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"It Hurts Me to Say": Preservice Teachers' Use and Disapproval of Deficit Discourse in Urban Schools

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Keywords

Preservice teacher education, teacher educators, preservice teachers, at-risk, deficit discourse, deficit theory, policy

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Abstract

Extensive research examines the development and impact of deficit discourse in schools. However, more research needs to be needed to explore how preservice teachers use this language during their preparation. Therefore, our qualitative study explored how deficit discourse became part of five preservice teachers' vernacular when speaking about children and teaching. Findings suggest participants (a) Relied on reductive labels to describe children, (b) attributed their use of these labels to their exposure to them during their practicum, and (c) demonstrated both cognitive dissonance and silent resistance toward deficit language. Implications are for teacher educators and school leaders.

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Introduction

As literacy teachers, educators, and researchers, we have deep ethical concerns about the deficit language often used in research, policy, and practice to describe children and their perceived (in)abilities as learners and individuals. In this paper, we deal with this perennial problem by calling attention to the issue of how deficit thinking and language now threaten to be reproduced by yet another generation of teachers. This problem will persist unless teacher educators render these marginalizing labels more "visible" (Pollack, 2012a) for beginning educators and offer alternative ways to think and speak about children that are more equitable and constructive.

Johnston (2012) aptly states, "as teachers, we choose our words and, in the process, construct the classroom worlds for our students and ourselves. The worlds we construct offer opportunities and constraints" (p. 1). As educators committed to increasing equity of opportunity

for children impacted by the deficit narratives that circulate about them, we believe intentional and relentless development of more professional language that resists and reshapes deficit language should take center stage within in-service teacher professional development settings and initial teacher preparation programs.

Deficit language (for example, terms used as adjectives to describe children that we have frequently heard used in schools, such as "low-baby," "behavior problem," "at-risk," "underachieving," and "struggler") stems from the *deficit perspective* (or "deficit theory" (Collins, 1988)) some educators hold about children, which Gorski (2011) explains involves "approaching students based upon our perceptions of their weaknesses rather than their strengths" (p. 152). Similarly, Pica-Smith and Veloria (2012) write deficit theories in response to differences among children, assuming "youth of color and poor youth" (p. 2) are inferior to others. Valencia (1997) explains that such a view of students "blames the victim" when educational disparities exist, making it possible for schools, educators, policymakers, and other educational stakeholders to abdicate their professional responsibility for children's academic success. Put differently, deficit labels assign a fixed identity to the children affected by them and attribute problems with learning or behavior to the child instead of relevant factors like teacher instruction, the public school system, educational policy, school procedures, and other influences related to student learning.

Unfortunately (and of particular relevance to this paper), although scholarly calls to resist and reshape deficit discourse in our field have been plentiful (e.g., Brown, 2010; Dyson, 2015; Gorski 2011/2016; Pollack, 2012a/2012b; Stein, 2004), the problem persists (Johnson et al., 2020; Ogletree, & Griffin, 2020; Paugh & Dudley-Marling, 2011) and is now being reproduced by a new generation of teachers (Achinstein & Barrett, 2004; Allday et al., 2011; Brown, 2010). In the context of the American public school system, Stein (2004) argues that the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) exacerbated long-standing problems with deficit ideology about children through its requirement that schools use various labels to identify "categories" of children eligible to receive services and resources via federal funds. Stein (2004) explains how this intentional *marking* (identifying as "defective" in some way) of certain groups

of children inadvertently resulted in the subsequent widespread circulation of deficit-oriented labels:

> most scholarly approaches to compensatory education do not focus on the problems of schools as institutions but instead on the deficiencies of the *students* attending them. The language of policymaking legitimized and institutionalized these categories of thought through legislation that eventually *required* their use in the identification and service of students. (p. 33, emphasis added)

Regrettably, the categories created by ESEA (intended to protect and serve potentially vulnerable children) have evolved into stigmas for the students who occupy those categories. However, ESEA is not alone in its contribution to the problem: From policy documents such as *A Nation at Risk*, released by the Reagan administration in 1983, to the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, policymakers have "framed children in a way that encourage[s] practitioners to talk about them in terms of their inadequacy, deficiency, and deprivation" (Stein, 2004, p. ix). Today, this discourse has become naturalized and taken for granted. Dyson (2015) points out that deficit discourse has resulted in the near "erasure" of low-income, minority children's abilities, strengths, and individual identities since a set of deficit-based low expectations and assumptions have come to accompany the labels that mark them (Allday et al., 2011; Brown, 2010; Carey, 2014; Paugh & Dudley-Marling, 2011).

