

ISSN 1883-7409 (print)

ISSN 1884-0184 (on-line)



*Outside the Box:  
A Multi-Lingual Forum*

Volume 9, Issue 1

Summer, 2019

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*The OTB Forum: A Multi-Lingual Forum*

Volume 9, Issue 1

June 30, 2019

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ISSN 1883-7409 (print)

ISSN 1884-0184 (on-line)



# Deficit Thinking in Pre-K Education

## A Case of a Federally-Sponsored Pre-K Teacher

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**Abstract:** *To meet the needs of marginalized students within US schools, many educational programs have been devised and implemented, but such programs are sometimes grounded within the notion of deficit thinking, which basically blames the failures or inferior performance of those marginalized students (e.g. colored or poor students) on the defects or deficits they were born with. Studies (e.g. Simone, 2012; Pitzer, 2014, 2015) have highlighted the complexity of deficit thinking discourse and simply trying to “fix” the deficit students will never be a satisfactory solution because the acts of “fixing” can further perpetuate the notion of deficit thinking. This study aims to investigate how a federally-funded classroom teacher perceives the students and parents’ participation in relation to the notion of deficit thinking/perspective. The findings suggest that deficit thinking is very likely to arise in educational institutions where marginalized students are present. We should not take the seemingly neutral practices for granted but begin to critically question such practices, so we might not continue perpetuating practices that would marginalize minority groups. Educators need to be aware of the such deficit thinking and actively find ways to dismantle it in their everyday practices. Also, student-teachers who come from minority groups should be aware of deficit thinking in education for dismantling the model of thinking that have discriminated against them in the first place.*

There are of course many challenges faced by teachers and administrators in America’s schools. One of the challenges is that the teachers and administrators are working hard to meet the needs of marginalized students. Existing laws such as the No Child Left Behind Act has have ensured the right of every child to education. Authorities or school/education boards throughout the US has have implemented many programs to make sure that no child is left behind. For instance, bilingual/multilingual students who are believed to be struggling with English in US mainstream schools are often times provided with additional English lessons because they need “help”, and children from low socio-economic backgrounds can still get their pre-K education through the federally-funded Head Start Program. Such programs or policies look very promising, but sometimes they are grounded within the notion of deficit thinking which basically blames the failures or inferior performance of mar-

ginalized students (e.g., colored or poor students) on the defects or deficits they were born with.

Many deficit thinkers have suggested that they work hard to help those marginalized students perform better so that they can catch up with better-performing students coming from dominant communities despite the fact that they are actually perpetuating the negative stereotypes/deficit discourse against the students they said they are trying to assist. Ruby Payne’s (2013) *A Framework for Understanding Poverty: A Cognitive Approach*, for example, seemingly offers a beneficial framework for those working with poor students, but her framework has been under fire for years because Payne’s works seem to focus on individuals rather than larger education system, overgeneralize people living in poverty, and/or focus on perceived weaknesses of poor people (van der Valk, 2016).

It may not be possible to precisely trace when the term deficit thinking was actually devised, but it seems to have been coined by a number of scholars who in the 1960s attacked orthodoxy, under which viewed poor and colored people were viewed as the actual causes to their very own problems (Valencia, 1997). In the United States, the notion of deficit

Zakaria, F. (2019). Deficit thinking in pre-K education: A case of a federally-sponsored pre-K teacher. *OTB Forum*, 9(1), 7-17.

thinking might possibly go back as far as early European settlements and slavery. The then racialized beliefs viewed non-whites and other minority individuals as less superior than the inferior to whites (Menchaca, 1997). In the 1800s, there were even groups of people (polygenists) who believed that “God had created the non-whites in the same manners that He created the rest of the animal kingdom” (Menchaca, 1997). Thus, it was not an immoral act to enslave non-whites because they were not much different from animals. Such early entrenched racist views might explain why racialized views or deficit thinking still exist up until today.

