"We Can't Fix That": Deficit Thinking and the Exoneration of Educator Responsibility for Teaching Students Placed at a Disciplinary Alternative School

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Abstract: *The increased use of exclusionary discipline over the past four decades has included educators sending students to involuntary disciplinary alternative schools. Reasons for sending students often include infractions that are subjectively defined by educators and nonviolent in nature, suggesting that educators' beliefs about students and their behaviors play an important role in shaping these students' trajectories. Using Valencia's (2010) deficit-thinking framework, this qualitative study of 29 educators and nine students in one school district in the Southeast examines the role that deficit thinking plays in shaping the educational experiences of students who had been placed at an alternative school. Findings suggest that both educators and students blame students' individual traits and decisions for their plights. Even when institutional barriers to success, such as racism, are identified, individuals stop short of advocating for changes that they themselves could enact. Instead, deficit thinking justifies inaction and students' struggles.*

The use of exclusionary discipline, particularly suspension and expulsion, has dramatically increased over the past four decades despite its correlation with school disengagement and eventual school dropout (Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007; Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011). The rate of suspensions and expulsions has doubled since the mid-1970s (Dignity In Schools Campaign, 2015; Wald & Losen, 2003), resulting in over 3.3 million elementary and secondary public school students suspended and over 100,000 expelled each year (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). In lieu of handing down expulsions, educators sometimes assign students to disciplinary alternative schools, where approximately 1.3% of public school students attend each year (Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010; Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Although alternative education has been variously defined and enacted over the past century, alternative schools in the age of zero tolerance primarily house students assigned involuntarily as a disciplinary consequence (Aron, 2003; Raywid, 1994). Guidelines for these schools vary by state and district, and no federal systems specifically account for their quality or student outcomes (Kennedy-Lewis, 2014; Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). Educators justify the use of these schools as better than full expulsions, though evidence suggests that these placements may be a step along the school-to-prison pipeline (Vanderhaar, Petrosko, & Muñoz, 2014). For instance, in their longitudinal study in one midsized public school district, Vanderhaar et al. (2014) found that over 40% of students placed in a disciplinary alternative school in middle school were detained in a juvenile justice facility within two years.

Deleterious outcomes such as incarceration disproportionately impact Black and Brown students, reflecting systemwide racial disparities in educators' uses of punishments. Black students receive disproportionately more disciplinary office referrals, in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions than their White counterparts (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010; Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). Black students comprise only 16% of the public school population but account for 42% of students receiving multiple out-of-school suspensions and 34% of students receiving expulsions (Aud et al., 2010). Black students are three times more likely than White students to be suspended or expelled from school (Wallace et al., 2008). These statistics indicate a discipline gap between student groups (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Race and ethnicity remain salient factors in students' assignments to disciplinary alternative schools. Of the 645,000 students in district-run disciplinary alternative schools in 2007-08, 43% were enrolled in districts in which students of color comprised at least half of the district population (Carver et al., 2010). Educators use these placements more frequently for minoritized students and often for more discretionary offenses, such as behavior deemed by teachers to be disruptive or disrespectful (Booker & Mitchell, 2011; Tajilla & Garba, 2014; Vanderhaar et al., 2014).

Educators' perceptions, beliefs, biases, and subjectivity in sanctioning students play key roles in the discipline gap between White students and Black and Brown students (Collins, 2011; Thornberg, 2007; Vavrus & Cole, 2002). Studies of possible explanations for the discipline gap show that teacher-level and school-level factors are more related to the "overselection and oversanction" of Black and Brown students than actual differences in student behavior (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Skiba et al., 2014; Skiba, Shure, & Williams, 2012). Replacing educators' uses of exclusionary discipline requires a dismantling of the beliefs that support current practices, which first requires sufficient understanding of those beliefs, particularly those that position students as deficient and unworthy. Using Valencia's (2010) theory of deficit thinking as a theoretical framework, this study explores the perceptions, beliefs, and assumptions of 29 educators in a suburban-rural school district regarding students assigned to a disciplinary alternative school. To obtain a complete picture of how deficit thinking shapes students' experiences, we also examined the beliefs

of nine students themselves as they transitioned back to comprehensive schools after completing disciplinary alternative school placements. This study addresses the following research question: How do students', teachers', and administrators' descriptions of students and schooling at both comprehensive and disciplinary alternative schools reflect and challenge deficit thinking?

Deficit Thinking

Valencia's (2010) construct of deficit thinking serves as a lens through which we can view educators' explanations for the disproportionate school failure of Black and Brown students or those living in poverty. In current educational research and practice, marginalized students are often blamed for their poor educational outcomes by well-meaning educators who lack the efficacy to help them. Valencia (1997) names the "blame the victim" approach "deficit thinking." He traces the advent of scholarly resistance to this perspective to the 1960s when "cultural deprivation" approaches met institutional analyses that examined the role of organizations, systems, and powerful actors in student oppression. He synthesizes the work of scholars who deconstructed the deficit-thinking approach by identifying its various attributes and describing how these attributes manifested in the national educational discourse during different historical periods.