Although we recognized deficit language during our previous experiences as elementary educators, it was not until we began to work as teacher educators that we started to collectively discuss, document, and confront deficit discourse with elementary preservice teachers and students enrolled in an educator preparation program who is also a prospective teacher at the elementary level. In our teaching and mentoring, we worked hard to model equitable mindsets about students and develop our preservice teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) to help draw their attention to connections between their instructional decisions and children's learning (Shulman, 1986). Still, we continuously noticed our preservice teachers tended to fixate on all the literate things children "could not do," or offered excuses as to why their students were not experiencing success that related to some perceived "inability" or "deficiency" on the child's part.

Our ongoing encounters with our preservice teachers' deficit language led to this exploratory research. At the time of the study, we were assigned as graduate assistants to jointly serve as *literacy content co*ντεντ–knowledgeable others who assist preservice teachers in making literacy theory to practice connections in the practicum context through literacy coaching cycles for a cohort of preservice teachers (Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014). These preservice teachers completed their final practicum (student teaching) in a teacher residency program. This full-time teacher preparation program focused on university student achievement through embedded coursework that provided "Resident" preservice teachers with the opportunity to work with a content coach. In practicum settings, preservice teachers attend grade-level team planning meetings, use student assessment data to design whole and small group instruction, and teach alongside and independently of the CT. After we had logged countless hours of reflective conversations with our students, during which time the deficit discourse we had anecdotally observed kept reappearing, we developed the following research question that guided this exploratory study: In what ways does deficit language become part of our preservice teachers' everyday vernacular to describe children and approaches to instruction?

In pursuing this line of research, our goal is not to villainize educators who may currently use the type of language our research problematizes. Instead, we wish to join our voices with the voices of other scholars (e.g., Dyson, 2015; Gorski, 2011/2016; Paugh & Dudley-Marling, 2011; Pollack, 2012a/2012b; Valencia, 1997/2010) who have brought attention to the problem of deficit discourse and invite educational stakeholders into an honest conversation about this harmful way of thinking and speaking about children so that it can be resisted and reshaped.

Literature Review

Deficit Discourse and Teacher Expectations

A vast body of K-12 literature has explored deficit perspectives and language in the context of both special and general education classrooms (e.g., Aukerman, 2015; Bianco, 2005; Gorski, 2011/2016; Norwich, 1999; Pollack, 2012a/b; Sleeter, 2004). For this reason, we chose to include unique and general education literature in our review of prior research to situate our study within the global conversation to challenge and dismantle deficit thinking, language, and practices in contexts where they exist.

Studies situated within the field of special education contexts have studied what if any, connections exist between exceptionality labels (e.g., *dyslexic*, *emotional, behavioral disorder (EBD), learning disabled* (LD)) and teachers' attitudes and beliefs about children (e.g., Allday et al., 2011; Bianco, 2005; Hornstra et al., 2010; Ivey, 2007; Missett et al., 2016; Norwich, 1999). These prior studies suggest special education labels and jargon (a) have "connotations of deficit" (Norwich, 1999), (b) lead to differential views toward the children who occupy them, and (c) may limit the academic opportunities teachers provide special education students within comparison to their same-age general education peers (e.g., Bianco, 2005; Hornstra et al., 2010; Ivey, 2007; Missett et al., 2016). It is important to note that there is a disproportionate representation of Black and Brown children in special education (Blanchett, 2014), which reinforces Dyson's (2015) and Pica-Smith and Veloria's (2012) claim that deficit discourse stratifies traditionally marginalized populations.

Outside special education literature, scholars have problematized particular labels that have historically been intended to identify and protect populations viewed as "vulnerable" by policymakers (e.g., children of small financial means (Stein, 2004)) but have instead come to marginalize vulnerable populations. For example, some scholars have challenged the use of phrases like "struggling reader" and "at-risk" (e.g., Alvarez, Armstrong, Elish-Piper, Matthews, & Risko, 2009; Dyson, 2015; James, 2012; Learned, 2016), and argue deficit discourse impacts, in particular, children of color and children from economically distressed areas (Aukerman, 2015; Dyson, 2015; Learned, 2016; Liou & Rotheram-Fuller, 2019; Paugh & Dudley-Marling, 2011; Pica-Smith & Veloria, 2012; Pollack, 2012a; Sleeter, 2004).

