Unlearning Deficit Ideology and the Scornful Gaze:
Thoughts on Authenticating the Class Discourse in Education

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It is popular in the education milieu today to talk about the dangers of assuming a *deficit perspective*, approaching students based upon our perceptions of their weaknesses rather than their strengths. Such a perspective deteriorates expectations for students and weakens educators' abilities to recognize giftedness in its various forms (Ford & Grantham, 2003). The most devastating brand of this sort of deficit thinking emerges when we mistake *difference*—particularly difference from ourselves—for *deficit*. If one concentrates best while sitting still it may be difficult to imagine that somebody else—a student or colleague, perhaps—concentrates more effectively while pacing or tapping a pencil. Similarly, if one always has lived among people who speak a certain language variation, such as what people commonly refer to as "standard English," she or he might mistake somebody's use of a different variation, such as the Appalachian variety spoken by my grandmother, as an indication of intellectual inferiority or, worse, deviance (Collins, 1988).

Over the past ten or so years a critical discourse challenging the deficit perspective has emerged among educators. Some insist that "every student is gifted and talented." Others urge us to "find the gift in every child"; to "focus on student strengths." Unfortunately, like many discourses in the education milieu, the one surrounding the deficit perspective occurs largely outside of what Nieto and Bode (2008) call the *sociopolitical context* of schooling, "the unexamined ideologies and myths that shape commonly accepted ideas and values in a society" (p. 7). So while this discourse involving deficit perspective focuses on individual attitudes and biases, it rarely addresses the ideologies or conditions which underlie and perpetuate the deficit perspective.

Like most repressive dispositions, the deficit perspective is a symptom of larger sociopolitical conditions and ideologies borne out of complex socialization processes. We no more can quash the deficit perspective without acknowledging, examining, and quashing these processes than we can eliminate racism without comprehending and battling white supremacist ideology. Otherwise we are dealing merely with symptoms, as we do when we attempt to redress racism with programs that

celebrate diversity but ignore systemic racism or when we respond to class inequities by studying a fictitious "cultural of poverty" rather than attacking, or at least understanding the educational implications of, the sociopolitical context of economic injustice.

The ideology underlying the deficit perspective has been described as "deficit theory" (Collins, 1988; Dudley-Marling, 2007; Gorski, 2008a), "deficit ideology" (Sleeter, 2004), and "deficit thinking" (Ford & Grantham, 2003; Pearl, 1997; Valencia, 1997; Yosso, 2005). I have chosen to use the term "deficit ideology" in this chapter in order to emphasize that it is, in fact, an ideology, based upon a set of assumed truths about the world and the sociopolitical relationships that occur in it. Despite variations in terminology, scholars who have studied deficit ideology similarly refer to something deeper than individual assumptions and dispositions. They describe an institutionalized worldview, an ideology woven into the fabric of U.S. society and its socializing institutions, including schools. They describe an ideology *which shapes individual assumptions and dispositions* in order to encourage compliance with an oppressive educational and social order. As Sleeter (2004) explains, "the long-standing deficit ideology still runs rampant in many schools…despite the abstraction that 'all children can learn'" (p. 133).

Briefly, deficit ideology is a worldview that explains and justifies outcome inequalities—standardized test scores or levels of educational attainment, for example—by pointing to supposed deficiencies within disenfranchised individuals and communities (Brandon, 2003; Valencia, 1997a; Weiner, 2003; Yosso, 2005). Simultaneously, and of equal importance, deficit ideology discounts sociopolitical context, such as the systemic conditions (racism, economic injustice, and so on) that grant some people greater social, political, and economic access, such as that to high-quality schooling, than others (Brandon, 2003; Dudley-Marling, 2007; Gorski, 2008a; Hamovitch, 1996). The function of deficit ideology, as I will describe in greater detail later, is to justify existing social conditions by identifying the problem of inequality as *located within*, rather than as *pressing upon*, disenfranchised communities so

that efforts to redress inequalities focus on "fixing" disenfranchised people rather than the conditions which disenfranchise them (Weiner, 2003; Yosso, 2005).

Dudley-Marling (2007) has warned of a recent resurgence of deficit ideology in the U.S., particularly visible in discourses related to low-income people's access to public services such as high-quality education, welfare, and healthcare. In the case of education, the class discourse tends to focus on outcomes in educational "achievement," and more specifically on how to "close" achievement gaps between low-income students and their wealthier peers; a framing which is, itself, a symptom of deficit ideology (as I will explain later). It is my intention here to describe the nature of this current wave of class-based deficit ideology, the ways in which it has come to dominate today's discourses on the education of low-income people, and the consequences thereof. In the process of doing so I hypothesize a process by which people in the U.S., including teachers, are socialized to comply with deficit ideology. I then discuss ways to "spot" and interrupt class-based deficit ideology in educational contexts.