Some recent studies (e.g., Pitzer, 2014, 2015; Simone, 2012) have highlighted the complexity of deficit thinking discourse and simply trying to “fix” the deficit students will never be a satisfactory solution. Here, the literature has also suggested that the acts of “fixing” further perpetuate the notion of deficit thinking and alienate students from their own schools. Weiner (2006) asserted that school bureaucracies usually try to “fix” students who do not behave or perform well “because the problem inheres in the students or their families, not in the social ecology of the school, grade, or classroom” (p. 42). Schools and practitioners should go beyond such a blaming game because marginalized students’ low and poor academic achievements will further be perpetuated. In this sense, Simone (2012) said,

“[D]eficit thinking cannot be fixed; it must be addressed, eliminated and replaced with an equitable education that equally and effectively prepares every student for his or her future” (p. 6).

Although there have been many studies on problems of deficit thinking in American classrooms, as far as I am concerned, there is little research has been done on Head Start teachers’ perspectives of the poor students and parents that they serve. The Head Start Program, which was officially launched by President Lyndon B. Johnson some fifty-one years ago, is a federally-funded public preschool program for children living in poverty (Mongeau, 2016). The Head Start program usually serves marginalized students (e.g., colored, bilingual, or immigrant students).

This study, therefore, aims to investigate how the teachers perceive the students and parents’ participation in relation to the notion of deficit thinking/ perspective. In particular, this study focuses on a

lead teacher, Ms. Anna, of a Head Start site of a mid-size college town in a Midwestern state.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How does the teacher perceive the student and parent participation in a Head Start Program?
2. How does the teacher construct her teaching and interact with students and others involved in her class?
3. What kind of discursive deficit thinking, if any, is being constructed by the teacher?

## Literature Review

### Defining the Notion of Deficit Thinking

Richard Valencia is one of the scholars who has spent much of his professional life critiquing and challenging the construct of deficit thinking (e.g., Valencia, 1997; 2010). Valencia (2010) connected school failures of low-SES students of colors to the development of deficit thinking. He explained that such school failures were somehow planned to happen because there were many schooling conditions that forced these low-SES students to fail. For example, segregated schooling of students of color usually “led, and still leads, to inferior schooling, hence school failure” (p. 2). This makes sense because students who receive lower quality instructions would definitely fail to compete with students who receive high-quality instructions. Here, Valencia concludes that “racialized opportunity structures lead to racialized academic achievement patterns” (p. 3).

One of the theories that scholars and other education stakeholders have linked to low-SES students’ school failures is the deficit thinking. For Valencia (2010), deficit thinking is an endogenous theory – “positing that the student who fails in school does so because of his/her internal deficits or deficiencies” (p. 6), and these deficiencies allegedly result in the student’s limited or lack of intellectual ability, linguistics proficiency, or motivation. Such a theory is dangerous because “it ignores the role of systemic factors in creating school failure, lacks empirical verification, relies more on ideology than science, grounds itself in classism, sexism, and racism, and offers counter-productive educational prescriptions for school success” (Valencia, 2010, pp. 6-7). Here, the actual problems that cause the students to fail may never be solved. The impact of deficit para-

digim can last much longer. For instance, children who are taught under such a paradigm may grow up believing that their backgrounds have many defective elements that would eventually contribute to their low performance. If the same students later enroll in a teacher preparation program that does not challenge the deficit paradigm, they would likely perpetuate the notion of deficit thinking in their own class (Sarmiento-Arribalzaga & Murillo, 2009).

Likewise, Walker (2011) contends that deficit theory “blames school failure for these students on the students’ lack of readiness to learn in the classroom, the parents’ lack of interest in their education, and the family’s overall lifestyle” (p. 577). Also, students’ cultures are often associated with their low performance at school. Walker (2011) further argues that students whose cultures are different from the dominant cultures are alleged to “innately have less competence, less intelligence, less capability, and less self-motivation (p. 477). Such a blaming game has apparently been based on unproven stereotypes and unempirical (if not baseless) assumptions. Valencia (1997, 2010) has, therefore, contended that deficit theory as a pseudoscience because the theory is lacking “empirical verification.”

