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ABSTRACT

The idea that a white teacher working predominantly with children of color might have problems because of the inability to understand where the students are coming from or because of racial/ethnic biases is supported in various branches of educational literature. This study investigates a first-year white teacher working in a middle school where the students were predominantly children of color. Most of the children had economic situations low enough that they received free or reduced-price lunch. Teacher and researcher met seven times during the 15-week semester for open-ended interviews. Interviews were tape-recorded and analyzed for themes and patterns through a grounded theory approach. Data and a final paper were shared with the teacher, a means of member checking that lent to the triangulation of the data and a tool for the teacher to use. Findings suggest that support services offered to the teacher by the principals and by her mentor teacher were clearly lacking in "educative" qualities. The kinds of assistance she needed--clear delineations of policies and procedures; proactive advice on classroom management; supportive, instructive listeners; and a sense of collaboration with other teachers and administrators--were unavailable. The teacher usually adored her students, but she began to resent them as the administration pressed her with rules, blame, and the threat of consequences for her students' underachievement. This teacher's case shows that even caring, self-reflective teachers who love their students can buy into deficit thinking and student-blaming when the school environment inculcates such practices. Contains 59 references. (BT)

A First-Year White Teacher Working with Children of Color:

An Investigation into the Meaning of "Trial by Fire"

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Introduction

As children of color now account for nearly 50 percent of the school-age population (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Lara, 1994) and English language learners (ELLs) account for a quickly growing portion of this population (Clair, 1995), White females continue to be the dominant face of the teaching profession. White teachers now make up nearly 90 percent of the teacher workforce (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Lara, 1994), with women accounting for 72 percent (Súarez -Orozco, 2000). Thus, as American schoolchildren become more diverse, teachers are becoming more and more homogenous. In an era of education where the phrase "All children can succeed at high levels" is virtually a mantra chanted in teacher education courses and education reform rhetoric, it behooves all of us to take a closer look at what is going on in schools where children of color are taught by White teachers with little or no meaningful preparation to teach children who are anything other than White English language speakers.

Indeed, many scholars argue that American schools are best suited to meet the needs of White, middle class students (Banks, 1991; Calabrese, 1989; Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1985). Schools of education generally reproduce this model as the grade-level, White, middle class student is most often considered the average, or "normal" student for whom the general curriculum is designed. In schools of education, the needs of children of color are often addressed through supplemental classes in multicultural education, second language acquisition, and "the at-risk child." In these classes, and in schools, the needs of children of color are most often explored through a deficit perspective (see Valencia, 1997). That is, children of color are understood to have less than White children: less economic comfort, less interest in education, less intelligence, less

discipline, less structure in their home lives, less chance for success, and even less love from their parents (see Valencia, 1997). Teacher education students are often taught to think of these children as challenges to teaching. Through this perspective, children of color and English language learners are thought of as detriments to the classroom rather than assets. Many teacher education students thus enter the teaching profession with some anxiety as to how they will "handle" their students of color (see Fuller, 1994 and Valli, 1995). Although schools of education, teachers, and teacher educators do not explicitly paint the White child as the "normal" or "neutral" child, the association between White and normal remains an unspoken assumption. This is an invisible privilege (see McIntosh, 1988/1997) White children have in American schools.

At the same time children of color and White teachers are spending their educational careers together, nearly 20% of teachers in Texas, the state where this study was conducted, quit the teaching profession after their first year; 50% leave by their fifth year (Austin American Statesman, 1999, December 2). National statistics show that teachers under 25 years old and over 60 leave at the highest rates; while most older teachers leave the profession to retire, most younger teachers leave to pursue different careers (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Each year, nationwide, more than 6% of White teachers leave the teaching profession altogether (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).[1] As I got familiar with this body of research, I wondered if classes filled with children of color might contribute to a White teacher's decision to leave her school or leave teaching. Although this sounds terribly pessimistic, because White teachers are so often taught to believe that children of color come to the classroom with more

weaknesses than strengths, it seemed conceivable to me that some White teachers might cite "culture clash" in the classroom as a reason for leaving the profession.