Conceptualizing Deficit Ideology

Deficit ideology is a remnant of imperial history (Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005), a mechanism for socializing citizens to comply with a host of oppressions, from colonization to enslavement, educational inequities to unjust housing practices. In the most basic terms, deficit ideology can be understood as a sort of "blame the victim" mentality applied, not to an individual person, but systemically, to an entire group of people, often based upon a single dimension of identity. At the core of deficit ideology is the belief that inequalities result, not from unjust social conditions such as systemic racism or economic injustice, but from intellectual, moral, cultural, and behavioral deficiencies assumed to be inherent in disenfranchised individuals and communities (Brandon, 2003; Gorski, 2008a, 2008b; Valencia, 1997a; Yosso, 2005). The deficit ideologue justifies this belief by drawing on stereotypes already well-established in the mainstream psyche—stereotypes which paint disenfranchised

communities as intellectually, morally, and culturally deficient or deviant (Villenas, 2001; Weiner, 2003).

Why are poor people poor? They're lazy. They don't care about education. They're substance abusers…

These stereotypes, however untrue—and, as we will see, considerable amounts of research clarify that

people in poverty are not, in fact, lazier, less likely to value education, or more likely to be substance

abusers than their wealthier counterparts—are the deficit ideologue's ammunition. She or he uses

them, in a process Rank (2004) calls "labeling," to draw a clear us/them distinction. Apple (2006)

explains,

> We are law-abiding, hardworking, decent, and virtuous. 'They'—usually poor people and
>
> immigrants—are very different. They are lazy, immoral, and permissive. These binary
>
> oppositions act to exclude indigenous people, women, the poor, and others from the
>
> community of worthy individuals. (p. 22)

This sort of binary encourages all people, including those who otherwise might identify strongly with the

"they," to associate with the "we," particularly upon witnessing the consequences of not doing so. It

becomes easier, then, to train the mass consciousness to pathologize disenfranchised communities—to,

in effect, blame them for their own disenfranchisement. Once that scornful gaze down the power

hierarchy is in place, so is established the justification for maintaining existing social, political, and

economic conditions, such as gross inequities in access to healthcare or educational opportunity, or the

waning of social programs and supports for disenfranchised communities. After all, if poor communities

are to blame for their own poverty, they are more easily painted as being unworthy or undeserving of a

fair shake (Apple, 2006).

Consider, for example, the stereotype that low-income families do not value education. This

stereotype often is propagated within school walls, not by educators who intend to act unjustly, but by

those who have been socialized by the deficit hegemony to buy into and perpetuate it (Yosso, 2005).

Rarely have I participated with a roomful of educators in a conversation about class and poverty in

schools without observing multiple and impassioned attempts to frame the conversation primarily, if not completely, in reference to low-income families' supposed disinterest in, lack of motivation for, and disengagement from their children's education. We must recognize, first of all, that this stereotype is fallacious. Studies have shown since the late 1970s that low-income families have the same attitudes about the value of education as their wealthier counterparts (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Leichter, 1978). But we must recognize, as well, that facts and evidence are of little mitigating consequence against mass perception. Once the justifying stereotype is socialized into the mainstream consciousness, the foundation for mass compliance is set.

Mass compliance with deficit ideology can be witnessed most clearly, perhaps, in the way we, in education, have responded to the "problem" of the "socioeconomic achievement gap." We comply by employing a deficit perspective and, as a result, demonstrating low expectations of low-income students (Sleeter, 2004). We comply by locating the problem of the socioeconomic achievement gap within low-income families and communities (Ladson-Billings, 2006). We comply by demonizing the most powerless people among us (Weiner, 2003)—*those people don't care about education!* And, as a result, we comply by attempting to redress the socioeconomic achievement gap by offering parenting classes and mentors to low-income families and students, measures that assume the chief problems to be what low-income communities lack, rather than by understanding and addressing the larger sociopolitical context of class inequity in the U.S. and its schools (Lipman, 2008; Weiner, 2003; Yosso, 2005). And this is the surest sign of deficit ideology: the suggestion that we fix inequalities by fixing disenfranchised communities rather than that which disenfranchises them.

This, then, is the *function* of deficit ideology: to manipulate popular consciousness in order to deflect attention from the systemic conditions and sociopolitical context that underlie or exacerbate inequities, such as systemic racism or economic injustice, and to focus it, instead, on recycling its own misperceptions, all of which justify inequalities (García & Guerra, 2004; Jennings, 2004). It deflects our

scornful gaze from the mechanisms of injustice and the benefactors of these mechanisms, and trains it, instead, on those citizens with the least amount of power to popularize a counter-narrative, just as the dominant "achievement gap" discourse draws attention away from underlying systemic conditions, such as growing corporate control of public schools, and pushes it toward "at-risk" youth from "broken" homes whose "culture of poverty" impedes them from "making it." Deficit ideology defines every social problem in relation to those toward the bottom of the power hierarchy, trains our gaze in that direction and, as a result, manipulates the popular discourse in ways that protect and reify existing sociopolitical conditions (Brandon, 2003; Yosso, 2005).