Anderson (2013) discusses the current school accountability system which links school performance with evaluations and accreditations. The better performing schools will be rewarded and the non-performing will be penalized. The penalty can be in the form of less funding. Such a high-stake condition may have further perpetuated the deficit model practices because the students, teachers, and school administrators would be in fear in that policies which can fix the issues will be devised. Again, this fixing effort will usually try to focus on internal matters of why students do not perform well.

### **Characteristics of Deficit Thinking**

Valencia (1997, 2010) proposes six characteristics of deficit thinking: (a) blaming the victim, (b) oppression, (c) pseudoscience, (d) temporal changes, (e) educability, and (f) heterodoxy. These are explained in the following sections.

#### **Blaming the Victim**

Here, deficit thinkers would not address the external factors as to why the low-SES students are

failing in school, but they would consider internal individual factors. They are eager to “fix” those internal factors as they see this as a simple act of problem-solving. Thus, the real issues of inequality will never be addressed.

#### **Oppression**

The abovementioned blaming game would translate into a form of oppression—“the cruel and unjust use of authority and power to keep a group of people in their place” (Valencia, 2010, p. 9). Classroom teacher practices or school board policies can potentially oppress the marginalized students, especially when the policies further blame the students and do not address the real causes to their low performance, for instance. School segregation is another example of oppressive education policy that is grounded in deficit thinking.

#### **Pseudoscience**

As has been said, deficit thinking is considered a pseudoscience because it lacks empirical verification. Deficit thinkers usually base their study on “unsound assumptions, use psychometrically weak instrument and/or collect data in flawed manners, do not control important independent variables, and do not consider rival hypotheses for the observed findings” (Valencia p. 12).

#### **Temporal Changes**

According to Valencia (1997), deficit thinking is “greatly influenced by the temporal and Zeitgeist (spirit of the time) in which it finds itself” (p. 7). Two points would make this clearer. First, deficit thinking is shaped more by the ideological and research climates of the time—rather than shaping the climates. Second, the fluid aspect of deficit thinking is not seen in the basic framework of the model, but rather in the transmitter of the alleged deficits.

#### **Educability**

Valencia (2010) argues that the social and behavioral sciences have four goals: describe, explain, predict, and modify behavior. Deficit thinkers would use these goals to put forward their deficit perspectives. For example, Stanford University Professor, Terman (1916), as cited by Valencia (2010), describes the IQ of Portuguese, American Indians, Mexican Americans, and African American as being at the bottom, he explains the cause to their low IQ (which was allegedly genetically-based), he then

predicts huge racial differences will emerge, and finally he proposes modification which was segregation of these low IQ people. Here, Valencia argues that “deficit thinkers would have us believe that educability largely depends on individual intellectual ability and that social, political, and economic conditions within the schools and society do not appreciably relate to why variability exists in student learning and academic performance” (pp. 15-16).

### **Heterodoxy**

Valencia (1997) argues that the notion of heterodoxy, which can be simply referred to as alternative or differing views, can help us grasp the debates between deficit and non-deficit thinkers. “Historically, the deficit thinking model has rested on orthodoxy—reflecting the dominant, conventional scholarly and ideological climates of the time. Through an evolving discourse, heterodoxy has come to play a major role in the scholarly and ideological spheres in which deficit thinking has been situated” (Valencia, 2010, p.18). Although such heterodoxy had little impact on challenging the status quo in the past, it was always a part of the deficit thinking evolution.

