

Presuming Incompetence from Preschool to the Professoriate: How Leadership Preparation Programs Perpetuate or Prevent Deficit Thinking

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This article discusses how deficit thinking is manifested through a presumption of incompetence for people of color from preschool to university levels. Examples are presented as a way to demonstrate that leadership programs can support future leaders in curtailing deficit thinking in our schools and communities.

I spend the bulk of my time as an Assistant Professor in the field of Educational Leadership challenging deficit thinking about people of color. Deficit thinking is the belief that people of color carry inadequacies (e.g. lack of motivation) that are often attributed to poverty and/or inadequate socialization from home (Valencia, 2010). To this end, my research and teaching focuses on interrogating everyday forms of power and privilege that have become rigid standards by which people of color are judged in society and in schools – from preschool to the professoriate (Burciaga, 2007; Burciaga & Erbstein, 2013). Deficit thinking is a cycle. How we – those in leadership preparation programs - think about young students, for example, shapes our ability to see them as having potential for developing competencies as adults. I firmly believe we underestimate the important role we play in shaping mindsets that either perpetuate or prevent deficit thinking.

“Closing the achievement gap” – namely, the unequal outcomes of educational attainment most often compared between White students and Latina/o and Black students – has become a common phrase in schools. Administrators and teachers are feeling increasing pressure to address this crisis. Their concerns are reflected in the most common questions from some of my students - teachers who are earning their administrative credential: “How do we improve graduation rates?” “How do we transition English Language Learners to general education programs?” “How do we close the achievement gap?” To be clear, these questions are important. These inquiries raise issues about unequal outcomes. What concerns me is that many of our everyday discussions around educational inequities are about *outcomes*. We rarely discuss the cumulative sociohistorical processes that have contributed to unequal schooling conditions (López & Burciaga, 2014). Moreover, what lurks beneath these questions are underlying assumptions that our educational systems are just fine – it is the *students* who are deficient. This logic blames the students who are not graduating, being mainstreamed, or achieving at the same rate as

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their White peers. Through this lens, a deficit narrative comes into focus – the achievement gap is not about White students – it is Black and Latina/o students who are not “keeping up.”

These well intended but deficit-laden perspectives - circulated among educators, policy makers, and researchers - blame the students and/or their familial, cultural, and communal practices rather than analyzing how systemic inequities (Burciaga, Perez Huber, & Solorzano, 2010) and fixed mindsets (Arriaza, 2009; Dweck, 2006; Steele, 2011) are at the core of these outcomes. Despite research demonstrating the importance of equity and social justice frameworks to address unequal schooling conditions, many programs preparing future leaders of Pk-12 schools center around generic leadership and managerial issues with little attention to addressing deficit frameworks that inform leadership actions and decision making strategies (Mendoza-Reis & Smith, 2013). Here is an illustration how deficit thinking operates:

I recently co-facilitated a seminar with a group of teachers from various schools throughout Northern California about addressing the needs of English Language Learners. Towards the end of our time, I asked, “What if we imagined your English Language Learner students as future educators? How might you teach them to become the teachers who will replace you?” The silence that ensued was palpable. The looks on many of their faces communicated that few had ever considered their students as future teachers. Still, a few heads shaking in doubt as if they did not believe *these* students had the potential to develop enough competencies to become teachers. This situation shows how we are products of our environment; we have, for example, normalized labeling all Latina/o students “at-risk” or calling them minorities in a school where they are 97% of the student body.

It is not only students of color who are implicated as incompetent. Deficit thinking is so deeply ingrained in the United States that many teachers, administrators and faculty of color share similar experiences of marginalization and racism in schools across the country - from preschool to the professoriate (Gutiérrez y Muhs, Flores Niemann, González, Harris, 2012; Kohli, Pizarro & Burciaga, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014). As a Chicana Assistant Professor, my experiences mirror those of my senior colleagues of color – despite our differences with postsecondary opportunities, and differing phenotypes. For example, colleagues of color and I have exchanged similar stories about the surprised looks we get when we tell people we are faculty members – their faces convey the message that we are not the ones they are expecting. There are assumptions people make about what professors look like - we are not White males.

Despite experiencing and challenging racism in schools as students *and* professionals, many critical educators of color – from pre-service teachers to professors - assert their commitment to serving students who often remind them of their younger selves (Kohli, 2014; Kohli, Pizarro, & Burciaga, 2014). Research has documented the importance of racially representative teachers to youth of color for their academic and emotional well-being (Sleeter, 1999; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995; Kohli, 2008). Yet despite these findings, there is much work to be done to address the mismatch between student and teacher demographics – the majority of teachers in our nation’s public schools are White.