Valencia (1997, 2010) theorizes that educators hold deficit-oriented views of students that place blame for students' school failure on the students' "internal deficits or deficiencies" (2010, pp. 6-7), which may be cognitive, behavioral, motivational, or contextual in nature. Deficit thinking has gained favor in teacher education programs through the works of educators such as Ruby Payne and is a pervasive, undesirable component driving policies and practices that address school failure for students placed at risk. For example, deficit thinking supports the labeling of disabilities and use of behavioristic interventions that pervade special education and often result in long-term tracking of students into subpar classes with inexperienced teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Valencia's (1997) description delineates six characteristics of deficit thinking, identified and developed by scholars who criticized this approach, which include: blaming the victim, oppression, pseudoscience, temporal changes, and educability. The sixth characteristic, heterodoxy, reflects the resistance to deficit thinking that has persisted through counter arguments that provide alternative explanations for factors that could otherwise be attributed to presumed deficits. Valencia describes how deficit thinking has been used to explain the school failure of marginalized students; we further develop Valencia's work by applying this lens to exclusionary discipline. Table 1 contains definitions of each characteristic of Valencia's framework. We have used this framework to understand how educators (and even the students themselves) blame students for what may be more accurately categorized as institutional failures. We also use this lens to view how some educators and students act against deficit thinking to support student success.

Deficit Thinking in Educational Research

Valencia's (1997, 2010) theory has been used by educational researchers in international contexts to explore how educators attribute the systematic failure of marginalized subgroups of students to personal, familial, and cultural deficits rather than examining institutional factors and educator practices that disadvantage these groups. In their mixed methods study in Flanders of Turkish and Moroccan secondary students, Clycq, Nouwen, and Vandenbroucke (2014) found that students, teachers, and parents all subscribed to a meritocratic ideal, attributing school success to individual effort. However, they also found that deficit thinking pervaded educators' discourse regarding students' working-class culture and home environments, showing that educators maintained these prejudiced opinions of students and families even while promoting individual effort as the means for school success and upward social mobility. Although students did not unilaterally disagree with these sentiments, the academic achievement gap between these immigrant groups and native Flemish students persists, reflecting additional institutional barriers to equitable outcomes. Deficit thinking by educators in U.S. schools also continues to perpetuate both the achievement and discipline gaps between White students and Black and Brown students (Gregory & Mosely, 2004; Solorzano &Yosso, 2001; Walker, 2011).

Deficit Thinking and Alternative Education

Alternative education in the U.S. for students who do not thrive in mainstream schools has a history in progressive education and ample evidence of successful outcomes (Kennedy-Lewis, 2012). Studies documenting the success of these schools suggest that effective programs are voluntary and reflect a shared perspective among educators that the purpose of the school is to modify its program to accommodate the student rather than attempting to get the student to behave in ways desired and required by mainstream schools (Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006). Nevertheless, both educators and students in comprehensive schools have increasingly come to view alternative programs as housing problem students whom they view as rightfully being segregated from nonproblem students (Brown, 2007; Kim, 2011). Similarly, studies have shown that educators in some punitive alternative programs justify discipline gaps between groups of students placed in the school as well as punishments given while at the school as being due to students' poor home environments, their lack of value for education, and their disrespect for educators (Brown, 2007; Davis, 2003). Deficit thinking continues to impact disciplinary alternative school placements and the educational trajectories of students who are persistently disciplined.

Method

Part of a larger study on alternative school placements and students' reinstatement to comprehensive schools, this qualitative study uses an interpretive paradigm to understand how deficit thinking manifests in educators'

Table 1

Valencia's (2010) Six Characteristics of Deficit Thinking

Victim-Blaming	Asserts "person-centered" reasons for school failure; students' personal characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language of origin) are assumed to be the basis for the student's poor school performance
Oppression	Provides evidence that those who are doing the victim blaming (i.e., educators) will have undue power and authority over those who are blamed (i.e., at-risk students), which can result in an oppressive power hierarchy
Pseudoscience	Occurs when deficit-oriented views are validated through researchers' and educators' inappropriate use of supposedly supporting evidence or data, which have been obtained or interpreted through a presumed deficit-oriented model
Temporal Changes	Ascribes students' failure to a set of accumulated deficits that are environmental or cultural in nature and that change depending on the current discourse around inferiority (e.g., genetics, family structure, culture, class)
Educability	Finds deficits in the ability of students to benefit from interventions; deficits are used to predict inadequate progress and as justification for the prescription of limiting remediation
Heterodoxy	Challenges the presumed orthodoxy of deficit thinking and its entrenchment in society and education by revealing places in which deficit thinking can be challenged and orthodoxy can be dismantled

and students' accounts of the education of students who are undergoing disciplinary action. We recruited nine students from one school district in the Southeast as they returned to comprehensive schools after attending the district's only disciplinary alternative school, the Phoenix School (pseudonym). We conducted interviews with 29 educators, including students' teachers at Phoenix, their teachers at the comprehensive schools, and their administrators at both schools. We also conducted interviews with the students themselves prior to, during, and after their transition semester returning to comprehensive schools to assess how their perceptions either reproduced or challenged the deficit perspective. Although we relied heavily upon Valencia's (1997, 2010) theory to guide our data analysis, we used our interpretive stance to remain open to the ways in which the data shaped new interpretations of, or challenged, the theory. During initial data analysis, the disconnections between Vacia's theory and the data led us to make adaptations to Valencia's six original characteristics of deficit thinking. We then used the adapted components of the theory as codes and identified themes from the coded data sources (see Table 2).