Stratifying people of color in an educational context is deeply rooted in the racist history of the United States. Menchaca (1997) states that historically, deficit "discourses centered on the premise that people of color were either biologically or culturally inferior to Caucasians" (p. 13), which lends to deficit thinking about ethnic minority groups. Valencia (1997) links these historical conceptualizations to the contemporary 'popular 'at-risk' construct, now entrenched in educational circles views poor working-class children and their families (particularly of color) as being predominantly responsible for school failure" (p. XI); therefore the perception is that Black and Brown children, particularly those from socioeconomically disadvantaged circumstances do

not perform well in schools because of inherent cognitive, familial, and or motivational deficiencies (Pearl, 1997; Valencia, 1997; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Thus, deficit perspectives become part of children's perceived identities.

In his ethnographic study of the moral, aesthetic, and political aspects of "listening," Wortham (2010) argues that speech inevitably conveys social identities or "positions concerning a set of socially recognized types" (para. 2). Children's social identities, when constructed through deficit language that casts them as specific "types" of students (e.g., "struggling reader," "at-risk," "low") may influence the academic and social opportunities provided to them because of how language and social identities influence teacher expectations that may lead to differential teaching. This differential teaching has been written about by Haberman (1991), who refers to it as a *pedagogy of poverty*. According to Haberman (1991), a pedagogy of poverty involves directive, controlling instruction and "appeals to those who have low expectations for minorities and the poor" (p. 292). The connection between speech, social identities, and teacher expectations (e.g., Pollack, 2012a) emphasizes the urgency to break the cycle of deficit discourse and beliefs about children by resisting it openly and explicitly in initial teacher education. The following section describes how research has studied deficit perspectives and language about preservice teachers.

Deficit Discourse and Preservice Teachers

In contrast to extant in-service teacher literature, research that provides insight into how preservice teachers come to take up and deploy deficit language needs to be more extensive. However, the studies that do exist provide information to fuel our curiosity, concern, and desire to contribute to this critical body of research.

In the context of initial teacher education, some scholars have investigated the impact specific words or phrases have on how preservice teachers think and talk about particular groups of children. For example, Brown (2010) conducted a study to explore how preservice teachers talk about, understand, and deploy the "at-risk" phrase. Brown discovered a "paradoxical stability and tentativeness of teacher candidates' talk about risk, academic achievement and the deployment of the 'at-risk' category" (p. 1077). In other words, while the preservice teachers expressed beliefs that "at-risk" children were more likely to experience "low achievement" in

school than their peers, they also expressed a belief that "engaging in... risk discourse carries with it its risks" (p. 1084). Similarly, Pica-Smith and Veloria (2012) conducted a study to explore, among other research questions, how 67 undergraduate students across various college programs (including elementary education) understood the construct of at-risk. They report that undergraduate students were influenced by the dominant "risk discourse" that they argue "pathologizes youth of color, poor youth, and youth with disabilities" (p. 40).

In another study, Salerno and Kibler (2016) explored how preservice teachers described "challenging" students in written reflections and, in doing so, whether or not those preservice teachers would draw on students' multiple identities. They grouped approximately half of the 267 nouns the preservice teachers used to describe children into three categories: (a) Behavior problem (17.8%), (b) disabilities (16.3%), and (c) English learner (15.5%). As they say in their own words, "From this analysis, we were surprised not by how often [preservice teachers] described students in multiple ways but by how often they did not" (p. 271). This observation falls in line with Dyson's (2015) argument that "in the process of naturalization [of deficit language]…resources and strengths [of children] are 'erased'" (p.199).

In sum, previous research suggests a relationship between deficit language and how preservice teachers describe and conceptualize the children they work with; however, these studies need to account for how preservice teachers initially take up this language. Therefore, our study aimed to move this body of literature forward by investigating how preservice teachers initially use deficit discourse to describe children. However, it is essential to note that Browning (2018) found that preservice teachers could disrupt and dismantle the use of internally persuasive deficit discourse through core reflection. For instance, after preservice teachers were taught the steps of core reflection, they shifted deficit feelings of angst and frustration about challenging students to empathy and understanding, even when their mentor teachers continued to sanction the use of deficit language (Browning, 2018). Further, Browning did not provide the preservice teachers with alternatives to deficit language, only with the tools of core reflection, which is essential to combat socialization practices that mark students with deficit labels.

At the start of our study, our research question was: How do five preservice teachers describe how they group and instruct their students? Based on deficit discourse that emerged

during our focus group conversation with our participants, we revised our research question: How and why do preservice teachers take up deficit discourse? In the next section, we describe our study's theoretical orientation.

