

Applying Ruby Payne's Theory of Social Class Rules in the Elementary Classroom, Part II

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Abstract

The work of Ruby Payne (2000) describes 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. Part I of this article (JPACTe, 1, 1, Winter 2006) examined Payne’s theory and its broad implications for classroom teaching in general. Part II examines three specific constructivist strategies for use at the elementary level that align with Payne’s theory.

Introduction and Review of previous article (Part I)

Dr. Ruby Payne’s theories of social class rules and language were examined in Part I of this article, published in the Winter 2006 issue of *JPACTe* (Phelps, 2006). 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 expected similarities of 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.

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. 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.

Broad Implications for Teaching

The impact of poverty on a child's readiness for school can be pervasive and varies significantly from child to child. Extreme poverty during the first five years can have a negative impact on a child's future. Children who grow up in poverty tend to have decreased verbal ability and achievement (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). In the past, educators have adopted this "catch them up" mentality and exposed these children to enormous amounts of passive instruction on letter recognition and phoneme awareness practiced out of context (Helm and Beneke, 2003, 14). In many cases the children did indeed appear to be "caught up" with their peers, but later studies found that this intensive training did not help them gain in emotional and social growth, and therefore they did not maintain the same level of achievement as their peers. In order to build a solid foundation of literacy, teachers need to establish lessons with long-term benefits. Such experiences should allow for frequent and meaningful opportunities for teacher-child, child-teacher, and child-child conversations. Children should be encouraged to share their ideas, ask questions, and offer suggestions. When teachers value a child's ability to communicate, learning becomes more meaningful and therefore lays the groundwork for future skills to be established.

Three fundamental constructivist approaches to teaching elementary-level children based on Payne's theory were examined in Part I. (Phelps, 2006). They included the use of *active engagement*, helping children to *see the relationship of parts to the whole*, and facilitating the *integration of new knowledge with prior knowledge*. *In addition, the implications of Payne's theory for behavior management were examined in Part I.* Considering the differences in social class assumptions and values can help teachers to analyze the reasons for misbehavior and to use flexibility and creativity to establish routines and interventions. The goal for these approaches to classroom management is to help children *develop self-governing behavior through self-evaluation*.

In Part II below, three specific strategies for teaching are examined in detail – the project approach, literature circles, and reader's theatre. These strategies align directly with learning standards in English Language Arts, both on the state and national levels, and they exemplify strategies based on constructivist concepts.

The Project Approach

In general, early childhood teachers approach teaching in very different ways. Some educators focus their teaching on a single concept that is teacher-initiated and skill specific. Others use a thematic approach which integrates various learning experiences from teacher and student derived topics. Still other teachers use a project approach that takes thematic teaching a step further, by allowing in-depth investigations by students which they initiate and make decisions about in

an open-ended manner. The greatest differences between thematic approaches and projects is the child's initiative and involvement as well as length of time devoted to a topic, timing of field trips, and the use of a variety of resources (Helm & Katz, 2001).

In early childhood programs, all children, even children in poverty, will benefit from project-based investigations. These investigations are on topics that the young children can relate to and the focus is primarily to research questions (both teacher and child derived) to find the answers. The premise behind this approach is that children will learn more by doing, and subsequently will become active and motivated learners. The goal is for children to investigate topics, in small groups or independently, in a way that will spark their curiosity, encourage self-initiation, and promote decision making, all of which fall within the domain of constructivism.

To better understand the project approach, one needs to understand the roles of both academic tasks and intellectual goals. There are many skills that children will need to master that will require the help of a knowledgeable adult, such as the alphabet, spelling, and punctuation rules. For many, these skills lack inherent logic and therefore would not lend themselves easily to the discovery approach. Other skills, like shapes and colors, don't require formal instruction and can be learned more spontaneously. It is important to include both academic tasks that address units of knowledge and intellectual goals which address habits of mind. Using the project approach, in addition to singing, listening to books, block play,

painting, participating in dramatic play, and learning and practicing emergent skills will give children the opportunity to initiate, investigate, and follow through on their interests. This will not only build content area skills, but social and emotional skills which are critical in establishing long term benefits for school success.