Context and Participants

Data were collected in one suburban-rural school district located in the Southeast. The school district contained over 28,000 students and was 45% White, 36% Black, 8% Latino, 4% Asian American, and 5% mixed race/ethnicity (source masked for anonymity). The Phoenix School had an overrepresentation of Black students (72%), male students (75%), and students from low-socioeconomic status backgrounds (85%; source masked for anonymity). Students were allowed to return to their comprehensive schools from Phoenix after completing the behavior management program in which a requisite number of points had to be earned to qualify for readmission to a comprehensive school. Participants included nine students who were enrolled in the alternative school during the 2012-2013 school year, eight of whom were Black (see Table 3).

Data Collection and Analysis

A total of 51 interviews, each lasting between 20 and 60 mins comprised the data for this study. We conducted face-to-face interviews with each student at the start and end of their transition semesters, and with four of them

while they were still attending Phoenix, accounting for 22 student interviews in total. Students were asked about their experiences at Phoenix and the comprehensive schools, their interactions with educators, at both schools, and their goals for the future. We also conducted 29 face-to-face interviews with educators including one administrator, one counselor, and two teachers at Phoenix and seven administrators, two counselors, and 16 teachers at comprehensive schools. Educator demographic data are omitted, and individual details masked or modified for anonymity. Educators were asked their impressions of Phoenix and the comprehensive schools, the progress of the particular student with whom they worked, and factors perceived to support or impede student success. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim with participant consent. Student and educator anonymity was protected through the use of pseudonyms and the alteration of identifying information.

The research team used HyperRESEARCH software version 3.7 to code instances of deficit thinking as characterized by an adapted version of Valencia's (2010) framework. Table 2 describes the seven codes that were used, indicates their connection to Valencia's original framework, and cites examples of how the codes were applied to the data. After all data sources were coded, one report containing the codes across all participants was generated to capture all instances of data that were identified for each code. Researchers conducted a thematic analysis of the code report to identify and describe how participants' perspectives reflected and developed our understanding of each component of our deficit-thinking framework.

Researcher Positionality

Both authors of this paper are White women who advocate for asset-based perspectives and practices among practitioners working in education and school counseling with marginalized students. The first author taught in an alternative school in a large urban district in a state other than the one where data were collected. She has insider knowledge regarding how students are assigned to alternative schools and how they are treated in the process as well as upon arrival. She brought opinions to the study regarding the role of educators' deficit thinking in disadvantaging excluded students. This knowledge and set of beliefs gave her an advantage to understanding educators' descriptions of administrative process and classroom practices, which were particularly helpful in asking follow-up questions during the semistructured interviews as well as focusing the classroom observation notes. The second author had no such experiences and provided an important outsider perspective during data analysis as the pair examined negative cases and instances n which educators enacted asset-based views. While we believe that our positionalities provided useful and complementary knowledge and understandings that strengthened our data collection and analysis processes, we recognize that all scholarship benefits from a multiplicity of voices from a diversity of scholars and practitioners.

Findings

All participants used deficit thinking to explain students' challenges at both Phoenix and comprehensive schools. We noted that when participants described why students were not successful, they attributed causes to the individual students as well as to school-based and societal causes, as Valencia's (2010) framework suggests. Barriers to success that participants attributed to individuals included personal choices and dispositions as well as negative influences from students' families and communities. Participants also mentioned barriers caused by institutions or educators. However, rather than attempting to remove such barriers, participants considered them to be beyond their control to change. While these findings were predicted by the theoretical framework, we further developed how each dimension of deficit thinking emerged in participants' descriptions of alternative school students.

We organized our findings into two main sections. The first describes how participants attributed failures to individual students, families, and communities. We call these "student-centered barriers" because challenges center on the student. Second, we describe how participants discussed institutional barriers to student success. We organize each section using the original components of the theoretical framework.

Student-Centered Barriers to Success

Person-centered attributions. Person-centered attributions, or deficit thinking that attributed students' struggles to flaws in the student's character, beliefs, or actions, were the most prominent form of student-focused deficit thinking expressed by participants. Educators at both Phoenix and the comprehensive schools frequently described the students they served in a negative light, painting the students as flawed due to internal characteristics beyond educators' influence. Educators frequently used chastising language to describe the behavior of students who were sent to Phoenix, including naming those students as "defiant," being "apathetic" towards education, or "lacking motivation" to succeed. These depictions often described students as having an "attitude" and needing "control" in order to conform to academic and behavioral expectations.