Theoretical Framework

Socialization in Teacher Preparation

As teacher educators, while we seek to problematize deficit labeling practices deployed by any educational stakeholder, we take a particular interest in how such discourses come to be part of our preservice teachers' vernacular in discussions about children's literacy abilities. We recognize that preservice teachers construct their identities, at least in part, by drawing on prior knowledge of education and educational practices based on (a) Their own experiences as K-12 students (Harper & Rennie, 2009; Haverback & Parault, 2008), (b) their teacher preparation program (Britzman, 1986; Vasquez & Arzúna, 2009), and (c) their practicum settings (Beijaard et al., 2000; Cochran-Smith, 1991; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Kosnik & Beck, 2008).

For this study, we use the word *practicum* to describe the setting for internships where preservice teachers provide assistance in classrooms and learn various teaching practices from in-service teachers. The practicum setting was exciting because we constantly heard preservice teachers and their in-service Collaborating Teachers (CTs) use deficit language to describe children in the classrooms they were jointly instructing. This was especially troublesome to us because we explicitly modeled more constructive language alternatives, such as emerging and striving learners in our university coursework, as well as during coaching events (pre-conference, video-recorded observation of a teaching event, individualized video coding sessions of that teaching video, and post-conference reflections (Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014)). Still, those alternatives did not seem to “take” with our students.

We theorized that the practicum setting was overpowering our efforts to dismantle deficit discourse because deficit perspectives and language were the dominant ways of viewing and communicating about children in that setting. Because of this, we turned to the theories of *figured worlds* (Holland et al., 1998) and *socialization* (Goffman, 1959) to make sense of preservice teacher identity construction and the role it plays in their uptake of deficit language. Specifically, the figured world we investigated for this study was the *world* of "teacher."

"Figured worlds." Inevitably, many current inductees into the teaching profession were taught as K-12 students within the same educational system they now seek to be part of as educators, making it easy for them to be *socialized* into that structure. Socialization is how individuals learn to play assigned roles (Goffman, 1959) from interactions with others within a figured world (Holland et al., 1998). According to Holland and colleagues (1998), figured worlds are identity categories with historical phenomena with specific traditions and discourses predicated on social activity and participation in those activities. Holland et al. (1998) further explain that the social activities that form such identity categories are predicated on three primary constituent constructs: *Artifacts*, *discourse,* and *identity*.

Artifacts. Holland et al. (1998) describe artifacts as the "means by which figured worlds are evoked, collectively developed, individually learned, and made socially and personally powerful" (p. 61). Hatt (2007), who investigated the figured world of "smartness" with urban youth, calls artifacts "semiotic mediators, which act to influence psychological processes and behaviors over time" (p. 151). Within the figured world of smartness, Hatt (2007) found urban youth who had been categorized from deficit perspectives and subsequently displaced from schools through expulsion or dropping out recognized smartness as grades, diplomas, labels (such as "gifted" or "honors students"), standardized test scores, lexicon, and going to college. Hatt (2007) further reported that the disenfranchised youth did not feel capable of attaining the artifacts above. Yet, Woodside, Zeigler, and Paulus (2009) state:

> ...artifacts of practice are used as resources when producing new meaning in a community (e.g., counseling with parents and teachers, conducting individual and group counseling, and implementing program evaluation). These artifacts emerge from a history or shared engagement yet remain ambiguous because they are open to reinterpretation by the community members. This ability to negotiate the meaning of the repertoire is part of becoming a full member of a community or practice (p. 22).

Therefore, to be wise, the participants in Hatt (2007) felt a sense of agency when they redefined smartness to highlight their ability to survive and successfully navigate city streets by, for example, managing poverty, evading police during drug deals, and understanding street culture.

Discourse. Artifacts have historical significance that mediates meaning and the consequent actions of individuals through discourses about what those artifacts represent within figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998; Urrieta, 2007). Artifacts must be distinct from the discourses, articulating their value and significance in figured worlds. Holland et al. (1998) state that this second construct of figured worlds, discourse, is "inscribed upon people, both interpersonally and institutionally, and within them. Selves are socially constructed through the mediation of powerful discourses and their artifacts" (p. 26). Within educational discourse, educators readily accept the powerful discourses that "shape taken-for-granted understandings and meanings in schools" (Hatt, 2007, p. 109) to include the artifacts and discourses that often marginalize children.

