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# Re-envisioning Teacher Education: Using DisCrit Perspectives to Disrupt Deficit Thinking

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# RE-ENVISIONING TEACHER EDUCATION: USING DISCRIT PERSPECTIVES TO DISRUPT DEFICIT THINKING

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*Abstract: This paper suggests that teacher educators engage in research that investigates practices and curriculum to consider how they might best confront issues of equity and deficit thinking in individual courses and disciplines. Rooted in the tenets of culturally responsive teaching and culturally sustaining pedagogy, the authors explore how DisCrit theory further informs understandings of hegemonic schooling practices, imploring faculty to upset the implicitly biased narratives that are so often reproduced in teacher education.*

As teacher educators, it is ethically imperative for us to prepare culturally competent teachers to interrupt what Paris and Alim (2017) call a “saga of cultural assault” which serves to harm students of color, resulting in both negative academic and emotional consequences (p. 1). Preparing culturally competent teachers to enact culturally sustaining practices works to ensure equity in education and an atmosphere of social transformation in classrooms. Culturally competent teachers honor students’ languages and cultures while providing experiences that “build, extend and sustain students’ local and cultural knowledge” (Nash, Panther & Arce-Boardman, 2017, p. 605).

We, three teacher educators and one education librarian/adjunct instructor, work together at a mid-size college in Western New York State. We currently teach in the college’s Inclusive Education and Graduate Literacy programs. We have all included anti-deficit practices in our courses for many years, but have come to realize the need for a collaborative effort to bring these practices to the forefront of our Education programs. So, starting last year, we have engaged in a series of conversations sharing our ideas and working together to develop a research plan to explore the effectiveness of our practices aimed at preparing culturally competent teachers, with a crosscutting goal of continuous course and program improvement.

An obstacle that we have encountered in our work to prepare culturally competent teachers is the unintentional ethnocentric marginalization that can occur within the classroom. We have noticed that ethnocentric marginalization operates largely unconsciously as we interact with and interpret the world based on our own cultural understandings. This unintentional ethnocentric marginalization may result in deficit perspectives regarding schooling which serve to homogenize children by ignoring their cultures and languages at best; while more often “viewing the languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being of many students of color as deficiencies to be overcome in learning the demanded and legitimized dominant language, literacy and cultural ways of being” (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 4). The constant comparison of diverse students (by classroom teachers, administrators, and politicians etc.), solely against White middle-class norms is demonstrative of the cultural hegemony of schooling (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Unintentional ethnocentric marginalization acts as barrier to becoming culturally competent. Consider the following example of a former student, Brienne (pseudonym), who was pursuing certification in Bilingual Education in our Northeastern teacher-education program. While engaged in a discussion of *Where Education and Assimilation Collide* (Thompson, 2009), an article that explores issues of immigrant students in American schools, Brienne verbalized her outrage that immigrant students would tear down the American flag. Brienne concluded her angry diatribe with “I would not want all of those drug dealers and gang members in my school.” *Where Education and Assimilation Collide* made no mention of problems with gangs or drugs, so Brienne’s statement brings to light her assumptions about immigrant students. We worry how these assumptions will impact Brienne’s teaching, learning

and relationships with students. How will these unexamined perspectives “devalue, distort, and erase their language, culture and identity” (Bucholtz, Casillas, and Lee, 2017, p. 45)?

As teacher educators committed to cultural competency, we work to provide spaces for faculty and teachers to enhance their understandings of inequalities in the education system, as well as create spaces for teachers to continually develop self-awareness and reflective skills. Thus, in our teacher preparation programs, we are working toward designing our courses within the framework of DisCrit theory in conjunction with our understandings of asset-based pedagogies including funds of knowledge and culturally sustaining pedagogy.

## **A DisCrit Framework**

The conflation of race and perceived ability is not a recent phenomenon; Du Bois (1920) discussed the origins of the belief that people of African descent possessed inferior intelligence and how that belief has been reified over the past century with the help of pseudoscientific fields like phrenology and racial physiognomy. This deeply ingrained narrative has been used to justify inequitable treatment of non-White people from the time of slavery to current day practices in education. It is well documented that students of color have higher rates of disciplinary intervention, incarceration, representation in special education and generally lower rates of graduation and academic achievement than White students (Slesaransky-Poe & García, 2014).

DisCrit is an emerging framework that brings the fields of Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory together to help understand the complex and historically charged intersection of race and perceived ability and the effects that this has on students of color. Annamma, Connor, and Ferri (2016) argue that ability and dis/ability are perceived and created based on ideologies of race, which are incubated and perpetuated in social and institutional structures such as the education system. DisCrit helps us to see and understand how structural racism and ableism operate in the day-to-day lives of students of color and so often result in the classification of “disabled.”