Students often saw themselves through the same deficit-focused lens used by many educators, often echoing and even extending the deficit-oriented descriptions of themselves that educators reported. Shaunika, Markesha, Nalaria, and Kendrick all cited their problems with anger as a salient contributor to their poor school performance and outcomes. Tenisha attributed her trouble to "having a slick mouth, cussing, saying mean words to people," while Paul admitted to "bullying other kids, taking their stuff, and messing with the teachers" until he received referrals. Though students occasionally expressed reasons for this anger that did not reflect self-blame, they often adopted educators' deficit perspectives of themselves.

However, students carefully distinguished between their own behavior and that of their Phoenix peers. They did not want to be grouped with these peers and recognized the labels that were placed on them by virtue of being sent to

Table 2

Coding System

Code*	Definition	Example of Code
Challenging Deficit Thinking *Heterodoxy*	Asset-based view of students or attributions of problems to institutional causes	"If kids seem to be failing, you know, are you going to call them failures? Or are you going to re-evaluate and figure how to attack it from a different point of view?" – Administrator
Cultural and Accumulated Environmental Deficits *Temporal Changes*	Attributing students' challenges to deficits in families or communities	"I mean the list goes on and on. And you look at their situations at home, most of them are minority students, most of them are living in poverty, you can do the math, the cards are just stacked against them." – Teacher
Educability *Educability*	Suggestions that students cannot learn or improve, or that if they do it will be because an intervention has changed the student to be more "normal"	"Just please come and observe her in my classroom and see if she changes at all or just be there to watch how she changes. Because I've tried A, B, C, D, and E, and nothing is working with her." – Teacher
Oppression *Oppression*	Deficit thinking played out through institutional policies and practices that disadvantage a group, such as gender, race, SES	"We've got a lot of behavior issues and kids that don't do well on testing … I told these kids, 'If you don't do well…you're gonna end up in a remedial class,' and it's like, well, that's where they've been their whole life." – Teacher
Orthodoxy *Heterodoxy*	From original deficit thinking theory (opposite of "Heterodoxy"). Maintaining tradition and preserving the status quo of authority or structure; philosophy-centered cause of the problem.	"It was just, our hands were tied and so was [the credit recovery program]. They were like, 'We can't, we don't take kids from Phoenix.' They don't look at the 8th grade overage at Phoenix, they only look at the non-alternative schools. 'If she gets sent to Phoenix, we can't take her [into the credit recovery program]'." – Counselor
Pseudoscience *Pseudoscience*	Use of evidence or data to support the deficit perspective that they hold about a student.	"It worked, you know, I didn't pull any punches on the behavior forms. If she argued with me or if she talked back to me, if she didn't fill out her planner, if she wasn't doing her work, it all went down on there [a behavior log]. And um, and I think that started to turn her behavior around because she was getting in trouble at home because of it. But I wasn't trying to get her in trouble at home, I was just trying to say that this is a picture of what's happening from the beginning to the end of my class." – Teacher
Person-Centered Attribution *Victim-Blaming*	Mentioning of cognitive and motivational deficits in students	"She was very defiant, and it seemed like she was more apathetic than she was even before she had left. Like, I can only compare it to kids going to the juvenile detention center, getting hardened, and coming back and saying, 'Oh I don't really care that much'… It seemed like she had been battle hardened…and the level of defiance was more nonchalant." – Teacher

Table 3

Participant Demographics

Student's Pseudonym	Grade During Transition Semester	Race	Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	Reason for Alternative School Assignment	Prior Retention	Number of Semesters at Alternative School
Isaiah	8	Black	Yes	Public intoxication	Yes	1
Jamey	8	Black	Yes	Referrals	No	4
Jonathan	9	White	Yes	Drug possession and use	Yes	4
Kendrick	9	Black	Yes	Referrals	Yes	Less than 1
Markesha	8	Black	Yes	Battery of school employee	Yes	Less than 1
Nalaria	9	Black	Yes	Battery of school employee	Yes	1
Paul	8	Black	Yes	Referrals	Yes	1.5
Shaunika	8	Black	Yes	Referrals	No	1
Tenisha	8	Black	Yes	Referrals	Yes	2

Phoenix. Student participants described other students at Phoenix as having behavior more severe than their own. The students appeared to separate themselves from their peers at Phoenix by describing their peers in terms of internal deficits and themselves in terms of growth, maturity, and motivation to succeed. Shaunika described her peers at Phoenix as "trash and ghetto," while Jonathan chose the term "bad-natured," and Nalaria and Kendrick accused them of being involved with "violence or drugs." Kendrick described Phoenix and its students negatively, stating, "It makes some kids even worse. Kids were going to jail every day for fighting and stuff. It's a bad school. A lot of kids fail the classes and stuff." Though our student participants separated themselves from the majority of others they viewed as bad, they nevertheless appeared to have internalized views of themselves that were similar to those of their educators, using language that mirrored educators' descriptions of them.

