

Book Review

Gorski, P. (2017). *Reaching and teaching students in poverty: Strategies for erasing the opportunity gap* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press. (233 pp., paperback \$29.95; ebook \$23.96)

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Over the past decade, we have seen a long-overdue proliferation of scholarship around racial inequities and anti-racism in writing center and communication studies (Condon et. al, 2019; Greenfield & Rowan, 2011), but there has been relatively little attention on how poverty and class intersect with our work. With its focus on socio-economic status, the groundbreaking study 2018 study by Denny, Nordlof and Salem of working class students and writing centers stands virtually alone in writing center studies. Paul Gorski's (2017) *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap*, which targets an audience of K-12 educators, does not quite fill this void, but communication center professionals will find this excellent book a useful resource for beginning conversations about class inequities in their centers and for educating themselves about barriers faced by students in poverty before they reach our institutions.

Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty is both a manifesto for the importance of learning about social and economic inequities and a practical guide to the dispiriting landscape of our unequal society and the toll it exacts on low-income students and their families. It is also, searingly, a critique of the current focus by educators on two popular theories, grit and growth mindset, which Gorski regards as

woefully misdirected. Both theories suggest that the right attitude or mindset is key to success and upward mobility (Duckworth, 2017; Dweck, 2019). But, when we focus on helping low-income students cultivate new mindsets or attitudes, Gorski claims, we divert our attention from a real understanding of the many obstacles that poverty stacks against their success. What we should be doing instead is facing those barriers directly and, just as important, making a concerted effort to learn about them. An educator who does this will attain equity literacy, which Gorski defines as “the knowledge and skills educators need to become a threat to the existence of bias and inequity in our spheres of influence” (p. 17). Based on this definition, equity literacy is an ideal any educator can aspire to, whether a third grade teacher or the director of a community college writing center.

Educators who already hold a structural view of poverty will find little to disagree with among the four abilities and twelve principles of equity literacy Gorski introduces in his second chapter, but many readers will appreciate having a list of principles that gives language to their values. Some of the twelve principles make bold assertions about poverty and education: “Educational outcome disparities are the result of inequities,

of unjust distributions of access and opportunity, not the result of deficiencies in the mindsets, cultures or grittiness of people experiencing poverty” (p. 25, principle 8); “There is no path to educational equity that does not involve a redistribution of access and opportunity” (p. 25, principle 12). Other principles insist that poor people are not a monolith: “People experiencing poverty are diverse” (p. 24, principle 4); and that poverty defies easy (or judgmental) explanations: “People experiencing poverty are the experts on their own experiences” (p. 24, principle 1).

The book offers primers on poverty in America and inequities in schools, and its second half is dedicated to prescriptions for disrupting inequity in classrooms, school leadership and in the broader political sphere. Among the takeaways from Gorski’s deeply researched primer on poverty in America (Chapter 3) is that at least one in every three Americans will spend at least one year in poverty (p. 42). In another chapter, Gorski introduces ten daunting barriers faced by students in poverty that are often invisible, or only partially visible, to educators, including a lack of access to living wage jobs with benefits, healthy food, stable and affordable housing, and community and social services (pp. 88-94).

Gorski writes with palpable sensitivity to the struggles of low-income students and families as he details how larger social inequities can be reproduced or even magnified within the walls of low-income schools, reminding us that their schools also often lack resources for college counselors; employ young, inexperienced teachers; and champion curricula with an undisguised and relentless focus on preparing for high-stakes tests, often at the cost of

subjects such as art and physical education, which have been repeatedly shown to boost academic performance (p. 117). Communication center professionals may appreciate the glimpse Gorski provides into the under-resourced schools that shape the experience of so many of our students, while those who work in colleges serving low-income students may reflect on analogous disparities in higher education.

In the book’s penultimate chapter, Gorski proposes 11 strategies for improving the educational experiences of students in poverty, most of which will have limited application outside a K-12 context. The same goes for his suggestions for improving relationships with students’ families, which are the focus of another chapter. More relevant for us are his suggestions for redressing inequities at the administrative level, including examining every decision and policy through the lens of how it might affect marginalized students. Some communications centers impose a penalty on students who miss a certain number of appointments. Applying an equity literacy lens, we might ask if this is a compassionate policy for a low-income student managing significant and ever-shifting work and family responsibilities.

What’s missing from Gorski’s book – and what I would hope to find in a (yet to be published) book about serving low-income college students – are case studies of institutions that have successfully adopted the principles of equity literacy and managed to craft sensitive policies without compromising rigor. Concrete examples of success might help persuade skeptical readers that implementing the ideals of equity literacy is in fact possible. Still, this book will speak to many

communication centers professionals as a powerful reminder that the larger problems of our society are inextricably connected with the work we do in our centers.

References

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