In conceptualizing DisCrit, Annamma et al. (2016) propose seven tenets to operationalize the use of the framework in educational fields. The first tenet of DisCrit focuses on how racism and ableism work interdependently in shaping cultural and social understandings of normalcy. The second tenet emphasizes that people have multidimensional identities where differences from the norm carry varied (and often multiple) stigma(s) relating to race, dis/ability, social class, or gender. Tenet three acknowledges the social construction of race and ability and simultaneously recognizes that there are palpable effects of being labeled as raced or dis/abled. Tenet four privileges the voices of traditionally marginalized populations within DisCrit research. The fifth tenet recognizes how the rights of certain non-White and/or dis/abled citizens have been historically and legally denied. The sixth tenet of DisCrit recognizes Whiteness and Ability as “property” and acknowledges that the same dis/ability label might provide different learning opportunities for children depending on their race. The seventh and final tenet promotes activism and resistance to deficit perspectives that are perpetuated in social structures and institutions.

Perhaps the deficit perspective can be best understood when explained within the context of the normal/abnormal and abled/disabled binaries. Deficit models identify the natural variations that occur in human shape, ability, and behavior as ‘abnormal’ and label people as ‘disabled’ individuals that are in need of remediation or cure. This perspective has resulted in differential and unequal treatment of people that is largely rationalized and justified by the belief that there are inherently deficient populations in humanity (Baynton, 2016). DisCrit challenges that the boundaries between these binaries are constantly shifting and questions how race positions one on either side of that line. The emergence of this field reflects a growing belief that much of what we consider an ‘achievement gap’ is, as Paris & Alim (2017) assert, reflective of hegemonic schooling practices.

Similarly, Zhao (2016) discusses a “deficit-driven meritocracy” of American schools where the focus is on fixing the deficiencies of children to meet pre-set standards and those who are fixed or have the most skills are deserving of the most merit (p. 718). Access to educational opportunities, resources, curriculum, and peers is largely determined by the level of perceived merit a student possesses. Harry and Klingner (2007) challenge educators to find ways to support students without undermining their self-confidence and stigmatizing students with a disability label or deficit designation. Unfortunately, those students most likely to be found meritorious are those reared in White, middle class, English-speaking households, leaving students of color, students with disabilities, and English language learners in the deficit realm.

While we can easily identify this subtractive view of students and families, it can be very challenging for us to understand our own biases, yet we recognize the value of this work and are driven to work together in the interest of all students. To this end, we frame our courses to call out the institutional racism and ableism in the American

education system, which relegates students of color to special education and alternative programs at significantly higher rates than their White peers. Before we begin instruction on the legal and pedagogical foundations of special education, we attempt to disrupt our teacher candidates' perceptions of normalcy by teaching the historic foundations of institutional racism and ableism and the complicity of the American education system in its perpetuation. Additionally, we bring the stories and voices of the marginalized into our courses and provide counter-narratives that challenge teacher candidates' beliefs. We seek to empower our teacher candidates to recognize the insidious ubiquity of the deficit perspective that marginalizes students outside of "normal," and we challenge them to think and act differently to become agents of change and transformation. For example, in our courses, at a macro-level, we broadly embrace culturally sustaining pedagogy so that our teacher candidates can see the interconnectedness of race and dis/ability across disciplines. At a micro-level, we challenge our teacher candidates to look closely at their responses to student behavior and achievement in order to reflect upon their own positionality in relation to race and dis/ability so that they may see the complexity in all students and the strength and richness of their lived experiences.

### *Funds of Knowledge*

Just as DisCrit forces educators to confront issues of inequity, funds of knowledge research also challenges deficit views of working class families who are often categorized by the education system as disorganized or deficient; this is reflective of the broader societal issues of power, social class and bias. Research in this area brings to light families' and communities' *funds of knowledge*: the strengths, skills, cultural resources and the ways of knowing and being that students bring with them into the classroom (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005). Such understandings of the value of students' lives and experiences outside of school is something that some of our preservice teachers have not yet fully considered. Several researchers suggest that when teachers learn about children's lives outside of school, students' experiences in school will be greatly enhanced (Llopart & Esteban-Guitart, 2018; González et al., 2005; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez & Turner, 1999; Heath, 1983). This research suggests that if teachers become learners (e.g. ethnographers) and go out into the homes and communities of their students, they can then develop a better understanding of the historical, cultural and political contexts of their students' lives. Such conscious endeavors enable teachers to draw upon families' funds of knowledge for more culturally responsive literacy instruction in schools and perhaps create what Gutierrez calls *a third space*: where home and school intersect (Gutierrez et al., 1999). Additionally, Campano (2007) suggests the creation of a *second classroom*, where curriculum is centered around students' identities, building off the notion that families' funds of knowledge represent "bona fide resources for teaching and learning in classrooms" (González et al., 2005, p. 277). Ultimately, funds of knowledge has emerged as an imperative topic for our preservice teachers as we challenge them to confront deficit thinking.

