



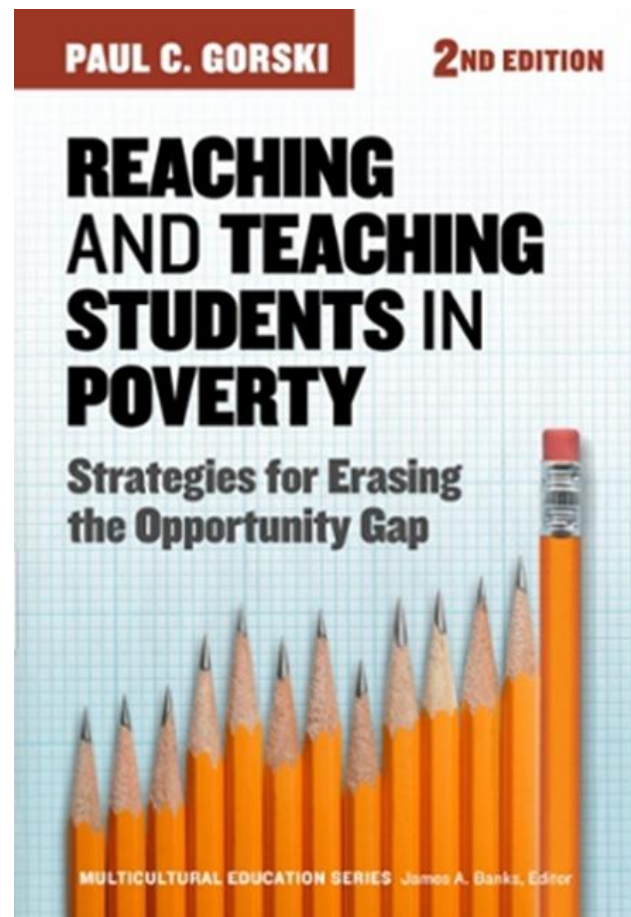
Gorski, P. (2018). *Reaching and teaching students in poverty: Strategies for erasing the opportunity gap* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press.

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Most classroom teachers know that current education reform is not working. Despite a plethora of expensive policy interventions attempting to address the widening gap between low-achieving and high-achieving students over the last decade, programs like No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and Common Core are making little to no progress. Recent testing has demonstrated that, despite billions in funding for these programs, the ‘achievement gap’ is widening (Goldstein, 2019). Beyond that, teachers sometimes feel like the *only ones* aware of how the public school system continues to let children down, especially children living in poverty. For teachers who find themselves frustrated by current reform efforts and eager to address the challenges faced by American students in poverty, Paul Gorski’s *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty* is an invaluable read. Educators with extensive experience teaching with culturally sustaining or social justice approaches may find the book somewhat basic, but it is an important tool for educators new to this kind of work.



Gorski uses an equity literacy lens to examine how classrooms can support – or fail to support – some of the most vulnerable people in our country: children living in poverty. His evidence-based approach demands a lot from his readers: from questioning their own complicity in poverty stereotyping to considering structural and systemic change outside the education system. At the beginning of the book, he asks, “What if we soften our impulse to find fault in communities experiencing poverty so a fuller picture can come into focus, even if there are parts of that picture we don’t feel equipped to change?” (p. 4). This impulse softening is what Gorski’s equity literacy lens is designed to foster. Recognizing the important role that ideology plays in how we treat students and families experiencing poverty is critical to facilitating an institutional environment that can support these children and families rather than isolate or alienate them.

Gorski’s seeming preoccupation with ideology is key to understanding how he believes educators can effectively teach students in poverty. He dismantles “deficit ideology” (p. 60), a perspective that blames students and families for being poor, in favor of a structural perspective on poverty in America. In Chapter 5, Gorski systematically deconstructs the mythologies that exist around American poverty, including myths like, “People experiencing poverty do not value education” (p. 74) and “People experiencing poverty are lazy” (p. 75). His refutations of common stereotypes about the poor are built on solid academic research, and though they can feel a bit reductive for a social justice-oriented educator, they are useful for teachers just beginning to examine their own beliefs and values critically. This self-reflexivity is one of the main tenets of the equity literacy lens, and in this text Gorski attempts to facilitate an honest and unwavering self-assessment for his readers.

Unlike many books focused on pedagogical praxis, Gorski spends a lot of time explaining the socio-historical context of the issues that he raises. He uses an intersectional lens to examine how issues of poverty disproportionately impact already-oppressed groups like women and people of color, and how these intersecting identities seem to work together to create even greater barriers for children suffering from poverty. For some readers, the focus on structural and systemic issues could seem irrelevant. Our work as teachers, after all, occurs primarily in the classroom. But for Gorski, a socio-historical understanding of poverty is crucial for teachers attempting to mitigate its worst effects in the classroom. He contends that, “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” (p. 60). In other words, a book focused solely on praxis is inherently problematic if teachers aren’t examining their own belief systems and how these affect their students.

Gorski suggests that educators need to be engaged on at least three levels to effect real, committed, and sustainable change in the education system. The first level is in the classroom, and Chapter 8 is devoted to curricular and pedagogical strategies that teachers can implement immediately. Gorski makes numerous research-based suggestions and offers concrete instructional strategies on an individual and classroom level. Beyond the classroom, Gorski believes that teachers should engage with work around inequity on the family and community level. This includes work like “Ensuring access to opportunities at schools is accessible” (p. 153), including childcare and access to teachers outside school hours. These suggestions are useful in that they call on educators to pay attention not only to the context of their students, but also to the context of the institutions they serve, and the role those institutions play in the

wider community. Finally, Gorski advocates a change in policy, and argues that attention to the wider socio-cultural landscape of inequities is the only way to create sustainable change. Chapters 11 and 12 are devoted to showing teachers how they can advocate politically for their students and may be the chapters where Gorski finds the most resistance from current educators, many of whom already feel overwhelmed by their everyday workload.

In our opinion, though, Gorski's push to create advocates out of teachers is the most significant part of *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty*. While many Americans recognize the influence that a good teacher can have on a young child's life, we are still far from recognizing the political power teachers can wield. Earlier this year, for instance, Chicago teachers went on strike for 11 days – the longest teacher's strike in decades – demanding, among other things, that a social worker and a nurse be present every day in every single public school in Chicago (Hauck and Richards, 2019). They won. A teacher's strike in Los Angeles ensured that public school class sizes would be reduced, and that more nurses and librarians would be available for students (Romero, 2019). Unfortunately, these strikes demonstrate that the only real

political advocacy students experiencing poverty are getting is coming from their teachers. It's clear that, in an age of neoliberal school reforms, an increased awareness of systemic and structural policy and an active and political commitment to serving students and their communities is the only real way to achieve significant and lasting change.

To read Gorski is to read an impassioned educator frustrated by the system's willful ignorance. In *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty*, he attempts to unpack the uphill battle confronting teachers who choose to engage with equity work. He continuously pushes readers to reconsider what they know and believe about poverty and education, to increase their understanding and compassion for students, families, and communities, and to consistently push beyond their sphere of influence. He does this difficult work with digestible prose, with practical tips and bullet points for his readers. He recognizes that educators already have numerous responsibilities. But, he writes, "If the measure of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members, what do these realities tell us about who we are as a society, when disadvantage is punished with more disadvantage?" (p. 43). Who indeed?

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