This phenomenon is not new in the U.S. Slavery, American Indian genocide, Jim Crow: these and countless other atrocities have been perpetuated against people through a similar socializing process. Writing about one popular target of deficit ideology in the U.S., Jennings (2004) explains,

> Dominant imagery depicts single mothers on welfare as women who lack an 'appropriate' orientation to the Protestant work ethic and to mainstream family values. Consequently, reform discourse emphasizes resocialization; it encourages the formation of programs that aim to inculcate an 'appropriate' (read White, middle class, heterosexual) orientation to work and family. (p. 114)

Similarly, a litany of atrocities within the education milieu, from the withering away of bilingual education to inequitable school funding, have been aided by deficit socialization processes that frame the least powerful communities as deficient and, as a result, undeserving of equal opportunity. Brantlinger's (2003) study of middle class attitudes toward educational equity illustrated this point. She found that middle class parents supported equitable educational access in theory, but that almost universally they retracted their support when faced with the possibility of resources being redistributed out of their children's schools and into those of lower-income communities. Her study raised important questions about the sorts of cognitive tensions people experience when their worldviews are informed

by conflicting value systems and socializations. But it also demonstrated how deficit ideology can be a strategic wedge or buffer protecting the economic elite: it encourages the middle class to see poor and working class people as threats to the meager levels of access they have been granted, despite the fact that their lot is much more similar to that of poor and working class people than to that of wealthy people. As a result, as Kivel (2006) explains, the middle class and even the working class, scornful gazes trained down the wealth hierarchy, in effect police compliance with the corporatocracy by keeping each other and the poor in line with, among other behavior management tools, the threat of the "them" label, evident in the "othering" power of brands like "socialist" or "communist." Unfortunately, as long as these sorts of deficit discourses dominate conversations about class and poverty, so will dominate the notion that we "fix" problems like poverty by "fixing" those most devastated by them (Villenas, 2001). And so long as we apply our resources and energies in this manner, we ignore the sociopolitical conditions that underlie poverty and its implications in and out of schools: the scarcity of living wage jobs, the scarcity of access to quality health care, and so on.

Complicating matters, schools, as the common refrain goes, are only microcosms of the larger society. They are micro-contexts into which individuals and groups carry their socializations, behaving accordingly. The false stereotype that low-income families do not value education can be seen, then, as a symptom of broader social conditioning to which current and future educators are susceptible. For example, the insinuations of laziness and irresponsibility underlying the stereotype that low-income people do not value education is propagated commonly by policy-makers who want to pinpoint the "problem" of class inequities *outside* of the systems they control and the larger sociopolitical conditions that have facilitated their own ascents to power. So although Berliner (2006) and others have argued rightly that we cannot assign schools the full responsibility for undoing systemic economic injustices such as the scarcity of living wage jobs or growing corporate influence on schools, a task for which they are neither intended nor equipped, these conditions are integral to the socializing processes of current

and future educators and the experiences of students and their families. And, as Berliner (2006)

demonstrated, they substantially influence educational outcomes. So we cannot engage low-income and

working class families equitably if we do not at least understand that these families are coming to us, in

part, through the repression of this sociopolitical context. Nor can we identify and institutionalize

effective strategies for dealing with the symptoms of these inequities which *are* in the purview of

schools and their practitioners—low expectations, disproportionality, formulations of family

involvement in ways that are not accessible to many low-income families—if we do not understand the

ideologies and conditions that bare these symptoms. Deficit ideology quiets this discourse and

discourages this deeper understanding (Brandon, 2003; Valencia, 1997a), an additional layer of

repression leveled against the dispossessed.

Breeding Deficit Ideology: Layers of Socialization

Unfortunately, the class discourse in the U.S. education milieu, like that in the larger U.S.

society, reflects the capitalist and consumerist hegemony through which educators, like everybody else,

are socialized. In other words—and this is a critical point—I am not referring here to purposefully

repressive educators acting in purposefully oppressive ways. Instead, I am referring to a socializing

process that conditions educators (as well as education scholars), like everybody else, to buy into certain

myths and stereotypes that inform educational philosophies and practices, but which also inform

individuals' and communities' levels of commitment to, and willingness to struggle for, social,

economic, and educational justice for low-income and other disenfranchised people.

Certainly counter-discourses exist, both in the larger theoretical landscape (Blaney &

Inayatullah, 2009; Chomsky, 2003; Gans, 1995; hooks, 2000; Klein, 2008) and in the education milieu

(Books, 2004; Gabbard, 2003; Giroux, 2008; Kozol, 1992). However, as mentioned earlier, these

discourses continue largely to be marginalized as anti-American, socialist, or communist, the conflation

of which is, in and of itself, a product of capitalist hegemony and the deficit paradigm employed to help

protect it. Enforcement of this hegemony and socialization for compliance with the deficit paradigm

begin at birth, after all—a process powerfully detailed, in part, in *Consuming Kids*, Adriana Barbaro's

(2008) film about the increasing commercialization of childhood in the U.S.