The structure of the project approach consists of three distinct phases, in which teachers evaluate the appropriateness of the topic, anticipate resources that will be needed, plan field experiences, and identify experts for interviews and demonstrations. Teachers need to be aware that there is a fine line between supporting children in their investigations and directing their inquiry. Equally difficult is finding the balance between offering support for children's learning and taking over the learning experience. One of the greatest challenges is how to recognize that line and avoid crossing it (Helm & Katz, 2001). Helm and Katz (2001, 10) highlight three phases in the following flow chart taken from Young Investigators: The Project Approach in the Early Years.

The Project Approach

(Helm & Katz, 2001, 10)

Phase One		Phase Two	Phase Three
Possible topic emerges T		Re-examine anticipatory planning web and children's web to tie in skills and concepts T, P	Debrief, plan culminating event for students to share, tell the story of the project T&C, P
Initiated by the teacher T	Emerging interest from child C	Prepare for field work and expert visitors T&C, P	Complete the culminating event or activities T&C, P
Complete anticipatory webs* on possible questions, curriculum opportunities. Explore resources and field sites available. T		INVESTIGATE Visit field sites, talk to visitors and other experts, examine artifacts, conduct experiments T&C, P	Review project and assess achievement of goals T, P
Provide focusing activities and common experiences for the group or class T, P		Represent what was learned through writing, drawing, construction, dancing, and dramatic play T&C	
Decide if the topic is appropriate or practical. T		Revisit web or re-web* Indicate what was learned, identify new questions, repeat investigation and representation T&C	
No Interest low not consistent with goals, not practical T	Yes Interest high with goals, consistent practical T		
Teacher webs with children about <u>current concepts and understanding</u> T&C			
Web or list questions for investigation: <u>What do we want to find out?</u> T&C			Key C = Child Activity T = Teacher Activity T&C = Teacher and Child P = Parent Involvement

* Webbing exercises utilize graphic organizers for the purpose of concept mapping, helping children to visualize and understand relationships between concepts and/or ideas associated with the project.

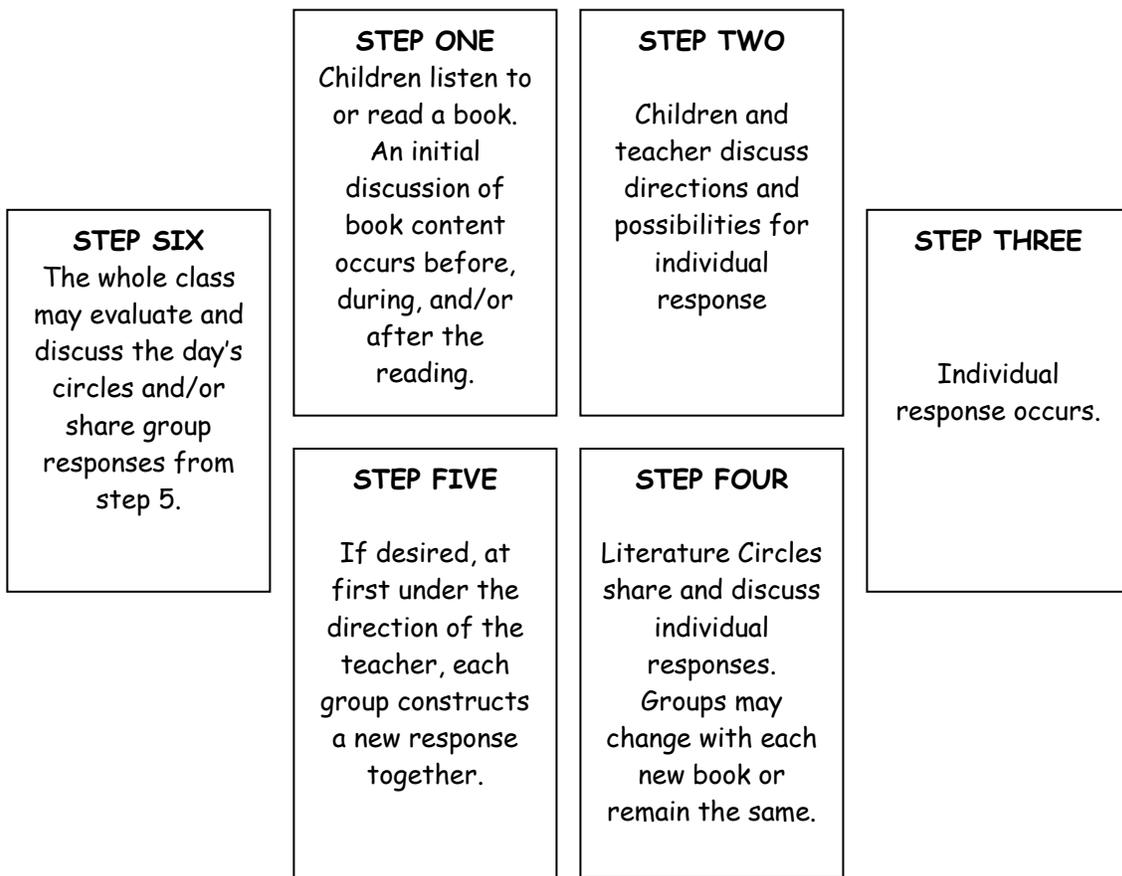
The project approach provides the structure needed for a successful learning experience by supporting children's learning in engaging, real ways.

