

Identifying and Challenging Deficit Thinking and Racial Microaggressions

Deficit Thinking in Educational Contexts: A Brief Definition

Deficit thinking privileges those children and families who are white, middle-class, and English-speaking as “normal,” while treating those children and families from Black, brown, non-English-speaking, and poor backgrounds as “deficient.” In deficit thinking, children’s and families’ deficits are assumed to be “located within” rather than “impressed upon” individuals. In other words, deficit thinking positions blame for minoritized students’ failure in school as inherent deficiencies within a person rather than inherent inequities designed and enacted by social systems at play (such as racism, classism, etc.). Deficit thinking disproportionately affects the lives of underrepresented and minoritized children, families, and communities. Furthermore, the teacher who practices deficit thinking justifies his or her “belief by drawing on stereotypes already well established in the mainstream psyche—stereotypes which paint disenfranchised [and minoritized] communities as intellectually, morally, and culturally deficient or deviant” (Villenas, 2001 & Weiner, 2003 paraphrased in Gorski, 2010, pp. 4–5). Deficit thinking sets up a dangerous, powerful, harmful “us versus them” mentality between white, middle-class, English-speaking people and “everyone else”; this deficit-based approach to “difference” is rooted in xenophobia and racism.

One of the insidious things about deficit thinking is that it can appear to be logical: by this I mean it “makes sense” that kids who come from a poorer neighborhood are less likely to succeed in school. There are always plenty of statistics to back up such deficit thinking. These “logical” assumptions which blame children and families for their circumstances is not only misguided but morally suspect. It leads us as teachers to treat “those” children from “those” families differently: even “good” teachers, even if we don’t realize we’re doing it (see Finn, 2009). Deficit thinking can lead teachers and school leaders to punish “those” kids more readily or to offer them more rote, mechanized instruction (worksheets, for instance) than we offer kids we perceive to be middle-class and capable of a higher level of learning and understanding (see Hatt, 2012).

Deficit thinking is a way of treating children and families of color and those economically challenged, immigrant, ESL-speaking, and LGBTQA+ children and families as if a child’s poor academic performance or behavior in school is a result of assumptions white, middle-class, English-speaking teachers and administrators have about these students’ and families’ weaknesses and shortcomings. In deficit thinking, students’ and families’ shortcomings are thought to be innate and tied to a pervasive belief that those weaknesses and shortcomings are cultural, racial, and/or physiological in nature. In this scenario, when these qualities are assumed to be innate, there is little or nothing teachers, administrators, or schooling can do to “fix” a student, so the blame for Black and brown and poor students’ failure in schools is not the teachers’ or administrators’ fault—it’s just how it is...destiny. This is dangerous thinking for a teacher, because thinking this way removes all blame for the teacher’s inability or unwillingness to educate a child who, that teacher believes, has an inherent deficit. Deficit thinking blames students and families for their academic failures. Deficit thinking blames the poor for their plight (“they’re not working hard enough,” or “they’re lazy,” for instance), rather than blaming the social and economic systems that, by design, conspire to keep most people in poverty and a very few very rich folks in power.

Components of deficit thinking include (from Valencia, 2012):

- “Blaming the victim”
- A “cycle of oppression which ensures victims and victim-blamer groups remain separate, thus allowing for deficit thinking to be seen as a rational conclusion”
- The “pseudoscientific nature of deficit thinking”
 - Black, brown, non-English-speaking, and poor kids’ poor performance on such “objective” measures of “intelligence” as high-stakes tests are used as a way to “prove” their inherent intellectual and cultural inferiority
 - The “norms” of this pseudoscience are based on the dominant, white, middle-class, English-speaking people’s ways of being and knowing, so Black, brown, poor, or non-native-English-speaking children cannot help but perform poorly on these measures. Pseudoscience is then used to “prove” that minoritized children and families cause their own academic, social, and economic failures.

“Valenzuela (1999) states that the major effect of deficit thinking, which targets the sociological-cultural backgrounds of racially marginalized students, is a sense of alienation. He claims that instead of seeing these students as capable of using agency, critical thinking, and being resistant to the school’s lack of connectedness to them, many school officials label them as disengaged individuals who act out against school rules (Valenzuela, 1999). In other words, these racially marginalized students are labeled as disrespectful, disengaged, unappreciative, and rebellious because they do not adhere to the dominant neoliberal norms that construct school culture (Valenzuela, 1999)” (paraphrased in Sharma & Portelli, 2014, p. 261).

The most pervasive, harmful, and hurtful aspects of deficit thinking show up in how Black and brown, poor, and/or ESL-speaking kids feel about themselves. When a child is constantly barraged by deficit thinking, that child begins to believe he or she cannot succeed; he or she begins to internalize and believe the deficit-based discourse. Deficit thinking toward minoritized children and families results in “internalization of a negative self-identity, alienation, discrimination, student disengagement, and a lack of trust and belief in the school system” (Sharma & Portelli, 2014, p. 262). A profound lack of trust in schools and those who work there and a feeling of alienation results all too often in a child “checking out,” “acting disrespectful,” or failing. One antidote to deficit thinking is viewing and interacting with all children and families through a strengths-based perspective (Yosso, 2005). Lisa Delpit suggests culturally aware “teachers recognize that children who grow up in poverty have a culture that is not well-aligned with the ways schools create knowledge. If teachers make an effort to bridge this gap, rather than focusing on a student-blaming deficit model, then all students can succeed in school.” It critically important to speak directly to the part of deficit thinking that makes out like something is “wrong with” people of color, ESL learners, and the poor...there is nothing wrong with these folks...nothing at all. These folks do not need fixing. What needs fixing is the deficit-based thinking, attitudes, and actions brought to bear on members of these minoritized groups.