Much of the literature concerning White teachers and the children of color classroom lends credence to this idea. Aanerud (1997), Delpit (1995), Foley (1990), Losey (1995), Marx (2000, 2001), McIntyre (1997), Paley (1979), Sleeter (1993, 1994), Trueba (1998), and Valencia and Solórzano (1997), among others, have written of the prejudices and racism that can influence relationships between White teachers and the children of color they teach to the children's disadvantage. Haberman (1993, 1998) and Haberman and Post (1998) also suggest that, because the majority of White teachers come from middle class rural and suburban areas, it is unlikely that they can empathize with the lives, challenges, and assets of children of color from urban and impoverished areas. Delpit (1995), Heath (1983), Mehan (1979), Labov (1972), Philips (1983), and Steward and Steward (1973) further argue that cultural and communication differences between teachers who are part of the mainstream, dominant American society and some students of color can lead to vast differences in expectations and beliefs about appropriate behavior and skills, again to the students' disadvantage. The work of Cummins (1984, 1986, 1994), Macedo (1993), Marx (2000, 2001), and Trueba (1988, 1993, 1998) on the misinterpretations, low expectations, and frustrations American teachers often have with English language learners, especially English language learners of color, adds another dimension to this area of literature. Cummins' (1994) discussion of the overrepresentation of Latina/o children in special education is a particularly harrowing example of the price children of color often pay for their teachers' and schools' inability to understand them and meet their needs. Thus, the idea that a White teacher working

predominately with children of color might have problems because of her inability to understand where her students are coming from or because of racial or ethnic biases is supported in various branches of education literature. Consequently, although this study started out with pessimistic expectations, these expectations were well founded.

The Study

With my expectations and pessimism in check, I endeavored to find a first year White teacher working in a school where the students were predominantly children of color. I found such a teacher at Northside Middle School,[2] a school where approximately 65% of the students were African American, 25% were Latina/o, 7% were Asian, and just 3% were White. Most of the children at Northside came from families with economic situations low enough that they received free or reduced-price lunch. Closely reflecting national statistics, about 80% of the teachers at Northside were White. 25 of the teachers were new to the school and 8 were new to teaching altogether.

Ms. L. was one of the brand new teachers. Just 22, she was a recent graduate of a five-year Masters of Education program in another state where she had specialized in math education. Far from the harried first-year teacher I expected, Ms. L., seemed exceedingly relaxed and well put together. A native of Louisiana, she had a lovely Southern accent and a ready sense of humor. Enthusiastically, she agreed to share her semester with me, even commenting that she was happy to share her new experience with another educator as she missed the collaboration that was a part of her teacher education program. I am very grateful indeed for Ms. L.'s generosity in allowing me to share her first semester.

Methodology

Together, Ms. L. and I agreed that we would meet every other week or so during the 15-week semester for open-ended interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1989) during her planning period. All in all, I met with her seven times, from 30 minutes to 90 minutes each time. I also observed her teaching for two 90-minute blocks, and I wandered through the hallways on several more occasions to get a better feel for Northside Middle School. After we have been talking for about two months, I asked Ms. L. for her permission to speak briefly with her Mentor Teacher. I tape-recorded all interviews, typed up the transcripts, and then analyzed all data for themes and patterns through a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After the first draft of my study was finished, I asked Ms. L. to examine it for accuracy and for her own take on my "re-presentation" (Abu-Lughold, 1991; Freire, 1970/2000) of her story, which she did for about four weeks. I then talked with her about her impression of the paper and incorporated her corrections and clarifications into the final draft, a copy of which I gave her to keep. Sharing the data and the final paper with Ms. L. was a means of member checking (Lather, 1991) that lent to the triangulation of the data, as well as a way to turn this study into a tool that could help her further reflect on her own positionality in the classroom.

Limitations

Although I visited Ms. L. about nine times over the course of her first semester, I remained an "outsider" to the school. I did not have a complex understanding of the school politics, its overarching goals, or its many teachers and administrators. Rather, I developed a good understanding of Ms. L.'s perspective of these things during the

semester I spent talking with her. Ms. L.'s story of Northside Elementary is precisely that, her story. It is not a telling of "the truth." This paper is essentially a case study with Ms. L. as the one key participant.