### **Deconstructing Deficit Thinking: Practical Solutions**

Pearl (1997) proposes “strong democracy” as an alternative to deconstruct deficit thinking. In order to deconstruct deficit model policies and practices within the school, democratic education should be in place. Pearl says that at least four requirements should be met in order for the democratic education to take place. The requirements are (a) provision of knowledge that would allow every student to equally engage in “an informed debate on every generally recognized important social and personal issues,” (pp. 215-216), (b) assurance that everyone has equal right of freedom of expressions, specified rights of privacy, due process (e.g., presumption of innocence), and freedom of movement, (c) provision of opportunities and skills to everyone so he or she can participate with equal power and (d) provision of equal encouragement to everyone so he or she could participate in various societal activities.

Further, Garcia and Guerra (2004) proposes a socio-cultural framework for the deconstruction of deficit discourse through professional development.

In their study, Garcia and Guerra report how some 69 teachers managed to challenge their deficit model teaching beliefs and practices after participated in Organizing for Diversity Project (ODP) at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) in Austin, TX. During the projects, these educators were able to discuss ways to create more equitable learning environments for their students. This makes a lot of sense. In-service teachers can significantly benefit from discussions with others or consultations with experts as they can, perhaps, be aware of their taken-for-granted teaching beliefs and practices so they can make calculated changes next time they teach.

Valencia (2010) also summarizes a number of anti-deficit thinking suggestions put forward by other scholars. Scholars have suggested anti-deficit thinking strategies can potentially improve the educational experiences of all students. Those strategies are discussed within the issues of preservice teacher education, parental engagement in education, educational leadership, social justice, ethnography of school.

Alber (2013) suggests that teachers need to build on students’ strengths and interests to avoid deficit model teaching practices. Specifically, Alber (2013, para. 8-12) suggests the following tips to build students’ strengths and interests:

1. Goal Setting. Ask students to list what they are good at, what they'd like to be better at, and what they can teach others to do. Include a writing activity where students set personal and academic goals, highlighting how the skills and talents they already possess will help them grow and accomplish these goals.
2. What I Know Well. Invite students to teach or share something they are good at with the class. Here are some examples of things I've seen students share: origami, dance steps, a self-defense move, basic guitar chords, cartooning, Photoshop.
3. My Learning Inventory. Ask students to list all the ways they learn best: by doing, by reading, by drawing, by seeing, by creating... Also, have them list the things that have made their learning memorable (possible answers: "a good book," "a nice teacher," "a fun assignment"). Ask them to also include things that may interfere with their learning (possible example, "if something is too hard").

4. Artifact from My Life. Students choose something precious to them, an item that has value (personal, not monetary). Create an assignment where the students bring the item to class (a photo, an award, baby shoes). They can write about it and then share in small groups why the item is so special.

5. Takeaways. Remember that critical to the learning process is self-reflection. Provide students with an opportunity to name and celebrate their own “takeaways”—all that they have gained from a specific learning experience.

## Theoretical Framework

For the present study, I consider deficit thinking theory which blames the students’ failures on their backgrounds (e.g., Anderson, 2013; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Pearl, 1997; Valencia, 1997; Valencia, 2010; Walker, 2011; ) and I was also inspired by Bourdieusian perspective of democratic education (issues of access) and socials (Grenfell, 2012). These informed my analyses of my interview data with Ms. Anna, a local Head Start lead teacher, to learn how to define her students and their parents’ participation and to learn if she develops and maintains deficit perspectives when talking about her students and their parents, particularly when discussing students’ achievements.

## Methodology

This is simply a case study but tries to utilize Gee’s (2014) discourse analysis tool called “the context is a reflexive tool” which brings my focus on the context, not just on what was said, as the lead teacher talks about her students and their parents. As we use language to construct, deconstruct things, or to get things done, the contexts may help us in this sense. The “property of context -namely that it is both there (and gives meaning to what we do) – is called the “reflexive” property of context. Speaking reflects context and context reflects (is shaped) by speaking (what was said)” (p. 91). Here, Gee’s tool was used as an additional tool to analyze interview data. Here, I adopt the following Gee’s questions to analyze the data:

How is what the speaker is saying and how he or she is saying it helping to create or shape (possibly even manipulate) what listeners will

take as the relevant context?