Person-centered deficit-thinking attributions were especially potent for educators at comprehensive schools who were forced to reconcile their opinions of students returning from Phoenix with educators' prior experiences with the students. Ms. Franz, Markesha's reading teacher at her comprehensive school, described Markesha upon reentry as "apathetic," "battle hardened," and exhibiting a "level of defiance" that was "more non-chalant . . . like a natural way of being" in comparison to what she perceived as Markesha's softer, yet still problematic, disposition before being sent to Phoenix. Ms. Franz used her prior knowledge of Markesha before her time at Phoenix to validate this perception of Markesha's reintegration into the classroom as difficult. Ms. Franz acknowledged that she held a negative view of Markesha before she left and stated that this perception had only increased since Markesha's return to the comprehensive school. This teacher blamed Markesha for what she interpreted as her increasingly uncooperative and disobedient attitude, viewing her character as adversely altered as a result of her Phoenix placement.

While Markesha admitted to having difficulties with this teacher in particular, her reasons for her behavior were incongruent with Ms. Franz's perception of Markesha's situation. Markesha attributed her misbehavior to a sense of despair over her academic concerns, whereas Ms. Franz viewed Markesha's "own choices" as the root of her behavioral issues. Through these descriptions, Ms. Franz downplayed her own responsibility for Markesha's academic and behavioral struggles, citing Markesha's perceived poor attitude as the deciding factor in her educational outcomes. Ms. Franz stated, "I wash my hands of it. You're going to make your own choices . . . she kept on bringing the attitude. And I cannot take that."

Cultural and accumulated environmental deficits. Educators at both types of schools reported negative attitudes toward students' families or home lives and interpreted a perceived lack of parental involvement, poor parent modeling at home, or parents' presumed devaluation of education as being responsible for students' academic and behavioral failures. For example, Isaiah's math teacher at his comprehensive school stated, "If you don't have parents who value education, you don't either, and you just kind of go through the motions until you're 16." The math teacher at Phoenix echoed this sentiment:

> With this population, it's really bigger than the school system, so many variables outside in the community, in the homes. There's all kinds of things, as you know. We can't fix that. And that's where they are most of the time. You know, they don't have the parental support, many of them, not all. You have poverty. You have drug [abuse].

Educators expressed deficit-oriented statements that reflected their feelings of frustration toward parents who were perceived as not instilling appropriate values. Educators saw parents as not doing what needed to be done to ensure the success of their children and often blamed parents for the child's perceived deficits. In addition to blaming parents, educators saw students' friends, neighborhoods, and personal situations as responsible for students' failures. Educators frequently invoked the limitations of their jobs in effecting positive change for students due to what they described as years of accumulated deficits. As the assistant principal at Isaiah's comprehensive school stated:

> The challenge for changing kids' behavior after 12 years of growing up in an environment where you can't do it is so hard, and it's so demoralizing over time that [as an educator, you're] ready to get out of here because you don't feel like you're being effective.

Such statements acknowledge the powerful effect of systemic influences like poverty on student outcomes but stop short of providing an educator-focused solution that could be used to respond to the child's personal circumstances. Instead, these statements cast the child's experiences, family, and community as negative challenges to be overcome rather than assets to be embraced and built upon.

Pseudoscience and educability. Educators also made statements that interpreted students' poor performance or lack of responsiveness to interventions as indicators of inherent deficits that would merit school removal. In such reports, educators shared that anecdotal notes, documentation of intervention team meetings, number of referrals, standardized test scores, and grades were used to justify and support the removal of students from school and the recommendation to Phoenix as an appropriate placement. One administrator described her interpretation of Phoenix as the "third tier" in a Response to Intervention (RtI) model, viewing Phoenix not as the punishment for which it had earned a reputation but as another level of inter-

vention similar to individualized services. She continued by reiterating the importance of having data to support placement decisions, stating, "You know, I have the documentation to back that up," though such documentation tended to be subjective in nature and lacking validity and reliability. District-level administrators accepted these data as evidence of students' deficits and justification for their removal without scrutinizing the fidelity or depth of school-based interventions that educators said they had used prior to recommending removal.

While acknowledging the need for other solutions, educators with deficit-oriented perspectives framed additional exclusionary disciplinary strategies as the remedy for students' misbehavior. After her return to a comprehensive school, Tenisha's history teacher stated, "Sometimes you get into just giving the referrals. And, that's all I feel like I can do . . . so, you know, sometimes, for the greater good, these kids get sent out." Nalaria's math teacher at her comprehensive school shared a similar experience with a sense of resignation regarding using office disciplinary referrals to avoid contact with Nalaria:

> I've even written her a couple of referrals for different things, and um, what has worked now is sort of like a 'I don't bother you, you don't bother me' sort of approach, which I know isn't the best . . . but if she's doing her work, and is quiet overall, that's a lot from her.