In our study, within the figured world of a teacher, the artifacts that influenced the discourse in the schools where our participants interned were (a) standardized test scores, (b) deficit labels (e.g., "low babies"), and (c) children themselves, who provided both CTs and our preservice teachers opportunities to stratify them just by their existence in the classroom. In this paper, we view the taken-up deficit labels used to categorize children in our participants' practicum classrooms as both artifacts (because of the way they evoke and develop a very particular way of being a "teacher" and of "knowing" children in classrooms) as well as discourse within the social world of teaching.

Identity. The third construct of Holland et al.'s. (1998) The concept of figured worlds is identity. Urrieta (2007) explains, "Identities are…formed in the processes of participating in activities organized by figured worlds" (p. 109). The historical artifacts and discourses associated with the institution of education are often predicated on the construction and distribution of predetermined identities; for example, what it means to be smart (Hatt, 2007), definitions and dispositions about Multiracialism (Chang, 2014), what it means to be a teacher (Beijaard et al., 2004; Bell, 2008), and even the expectations placed on children in their classrooms (Pollack, 2012a). Bell (2008) and Goffman (1959) posit that everyday life is a ritualistic performance where participants follow a scripted code set forth by society, in which discursive interactions shape and are shaped by social structures. Bell and Goffman's perspectives help conceptualize the social, cultural, and political structures preservice teachers encounter as they engage in

discursive relationships in field experiences. Such structures ultimately socialize novices into the world of "school" and "teacher," a world that, regrettably, is currently saturated in deficit language about children. Because of our theoretical perspective, this saturation communicates a metaphorically invisible message to novices that part of assuming the " teacher " identity is participating in the collective deployment of this deficit language.

When peripheral newcomers enter a figured world, they are subjected to innumerable discursive interactions about cultural artifacts that provide a foundation for assimilation into that identity category. Urrieta (2007) posits, "figured worlds are a social reality that lives within dispositions mediated by relations of power" (p. 109). In the context of education, Holland et al.'s (1998) construct of figured worlds provides a valuable framework for conceptualizing urban educational dispositions (Chang, 2014; Hatt, 2007; Urrieta, 2007). In preservice teacher education, teachers in training are exposed to discursive practices that label ("low," "high," "low baby," "bad reader," etc.) and disenfranchise children. Some teachers have adopted this deficit language and are passing on this proverbial socializing torch to the preservice teachers they mentor through their consistent and uncritical use of it daily to reference children and their academic performances.

In this study, we drew on the notions of figured worlds and socialization to conceptualize what occurred when our preservice teachers picked up the practices and language of their school cultures and in-service mentors. Since the figured world of “teacher” is predicated on the participation and reproduction of the language and activities of in-service teachers, our theoretical perspective allows us to claim that the preservice teachers in our study likely participated in what they saw and heard because of the robust process of socialization and their desire to enter the figured world of "teacher."

Methods

Study Design, Context, and Participants

For this study, we sought to investigate in what ways deficit language becomes part of our preservice teachers' everyday vernacular to describe children and approaches to instruction. Moreover, the theoretical lens that grounded this study was predicated on the constructs of figured worlds and socialization. The data discussed in this paper is from a 60-minute

exploratory focus group with five preservice teachers. According to Vaughn et al. (1996), conducting a single focus group interview in exploratory studies is possible. The information garnished from that interview would inform further research on the topic. Due to our study's aim and our desire to have a candid and informative conversation about specific school sites' language and instructional grouping practices, a focus group would provide us with the most robust data. This decision was further influenced by the work of Gall et al. (2007), who suggest focus groups: (a) Allow for interactions amongst interviewees that encourage them to state feelings, beliefs, and perceptions they might not articulate if interviewed individually and (b) avoid putting participants in a direct role for reporting information. Additionally, after questions are asked to participants in a focus group, the participants themselves help to draw out the views of others in the group.

The context for our study was a two-year, clinically rich teacher preparation program that operates out of a large urban area in the southeast United States. In this program, preservice teachers are known as "Residents," they complete more than 2,000 hours of field experience over their two years of practicum. From our perspective, Residents were ideal participants to inform our research question because of the extensive time they spent in field placements (in other words, within the figured world of “teacher”) observing and participating in conversations about children, teaching, and learning.

The program that served as the context for our study partners with six Title I public schools where university faculty, content coaches (instructional personnel with expertise in specific content areas who coach preservice teachers' instruction), partnership resource teachers, and school-based personnel work together to mentor and develop preservice teachers throughout the two-year program. We classify these schools in a large city as *urban emergent* (Milner, 2012) schools because of their challenges regarding resources, retaining qualified teachers, and student's academic development.