How is what the speaker is saying and how he or she is saying it helping to reproduce contexts like this one (e.g., a class session in a daycare), that is, helping them to continue to exist through time and space?

Is the speaker reproducing contexts like this one unaware of aspects of the context that if he or she thought about the matter consciously, he or she would not want to reproduce?

Is what the speaker is saying and how he or she is saying it just, more or less, replicating contexts like this one or, in any respect, transforming or changing them?

Gee argues that “no act of speaking in context is ever totally identical in every aspect to another (e.g., every lecture is different somehow), but sometimes the differences are small and not very significant and other times they are larger and more significant” (p. 91).

## Research Context

I chose to observe a local federally-funded pre-K classroom (best known as Head Start classroom) and interview its two teachers. The Head Start classroom that I observed is situated within a church building on the east side of a mid-sized college town in the Midwest. Altogether, there are four pre-K Head Start classrooms at this church location. The classroom that I observed is was team-taught by Ms. Anna and Ms. Sharon (not real names). During my research, 13 students were enrolled in this classroom (maximum number).

## Observation

To better help me understand the research contexts and everyone involved in it, I observed Ms. Anna’s class twice (approximately four hours in total). I decided to observe the class from 9:00 am (starting time) to 11:00 am (right before the children went to the playground to play) because I wanted to witness the kinds of teaching practices that Ms. Anna and Ms. Sharon, the assistant teacher, engaged in inside the class. In fact, the children would not spend so much time studying after lunch as they would take an hour-long nap and have some snacks before they go home. In addition, Ms. Anna also



suggested that I observe her class before lunchtime.

During my first observation, I paid attention to the physical condition of the class and the kinds of activities that the students and the teachers were doing from the beginning. From this observation, I learned that the class is following some types of routines. In fact, Ms. Anna printed and attached a list of daily activities that the students and the teachers will be doing every day from the very first minute to the last minute.

Because I witnessed the same activities were performed on my second observation, I diverted my attention to unfamiliar things that the teachers or the students were doing. With careful observation, I noticed that Ms. Anna and Ms. Sharon were not reluctant to do different things (e.g., doing different math and science activities) in their class although routine has been established. In addition to observing the nature of student-teacher interactions, I also focused on how Ms. Anna and Ms. Sharon performed team-teaching and on how responsibility was shared.

Overall, I used my observation as a tool to gain preliminary knowledge or initial assumptions of my research setting. The observation was expected to provide me with an “authentic” experience of how the class is actually run. For me, such initial knowledge and experience would better assist me when I conduct the interview. For example, I can just confirm my interpretation of one particular classroom activity or interaction during the interview. Also, I was hoping to get some general impressions of Ms. Anna’s class and to see whether deficit discourse was enacted in the way she ran the class.

## **Interview**

I initially conducted two separate semi-structured interviews with Ms. Anna and one interview with her assistant for another project that focused on teacher teaching beliefs. For this study, I decided to use the data from my two interviews with Ms. Anna (because this study focuses on Ms. Anna). I later decided to do another interview with Anna where I asked specific questions that could reveal deficit discourse was enacted as she was talking about her students and their parents. Here, I focus my analysis on my interview with Ms. Anna.

## **Participants**

Ms. Anna was born and grew up in a Midwest

state and she has extensive experience teaching children aged 5 and under. Ms. Anna started her career teaching children after she graduated from college decades ago. Ms. Anna, she has been teaching in this federally-funded classroom for almost five years. During the interview, it was revealed that Ms. Anna had taught in many different daycares before but Ms. Anna had to adjust here and there and had to upgrade her ability when she first worked at her current Pre-K class. She had to do more paperwork and learned other computer skills which were not required in her previous works. Currently, Ms. Anna serves as a lead teacher.

## **Data Analysis Process**

After I retyped my observation notes and transcribed all interview data. I also coded my interview transcripts and observational notes. It is important to note that I had to omit some data because both Ms. Anna and Ms. Sharon talked about things that were not directly related to the topics of my questions. [Omitted] would indicate such data omission.