These conditions, like any sociopolitical context, present formidable challenges to those who are

attempting to offer or engage with counter-discourses, including critically-oriented teachers, teacher

educators, and staff development specialists. One function of class hegemony is to ensure constant self-

reproduction so that its outcomes—socialization for compliance with itself, for example—are mistaken

as organic and natural rather than purposeful and manipulative.

My examination over the past several years of the origins and implications of deficit discourses

in education (see Gorski, 2009, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2006) and my review of others' critical

contributions on this topic (Collins, 1988; Dudley-Marling, 2007; Gans, 1995; Garcia & Guerra, 2004;

Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pearl, 1997; Sleeter, 2004; Valencia, 1997; Yosso, 2005) have led me to

understand this process of socialization for complicity with economic injustice, deficit ideology at its

core, as a two-dimension process of social conditioning and compliance enforcement, each dimension

informing and providing support for the other. This process, depicted in Figure 1, prepares individuals to

comply with the dominant discourse—the *deficit* discourse—on class and poverty in education and the

larger society. But it also prepares us to enforce compliance by marginalizing counter-discourses.
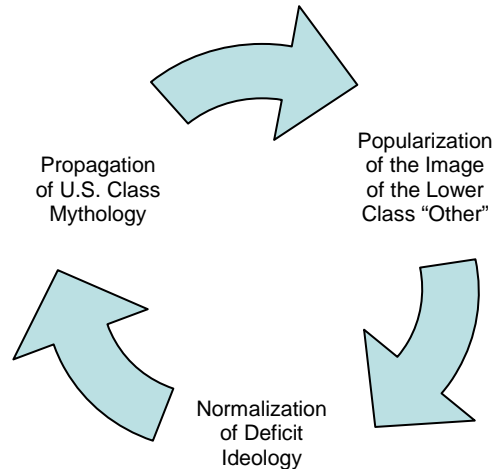
Figure 1. Cycle of social conditioning for compliance with deficit ideology.

Propagation of the U.S. Class Mythology

The base layer of socialization for compliance with deficit ideology is the propagation of a complex class mythology that frames the U.S. as a meritocratic land of opportunity while simultaneously reifying the popular conception of a deficient, undeserving underclass (Gans, 1995). The popular discourse about the U.S. opportunity structure, grounded firmly in notions of rugged individualism, the Protestant ethic of hard work and sacrifice, the conflation of democracy and capitalism, and an imaginary level playing field of meritocracy remains dominant even as wealth inequality increases— even as the wealth inequality in the U.S. exceeds that of most every other "advanced democracy."

An implication of the propagation of this mythology in education can be observed in the growing sense of urgency, even among many people ostensibly committed to educational equity and social justice, to "close" an "achievement gap" measured almost exclusively by standardized test scores while a grossly un-standardized educational *opportunity structure* receives considerably less attention. An implicit assumption underlying this discourse appears to be that the opportunity structure is relatively solid, that the playing field is relatively level, that the system is relatively equitable (Yosso, 2005). Otherwise, a problem like the "achievement gap" would be seen as precisely what it is: an outcome, *and*

only one of many outcomes, of economic injustice—a symptom of gross inequities, of a playing field that is, in Kozol's (1992) language, "savagely" un-level.

High-poverty schools are more likely than low-poverty schools to have inadequate facilities, insufficient materials, substantial numbers of teachers teaching outside their licensure areas, multiple teacher vacancies, inoperative bathrooms, and vermin infestation (National Commission on Teaching America's Future [NCTAF], 2004). Studies point to less rigorous curricula (Barton, 2004), fewer experienced teachers (Barton, 2004; Rank, 2004), higher student-to-teacher ratios (Barton, 2003), larger class sizes (Barton, 2003), and lower funding (Carey, 2005) in high-poverty schools than in their low-poverty counterparts. The NCTAF (2004) concludes,

> The evidence . . . proves beyond any shadow of a doubt that children at risk, who come from families with poorer economic backgrounds, are not being given an opportunity to learn that is equal to that offered to children from the most privileged families. The obvious cause of this inequality lies in the finding that the most disadvantaged children attend schools that do not have basic facilities and conditions conducive to providing them with a quality education. (p. 7)

Broaden the view, and the picture is even bleaker. Low-income people bare the brunt of almost every imaginable social ill in the U.S. (Books, 2004): limited access to healthcare, to safe and affordable housing, to living wage work, to clean air and water. But how often are conversations about the economic achievement gap informed, for example, by data on access to prenatal care? How often do these discourses consider the percentages of jobs that pay a living wage in neighborhoods feeding into a particular school district? Wouldn't these sorts of concerns be evident, if not central, if the popular class discourse in education did not assume the existence of a meritocratic playing field?