Throughout our conversations, I was consistently impressed with Ms. L.'s constant self reflection, her innovative ideas, and the care she showed her students. While it is possible that she could have masked her true feelings about her students from me during our conversations in an attempt to appear "politically correct," it has been my experience that most teachers do not believe they are speaking in a socially unacceptable manner when they criticize the skills or personal characteristics of their students. Rather, they appear to feel that they are being insightful and honest rather than negative. During the four months this study took place, the thoughts Ms. L. shared with me seemed to me to be consistent and sincere. What emerged from our conversations is a portrait of sorts. The reader is invited to find parallels with her or his own experiences in schools.

The Story of Ms. L.

Highlights of the Job

When I met with Ms. L., I asked her about her students, what she thought of their potential, and what she thought of their intelligence. These questions were designed to open up doors to deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997), the notion that children of color are incapable of succeeding at high levels due to their culture, their ethnicity, their race, or their language. Every time I asked these types of questions and in every manner of answering, Ms. L. responded that she thought all her students could succeed, if only she helped them develop the skills they needed. Several times she told me that she loved her students and that they were the highlight of her job.

When I asked Ms. L. if she thought her students could go on to succeed in college, she hesitated and responded that, "Well, a few of them might not get the skills they need or might not be able to get the money to go. But all of them could if they had those things." While she was concerned about their skills, she seemed very confident in their inherent intellectual abilities. Her job, she told me, was to focus on strengthening their skills. I found this response particularly encouraging considering that not one of her students performed math, her subject area, on grade level. During the four months I spoke with Ms. L., she consistently assessed the skills of her students as areas to develop rather than judgments of student potential. She was particularly proud of the students who were close to level and those who were making quick progress.

In addition to the ways in which she talked about her students, Ms. L. also showed respect for her students by eliciting their input on curriculum development and classroom management. She regularly asked her students for advice on making the class more interesting and more meaningful to them, and they regularly surprised her with their responses. On one occasion, for example, her students suggested that her teaching needed to be more "hands-on" and more "real world." This surprised Ms. L. because she thought that this was something she was already doing; as a teacher, she strongly believed in the approach they were advocating. So, she took her students' request as a challenge to improve her teaching and, with them, created a six-week unit on building a model for a new and improved school playground, complete with equipment. As she excitedly told me, "The math involved is just unbelievable." On another occasion, after a particularly frustrating class, Ms. L. decided not to call parents to complain about their children's behavior but to call each child to ask what had gone wrong with the class. On

the phone, she asked each child how she or he could help better manage the behavior of the class as a whole. She also asked each of them for advice on what she could do to encourage better behavior. Through this personal communication, Ms. L. developed several student allies who thereafter helped her quiet down noisy students and lead good behavior by example. One of these students had previously been her most difficult behavior challenge. In the time we spent together, it seemed to me that the students and the challenges they gave her accounted for the parts of teaching that Ms. L. loved the most. She truly seemed to care for, respect, and enjoy her students.

Rather than confirming my hypothesis that White teachers would likely have problems understanding and appreciating their students of color, Ms. L. appeared to be evidence to the very contrary. Understanding and appreciating her students seemed to be her greatest strengths in the classroom. However, all was not perfect. During our time together, Ms. L.'s thoughts about whether or not she would stay at Northside changed continuously. While her students drew her attention to staying, most other aspects of Northside drew her attention to leaving. Surprisingly, the support systems specifically designed to help her as a new teacher were, in fact, the systems that made her repeatedly think about quitting. As I analyzed the sources of her frustration, a larger, more troubling, picture began to emerge. All the systems designed to help her instead hurt both her and her students. The means by which this happened will be outlined below.

Detriments of the Job

When I first drove up to Northside Middle School, I was impressed by how much it resembled a prison. The tall, angular walls were built of bluish gray brick and the windows were so small and narrow that, from the outside, they were hardly visible at all.

The school looked like a cold, impenetrable fortress. To my surprise, the inside had an even stronger prison-like environment. The few windows were fortified with chicken wire and, during lunchtime, the cafeteria wing was separated from the rest of the school by iron bars that pulled down from the ceiling. Narrow hallways with frequent 90 degree turns prevented any natural light from reaching the common areas, so fluorescent lighting was the only means of illuminating the foreboding brick walls and shiny tile floors. Pictures, posters, and other articles of warmth one usually associates with children were missing in the public areas of the school. During my time at Northside, I could not help but wonder whether the students and teachers were being subtly conditioned to feel comfortable in a prison environment. The contrasts between Northside and other schools of higher economic affluence I have visited over the years were stark.