This teacher uses office referrals and a hands-off approach to reach a détente with Nalaria in which the teacher forgoes interactions with her, both disciplinary and academic, in exchange for Nalaria's silence. Educators' student-centered explanations for school failure limited culpability to the students' personal circumstances and did not account for the role educators or the school could play in ensuring students' success.

Institutional and Educator-Centered Barriers to Success

Oppression. Educators readily identified societal or institutional concerns that they viewed as oppressive and detrimental to students' progress. Educators frequently interpreted these policies and practices as being outside their sphere of influence or control and beyond the scope of their work due to the constraints of their jobs. These included concerns about their ability to educate effectively given the highly prescribed nature of pacing charts and assessments; systems that encouraged tracking, the use of remedial courses, and frequent retentions; and insufficient resources to implement the interventions and programs that would be most helpful for students. Some educators also directly discussed racism and poverty as powerful factors that influenced students' outcomes. For example, the math teacher at Phoenix stated, "I am concerned about the disproportionate number of Black males that come here." when asked how she accounted for the disproportionality, she responded, "Racism in this country. . . Black males aren't advancing the way they need to." Having two Black sons herself, this participant spoke from a personal per-

spective about the constraining role of racism in the lives of Black boys, but she did not see herself or her teaching as powerful challengers of these barriers. Instead, she attributed students' failures to their individual choices, contributing to existing oppressive structures with her own deficit thinking.

Student views on oppression. Students, however, identified oppression in the statements and actions of their educators as well as in the norms reflected by society. Students noted ways in which educators exercised their power over students, both at their comprehensive schools and at Phoenix. Shaunika reported liking all of her teachers "except for . . . [one] because she gets power happy. I don't like that." Shaunika reported that this teacher frequently gave referrals to "select people that she doesn't really like." Shaunika perceived that this teacher had preconceived ideas about some students that allowed her to treat them differently than others. Some students described experiencing similar discrimination by being assigned to Phoenix, which Isaiah described as being "like a jail with a fence around it." This perception led to a sense of despondency that transformed into a desire to leave Phoenix. He reported, "[You feel] like a prisoner when you go through the gates. If you feel like a prisoner long enough, you're eventually going to do something to get out of there." Kendrick echoed this description, stating:

> At Phoenix, it . . . looked like a jail, with a courtyard and the rooms look like cells and there were cameras in the classrooms. Sometimes I felt like I'm in jail. You gotta keep your shirt tucked in, wear two colors, wear belts. I saw people going to jail every day, like I was with criminals . . . I had to watch my back so I just stayed to myself.

Here, Kendrick and Isaiah described Phoenix as an oppressive environment in which they felt powerless, lacked privacy, and were constantly in danger. Similar recollections from other students emphasized the behavioral rules in place at Phoenix, its strict dress code, and the level of security and surveillance that characterized Phoenix's atmosphere.

Students also reported ways in which larger systems beyond the educators' and individual schools' actions prevented them from being successful. Several students had juvenile court records for minor offenses that they believed shaped their life chances. One 16-year-old student, Jonathan, reported that he was turned down for jobs because of his preexisting record. Another, Paul, said he agreed to a plea bargain regarding charges of him hitting another student because "I would just be wasting my money if I knew I was going to get on probation for it anyways." Paul reported being innocent in this event but did not have the resources needed to challenge the accuser's statements. While he had access to a public defender, transportation to and from the courthouse from his rural home as well as time off work his mother would need in order to accompany him were obstacles to pleading innocent. Like other students at Phoenix, he reported that the public defender encouraged him to plead guilty so that he would not have to return to the courthouse for a trial. As a result, he resigned himself to the idea that he would be placed on probation regardless of the outcome and did not attempt to fight the charges. Behavior incidents at Phoenix led to such court involvement due to the permanent placement of two police officers at the school. Educators' deference to police to enforce school rules had long-term and far-reaching negative impacts on students' futures. Students' experiences reflected the national trend of having school infractions result in court involvement, especially for Black and Brown students (Texas Appleseed, 2010).

Students spoke more openly about the impact of race on their transition experiences than educators did, and several of them named race outright as an influential factor in their educational experiences. Tenisha reported feeling singled out in her history class at her comprehensive school in comparison to her peers. When asked why she felt this way, she responded, "Truly, because of my race." Kendrick echoed a similar interpretation of how racism shaped his experience with educators:

> Some White teachers are racist. The schools need to have at least half Black teachers and half White teachers. When I was in eighth grade, we had an intern. She said she voted for Mitt Romney, not Obama. She said she didn't want food stamps or people getting free money because we need the money. I didn't understand that part. We thought she didn't want a Black president. I was mad. I thought she was saying Black people were poor.

The cumulative enactment of educators' deficit perspectives seemed to shape and reinforce students' perceptions of the insidious and systemic ways that poverty and racism stymied students' opportunities for success.