But again, the reality of a savagely un-level playing field means little to a popular consciousness molded to hold the notion of meritocracy as a defining tenet of the U.S. and its education system. And so critical to grasping this layer of socialization for compliance with deficit ideology is understanding

that, in order to buy into this class mythology—in fact, in order to be seen as a "real" American—I need to ignore, or be wholly miseducated about, sociopolitical context. And this, precisely, is the groundwork laid by the propagation of the U.S. class mythology.

Popularization of a Stereotyped Image of the Lower Class "Other"

Making matters worse, the imposition upon mainstream consciousness of a structural class mythology—the solidification of this sort of class hegemony—happens simultaneously with that of an equally inaccurate mythology that paints low-income communities (as well as communities of color, LGBTQ communities, communities for whom English is not a primary language, and other disenfranchised communities) as morally, culturally, and intellectually deficient. As a result, as sociopolitical context—economic injustice, racial injustice, and so on—fades into the backdrop of popular discourses on problems like the "achievement gap," those who are most disenfranchised by existing conditions and by the discourse itself are thrust into the spotlight, rendered indistinguishable from the problems themselves.

Consider this: Since the mid-1970s most people in the U.S. have believed that poverty is caused by insufficiencies or deficiencies among poor people (Feagin, 1975; Gilens, 1999; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001; Kluegel and Smith, 1986; Rank, Yoon, & Hirschl, 2003). For example, a 2001 Kaiser Family Foundation study revealed that a majority of people considered poverty to be a result of low-income people not doing enough to help themselves overcome poverty. People who made more than twice the poverty level ranked "drug abuse" and "a decline in moral values" as the most prominent causes of poverty. Furthermore, demonstrating the power of socialization, although a slightly smaller majority of low-income people believed that poverty resulted from a lack of effort among the poor to escape poverty, low-income respondents were *more likely* than their wealthier counterparts to identify "drug abuse," "poor people lacking motivation," and "a decline in moral values" as prominent causes of

poverty (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001). Take a step back, now, and consider that this was not always the case. Prior to the mid-1970s, the popular perception was that poverty resulted, not from deficiencies within low-income individuals and communities, but from social conditions and repression (Rank et al., 2003).

In order to understand the manufactured nature of this shift, we might recall the introduction to mainstream consciousness of a single deficit depiction of a disenfranchised community during the 1976 presidential primaries. During his unsuccessful campaign for Republican endorsement, Ronald Reagan often repeated the story of Linda Taylor, a woman from the south side of Chicago who defrauded the government out of roughly $8,000 in welfare claims by using four aliases. Again, the legitimacy and accuracy of Reagan's claims appear to have mattered little. He exaggerated considerably, suggesting that she had collected more than $150,000 and used more than 80 aliases, a mischaracterization uncovered immediately by *The Washington Star* ("'Welfare queen' becomes issue in Reagan campaign," 1976). The article concluded: "The 'welfare queen" item in Mr. Reagan's repertoire is one of several that seem to be at odds with the facts" (par. 12). Despite failing to survive past the Republican primary, Reagan left an indelible mark on the popular class and poverty discourse with the strategic and repeated use of "welfare queen." Reagan did not coin the term. But his habitual use of the idiom established it, with all of its insinuations, firmly in mainstream U.S. cultural and political lexicons (Gilliam, 1999), where it has remained for more than thirty years.

Broadening the sociopolitical context even further, it surely is no coincidence that Reagan used this strategy in the mid-1970s. Only fifteen years earlier Oscar Lewis (1961), one of the most prominent social scientists of his era, introduced the "culture of poverty" hypothesis, which he based on observational studies of small high-poverty Mexican and Puerto Rican communities. Lewis argued based on these studies that poor people shared a universally consistent, predictable set of values and behaviors: emphasis on the present and neglect of the future, violent tendencies, a lack of a sense of

history, and so on. Once again, the rigor and accuracy of Lewis's work, which initially was challenged empirically by social scientists in the early 1970s and largely dismissed by them shortly thereafter (Abell & Lyon, 1979; Billings, 1974; Harris, 1976; Van Til & Van Til, 1973; Villemez, 1980) as the product of unsupported extrapolation, seemed to be of negligible consequence. Despite the fact that Lewis identified strongly as a champion of the downtrodden and associated with the emerging progressive segment of the social science community (Ortiz & Briggs, 2003), his culture of poverty hypothesis was endorsed and employed over the next couple decades most vigorously by Reagan and other members of the right-wing establishment, including the mass media. They found the culture of poverty hypothesis a useful paradigm for encouraging support for, or at least discouraging resistance to, their goal of reversing a litany of progressive programs, such as social welfare programs, intended to shift modest amounts of resources from the elite to the poor. And it worked: by the mid-1970's, social scientists began identifying a shift in mainstream U.S. attitudes about the primary cause of poverty, from social conditions and repression to deficiencies within low-income communities (Rank et al., 2003).