The Assistant Principals

Like guards in a prison, the two Assistant Principals spent their days monitoring the halls and common areas in search of disturbances and peeking into classrooms to make sure classes were under control. Also like prison guards, much of their time was spent on emergency detail. They regularly cornered wandering students, broke up fights, and helped teachers "put out fires" in the classroom. These administrators also monitored teachers by evaluating them on occasion and monitoring them for compliance with school policies. In the days before Ms. L.'s evaluation, she was quite nervous and spent a great deal of time planning her lessons. However, the Assistant Principal who observed her arrived midway through her seventh-grade class and only stayed for five minutes before quickly running out again. Ms. L. said that she "looked at my lesson plans the whole time." However, as she explained,

> I was not teaching what was on my lesson plans because she was looking at my elective lesson plans. But, you know what, I got 'yes' for everything [on my evaluation]. That I couldn't figure out; she must not have been really paying attention. I thought, "Ok I don't feel nervous about this anymore."

Ms. L. thought of this kind of "support" from the administration as a joke and lamented that she needed to have an emergency to get any real attention from them. Indeed, on one occasion I saw one of the Assistant Principals, Mr. E., groan as he received yet another "911" text message on his cellular phone. It is likely that he realized the inefficiency of the system as clearly as Ms. L. did.

In his article about the characteristics of some highly successful schools that serve students who are primarily children of color and English language learners from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Scheurich (1998) points out that these schools rarely spend time on "discipline cases" because "appropriate conduct, for children and adults, is built into the organizational culture" (p. 473). Therefore, administrators do not "[work] with discipline cases all day long" (p. 473), as they did at Northside. Constant attention to discipline enervates administrators and promotes burnout. Indeed, several times during this study I heard Mr. E. lament, "I've got to get out of here." The next year, he became an Assistant Principal at a local high school where, reportedly, he was much happier with his job.

The Principal

If the Assistant Principals were the guards, the new Principal, Mr. D., was the warden. Ms. L. had originally decided to apply to Northside because of Mr. D. She was impressed with his plans for the school and his desires to center all aspects of the school

on the needs of the students. An African American man, he emphasized the need for "culturally relevant" teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994), getting to know students personally, and placing their interests at the center of curriculum. This philosophy was very important to Ms. L. and she was excited about being part of Northside's transformation to a high-achieving, student-centered school. However, turning Northside around from a "low performing" school to one where the students, most of whom performed below grade level, quickly became high achievers was, understandably, a greater challenge than Mr. D. may had originally realized. In trying to achieve this goal, he sought more control of teachers and students in several different ways including dress codes for teachers and students, school policies posted on every classroom wall, more attention to improving test scores, more teamwork, and more respect for students. However, during the first semester of his first year at Northside, the only documents that delineated all the new policies and procedures, the teacher and student handbooks, were mere abstractions always in progress somewhere between the Principal's office and the printer. Every time I visited Northside, I heard that the handbooks were to be printed "any day now." The mysteries the phantom handbooks would dispel became a running joke between Ms. L. and I after about the 10th week of hearing this rumor. The idea of improving teamwork was also something of a joke as well because, although every department had a team, each team member had a different planning period. There was never any time to meet. During the semester of this study, it seemed that none of Mr. D.'s new planes were coming to fruition.

Although the new policies and procedures were not clear to Ms. L. or many other teachers, they were still clear to Mr. D. This lack of a shared vision created a great deal

of frustration among teachers and the Principal; the teachers because they were unsure of the vision and the Principal because it was constantly violated. To ensure that teachers were practicing his ideals, Mr. D. took to monitoring the hallways and listening for teachers who, in his mind, stepped out of line. When they did this, he reprimanded them on the spot. Ms. L. was very intimidated by this style of communication and dreaded contact with Mr. D. As she talked about the Principal, her calm demeanor dissolved and she became noticeably uneasy. Nervously, she explained that, "I'm afraid that I'm going to do things wrong and I might get in trouble.... It's just so horrible." She then went on to explain that, in addition to aggressively speaking about and to teachers in front of students and in front of other teachers about their behavior, she had heard he was also planning to "have student representatives... report back [to him] what was going on in the classroom and whether the teachers were following the rules and what they were doing." Because the rules were listed in the as-yet-to-be-published handbooks, Ms. L. was afraid she would unknowingly violate them and gain the Principal's wrath. She emphasized to me, "That's what I don't want; that's what I'm scared of." As she talked, I was struck by how much Ms. L. sounded like a student afraid of getting into trouble. She was very afraid of Mr. D.

