Identifying and Disrupting Deficit Thinking

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A community of scholars who study “at-risk” populations focuses on how students’ family values might hinder their success in education. An educational researcher utilizes evidence of racial inequities to justify their work on how racial and cultural contexts cause barriers for students of color. An education scholar conducts an analysis to show how policy discourse is perpetuating ways of thinking that detract from efforts to address core systemic barriers to success for low-income students. Which of these constitutes deficit-thinking? How does one accurately make this assessment?

Because education is a problem-based field, doctoral students are encouraged to use problems to justify the urgency of their research. To be sure, there are numerous problems plaguing education, but how problems are identified and named is just as important to the research process as efforts to actually address them. Research itself becomes problematic when framed with deficit thinking, and researchers are not immune to using deficit frames to respond to educational issues. Despite some of the most conscious efforts, even the most critical scholars — the authors included — have the potential to produce research laced with deficit thinking. In addition, researchers have recently begun to apply the concept of deficit thinking to critique any discourse that discusses challenges or disparities, making it difficult for anyone to know what actually constitutes deficit thinking.

Education scholars and researchers are often socialized into deficit thinking. In this article, we highlight a few common ways — among many — that deficit thinking emerges in educational research. We also offer recommendations to encourage colleagues to actively disrupt deficit thinking by understanding what it is, addressing it in their own research, and offering helpful critiques to disrupt the spread of deficit narratives. **The theme that runs through each of our examples is that deficit thinking is rooted in *a blame the victim* orientation that suggests that people are responsible for their predicament and fails to acknowledge that they live within coercive systems that cause harm with no accountability**. In a forthcoming brief, we discuss how deficit thinking is not only a symptom of larger systemic oppression, but also reinforces these oppressive systems. Furthermore, deficit thinking is pervasive and implicit, and often emerging in language that treats people as problems.

“People are not Problems”

In *Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois offered critical commentary in the essay, "Of our spiritual strivings." In the piece, Dubois ponders the "Negro problem" and his response to the question, "How does it feel to be a problem?" DuBois' question could readily be answered by numerous communities of color who have been positioned in educational research as "problems" that need to be solved or "broken people" who need to be fixed.

> Researchers who situate people as problems engage in deficit thinking by focusing on fixing people rather than fixing oppressive and disabling systems.

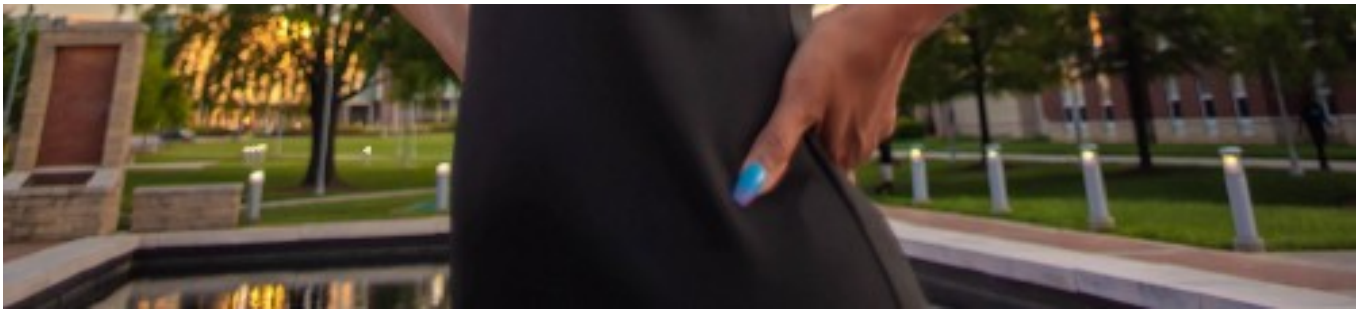
For example, early research on Black boys and men referred to them as an "endangered species." This same line of research, although intended to amplify the issues facing Black boys and men, positioned them as lacking agency or capacity to succeed and perpetuated beliefs that the education system has the ability to bestow this agency and capacity upon them. Ultimately, a deficit narrative entered the research discourse, often blaming these boys and men for their predicaments. Cultural phenomena such as sagging pants, participating in gangs, or desiring to be rappers and athletes — all with their own reasons for their societal prevalence — fueled images that were used to confirm this deficit narrative. Building on critiques of such thinking, Shaun Harper later offered an alternative anti-deficit framework about Black men and college attainment, in which he shifted the focus toward systemic influences on their success and away from centering on individual traits.

The Language of Deficiency

What is really "At-risk"?