By the late 1970s, as Reagan launched his successful campaign for president, his "welfare queen" terminology was established firmly in the mainstream lexicon and low-income people who collected welfare were being blamed for the very social ills that repressed them the harshest, from national deficits to urban decay. In pure deficit ideology form, this was especially true for low-income African-American single mothers, those with little power to popularize a counter-narrative to the increasingly-dominant, highly racialized and genderized, "welfare queen" one. As the political landscape has shifted increasingly rightward, U.S. politicians, whether Republican or Democrat, have engaged this narrative through three decades of "welfare reform," withering programs created, not to eliminate poverty, but merely to sustain people in poverty. In the process, these politicians, as well as the corporations which have funded both these sustenance programs and political campaigns, have been able to frame themselves as socially responsible saviors of the "undeserving" poor (Gans, 1995).

Again, the key to this process was in training the mainstream scornful gaze down, rather than up, the socioeconomic hierarchy by popularizing the "welfare queen" image—the surest way to avoid demands for substantial social change. In fact, policymakers on the political right today employ a related deficit tactic—the repeated use of the term "entitlement class" to refer to people benefitting from welfare programs in the U.S.—in order to turn the scornful gaze from those with, perhaps, the greatest entitlement complexes (including bailed-out banks and other corporations) and onto poor and working class people.

Like mass indoctrination with the U.S. class mythology, the implications of this "othering" of economically dispossessed people can be observed in educational chatter about the economic achievement gap "problem," which tends to point most vigorously to insufficiencies or deficiencies in the rearing and home lives of low-income students (Weiner, 2003; Yosso, 2005). *Their parents don't care about education. They're lazy and have weak work ethics. They have poor language skills because of language-deficient home lives.* Ladson-Billings (2006) has argued that this sort of chatter reflects the common fabrication of "them" that occurs constantly in education, where all variety of problems are attributed to the amorphous "culprit" of *those students'* "cultures" (p. 105), perhaps a reflection of the continued popularity of the "culture of poverty" concept. She explains,

> …culture is randomly and regularly used to explain everything. So at the same moment teacher education students learn nothing about culture, they use it with authority as one of the primary explanations for everything from school failure to problems with behavior management and discipline. (p. 104)

Once again, the fact that these assumptions of laziness, ambivalence about education, language deficiencies, and so on, are baseless—that research refutes virtually every common stereotype about poor people, including those that form the basis of the "culture of poverty" paradigm—appears to be of

little consequence against relentless socialization. In fact, in a previous examination of research on these stereotypes (Gorski, 2008b), I found that:

- There is no evidence that poor people have weaker work ethics than their wealthier counterparts. In fact, evidence suggests that socioeconomic status is no indicator of work ethic (Iversen & Farber, 1996; Wilson, 1997). The shortage of living-wage jobs necessitates that many low-income adults work multiple jobs. As a result, according to the Economic Policy Institute (2002), poor working adults spend more hours working each week on average than their wealthier counterparts.

- Studies have shown consistently that low-income parents possess the same attitudes about the value of education as their wealthier peers (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Leichter, 1978). While it is true that low-income parents are less likely to attend school functions or volunteer in their children's classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005), there is no indication that this is because they care less about education. In fact, they believe just as strongly in the value of education as wealthier parents despite the fact that opportunities for school involvement usually are structured in ways that are not accessible to people who are likely to work multiple jobs, to work evenings, to have jobs without paid leave, and to be unable to afford child care or public transportation if necessary.

- Drug use is distributed equally across socioeconomic brackets (Saxe, Kadushin, Tighe, Rindskopf, & Beveridge, 2001). Meanwhile, Chen, Sheth, Krejci, and Wallace (2003) found that alcohol use is significantly higher among upper middle class white high school students than poor black high school students. Overall, alcohol abuse is far more prevalent among wealthy people than among poor people (Diala, Muntaner, & Walrath, 2004; Galea, Ahern, Tracy, & Vlahov, 2007).

- Linguists have known for decades that all language varieties are highly structured with complex grammatical rules and syntaxes (Gee, 2004; Hess, 1974; Miller, Cho, & Bracey, 2005). What

often are assumed to be deficient varieties of English—varieties spoken by some poor people in

Appalachia, perhaps—are no less sophisticated than so-called "standard English."

Ruby Payne's (2005) decade-long dominance of the class and poverty discourse in education,

despite the inaccuracy of the culture of poverty paradigm and the many false stereotypes, like those

listed above, that her framework propagates, is another important symptom of this layer of socialization

(Dudley-Marling, 2007; Gorski, 2008a). Because several scholars recently have mined Payne's work in

great detail, uncovering its deficit bases (Bohn, 2007; Bomer et al., 2008; Dudley-Marling, 2007; Kunjufu,

2007; Ng & Rury, 2006; Osei-Kofi, 2005) and critically examining its "culture of poverty" grounding, and

because this book contains three chapters detailing these and other oppressive dimensions of Payne's

work, there is little need to reproduce those analyses here. But a cursory reading of most any of her

work reveals the ways in which the culture of poverty paradigm continues to be used to socialize

people—in this case, teachers—into deficit-laden misperceptions about poverty and low-income people.