In fact, just a few weeks after this conversation, Mr. D. did upbraid Ms. L. in the teachers lounge, in front of several of her colleagues, after he heard her loudly tell a student to "wake up." Ms. L. was terribly upset and embarrassed by this situation. A teacher who witnessed the event told her afterwards, "Don't listen to a damn word he says." This comment belies the lack of trust and respect many teachers had for the Principal. Ms. L. shared with me that although most faculty considered his intentions

good, they considered his methods terribly alienating. She was actually one of Mr. D.'s strongest allies, philosophically; after all, she had specifically come to Northside because she believed in his vision. However, Mr. D. did not seem to realize this as he used a consistently heavy hand with everyone. The rumor that children were spying on teachers and reporting back to the Principal dumbfounded and somewhat terrorized Ms. L. She just could not believe Mr. D. found that to be a successful means of improving teaching. The fact that she heard so many rumors and did not know whether to believe them gave further evidence for the severe lack of communication among the adults at Northside Middle School.

In his examination of successful schools, Scheurich (1998) writes of the importance of a "strong, shared vision" (p. 467) among all adults in the school building. Without a shared vision, no shared goals exist. Moreover, without a "strongly collaborative" (p. 470), family-like school environment, environments that the successful schools he studied all maintained, the adults at a school like Northside may not feel supported enough themselves to selflessly adopt a shared vision that focuses entirely on children. The teachers at Northside were busy defending themselves because no one else would. The frustration and resentment linked to this unhappy, stressful environment was likely part of the reason Mr. D. decided to quit after his first year at Northside.

The Mentor Teacher

While the Assistant Principals put out fires and the Principal hunted down teachers violating unwritten policies, the Mentor Teacher's specific purpose was to help new teachers adjust to their first year in the classroom. Many schools across the nation now assign a mentor to each new teacher (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Fideler & Haselkorn

1999; Johnson, 2001; LeMaistre, 2000; Sweeney & DeBolt, 2000). Citing the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996), Feiman-Nemser (2001) adds that "These induction initiatives are part of a larger effort to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools by focusing on the recruitment, preparation, induction, and renewal of teachers" (p. 18). Indeed, all schools in Northside's district were required to offer some sort of mentoring to new teachers.

Ms. L.'s Mentor Teacher, Mr. F., was a White man in his middle 30s who had been trained as an accountant. In his second year at Northside, he was still teaching math with an emergency certification as he pursued his teaching credentials in the evenings. Although Mr. F. had one more year of teaching experience than Ms. L., Ms. L. had five more years of theoretical and practical teaching preparation than her Mentor. It is hard to assess whose experience was more useful in this situation. Both teachers were at a disadvantage. Even the Assistant Principal, Mr. E., shook his head and commented, "the blind leading the blind" when he heard about this mentoring relationship. Compounding the experience portion of this relationship was the lack of training on the parts of Mentor Teachers. Like the handbooks, training for mentors was illusive at best.

Ms. L. was aware of these limitations of the mentoring program at Northside and usually avoided her Mentor Teacher. As she explained,

> Well I was kind of expecting someone that I could go to and ask questions. Someone who would check up on me, kind of a two way street. Someone who was approachable. You know, he's a real nice guy but, I don't know if it's just him or if it's the school, maybe he doesn't know how to mentor. I don't think anybody has been trained. I mean, I am a mentor. What is a mentor?

Ms. L.'s final question was particularly insightful considering the fact that mentors at Northside did not have a shared vision of the role of the mentor because they had no training. While they may have agreed that the title of mentor would necessarily carry the "presumption of wisdom... accumulated knowledge that can serve as the basis of sensitive observation, astute commentary, sound advice" (Little, 1990, p. 316, as cited by Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 18), they each had different understandings of the "wisdom" that was worthy of sharing. In passing, the Lead Mentor Teacher told me that Northside was not a good example of a mentoring institution. She recommended that I speak with someone in the district central office about the district's understanding of a good mentor. The usefulness of a proper definition of mentoring without its implementation eluded me.