As per the transcription process, I decided to provide light Jeffersonian transcription where I type what I hear but also add some Jeffersonian transcription symbols. To help me transcribe the huge amount of audiotaped data, I used Express Scribe software where I can set hotkeys (e.g., I assigned F4 key for pause and F9 key for replay) so I could continue typing without having to close my Microsoft Word file. Because the transcription process can also offer some initial interpretation of the data, I deleted the data that I did not need (i.e., I omitted data that was not related to topics discussed). Another benefit of this transcription process is that I could develop some kinds of initial analysis of the data.

To analyze the data, I first tried taking the following three steps: describing, analyzing, and interpreting. The data I collected from the interview were transcribed and were coded and analyzed thematically. I also took the same process when I analyzed observational note data. I would discuss these themes in regard to deficit thinking theory. For interview data, I tried to apply Gee’s the Context Is Reflexive Tool which could, I hoped, shed additional light on the kind of contexts deficit thinking discourse/perspective which is or is not enacted.

Here, I simply printed my transcribed data and provided my codes on the margins of the papers or

in-between the lines because I did not use any qualitative analysis software packages such as N-Vivo. This coding strategy, however, resulted in numerous codes, thus making it more difficult to come up with themes that accurately represent the data. When I revisited the data several more time, I decided to draw themes based on the themes of my interview questions. This strategy allows me to quickly arrive general interpretations of the data.

Furthermore, I was aware that it is important for me to try to “establish trustworthiness” in my analysis so I tried revisiting my initial codes several times. This allows me to move from a broad understanding of large dataset to categories/themes. I also asked one of my colleagues to read my transcripts and codes to check if the themes have accurately represented the dataset.

## Findings and Discussion

I decided to discuss only a few major themes in order to delimit this paper. As I said earlier, these themes were largely based on the questions that I asked during the interviews, but the themes mostly connected to how the teacher perceives her students and parent’s participation. The themes are as follow:

1. Teaching high-SES vs. low-SES students
2. Children Education & Parent Capitals
3. Rough Family Life & Defiant Students
4. Perfect families vs. broken families

I would go through each of these themes in details where I would refer to specific quotes to support the proposed themes. As these are tentative themes, I may possibly revisit and revise themes in my future studies involving the same dataset. This makes sense because my understanding of the data would possibly evolve if it is seen at a later time.

When asked to compare her experience teaching both high- and low-SES (social economic status) students, Ms. Anna offered some significant contrasts between what the parents of high-SES students and low-SES students expect from their children’s pre-K education. In the following interview excerpt, Ms. Anna considered parents of high-SES students belong to elite groups and assumed these elite parents want their kids to learn more, not just playing, so they can be better kids.

I guess they’re focusing more on what is it I don’t know the elite group. You know since

they had jobs, more than college-educated. And I guess they think since their kids know so much more at this age that they think they’re gonna be better kids, maybe. I don’t know. It’s just status, status, symbol we call like maybe. I mean you know like I said I had parents who want good education; they are learning something, not just playing.

The context of Ms. Anna’s account here was when she was talking about how goal-oriented these parents were. The parents would oftentimes ask whether their children had met their learning goals. I think, here, Ms. Anna is trying to produce a context where the parents of high-SES students want their pre-K children to learn more, not just playing. When Ms. Anna said “[T]hey are learning something, not just playing,” she seemed to highlight the contrast between the teaching goals of the expensive daycare which she taught before and Head Start program where she is teaching now. The high-SES parents who paid expensive daycare fees demanded to know if their children had met the learning goals while the low-SES parents of Head Start program did not necessarily do so. The low-SES parents would let their children follow Head Start learning principle which learning through play.