It can complement many different teaching approaches and will help children achieve higher levels of thinking than more traditional methods. With reflective practices, any teacher can grow with this approach while promoting active learning, inquiry, and problem solving in their students, which will help promote better attitude, interest, and abilities.

Literature Circles

Many children, particularly children in poverty, have not been exposed to children's literature and therefore have not developed a love of books. Using literature circles has the potential to create that love by providing a structure for children to read and consider stories together. In an early childhood classroom, that involves children listening to stories that are tied to personal interest or themes, responding to those stories, and engaging them in follow-up discussions. In this setting children listen to a story and then explore it by drawing, writing, sculpting, painting, playing, dramatizing, or composing, and then discuss it with peers (Owocki, 2001). In this approach, listening to the story is seen as the first step of exposing children and generating interest. The follow-up explorations create the opportunities for developing a deeper understanding. The following flow chart from Make Way for Literacy describes the literature circle approach (Owocki, 2001).

The Literature Circle Approach
(Owaki, 2001)



Throughout the six steps outlined by Owacki, literature circles incorporate the use of collaborative groups to stimulate thinking and hypothesizing, critical thinking, and self-evaluation to help children construct new knowledge through literature.

One of the greatest goals any teacher could have is to turn kids on to learning. One way this can be accomplished is by using literature circles to engage students in becoming independent learners. It also allows children to be exposed to new vocabulary in a meaningful way. The context, provided by both the book and

subsequent conversation, helps children learn words as concepts rather than just words (Owocki, 2001). Learning new words is most effective when it occurs in a natural way by using them in conversation, reading, and writing. It is important to recognize that learning is hierarchical and therefore students will not automatically have the skills for literature circles, they will need to develop them with the teacher's support. Using Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning will help teachers understand where children are currently at in their level of thinking and help them reach higher levels of thought with exposure, support, and practice. The following example of Bloom's Taxonomy looks at questions that correspond to the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. (Teacher's Corner, 2004).

Bloom's Taxonomy and Teaching *Goldilocks*

(Teacher's Corner, 2004)

