



Book Review

Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap

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Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap

(2nd Edition) By Paul C Gorski

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In *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap*, 2nd edition, author Paul C. Gorski advocates for the development of equity literacy among educators to reshape schools to reach and teach students and families impacted by structural inequalities. Gorski challenges educators' understandings of the opportunity gap that students in poverty face and offers a number of strategies to be implemented at the classroom, school, and district levels for schools to develop equitable opportunities for students.

Overview

The book is divided in eleven chapters, but overall can be described in two sections. The first section, or chapters one through seven, describes equity literacy, challenges readers to (re)examine their understanding of people experiencing poverty, and connects to historical data and research to support Gorski's argument that educators must take a structural, not deficit view, if we truly want to erase the opportunity gap in education. The final four chapters offer explicit strategies teachers and leaders can enact in their classrooms, schools, and districts to dismantle the opportunity gap. Starting in chapter three, each chapter begins by identifying the principles in equity literacy the chapter addresses, and each chapter ends with reflection questions and exercises, helpful for individual or group reflection.

Chapter Synopses

"Education is the great equalizer" (p. 1) is the adage Gorski begins with in the introduction. This belief is echoed throughout media, politics, and teaching. It is argued that if educators just work hard enough, we can eliminate barriers faced by so many of our students. However, throughout the text, Gorski argues that this adage is false. Instead, Gorski points out the existing structures in our society and schools that perpetuate inequalities. Chapter one outlines and defines important terms used throughout the rest of the book (socioeconomic status, poverty, working class, income and wealth.) Additionally, Gorski distinguishes between a structural view of poverty and a deficit view – a key distinction necessary for the reader to undertake the work needed to develop equity literacy.

Chapter two describes the equity literacy approach and the principles of equity literacy that frame the remaining chapters. Equity literacy is defined 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). Gorski supplements this definition with four abilities equity literacy educators can foster to develop and maintain their own equity literacy. Gorski draws from a number of scholars and their research in the development of the twelve equity literacy principles for educators.

Chapter three delves into the history and assumptions of poverty in the United States. Gorski presents research and data from an intersectional lens (one of the principles of equity literacy) and discusses poverty in terms of gender, race, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, and region.

Chapters four and five dismantle the deficit and mindset views of poverty. Building on the history and research presented in chapter two, Gorski challenges many of the buzzwords and stereotypes commonly held by educators such as, grit, growth mindset, culture of poverty, and mindset of poverty. The author describes how developing a structural view, instead of a deficit view, will foster equitable education. Educators who have experienced the deficit view first hand either as students themselves, in teacher education or in professional development may find these chapters particularly challenging. These chapters prompt the reader to confront these deficit views and begin (or continue) the work needed to dismantle this way of thinking.

Chapter six outlines out-of-school inequities, such as employment, healthcare, nutrition, housing, environment, recreation, local services, childcare, additional learning opportunities, and society. Gorski describes how each of these impacts what happens in schools. Chapter seven challenges the deficit language of the achievement gap and presents the structural view, reframing the achievement gap as it really is – the opportunity

gap. Gorski returns to the opening adage and describes how, rather than being the equalizer, the educational opportunity gap creates more divisions among students by affording greater educational opportunities, both in and out of school to wealthier students.

Chapter eight begins the chapters on actionable strategies teachers and leaders can implement. However, Gorski reminds readers, educators cannot enact these strategies without the committing to the work of reframing required from chapters one through seven. To enact equity literacy, educators must take on the structural view and leave behind the deficit view so often entangled in schools. Gorski offers eleven strategies and includes a number of texts teachers can use to foster equity.

Chapter nine, titled, “The Mother of All Strategies” (p. 143) describes the importance of developing relationships between educators and students and their families. In this chapter, Gorski extends the principles of equity literacy into eight “equity-informed relational commitments” (p. 144) aimed at supporting the relationships between educators and students. In each of these commitments, Gorski details why the commitment is important and necessary and how to enact each commitment. For example, the fourth commitment, “Broaden Our Notions of Family Engagement” (p. 151), challenges stereotypes and deficit views of families experiencing poverty, and instead, listen and learn what families are already doing and reframe what educators mean by engagement.

Chapter ten speaks directly to school and district leaders and describes how educators in these leadership roles can reframe not only their perspectives of students experiencing poverty but also lead the institutional shift to an equity literacy perspective. Chapter eleven grows educational equity literacy to outside the school and district level and into other policy areas of educational equity and social justice.

Discussion

Gorski's central argument is that in order to educate students experiencing poverty, we need to develop educational equity literacy. And, to do this, we must eliminate the deficit mindset many in education hold and instead adopt the structural view poverty and inequality. This book will challenge many teachers and leaders thinking, whether they hail from upper, middle, or working-class backgrounds. As Gorski describes, the deficit view is so embedded in our educational system, it will take consistent work on the part of educators to dismantle its stance. To this point, in the conclusion Gorski offers readers an example how he still works on reframing his own thinking at times.

This book will work well for teachers, leaders, and teacher educators to work through these chapters in small group or whole school settings – the reflection questions at the end of each chapter are good starters to begin the work of undoing deficit thinking and developing instructional strategies and policies to support students and their families.

References

Gorski, P. C. (2018). *Reaching and teaching students in poverty: Strategies for erasing the opportunity gap* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