The problems created by Mr. F.'s lack of training and lack of teacher preparation coursework paled in comparison to the negative beliefs he seemed to have regarding his students. He was continually astounded that his students performed math at the third or fourth grade level. As he said, "To me, that's ludicrous. How they got to the seventh grade when they're still having problems with third or fourth grade level is beyond me." The pressures from the school to help the students achieve at grade level provoked a great deal of resentment from Mr. F. He considered the task impossible because he considered the children impossible. Primarily, he thought of education as a privilege rather than a right and explained that, because the children did not value education, they should not be allowed to attend his classes. As he explained, "These kids – if they don't want to be here, they [should] go to a day labor camp and just work and learn a vocational training. This should be a privilege for them; they should be in here to learn."

As he denigrated the students, Mr. F. elevated the teachers. He portrayed himself and his colleagues as benevolent, unappreciated martyrs whose kindness was not deserved by the students. As he said,

> These kids, they don't realize what they have compared to what I had when I was in middle school.... And this staff, well I would argue that, how they teach or whatever, whether they are the same type teacher that I am, everyone on this campus does a hell of a lot of work for these kids. A lot more, above and beyond what should be required. I'm just thinking that it is not appreciated, by the kids and by the parents; but I mean these are kids and the parents need to be taking some responsibility.

Mr. F.'s thoughts about the students at Northside certainly influenced his mentoring style. Rather than proactively meeting with Ms. L. to discuss possible problems, he preferred to wait for Ms. L. to come to him in anger, tears, or frustration. The few times she did this, he comforted her by assuring her that her students did not deserve such a good teacher. Although Mr. F. may have believed he was sharing "sensitive observation, astute commentary, [and] sound advice" (Little, 1990, p. 316), in reality, he was fomenting a school culture where the students were viewed as unappreciative, uncivilized, and entirely lacking in responsibility for their own actions. He also helped perpetuate the belief that the teachers were victimized by the students they selflessly sought to help. Despite the harsh ways in which he talked about students, he viewed himself as a kind of martyr who wanted nothing but the best for them. These thoughts likely perpetuated his own feelings of burnout after just one full year at Northside.

Mr. F. promoted a vision that was the very opposite of the successful schools that Scheurich (1998) examined. Instead of centering the needs of his students. Mr. F. centered their weaknesses and their irresponsibility, emphasizing that their education was an undeserved privilege rather than a right. At the same time, he emphasized his belief that teachers were misunderstood, overworked, and underappreciated. The lack of a shared vision among the adults at Northside, as well as a lack of mentor training, allowed Mr. F. to seek to dispense his own deficit thoughts about the students in the guise of mentoring new teachers. His feelings of resentment and dislike regarding his students were obvious enough that Ms. L. usually avoided contact with him altogether.

Findings

The support services offered to Ms. L. by the Assistant Principals, the Principal, and Mr. F. were clearly lacking in "educative" (Dewey, 1938; Feiman-Nemser, 2001) qualities. Ms. L. found them patronizing, useless, and frustrating. The kinds of assistance she would have liked to have received, clear delineation of policies and procedures, proactive advice on classroom management, supportive, instructive listeners, and a sense of collaboration with other teachers and administrators, were unavailable at Northside. Thus, she tended to isolate herself from the other adults in the building and retreat to her "cave." Due to her educational training, her own experiences growing up and attending schools in predominantly African American areas, and a myriad of other personal qualities and experiences, Ms. L. was nevertheless able to relate well to her students, close her door, and try to figure things out. This method was painstaking and time-consuming, but she valued the relationships with her students enough to put in the effort.

These measures of avoidance did not inoculate Ms. L. from all of Northside's problems, however. Although she usually adored her students, she also began to resent them as the administration pressed rules, blame, and the threat of consequences upon her for her students' underachievement. At these moments, in efforts to deflect blame from herself, she uncharacteristically asserted deficit thoughts about her students. The following comments illustrate the resentment born out of her frustration:

> You know, all I hear is "teacher accountability." You have to be held accountable; well, what about these children? What are they held accountable for? This is their education, not mine. You know, they don't need one hundred percent [accountability]; but they need some kind of responsibility for what they do.... "Put the children first." "The children first," but where's the child's responsibility in all this? What about the parents? It's always about the person who is in this class room.... We can't do it all and that's what is frustrating.