Orthodoxy. Educators and students also identified practices and policies that impeded student success by serving to maintain tradition and preserve hierarchical structures. These practices relied on exclusionary discipline and the application of inflexible and punitive standards for student behavior. Orthodoxy-based deficit thinking was evident in educators' statements about what they viewed as appropriate teaching practices. For example, Jamey's teacher explained how Jamey was nearly suspended for wearing a hat, stating:

> Wearing a hat in the room where you know you got to take the hat off, he wouldn't do it. It was sort of like a fight. I mean, why do you want to fight over the little stuff . . . he'd come in the door. It was cold out there, warm in here, "Take your hat off . . . you know it's almost a suspension."

Students' accounts revealed that educators' punitive practices contributed to students' perceptions of disrespect from educators and may have impeded students' abilities to form meaningful relationships with adults at school.

Educators also identified ways in which the educational system forced them to comply with rules or regulations that were not helpful for students' academic and behavioral success. Guidance counselor Courage recalled being with Markesha when she learned that, because of her infraction, she would be ineligible for a credit-recovery program that she would have needed to attend in order to make up the year she was held back due to failing the state standardized test in third grade. Ms. Courage reported, "As soon as this happened, she was sitting in my assistant principal's office and it hit her. She realized, 'I just threw away [my chance to attend the program].' And she just broke down." Ms. Courage recounted actively trying to fight the decision by personally contacting the director of the program and pleading for consideration of Markesha's case. She appeared to be highly invested in Markesha's well-being and took it upon herself to help. Ms. Courage stated, " I didn't sleep for like a week after this because I was like, 'What could I have done differently?'" Despite Ms. Courage's significant efforts to challenge the deficit-oriented view of a Phoenix placement, the existing rules were imposed. In this example, orthodoxy's power stopped Markesha from attending the credit-recovery program, effectively altering her educational trajectory and preventing her from rejoining her age-level peers. Other educators' responses to Ms. Courage's attempts to reinstate Markesha reflect an unyielding rule-following that served to maintain the status quo rather than promote creativity or flexibility that could better support students.

Challenges to Deficit Thinking

In the example above, Ms. Courage's actions attempted to change an institutional structure because she believed that, given an opportunity and support, Markesha could succeed. She challenged deficit thinking in her actions, just as did other educators and students in some of their descriptions of themselves and the educational system. Students challenged deficit thinking when they displayed self-confidence, acknowledged their unique strengths, and set high expectations for their own futures. Jamey, Jonathan, and Paul attributed changes in themselves to a newfound sense of maturity; and Shaunika, Markesha, Nalaria, and Tenisha claimed success with learning how to cope with anger and frustration. However, these positive claims also reflected the assumption that the students were deficient, bad, or trouble to begin with. When challenging the deficit thinking that was imposed on them, students often referred to a contrast between their perceptions of self before and after Phoenix. Nalaria echoed this idea of a former, bad, and current, good, self: "In elementary, I used to have a bad attitude. And now that I grew up, my attitude changed and got more mature, and I learn how to hold my anger in basically." Students appeared to struggle with the internalization of labels of themselves as bad kids but attempted to resist these categorizations through beliefs in their own ability to change and grow.

Some educators struggled with the deficit-oriented milieu within which they operated and resisted its influence through statements that focused on student success.

Educators' statements that challenged deficit thinking reframed student missteps by considering the influence of the social context and explored ways in which the educators themselves could be more effective instead of placing the onus for educational success entirely on the students. For example, in the midst of a deficit-filled description of students at Phoenix who had excessive absences and multiple retentions, one Phoenix educator stated: "That's an opportunity for us to try to keep them hanging on, and try to find some successes, and maybe get them reinterested in school enough to keep it moving." These glimpses of resistance showed educators trying to "do a better job of understanding" students, as advocated by a Phoenix administrator, and moving beyond their views of students as deficient.

However, it was difficult for most educators to reconcile their deficit perspectives with their desires to help kids. For example, immediately after a discussion of the need to "salvage" students who have "high referrals . . . absenteeism . . . truancy," one administrator at Kendrick's school asked, "Are we offering them what we need to offer them? Do we need to change this? Do we need to change that? Because the idea is for everyone to graduate." This conflict between embracing and challenging deficit thinking exemplified the ways in which educators grappled with deficit-oriented perceptions of students and their own desires to be effective educators. The conflict between maintaining deficit perspectives and taking responsibility for the success of all students caused consternation for our most conscientious participants while others seemed to accept the blaming of students for their own plights.

Discussion

Abundant evidence of deficit thinking emerged in participants' descriptions of individuals who were sent to Phoenix and educators' conceptualizations of what Phoenix was like. Participants primarily attributed students' challenges to their school problems or individual character. To support deficit-oriented views of students' personhoods, educators relied on subjective data, the prior failure of poorly implemented educational interventions, and judgments about students' family structures and values. Educators used these factors as evidence to suggest that students' failures were beyond the control of the educational system and outside the purview of their jobs. The students themselves had deficit-oriented views of their own characters and the characters of other Phoenix students combined with meritocratic views of the individual factors that allowed them to exit Phoenix.