Similar to national teacher demographics, the majority of my students are White and female. I was initially surprised by the questions graduate students asked, “I have this Hispanic kid in my Algebra class who doesn’t care about math, no matter what consequence I give him.” She asked, “When is it okay to give up?” When I addressed this teacher’s question, I responded with a calm I didn’t realize I had before teaching in this field. I began with “Never. We would never want someone to give up on *our* children,” and continued to probe about what school structures were in place to support students struggling with math. There were none.

In addition to seeking permission to give up on this student, what also troubled me is that her student’s perceived apathy was met with consequences. This teacher’s punitive response to the student not “caring” about math reifies the trend in schools across the country towards increased punishment for students of color compared to their White peers. Between 2011-2012, for example, California schools issued more suspensions than diplomas (Public Counsel Law Center, 2014). In some cities, Black and Latino students were 5-6% more likely to be suspended than White students. These alarming statistics further implicate schools in curtailing students’ opportunities to learn. Research has demonstrated clear links between these punitive approaches and deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010). In schools where there are no structures to support students struggling with math, this example is just one of *many* opportunity gaps that Black and Latina/o students experience in comparison to increased opportunities in predominantly White Schools in our country. Leadership preparation programs have multiple opportunities to engage current teachers in discussions and assignments to identify and address deficit thinking within themselves, in schools, and in society at large.

As I prepare for my classes with teachers, I focus on how to prepare the next generation of educational leaders – and ultimately the students they serve – to recognize and challenge deficit thinking in the hopes of curtailing deficit thinking. In my “Leader in the Community” course, for example, I am less concerned with training my students “how to be principals” than I am with their close study of support systems for students and the funds of knowledge and community cultural wealth (Gonzalez, Moll, Tenery, Rivera, Rendon, Gonzalez, & Amanti, 1995; Yosso, 2005) of the students and communities they serve. One activity that pushes them to look more closely at students is a critical ethnography assignment.

Graduate students conduct a critical ethnography of one K-12 student. Each graduate student chooses one K-12 student who is struggling socially or academically and is from a historically underserved population (African American, Latino/Latina, English Language Learner, special education student, etc.). Over the course of two weeks, graduate students observe the student’s experiences in various settings. They are also invited to observe the student’s teachers, family, peers, and friends. Graduate students are not allowed to interview the student or any of the adults about their student. This close study culminates in a paper and class discussion that chronicles observations of this student, the schooling environment, and the people surrounding them. After discussing these ethnographies in class, I break the graduate students into small groups and have them answer the following questions:

1. What do people at your school do to help this student feel cared for?

2. What do people at your school do to help this student know that expectations are high and support is strong?
3. What do people at your school do to help this student know that their participation in the life of the school and classroom is valued?
4. How does this student and their family create their own support networks?
5. How could this school create a more resilient learning community for this student?

Graduate students emerge bewildered by this experience because a great majority of them document missed opportunities and a lack of support for the student they observed. They begin to see qualities that students hold that were previously ignored. What I especially appreciate is that they begin to question the status quo that is rarely questioned in school. In response to this assignment, one of my students wrote the following:

*I am mostly struck by a realization that, while *Manuel* certainly has areas he can work on to make more growth in our current learning environment, I cannot help but feel that our environment should be the one to bend instead. *Manuel* is verbally nimble and witty, endlessly entertaining and endearing, and unavoidably unique. He doesn't color inside the lines. He won't follow the rules without questioning them. He doesn't sit still. He won't be quiet. And at the end of the day, I don't want him to. What would be the benefit of that? And in learning to conform, what would get lost along the way?*

I have been deeply moved and inspired by new pockets of hope (Reyes & Gozemba, 2002) developed by my graduate students that challenge deficit thinking. I see a pocket of hope in the after-school math tutoring program that my former student coordinates – the aforementioned teacher who almost gave up. I see pockets of hope in the new lesson that two of my students developed as a result of our class discussions on how children internalize racism and notions of beauty. In addition to modeling the lesson, they brought beautifully laminated samples of student poems, “My skin is like the *canela* that my Mom stirs into our *chocolate*,” read one poem from an 8-year old Latina. Some of my students decide they do not want to become administrators. Yet, what I have seen time and again is that they *teach* differently because of our work together.

My passion for addressing deficit thinking in schools lies in my realization that the way some of my graduate students speak about their students of color is linked to the way they see me. The lessons I plan for them are less about the outcome and more about the process of discovering new tools to reclaim approaches that affirm and nurture the wealth *all* students bring to schools. Until we intentionally prepare future leaders to consider how schools can increase support systems for students, these deficit mindsets will remain. As long as I am charged with the responsibility of credentialing new leaders, I will work tirelessly to address the way they see students – the way they see me.

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