I think the context that Ms. Anna was trying to produce here indicate some kind of deficit discourse. The elite parents who can afford expensive education fees are depicted as the ones who want to make sure that their children receive a good education from early on so they will be better kids thus the possibility of their having better and brighter future will be more likely. This kind of education scenario has seemingly been taken for granted for generations; it is supposed to be like that; critical review of such scenario is not needed. Here, I recall when Grenfell (2012) discusses Bourdieu’s critique of supposedly equal access to education. Although quality education is claimed to be available for everyone, only those with sufficient capitals can truly access such high-quality education. In the end, the marginalized low-SES students will stay in their places.

Ms. Anna went on discussing how parents’ economic, social, political, and or cultural capitals matters in children’s education. When Ms. Anna was asked to compare her experience teaching at her previous work site with her current Head Start program, she valued a different kind of social capital of the

parents of her current students. The context of her discussion was the Head Start program which is a federal-sponsored program that provides both nutrition and pre-K education to poor children at no cost. She did not talk about the parents' low economic status but praised their education. The fact that her classroom is attended by international students whose parents are working on graduate degrees at a well-known university in the Midwest makes her Head Start class uniquely-different from other Head Start classes. Other classes usually have local poor students whose parents do not necessarily have a college education. Ms. Anna is aware that her students' parents are not rich because, to be eligible for Head Start, a student has to come from a family whose household income should be at or below Federal Government poverty level but the parents' higher education provides a key difference here. In other words, the parents may not have economic capital but they have social, cultural, and education capitals that make them stand above the rest of parents of students in different Head Start locations. To me, the discursive discussion here is that the parents will care about their children's education when they care about their own education in the first place so the students will have more possibility to succeed. This kind of perspective seemingly makes perfect sense but, on a second thought, the perspective is too stereotypical, if not deficit model of thinking, because students' internal motivation to learn can just be overlooked.

FZ: Uh uh, so so if you compared your experience with the parents uhm in the previous church daycare and here. Did you see differences?

MA: A huge different!

FZ : What are they? Can you explain?

MA: Well, here's a huge difference from where I work and another Head Start site, which is on the other side of town, because like I said a lot of my parents are a Midwestern university-affiliated so they're coming to learn. To do more research, to learn.

FZ : Students?

MA: Oh yeah, right here where I am at, this site, right here. If I do another site, it was not (.) but I worked at Broadview was nothing like it.

FZ : Why?

MA: Demographic

FZ : What demographic what's demography like over there?

MA: Like I said uhm (.02) I had more parents in jail hum(h)our

FZ : More parents in jail?

MA: Incarcerated uhm like I said uhm we serve the Midwestern university population, about two miles from campus, two miles.

FZ : Why do you think do:: you think that has connection with uhm (.)

MA: That's just my opinion. I just feel like because I'm uhm I don't know I mean a lot of [people cause I have]

From the above excerpt, we can see how Ms. Anna links parents' rough conditions (e.g., being incarcerated) to the possibility of the parents' willingness to get involved in their children education. Although Ms. Anna was seemingly a bit hesitant about drawing a direct connection between family condition with children learning, we can understand the context here. She hinted that teaching students, whose parents are uncaring, is very much different from teaching those with caring parents. Simone (2012), whose study investigates the kind of strategies school principals employ to eliminate deficit thinking, argues that many teachers view their job assignments to teach lower level students as negative ones. "Common perceptions regarding the lower track students included troublesome, unmotivated, uncaring parents, unprepared for rigorous work, difficulty with discourse ... are indicative of deficit thinking" (p.1). Such perceptions are certainly troubling because they impact how a teacher teaches.

Moreover, Ms. Anna addressed her concerned about the kind of negative impacts children with rough family life would bring to the classroom. She asserted that a lot of time the students would behave violently in the classroom or say inappropriate things that no children of their age would have said. As a teacher, Ms. Anna said she indeed dreaded of coming to class and face these kinds of children. "The kids, you know, they were violent. They kicked, they hit me. They kinda choke me," says Ms. Anna at one point during the interview. I think she said this to picture how difficult her previous

teaching condition was. It was a struggle for her as a teacher to come to class as there was no comfort at all. Ms. Anna did not, however, confirm if she or her colleague at the school had tried to do something to help these violent students. To me, these kinds of students would likely be like this because not many teachers would go extra miles to learn the actual causes of their violent acts as everything, usually, is linked to their family life. Below, Ms. Anna explains why a child's behavior is somehow connected to their family life.