Educators' and students' promotion of individual responsibility for success has roots in the dominant American ideological paradigm of individualism and meritocracy (Clycq, Nouwen, & Vandenbroucke, 2014; Milner, 2010). Children learn that hard work will be rewarded and that misfortune or failure is a result of poor choices or a lack of hard work. This paradigm does not recognize that individuals neither begin their journeys on equal footing nor have similar affordances to maximize their resources and opportunities (Gibson, 2015). The insidious myth of

meritocracy fuels educators' deficit perspectives of students and families that do not attain social and educational success, justifying educators' blame of those individuals (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Milner, 2010). However, Ladson-Billings (2006) points our attention toward focusing instead on the "education debt" that has disadvantaged students of color and those living in poverty, suggesting the need for a radical commitment to closing the opportunity gap by addressing systemic disadvantages and constraints.

Students and educators identified instances of oppression and orthodoxy, which pointed toward the role of the educational system or other systemic causes for students' struggles. These obstacles were difficult to overcome due to the entrenched nature of their consequences, and educators either reinforced or found themselves struggling against the hegemonic systems within which they operated. The system seemed to grind forward with student exclusion as the only viable response to students' challenging behaviors. Deciding to handle students' behavioral infractions within classrooms and schools not only posed an ideological challenge to educators, but also practical and logistical ones. Educators neither knew of alternatives that they could effectively use nor had the time or resources to use them. The increased pressure on educators to improve students' test scores and to keep up with the pacing guide in the age of accountability and "value-added" teacher evaluations have precluded adequate attention being given to the development of inclusive, developmentally appropriate discipline strategies (Advancement Project, 2010). Instead, students who challenge educators have been increasingly excluded from school and placed in the school-to-prison pipeline (Dignity in Schools Campaign, 2015).

Implications: Integrating Theory and Practice

In this study, educators and students sometimes challenged the internalized messages communicated through exclusionary discipline by recognizing institutional practices, educator-centered actions, or personal beliefs that could mitigate the effects of pervasive deficit views. However, they simultaneously struggled with deficit-oriented perspectives that served as a constant barrier to making positive change, and they had little impact on systemwide policies and practices. Nevertheless, teachers can have significant direct impact on the students they teach, and positive relationships between teachers and students of color continually appears as one of the most significant indicators of student engagement and achievement (Toshalis, 2015). Findings from this study echo those of other studies that have found that both preservice and in-service teachers are underprepared to build and maintain positive relationships with Black and Brown students as well as to view and to use students' cultural backgrounds as assets and foundations upon which to build an engaging curriculum (Gregory & Mosely, 2004; Milner, 2010; Walker, 2011). The professional development of both pre- and in-service teachers should continue to focus on challenging candidates' deficit perspectives of Black and Brown students and those from low-income backgrounds (Ulucci & Howard, 2015). Developing teacher education programs and professional development experiences that require participants to be deeply embedded in students' communities, and that couple those experiences with critical reflection and debriefing that effectively challenge participants' assumptions, could significantly contribute to reducing educators' deficit perspectives (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Cooper, 2007; LaDuke, 2009; Lesko & Bloom, 1998; Ulucci & Howard, 2015; Walker, 2011).

Gregory and Mosely (2004) propose the use of a culturally relevant discipline (CRD) framework to guide these efforts. This framework contextualizes individual teacher beliefs within broader social and institutional forces that influence deficit perspectives and lead to the discipline gap. Findings from this study support the dual focus on teachers' individual perspectives as well as on the school, district, and larger social forces that reinforce deficit thinking and negatively impact student outcomes. Despite the many negative impacts of the accountability movement in education, its focus on the achievement of subgroups of students has positively fueled efforts to address achievement gaps (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). Skrla and Scheurich (2001) assert that this focus provides an opportunity for school and district administrators to reevaluate their own deficit perspectives. Skrla and Scheurich's research reinforces education reform literature that asserts that strategic, districtwide implementation that contains both "bottom-up" and "top-down" approaches could yield the most promise for sustained change within districts and schools (Fullan, 1994; Osher, Poirier, Jarjourn, & Brown, 2015). Such efforts should focus on educators' beliefs, the development of deep knowledge of students' cultural and personal lives, and the development of empathy (Hambacher & Thompson, 2015; Okonofua, Paunesku, & Walton, 2016; Osher et al., 2015).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study occurred in one district, allowing us to gain nuanced understandings of the relationships between educators at Phoenix and those at comprehensive schools as well as how the system functioned. The context-dependent nature of the findings allows readers to determine the appropriate transferability of findings to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and to make naturalistic generalizations (Stake & Trumbull, 1982) but does not allow for the generalizability across contexts. Future research could address this study's limited sample and explore policies and interventions aimed at changing educators' deficit-oriented perspectives of challenging students. Additional studies of alternative schools and disciplinary exclusion could provide a broader picture of the state of the field.

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