Racial Microaggressions

One of the ways deficit thinking, and racism in particular, is manifest in the everyday is through a practice that’s referred to as committing “racial microaggressions.” So, what is a microaggression? Well, it’s a seemingly innocent, harmless, or, frankly, ignorant, subtle racist remark or action made by a white person to a person of color based on the person of color’s racial group identity, that reinforces the white supremacist racial order. A racial microaggression travels in only one direction: from a white person to a person of color. There are lots of different kinds of discrimination (sexism, classism, homophobia, ableism, etc.), but a racial microaggression is a very specific, insidious type of discrimination. I know seeing the term “white supremacy” in this context is difficult for some, but when it comes to racism, the

only way we make any progress at all is to get educated and to call it out when we see it...and to get down to this uncomfortable, often scary conversation.

Microaggressions are so pervasive, so very common, that their combined effect on people of color is nothing short of toxic. Sue (2007) defines them as “everyday insults, indignities and demeaning messages sent to people of color by well-intentioned white people who are unaware of the hidden messages being sent to them.” White folks must become aware of and educate themselves on what a racial microaggression is and the harm it does in our classrooms and schools to children and families. Because even the best-intentioned white folks can make mistakes, perhaps the two most important things to be are **humble and thoughtful**. Don’t be colorblind (“I don’t care what color my students are...they could have polka dots.”)! Colorblindness is a dangerous distraction from confronting and eliminating racism (see Thompson, 1998). See and recognize the racial identity of students of color and their families; race is an integral part of one’s identity. Do not conflate equity with equality.

Here’s an academic-ish article on microaggressions:

<http://www.apa.org/monitor/2009/02/microaggression.aspx>

Here’s a great buzzfeed article with examples of what a microaggression looks/sounds like:

<http://www.buzzfeed.com/hnigatu/racial-microaggressions-you-hear-on-a-daily-basis#.ssEvDLdz2>

And, here’s a popular, thoughtful twitter feed on the subject:

<https://twitter.com/microaggressive?lang=en>

Racial microaggressions may appear trivial to those who have white privilege, but they are especially hurtful and **damaging** to people of color. Racial microaggressions go beyond words to actions such as touching a Black woman’s hair, clothing, or body without consent. There are always complicated historical reasonings behind racial microaggressions and they are always a flexing of power by “those who believe that they are white” (see Coates, 2015). As Sue teaches us, “Microaggressions are similar to carbon monoxide—invisible, but potentially lethal—continuous exposure to these types of interactions can be a sort of death by a thousand cuts to the victim.”

Once you have a very basic understanding of racial microaggressions, you can look at the twitter site. Choose one or two racial microaggressions and ask yourselves what’s the racial microaggression that’s being made here? Think about and explain the message or messages that are being sent. What’s the story underneath or behind this racial microaggression? Why is it harmful or hurtful? What’s a way that each racial microaggression could be overcome through better, more thoughtful, just, and inclusive communication?

Once we have awareness, however dim (remember: be humble), what can we do? Sue (2007) helps white folks to begin listening for and confronting racial microaggressions by making these suggestions:

- Take responsibility. When you do so, be brave, not brash.
- Understand your good intentions (as opposed to actions) do not equal positive outcome.
- Manage your defensive feelings and be open to hearing difficult feedback.
- Reflect on what you are being told and the message/s being sent.
- Do not try to prove your view or prove how un-racist you are! We live in a racist culture; it’s inescapable, but not omnipotent.
- Do not equate your own, white experiences with the experiences of people of color (this in itself is a racial microaggression).
- Share ways that particular microaggressions can be overcome.

- Challenge colorblindness! Take race from “invisibility” to visibility by using thoughtful, inclusive language.
- Ask questions; ask them with humility. Don’t take for granted that you know the experiences of people of color because “you have a Black friend” or because you’ve seen Black folks on YouTube or the twitter or tee-vee.
- Try to be and do better.

Further reading:

Coates, T.-N. (2015). *Between the world and me*. New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau.

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Giroux, H. A. (2008). *Against the terror of neoliberalism: Politics beyond the age of greed*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.

Gorski, P. C. (2010). *Unlearning deficit ideology and the scornful gaze: Thoughts on authenticating the class discourse in education*. <http://www.edchange.org/publications/deficit-ideology-scornful-gaze.pdf>

Hatt, B. (2012). Smartness as a Cultural Practice in Schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 49(3), 438–460. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831211415661>

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Urrieta, Jr., L., & Martínez, S. (2011). Diasporic community knowledge and school absenteeism. *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 13(2), 256–277. doi 10.1080/1369801X.2011.573225

Valencia, R. R. (2010). *Dismantling contemporary deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. London: Routledge.

Valencia, R. R. (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking*. London, UK: Falmer.

Villenas, S. (2001). Latina mothers and small-town racisms: Creating narratives of dignity and moral education in North Carolina. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 32(1), 3–28.

Yosso, T.J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91.