Comments such as these were readily supported by Mr. F. and other teachers who sought to redirect the unrelenting pressure placed on them by the administration. Thus, even while she recognized and resisted the obvious deficit thinking that made up much of the culture of Northside, Ms. L. did buy into the subtle aspects of it at times. In this way, she began to adopt and perpetuate some negative aspects of the Northside culture.

When Ms. L. first read this part of my analysis, she disagreed with my interpretation and became quite angry with me. However, she held onto the original draft of this paper for about a month before we were able to meet again. In this time, she told me that she began to agree with my analysis. Coming to terms with her own deficit thinking, she said, was a shocking, embarrassing experience. However, the more she

thought about it, the more she realized that she was in a position to do something about it. She thus vowed to reflect on her positionality even more intensely and to call herself on her own deficit thoughts. She adamantly did not want to be a teacher who blamed her students for their own struggles. Because Ms. L. was so reflective, and because she was not afraid to be self-critical, she seemed, to me, to be learning how to be a very successful teacher for students of color.

Damage to Teachers

Northside's environment of great amounts of pressure bestowed on teachers in the name of students had the unintentional yet devastating effect of creating a backlash among its teachers. The most common grievances I heard at Northside were phrases such as, "What about the students?" and "What about the parents? They need to take some responsibility too." An environment such as Northside's is a destructive place for teachers. Towards the end of our semester together, Ms. L. told me that, "People are jumping ship left and right." She went on to explain that,

> People [in the math department] are leaving already. One person already left; another is leaving this week. There is another teacher who is not signing a contract, he's got several job offers. He's been teaching math. You can't transfer within the district, so if you really want to leave the school, you'd really have to either leave the district or leave teaching.

At this point, Ms. L. was leaning toward finishing out the year and then transferring to a different district. Her mother, an elementary school teacher in a suburban district, sometimes encouraged her to transfer out to the suburbs where, in her mind, the principals were more supportive and the children were better behaved. Although her

mind change weekly, in the end, Ms. L.'s affection for her students led her to stay at Northside another year.

Damage to Students

While the environment at Northside was very destructive for teachers, I argue that it was even more destructive for students. The teachers, after all, had the option of moving on to different districts or different careers altogether. The students at Northside had no choice but to stay. In the time I spent at Northside, the most dire effect of the environment that placed unreasonable amount of pressure and blame on teachers was the backlash that caused teachers to resent and even dislike their students. This backlash caused teachers to complain to each other about their students' lack of responsibility and, in Mr. F.'s case, their lack of educability. In examining this backlash, I was struck by the parallels between it and the notion of White backlash that Omi and Winant (1994) and Winant (1997) outline in their analyses of racism in the United States. These scholars write that "multiculturalism," "political correctness," and other ways of thinking, talking, and constructing policy with sensitivity to people of color in mind have left many White Americans resentful of what they see to be a "new form of racial hegemony" that "disproportionately benefit[s] those concentrated at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, where racial discrimination has its most damaging effects" (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 148). An indication of this backlash is that, while many White Americans are now willing to admit that there is structural racism in our society, many of them/us see only the structures that benefit people of color.

Indeed, when the administration at Northside constantly stressed that the new policies and "rules" were there to benefit students, despite the pressure and resentment

they created among teachers, they evoked the same kind of backlash. Mr. F. was an extreme case in that he thought that few of the students deserved or appreciated the education he offered. Ms. L. was a more moderate case in that she only lashed out at her students and thought of them as irresponsible and unappreciative when the administration bore down on her in a particularly intense manner. Whenever she did redirect the blame for underachievement and irresponsibility to her students, her colleagues sympathetically agreed and supported her. Together, they built a solidarity based on the feeling that they bore too much responsibility while students and parents bore too little. This solidarity, in turn, led to a resurgence in deficit thinking. Because children of color are so often viewed through a deficit lens in teacher education programs and society in general (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997), this is an incredibly easy way of thinking to adopt. Considering than 97 percent of the students at Northside were children of color, it was easy and common for teachers to blame ethnic, cultural, and familial characteristics for underachievement, a phenomenon documented by Carrasco (1981), Delpit (1995), Diaz, Moll & Mehan (1986), Hull, Rose, Fraser and Castellano (1991), Foley (1990), Laosa (1977), Ortiz (1988), Trueba (1983), the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1973), and Valencia (1997), among others. Marx (2001) further argues that deficit thinking, naïveté, and the "desire to save" that accompanies many White teachers into the children of color classroom "are basically *the norm* when it comes to White teacher education students and White Americans in general" (p. 40). However, because teachers of all races in the US go through the same types of training and live in the same society, all of them/us can easily buy into these destructive norms (US Commission on Civil Rights, 1973).