The term at-risk is commonly used to refer to students who are marginalized and academically disadvantaged within educational systems. Gloria Ladson-Billings challenged the use of the term "at-risk," explaining that children could derive no sense of pride from such a label. This concept has fueled discourses that are deficit-oriented in that they foster assumptions that minoritized students are more likely to fail than succeed and fixate on these students' traits, rather than oppressive structures, as the cause of failure. **An anti-deficit perspective would suggest that racially minoritized students are not "at-risk," but educational institutions are at-risk of failing them**.

These institutions are at-risk of losing out on the diverse perspectives and experiences that these students contribute to the learning environment. Ivory Toldson noted, the best alternative to describe “at-risk students” is simply “students.”



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Resilience and Grit

The concepts of *resilience* and *grit* allude to characteristics that determine whether individuals succeed despite seemingly insurmountable odds. **Research emphases on resilience and grit may promote deficit thinking because they situate the responsibility of success or the predicament of failure on individuals**. Focusing on individual prowess does little to name how educational structures operate to ensure that some students fail while others succeed. Resilience and grit also fuel a system of shame management. Educational institutions have notoriously failed students, so much so that school districts across the US have been labeled as "failing." Yet, minoritized students who strive and beat the odds are treated as exceptional, while the majority of them are viewed as deficient. Deficit thinking blames the students who are left behind for their predicament, rather than the policies and practices that perpetuate oppressive and inequitable systems. Exceptionalism and praise directed toward students who "succeed" help institutions manage the overwhelming shame of systemically failing students, most of whom are racially minoritized and economically disadvantaged. Anti-deficit viewpoints place less emphasis on these individual traits, and greater focus on how to re-envision and transform the larger systems and structures that perpetuate inequities in educational outcomes.

Minority vs. Minoritized

Since the 1980s, the term *minority* and *minorities* were used to refer to African American, Asian American, Latinx/a/o, Native American, and Pacific Islander populations. Over time, *minority* became standard language in educational research. The use of the term signaled a discourse in which every population was "less than" White people. This term is still used in educational research and promotes deficit thinking. However, these populations are not inherently minorities. Instead, they have been forced to operate in a hegemonic system that minoritizes them. Unlike the term

minority, using the term *minoritized* can disrupt deficit thinking in educational research because it gets at the contextual nature of oppression, systems and processes rooted in power that affect these populations, and reality that identities and experiences are not objective.

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Giving Voice

The strength of qualitative educational research lies in its emphases on particularities rather than broad strokes. Through qualitative research, readers can access thick descriptions in which individuals articulate their lived experiences. Yet, qualitative researchers have engaged in deficit thinking by referencing their work as "giving voice" to participants. **Although qualitative research is one venue through which we learn about people's experiences, participants come to the research with voices of their own**. Deficit thinking prompts researchers to presumptuously conclude that participants enter our research processes with no voice, we are essential in making their voice materialize, and they exit the study with voice as a result of our work. Despite the fact that qualitative research can illuminate pressing issues and center populations whose

perspectives and experiences might not otherwise enter particular discourses, we would argue that research does not give voice. Instead, research, especially qualitative inquiry, is a tool to share the already-existing stories of participants that were otherwise silenced by oppressive systems.

Moving Forward

Given the pervasive nature of deficit thinking, we want to encourage educational researchers in two ways. First, we encourage scholars to understand anti-deficit thinking, which requires comprehending the impact of language and discourse on how people are situated in research, how questions and language are framed, and how findings are reported. Second, we encourage scholars to engage in healthy critique and disruption of deficit-oriented research. A host of scholars have offered critiques of bodies of literature framed with deficit thinking in an effort to shift dominant narratives, but more is needed. Although we encourage greater critique, we caution scholars to apply the concept of deficit thinking carefully to avoid certain pitfalls, such as referring to research as deficit without having a clear understanding of what deficit thinking is and how it shows up in educational research. We also caution scholars to avoid being hasty in offering critique because doing so can promote unnecessary confusion. For example, some scholars refer to anti-deficit research as deficit oriented or critique deficit-based research to build an argument that is deficit itself.

Overall, as researchers, senior faculty, and mentors who are committed to equity-focused, anti-deficit research, we want to build upon and contribute to dialogue within educational research spaces that is devoted to disrupting deficit discourses. We know first-hand the power of deficit discourses in research and the harm they can do, but we also believe in the power of critical anti-deficit scholarship that can disrupt, dismantle, and reshape how scholars approach research for educational equity.

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Education Diversity Equity Research Students