Well, it was hard because when they have a rough family life, they're gonna come in and some of that takes a toll on the child, whether emotionally or socially yeah.

Here, Ms. Anna argued that difficult family life would affect a child either emotionally and socially. This can then explain why a child behave violently when interacting with others. While it makes so much sense to make such a conclusion, we need not close other doors of interpretation. We also need to consider other internal and external problems to help explain why a low-SES student performs poorly at school. That way, we will not base our conclusions on assumptions and we will not be at risk of being trapped in the deficit model of thinking.

Similarly, Ms. Anna further talked about ideal families that could better encourage and support a child's learning. According to Ms. Anna, two-parent families are seemingly better supporters of their children's learning than single families because the husband and wife can take turn caring for their children. Thus, children of a two-parent family can get full familial supports.

I think it makes a difference. This is just my opinion. You could ask somebody else, maybe someone say no because I am not saying all people of single families. I am not saying that at all. I'm saying that a two-parent family who are working together as uhm family, man, and wife, and a family encouraging the child that's better than just the single parent whose significant other is in jail, deceased, or out of your life. And it's harder on a single mom.

From the excerpt, we learn that Ms. Anna claims that a single mom would find it harder to support a

child's learning. Though we can see that there are a lot of examples of struggling single-mothers, we cannot simply conclude that a struggling mother is uncaring about her child's education. We have seen so many stories of single mothers successfully raising and educating their children. I think it makes sense to consider single-family hardship and struggle but this should not make us engender deficit thinking. I understand the context that Ms. Anna was referring to when she talked about. She was referring to vulnerable mothers who had to stay in a woman shelter because they could not afford housing on their own or those young mothers whose partners had abused them.

Perhaps, Ms. Anna here considers that students coming from troubled or broken families are at risk of not being able to learn like other children who have a "perfect" family. Valencia (2010) contends that "at-risk" are usually referred to minority students. In this sense, he writes "given that at-risk students are concentrated among pupils of color, from poverty households, single-parent families, and immigrant populations, the at-risk inventory approach has the strong tendency to stereotype" (p. 112). Judging from Ms. Anna's class population, we can see that the students are somehow connected with one of the characteristics of "at-risk students" mentioned by Valencia above. Thus, simply labeling Ms. Anna's students as "at-risk" students might just be a form of stereotyping.

Ms. Anna's definition of an ideal family consisting of a man and wife might not fit everyone's definition of a family. For instance, a child who did not know his or her mother and father and was raised in a foster home would never have a family if he or she goes by such a definition. Adopted children raised by same-sex couples might also be troubled by the definition. I think educators need to avoid using a single broad brush to treat every issue in their classrooms.

## Conclusion

The tentative findings that I present in this paper indicate that deficit thinking are very likely to arise in educational institutions where marginalized groups of students are present. We should not take the seemingly neutral practices for granted but begin to critically question such practices so we might not continue perpetuating practices that would marginalize minority groups. Educators need to be aware of

the deficit thinking and actively find ways to dismantle it in their everyday practices. Also, student-teachers who come from minority groups should be aware of deficit thinking in education for dismantling the model of thinking that have discriminated them in the first place.

This research project and its findings have not only enabled me to learn more about deficit thinking and Head Start Program in general but also allowed me to practice what I learn in qualitative class and experience what it really means to actually conduct a qualitative study. The themes that I draw from the dataset might not represent the “reality” in its entirety but the readers, especially those interested in the issues of deficit thinking in the field of education, would gain a deeper understanding that deficit model of thinking can be engendered or perpetuated unconsciously.

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