Even if new teachers did not bring deficit thoughts with them into their Northside classroom, they almost inevitably had to adopt these negative, destructive ways of thinking about their students if they were to survive the "trial by fire" that was Northside. "Sharing the blame" with the students seemed to be the only means by which teachers were able to deal with the pressures created by the administration. The only other way to escape the chaotic, stressful environment that characterized Northtown, was to transfer to a wealthier school district where most children achieved at grade level so transformation efforts were not necessary. By default, in Texas at least, most of these schools are populated predominantly by White children (see Scheurich, 1998 for notable exceptions). By the end of her first semester, three of Ms. L.'s colleagues in the math department had decided to move to leave Northside for Whiter, wealthier schools.

Scheurich's (1998) study of highly successful schools with large populations of children of color and English language learners from low socioeconomic backgrounds outlined several "core beliefs" that seem to be the key to each school' s success. Among these are the beliefs that everyone in the school sincerely believes that "all children can succeed at high academic levels" (p. 460) without exception, that the schools are "child- or learner-centered" (p. 461), and that "all children must be treated with love, appreciation, care, and respect" (p. 462), again without exception. However, he also notes that in order for all school faculty and staff to buy into the beliefs, the school environment must also be "loving and caring" (p. 469) for adults as well as children. As he notes,

> [These] schools have discovered that if the goal is to create a whole school, a whole system, that is successful for children of color, the adults working in the

school must be treated in the same loving, caring manner. In short, these schools are wonderful places to work for adults, too, and not just because of pride and success. (p. 469)

Scheurich (1998) goes on to emphasize that, "The key to transforming a school from low to high performing, according to those who guided these transformations, is transforming the way that staff are treated and the quality of the work environment that is created" (p. 469). These important school environment characteristics were sorely lacking at Northside. Without them, resentment and deficit thinking reigned. Teachers were so busy defending themselves, they had no patience for consistently centering the needs of their students. The Principal, one Assistant Principal and several teachers left Northside after school year this study took place to try again somewhere else. The students were thus left to make sense of the policies, practices, and visions of the next new regime.

Many low performing schools that serve children of color, English language learners, and children from low socioeconomic backgrounds may find that they need to overcome obstacles similar to those in the way of Northside's efforts toward transformation. In an era of "high-stakes" testing, low performing schools can make serious errors in their efforts to improve test scores at any cost. Northside's efforts to center the needs of the students as it marginalized the needs of the teachers fueled the deficit thinking and blame it sought to extinguish. Indeed, to stay at Northside, a teacher almost necessarily had to adopt some aspects of the negative culture it perpetuated.

While teachers and administrators leave schools like Northside as quickly as they enter them, the long-term, subtle effects on the students who stay are more devastating. Rather than being loved and cared for by their teachers, students in these kinds of schools

become an enemy of sorts, the imagined source behind the frustrations generated, in reality, by the deficits in organization, communication, and leadership of the adults. The case of Ms. L. shows that even caring, self-reflective teachers who love their students can buy into deficit thinking and student-blaming when the school environment inculcates such practices. In this era of school reform at any cost, it is my hope that this study sheds some light on the routes to be avoided on the way to improved schooling for all children.

Notes

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[1] According to U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Surveys, 1993–94 and 1994-1995, Whites left the teaching profession at a rate of 6.2% in elementary school and 6.8% in secondary school. Blacks left at 7.5% and 5.7% respectively, Hispanics at 8.2% and 10.5%, Asians at 5.6% and 2.2%; and Native Americans and Native Alaskans left at the rates of 7.6% and 3.4% respectively. So Whites left the profession at a somewhat lower rate than people of color, although their actual numbers were greater. Found at *The Condition of Education* website: http://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/condition98/ c9859d07.html.

[2] All names of schools and people are pseudonyms.

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