Although at the time of this study, we were directly providing literacy content coaching (Dennis, 2016; Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014) to only the final (second) year Residents, Sherridon had previously taught a year-long literacy content course to 21 first-year Residents and had encountered deficit language during that time as well. Therefore, we decided to include both first

and final-year participants in our study for several reasons: First, because we were uncertain as to when deficit language begins to appear in preservice teachers' vernacular when discussing children, teaching, and learning, we wanted to hear the language of preservice teachers at various stages of our program. Next, deciding to include first- and final-year residents allowed us to increase the size of our population. We used systematic randomized sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), where first and final-year Residents' names were placed in a randomizer, and selection continued until we generated five willing participants. Using randomized sampling in our study helped us ensure we did not execute any bias in who we selected for participation in the focus group conversation.

The five preservice teachers who participated in our study had been placed across two of our program's six partnership schools (Rawlings Elementary and Fruitvale Elementary; all names are pseudonyms). For this study, all demographic data was self-reported and collected during the write-up of this article in the spring of 2018. Our participants varied in racial backgrounds as well as previous K-12 school experiences. Two participants, Mia and Shauna, attended only public schools as K-12 students, while the other four participants (Melissa et al.) attended various private or charter schools. Table 1 provides in-depth profiles of all five preservice teachers who spoke with us.

Table 1: Participant profiles

Participant	Racial self-identification	Prior K-12 experiences	Practicum school/grade level placement	Status/months in the program at the time of study:
Ava	Hispanic-White	Private elementary school; 6th/7th grade in a public school; charter high school	1st grade Fruitvale Elementary	First-year Resident: Seven months
Leah	White	Private elementary school; public middle/high schools	5th grade Fruitvale Elementary	Final year Resident: 17 months
Melissa	White	(Data unavailable; left the program)	5th grade Rawlings Elementary	First-year Resident: Seven months
Mia	White	Public schools	5th grade Rawlings Elementary	Final year Resident: 17 months
Shauna	Mexican American	Public schools	5th grade Fruitvale Elementary	Final year Resident: 17 months

At the time of this study, the two elementary schools where participants interned, Rawlings and Fruitvale, had partnered with our residency program for over five years. At the time of the study, both schools were under significant pressure to perform well on upcoming math and reading high-stakes tests to meet accountability requirements and avoid consequences from the state. Demographics data for Rawlings and Fruitvale are displayed in Figures 1 and 2, respectively. This data was collected directly from each school's district website.

