can lead to strategies that sidestep the core causes of those disparities, requiring students to overcome inequities they should not be experiencing.

The hope of structural ideology

Educators with a structural ideology understand that educational outcome disparities are dominantly the result of structural barriers, the logical if not purposeful outcome of inequitable distributions of opportunity and access in and out of school (Gorski 2016b). As mentioned earlier, this inequitable access tracks most closely to the symptoms of income and wealth inequality (Berliner 2006, 2013) – to economic injustice and its implications. Outside of schools, lack of access to adequate financial resources might mean that students experiencing poverty are coping with some combination of unstable housing, food insecurity, time poverty, and inadequate or inconsistent health care (Gorski 2013; Pampel, Krueger, and Denney 2010). They likely have less access than wealthier peers to Internet technology, books, tutoring, formal opportunities to engage with the arts, and other resources and experiences that bolster school achievement (Bracey 2006; Buchmann, Condron, and Roscigno 2010). Often students experiencing poverty are even cheated within their schools out of similar levels of access to experienced teachers, higher order pedagogies, affirming school cultures, arts education, co-curricular programmes, and other resources and opportunities their wealthier peers may take for granted (Almy and Theokas 2010; Barr and Parrett 2007). The barriers and challenges are diverse, but they do have this in common: they are wholly unrelated to the mindsets of families experiencing poverty. They have this in common, too: as long as they exist, educational outcome disparities will exist; there simply is no way to eradicate educational outcome disparities while sidestepping structural injustice (Berliner 2013).

What makes this reality difficult to manage in a teacher education context is that all of these outside-of-school inequities appear to most current and future educators far outside their spheres of influence (Gorski 2012). In fact, neither teachers nor schools are equipped with the knowledge, resources, or time to resolve these conditions – especially not in the immediate term. This is, in part, what makes deficit and grit ideology so alluring: they allow educators to define problems in ways that call for straightforward and practical solutions. *Teach families the value of education. Cultivate resilience in students.* With a structural ideology educators see big structural conditions they cannot rectify so easily or practically.

The hope of structural ideology is that, even if schools and educators cannot fully rectify those conditions, equity policy and practice should be responsive to those conditions and not punish economically marginalised students for their implications. Returning to the example of family involvement, rather than blaming parents experiencing poverty for lower at-school involvement rates, the educator with structural ideology steps back and reflects with greater equity literacy. Do we organise opportunities for family involvement in ways that are responsive to the challenges economically marginalised families face, perhaps a

lack of paid leave, difficulty securing transportation, the inability to afford childcare, and the necessity of working multiple jobs? Even if we cannot eliminate these barriers entirely, can we create policy and practice that do not exacerbate them? Are we able to identify all the way in which structural inequalities are being reproduced in our classrooms and schools, in our spheres of influence, and eradicate those? Do we have the will, upon doing so, to expand our spheres of influence and find ways to address the structural conditions that underlie school outcome disparities?

This is equity literacy: having the knowledge that a commitment to equity requires us to ask these questions and then having the will to ask them. There is no path to equity literacy that does not include the adoption of a structural ideology because there is no way to cultivate equity through an ideological standpoint, like deficit or grit ideology, that is formulated to discourage direct responses to inequity.

Conclusion: holding myself accountable to structural ideology in my teacher education practice

In teacher education, if we only prepare future educators to be aware of outcome disparities or to think of achievement gaps solely in terms of test score disparities, 'dropout' rates, or other symptoms of economic injustice, and not as the *opportunity gaps* that they actually are, we may be inviting them, even if unintentionally, to slide into a deficit or grit view. If we equip them with practical instructional strategies but fail to facilitate the difficult ideological work necessary to become responsive to structural barriers within their spheres of influence (even if they cannot eliminate those inequities altogether) we become facilitators of deficit ideology. It is not easy. I have written about the challenges I have faced attempting to cultivate these shifts in my teacher education students (see Gorski 2012), as I try to navigate the ideologies they bring with them and their experiences in many of their other classes, where they are treated as mindless technicians concerned only with easily implementable strategies (DiAngelo and Sensoy 2010).

In order to ensure that I sustain a structural approach I have crafted a series of reflective questions that I occasionally revisit. I offer these, not in judgement of others' practice, but in hopes that they might inspire a similar ideological commitment in colleagues who, like me, struggle to cultivate in their students equity literacy – the ideological shifts necessary to become a threat to the existence of inequity in their spheres of influence.

Question 1: Am I helping students develop a language that problematises deficit framings?

When students refer to school 'dropouts' I encourage them to restate their concerns using 'pushout' instead. It helps them learn how a simple shift in perspective provides a more sophisticated equity understanding. Similarly, the term 'generational poverty' is popular in the US, suggesting poverty persists because it is passed generation to generation. I encourage my students to think, instead, of 'generational *injustice*', wherein families experience generations of economic injustice, making its impact more and more insidious.

Question 2: Am I in any way suggesting that educational outcome disparities can be eradicated by fixing economically marginalised people's mindsets rather than by fixing the conditions that economically marginalise people?

I must ensure that I am not, in any explicit or implicit way, supporting the former, thereby validating the deficit view many teacher education students learn in other contexts.

Question 3: Am I providing students with adequate structural context so that they will understand and learn how to respond to the core causes of educational outcome disparities?

I must ensure that I have high expectations of my teacher education students as thinkers and theorists, as people who desire to make and are capable of making big theoretical connections. Any discussion of practical 'diversity' or 'equity' strategies is inadequate without this structural context.

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