### *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy*

Culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) provides teachers and teacher educators with a pathway to engage in classroom, school, and community practices that confront oppressive educational forces. As Lehman (2017) suggests, "Having instruction that is culturally relevant and personally empowering is both a right of our students and a responsibility of schools in the business of building a just society" (p. 33). While Ladson-Billings (2014) notes that culturally responsive pedagogy is a popular approach to supporting students, she suggests that subscribers to the approach need to consider what she has named "the remix," or culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) (p. 77). CSP is described by Paris and Alim (2017) as a stance that fosters and sustains "linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation" (p.1). CSP, by its nature is additive, both valuing and enhancing students' strengths without a focus on overcoming perceived deficits. Alim and Paris (2015) suggest the CSP framework allows us to change schools from being "oppressive, homogenizing forces" by enabling us to "reframe the object of critique from our children to oppressive systems," like the U.S. education system (p. 3). While culturally sustaining pedagogy builds upon Ladson-Billings's (1995) ubiquitous culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) theory, culturally sustaining pedagogy is emphatic about a focus on critical consciousness—something that Ladson-Billings (2017) argues has been corrupted or left out altogether in today's practice of her culturally responsive pedagogy. This critical consciousness is essential as it enables students and teachers to problematize schooling and the White middle-class ways of doing school. So we wonder, what does this mean for us as teachers and as teachers of teachers? How can we support our students in recognizing deficit viewpoints and embracing asset-based pedagogies, while also supporting development of a critical perspective aligned with the tenets of culturally sustaining pedagogies?

## Discussion

While we strive to combat deficit thinking in our courses by exposing preservice teachers to approaches that help them to confront teaching practices that perpetuate systemic legacies of oppression and inequality, this work has become more urgent given current narratives about education and families in the political sphere. Additionally, many of our in-service teachers report feelings of distress in their early careers because they are mandated to use packaged curriculum that is not responsive to students' needs and instead follows a one-size-fits-all approach to increasing test scores. Thus, the question arises: as teacher educators, how can we strive to ensure that our students are exposed to important scholarship and practices that address deficit thinking and offer preservice teachers accessible approaches to meaningful and responsive instruction?

Drawing on the literature above, we have started to host meaningful conversations about how teacher education programs can work to combat deficit thinking. Our initial explorations have yielded very little research on methods teacher educators can effectively utilize to disrupt deficit perspectives in teacher education, and we presently have more wonderings than definitive conclusions. The following table includes our emerging work, through which we aim to disrupt deficit perspectives on our campus.

Context	Changes We Have Implemented
<i>Disability Studies in Education</i> course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students read relevant research and essays in the field of Disabilities Studies to understand how this work impacts educational practices. Students problematize existing systems.</li> </ul>
<i>Emergent Language and Literacy</i> courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students explore a wide variety of articles that: address the need for culturally relevant literacy instruction, and provide examples of practical applications of culturally relevant and sustaining practices with elementary students. Through rich, personal conversations, students grapple with ways that they, as future teachers, might be agents of change in their classrooms and schools to value and sustain their students' diverse languages, cultures and identities.</li> </ul>
<i>Adolescent Language and Literacy</i> courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students discuss and confront issues of power through critical literacy.</li> <li>Students explore local issues around social and structural inequity in schools as points of research and discussion.</li> <li>Students explore culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies for their own practice.</li> </ul>
<i>Graduate Literacy Program</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We have collaborated to improve our program's approach with a goal of inclusivity by providing opportunities for students to discuss and address diverse voices through new course development, like our new <i>Critical Literacies</i> course and revision of assignments that focus on advocacy.</li> </ul>
<i>Global Children's Literature Book Clubs</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We are currently engaged in a collaborative research project which incorporates global children's literature Book Clubs as a way for teacher candidates to explore, critique and see possibilities in ways to positively use global children's literature as part of culturally sustaining practice in their future classrooms.</li> </ul>

We propose a need for more research in order to guide faculty in upsetting the implicitly biased narratives that are so often reproduced in teacher education. Below we describe some of our questions:

### *Lingering questions to serve as a guide for future research*

1. As culturally sustaining pedagogy continues to evolve, how might teacher educators work together to create more culturally sustaining pedagogy and practices to contribute to a just society?
2. How might preservice teachers' understandings of culturally sustaining pedagogy and DisCrit theory work to combat deficit thinking?
3. What happens when both instructors and teacher candidates examine their own assumptions and biases? How do these examinations work to remedy deficit thinking?
4. How can teacher educators rethink and remodel their courses to allow for teacher candidates' self-examination to reduce or eliminate bias?
5. What teaching practices can we consider that embrace diversity so all of our students, families and communities are honored?

## Conclusion

Our current self-explorations remain in the early stages; however, we realize that it is important to draw attention to deficit discourse and thinking in education courses and programs. If we do not formally confront this sort of thinking in our classes, then we risk the perpetuation of deficit attitudes that so frequently make their way into America's classrooms. Just as we are beginning to research and reflect, we suggest that other teacher educators and educators begin to explore their own thinking and context in order to better understand how the system reinforces deficit thinking and how we as educators can confront and challenge deficit teaching practices.

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