For example, in one single-page essay Payne (2006) wrote in response to Hurricane Katrina, she

managed to support dominant U.S. class discourses by reifying several popular deficit stereotypes about

the economically repressed people most devastated by the hurricane. "The violence was to be

expected," she wrote. After all, "Words are not seen as being very effective in generational poverty to

resolve differences; fists are" (¶ 3). Poor people lack the "necessary language" (¶ 3) to communicate

effectively. In addition, she argued that in poor neighborhoods "prostitution and drugs" constitute "two

of the primary economic systems" (¶ 4). Meanwhile, in classic deficit ideology form, her essay contained

not a single reference to government inaction or mis-action before, during, or after the hurricane; not a

single note about ineffective communications regarding the hurricane and its aftermath among

government officials; not one mention of the horrid economic conditions—the scarcity of living wage

work, the lack of access to healthcare, and so on—that plagued low-income communities in and around

the affected region before Hurricane Katrina struck. And again, this silence on sociopolitical context,

married with the relentless reification of the lower class "other," reaffirms readers' perceptions that the "problem" to be fixed, that the deficiency to be remedied, exists within the disenfranchised community rather than in the conditions which disenfranchise the community. Howley, Howley, Howley, and Howley (2006) have shown that teachers trained using Payne's deficit model demonstrate a keen propensity for "othering"—for drawing a clear and deficit-drenched distinction between themselves and their low-income students—because Payne reaffirms their stereotypes; because she reifies class hegemony.

A telling symptom of this process of socialization lies in the most common response I receive from people raising questions about my own critiques of Payne's work (see Gorski, 2008a). Rarely is the content of my critique questioned. Instead, I am met most often with comments like, "Payne's model rings true for me. It reflects my experience with students in poverty." In this sense, Payne is, if nothing else, a brilliant businesswoman. Her work has joined a long history of educational programs, pedagogies, and practices which, however unsupported or contradicted by research, won popular approval because they spoke to a certain mass sensibility which, in and of itself, was the result of socialization. (Consider how a supposed loss of U.S. global competitiveness in math and science has been used, among other things, to justify standardization and high-stakes testing, neither of which have been shown to improve students' math or science competencies.)

Again, the scornful gaze is trained down the power hierarchy, at a fictional "them," where it poses no threat to existing inequities. As a result, the policies, programs, and practices engaged in order to redress educational problems focus, as well, down the power hierarchy, aimed at fixing the most disenfranchised students and families rather than that which disenfranchises them (Brandon, 2003; Weiner, 2003). Instead of addressing school funding discrepancies, we implement more standardization and testing. Rather than fighting for fair wage work for all families, we offer parenting workshops. Rather than insisting as an *educational imperative* that all students have equitable access to healthcare,

we offer tutoring and mentoring programs. Certainly this is not to say that we should not offer tutoring and mentoring programs for any students who need them, as long as we do not fall into the deficit-inspired "savior syndrome" or use "mentoring" as code language for "assimilating." But in the end, these programs and practices pose no threat to educational inequities, much less economic injustice. They simply sustain disenfranchised people within a disenfranchising system.

The implications are devastating for a variety of reasons. First, by complying with deficit ideology we contribute to the very stereotypes and repressions we ought to be eliminating. Secondly, by doing so we dutifully play the role of buffer class (Kivel, 2006), protecting elite class interests by shifting attention from systemic injustice and locating the sources of social problems as existing within economically disadvantaged communities. Thirdly, even if we do not imagine the destruction of injustice on a systemic scale as our purview, by failing to understand the sociopolitical ramifications of institutionalized racism, economic injustice, and other systemic conditions, we all but ensure our failure at facilitating and sustaining equity, even at the individual classroom level. After all, how can I facilitate and sustain an equitable classroom environment if I do not comprehend fully the very inequities I am attempting to unravel?

Defeating Deficit Ideology

How, then, might we encourage and facilitate this understanding in ourselves and others? How might we begin to see that which we are socialized not to see? Based upon my ongoing process of grappling with this topic and my own complicity with it, I have identified five strategies for defeating deficit ideology—for loosening its hold on educational discourses related to class and poverty.