KNOWLEDGE	<p><u>THE RECALL OF SPECIFIC INFORMATION</u> Who was Goldilocks? Where did she live? With whom? What did her mother tell her not to do?</p>
COMPREHENSION	<p><u>AN UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT WAS READ</u> This story was about _____. (Topic) The story tells us _____. (Main Idea) Why didn't her mother want her to go into the forest? What did Goldilocks look like? What kind of girl was she?</p>
APPLICATION	<p><u>THE CONVERTING OF ABSTRACT CONTENT TO CONCRETE SITUATIONS</u> How were the bears like real people? Why did Goldilocks go into the little house? Write a sign that should be placed near the edge of the forest. Draw a picture of what the bear's house looked like. Draw a map showing Goldilocks' house, the path in the forest, the bear's house, etc. Show through action how Goldilocks sat in the chairs, ate the porridge, etc.</p>
ANALYSIS	<p><u>THE COMPARISON AND CONTRAST OF THE PERSONAL EXPERIENCES</u> How did each bear react to what Goldilocks did? How would you react? Compare Goldilocks to any friend. Do you know any animals (pets) that act human? When did Goldilocks leave her real world for fantasy? How do you know?</p>
SYNTHESIS	<p><u>ORGANIZATION OF THOUGHTS, IDEAS, & INFORMATION FROM CONTENT</u> List the events of the story in sequence. Point out the importance of time sequence words by asking:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What happened after Goldilocks ate the Baby Bear's porridge? • What happened before Goldilocks went into the forest? • What is the first thing she did when she went into the house? • Draw a cartoon or stories about bears. Do they all act like humans? • Do you know any other stories about little girls or boys who escaped from danger? <p>Make a puppet out of one of the characters. Using the puppet, act out his/her part in the story. Make a diorama of the bear's house and the forest.</p>
EVALUATION	<p><u>THE JUDGMENT & EVALUATION OF CHARACTERS, ACTIONS, OUTCOME, ETC., FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION & UNDERSTANDING</u> Why were the bears angry with Goldilocks? Why was Goldilocks happy to get home? What do you think she learned by going into that house? Do you think she will listen to her mother's warnings in the future? Why? Do parents have more experience and background than their children? Would you have gone in the bear's house? Why/Why not?</p>

By incorporating Bloom's Taxonomy into literature circles students are more likely to develop a personal attachment to the books they read. They'll begin to see reading as a link to their imaginations, a way to see how other people live their lives, and a way to gain a better understanding of who they are as people. The questions that teachers ask can be a guide to seeing a greater purpose for reading than to simply retain facts. This can foster students to value reading for pleasure as well as being a resource for gaining information and can ultimately lead the way for making reading a life-long habit.

Reader's Theatre

Another practice that teachers can use to promote literacy is to introduce the concept of reader's theatre. It is a way of orally presenting written text. The first step is to choose a piece of literature that is in script form or one that lends itself nicely to translating into such form. The students then rehearse the text extensively, create a few props, and read it for an audience. By becoming engaged in the text, children are given the opportunity to develop a new appreciation for literature. It allows them to become a part of stories in a way that listening alone does not cultivate. Children become motivated by the audience's responses as well as the pure enjoyment of acting out amazing characters. They become transformed by wolves that blow down houses, animals that can talk, and children who solve big problems (Owocki, 2001, 132-133). The process of reader's theatre is another opportunity for teachers to integrate language in meaningful ways.

A useful example of reader's theatre that teachers can use can be found at Aaron Shephard's website (<http://www.aaronsherp.com/rt/RTE22.html>). It is a script for Which Shoes Do You Choose? (Shephard, 1997).

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PREVIEW: With so many kinds of shoes at the store, how can Katie ever choose?

GENRE: Humor, poetry

READERS: 12

CULTURE: Contemporary

READER AGES: 6–9

THEME: Making choices

LENGTH: 3 minutes

Reader's theatre can be an exciting opportunity for students to play with great works of literature, but just like anything it is a process. Once the script has been chosen or prepared, allow for several rehearsals. The actors should be encouraged to use voices and expressions that match their character as they read their lines (memorization is unnecessary and could cause anxiety). It is important that children of varying abilities be able to be successful by offering roles that may be chorally read. All children should be able to perform at some time or another regardless of ability or personality. The primary focus should always be on the process rather than the final product. It is more important to focus on what the children have learned from the process, rather than creating future Emmy Award winners when evaluating the reader's theatre experience.

Conclusion

The role of early childhood educators who embrace a constructivist philosophy of active learning, inquiry, and problem solving will provide an effective learning environment for all children, including those who are at-risk. With knowledge,

compassion, commitment, and good communication with parents and professionals, educators will find teaching more rewarding and their students will grow emotionally, socially, and intellectually, building positive skills for future success.

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