Figure 1: Rawlings Elementary School demographics

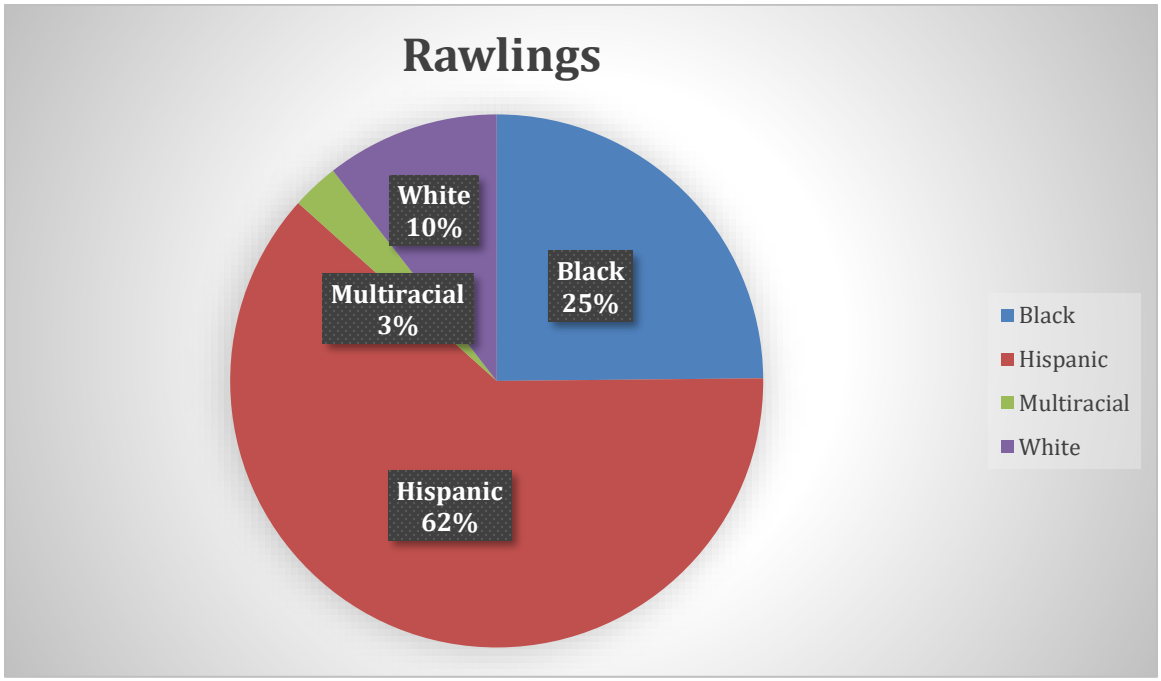
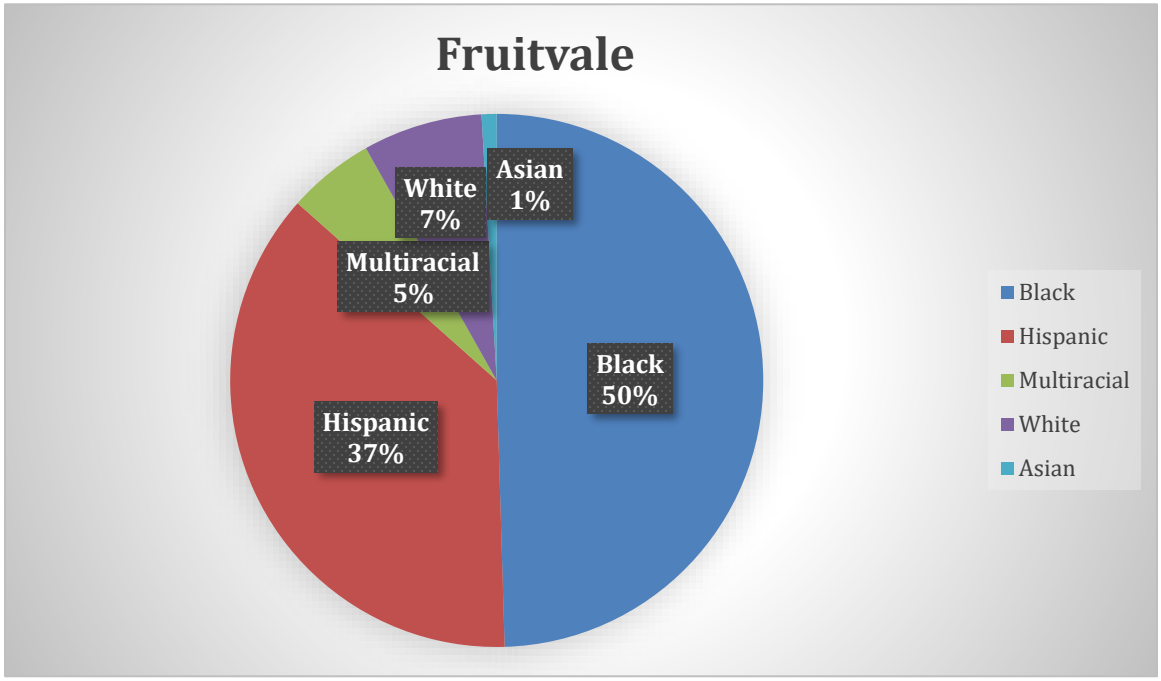


Figure 2: Fruitvale Elementary School demographics



Researcher positionality. As a researcher, I (first author) came to this study as the literacy content coach and former literacy instructor to study participants. Additionally, before engaging in this research, I served as a CT to the first and final-year Residents in the program. During my time as a CT, I studied how my language influenced (a) My Residents' identity development, (b) my primary students' literacy acquisition, and (c) children's social-emotional development. Given my long-standing and well-known history of problematizing deficit language in elementary school settings and preservice teacher literacy methods courses, we chose to have Brian of this paper conduct the focus group without me present to create as safe of an environment as possible for participants to share honest answers to our focus group questions.

At the time of this study, Brian was a research assistant for the Residency program that served as our research context, as well as a literacy content coach and a methods course instructor. While working with Residents, he witnessed deficit language in use, even though the program they were in (that he coached and taught for) espoused an ethic theoretically grounded in asset-based beliefs about students.