The first step toward uprooting any ideology is in learning to "spot" it—a challenging task when it envelops us, when it has infested most every social and political discourse. Drawing on my experience uncovering deficit ideology in education discourses and a review of the literature on the topic, I have

located three common discursive hallmarks of socioeconomic-based deficit ideology: three discursive signs that alert me that deficit ideology is being employed in conversations about class and poverty in education. These include: (1) an unnamed assumption of shared stereotyped thinking (between author and reader, speaker and listener, and so on), (2) identification of the "problem" of inequality, or of poverty itself, as existing within working class and low-income families and their "cultures," and (3) failure *or refusal* to acknowledge sociopolitical context. In order to defeat deficit ideology, both in my own thinking and in those around me, I must learn to recognize these signs. Often they are appear implicitly in what has become common language in education: "at-risk," "remedial," "culturally deprived," "disadvantaged"—the very normalization of these idioms, the way they slide so easily off the tongues of many of us who count ourselves among equity advocates, demonstrates the hegemonic power of mass socialization. I must challenge this language and ask questions of the overall class discourse: How are issues like the socioeconomic achievement gap being framed in the context of professional development? How is the problem being defined? Do proposed solutions focus on remedying supposed deficiencies in poor and working class families? Are concerns regarding contextualizing factors, including systemic inequities and the ways those inequities are reflected in school policy and practice, suppressed or ignored? Posing these sorts of questions can help us make sense of class and poverty discourses in education and whether they show the signs of deficit ideology. But beyond mere recognition, I must be willing and able to name the limitations of these discourses and to offer a counter-narrative.

Secondly, I must reflect critically upon my own class socialization; on how and by whom my gaze has been trained. I must recognize that the very perception of something "ringing true" for me could be symptom of manipulative socialization—that my perceiving it is so does not make it so and might be the best evidence that it is not, in fact, so. How do I, intentionally and unintentionally, reify the myth of

meritocracy or stereotypes of low-income people in my educational practice? What assumptions or biases might keep me from demonstrating the highest possible expectations of all of my students?

Additionally, and in a similar vain, I must refuse, despite the dominant discourses, to locate any problem in the "cultures" of disenfranchised communities. Doing so is, in and of itself, a disenfranchising practice. But it is also the surest way to misdirect strategies for redressing inequities. For example, when we locate the "problem" of lower rates of family involvement among low-income families than their wealthier counterparts as existing within those families, we ignore critical sociopolitical context. We fail to ask very basic questions, such as whether opportunities for family involvement are even accessible to parents and guardians who are most likely to work multiple jobs, to work nights, to be unable to afford child care or public transportation, or to experience schools as hostile environments. When we fail to ask these questions, it becomes too easy to assume that we "fix" this problem by fixing low-income families rather than by addressing systemic inequities in access to opportunities for family involvement, much less the larger sociopolitical context of, for example, the scarcity jobs that pay a living wage. In addition, by locating this "problem" in low-income families, we solidify the presumptive and supremacist notion that the only way to be an involved parent or guardian is to do so in ways that reflect dominant norms of involvement (i.e., through parent-teacher conferences and other school visits). As a result, we distract ourselves from the opportunity to develop deeper understandings of the problems we are attempting to solve. And without this deeper understanding, we continue to develop solutions that demonize our most disenfranchised neighbors rather than those that offer new possibilities for equity.

As a final, longer-term, strategy for defeating deficit ideology, I must teach about economic injustice and poverty. In doing so, it is critical that I refuse to frame "poverty" as a culture rather than an oppressed condition. The latter suggests choice and intimates deficiency. And I must teach about socializing forces like deficit ideology, providing my students opportunities to practice the competencies of media and propaganda literacies.

Conclusion

In *Following the Equator*, a travel book full of scathing anti-imperialist commentary, Mark Twain (1897) wrote, in response to the deficit ideology employed by Europeans to justify the oppression of indigenous Australians, "There are many humorous things in this world; among them the white man's notion that he is less savage than the other savages" (p. 213). Still, here we are, all these years later, grappling with deficit ideology, hegemonically buried in it, using it implicitly as the basis for conversations about myriad social problems from health care disparities to educational outcome inequalities.

Hegemony is a difficult thing to break. In order to break it, we must consider our own complicity with it and our socialization for compliance. We must avoid the quick fix and the easy answer. We must bare the price of refusing compliance, knowing that by looking up, by training our gaze toward the top of the power hierarchy, we might strain our necks, not to mention our institutional likeability, more so than we do when we train it downward, where we pose no threat to the myths that power the corporate-capitalist machine. But if we do not break hegemony, if we do not defeat deficit ideology, we have little chance of redressing, in any authentic way, its gross inequities. This, we must realize, is the very point of the redirected gaze: to ensure and justify the maintenance of inequity and to make us— educators—party to that justification and maintenance.

Collins (1988) has called deficit ideology "a social pathology model" (p. 304) because of how it pathologizes disenfranchised communities. I argue that it is equally accurate to refer to deficit ideology as a social pathology model because it is symptomatic of a mass pathology borne of socialization and psycho-social coercion. It is we, the people engaging deficit ideology, who are pathological, who push aside so much evidence to comply with a world view of which each of us, in one way or another (class, race, gender, sexual orientation, language, religion, size, age, or something else), eventually becomes a target.

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