Because we researched within a communal context (one teacher preparation program) where we also participated as members of the community who provided literacy content coaching (Dennis, 2016; Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014) and literacy coursework instruction to participants, we align with Gelfuso's (2017) thinking when she argues the "researcher/participant role calls for concerted reflexivity and answerability" (p. 37). To address our positionality in this study, we engaged in ongoing conversations throughout our multiple phases of data analysis to challenge one another's thinking and to understand which ideas we potentially generated based on our biases and prior understandings and which held merit based on words, phrases, and perspectives participants shared in our data. It is important to note that we both identify as white and middle class, and I (the first author) identify as female, while Brian identifies as male. We both taught elementary school in urban contexts, depended on deficit (low/high) language until we learned the alternative language, and we both felt tension with our use of deficit language. Our colleagues continued using deficit language after we ceased using it ourselves. We understand that our demographic identities–race, class, gender, etc. shape our experiences in education, how participants interacted with Brian during the focus group, and how we interpret that data; we feel it is important to note that these identity markers are connected to deficit discourses.

Additionally, we used member checking to invite participants' voices back into the conversation facilitated through this paper to challenge any interpretations of the data they felt were inappropriate or unwarranted. To member check, we sent our findings to participants in written narratives with their direct interview quotes embedded as evidence to support each finding. Participants were instructed to articulate places where they felt we had inaccurately represented what they said or the intent behind what they discussed. None of the participants refuted our findings.

Data Sources

We generated data through a focus group with semi-structured interview questions (Lichtman, 2013), both audio and video recorded. The semi-structured format allowed the focus group conversation to engage with topics and tangents that deviated from the interview guide, allowing participants to openly discuss concepts they felt were important to share with us that

went beyond the scope of our initial questions. In other words, this format provided a flexible structure for the interlocutors to openly engage one another while addressing the questions in our interview guide (Appendix).

Data Analysis

Once the focus group data was collected, the audio recording was broadly transcribed (Gee, 2014); we then used deductive and inductive coding (Hatch, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) techniques across two iterations of data analysis to gain insight into our research question. Throughout all iterations of data analysis, we placed figured worlds as the grounding construct that guided our inquiry. In the first iteration, we independently listened to the audio recording of the focus group and engaged in open coding (Miles et al., 2013) of the corresponding transcript. Since our research question related to possible origins of preservice teacher deficit language, our coding attended to the appearance of deficit discourse (discourse that expresses underlying assumptions, beliefs, or theories about children that are rooted in a starting point of deficiency or low expectations) and to any attributions (implicit or explicit) our participants offered for its origins.

After we independently engaged in open coding of the transcript data, we met in person to share our initial codes and watch the focus group's video recording together. This served as a second iteration of data analysis and was deductive (Hatch, 2002) since we used our existing codes from the first iteration as a lens through which to engage in our second round of analysis. However, during this second round of analysis, we remained open to the emergence of additional codes (Miles et al., 2013) that might have yet to surface when we independently analyzed the data during our first round. Additionally, the presence of video footage during the second round of analysis allowed us to confirm that we had previously attributed all dialogue transcribed from the focus group audio to the appropriate participant. After both rounds of data analysis were complete, we used our final set of codes to identify patterns in our participants' conversations. Then, we collapsed those patterns into broader findings that informed our research question.

For example, through the lens of figured worlds, when participant Shauna makes the following statement,

> I am guilty of that [using a deficit label] sometimes…It is just that I do not know. How else? I feel bad when I say 'red group,' too. It hurts me to say, but that is how they are categorized.

We both independently coded this section for the use of deficit labels. We then connected this use of deficit labels to socialization when she said, "I don't know like how else…" because we explicitly modeled more constructive language alternatives in university settings. However, the practices in the practicum context significantly influenced her language about children more than the theoretical conversations in university coursework. We then met and were able to determine that Shauna felt 'dissonance deductively' (she claimed to be 'guilty,' 'feel bad,' and be 'hurt') when deploying this language about students, and through the second round of data analysis, we confirmed that other participants also felt such dissonance to deficit language.

Findings

Evidence from our data suggests participants (a) Relied on reductive and deficit-based labels to describe the children in their classrooms, (b) attributed their use of these labels to the procedures and discourses of their school sites, and (c) demonstrated both cognitive dissonance and silent resistance toward such language about children.

In what follows, we describe our participants' enactment of their schools' labeling practices, reflecting deficit language and its apparent origin. These two findings are particularly relevant to a broad audience, including university faculty, school administrators, CTs, and policymakers who share our devotion to creating more just and equitable learning contexts for children. To protect the anonymity of the school administrators we work with, we use gender-neutral pronouns in excerpts from transcript data where participants directly reference statements made by their school principals.

Finding One: Reductive and Deficit-Based Labels

During the focus group discussion, deficit labeling practices began to surface when participants described how the children in their classrooms were grouped for literacy instruction, particularly children who had been retained or were considered *below-level* literacy learners by the school district's grade-level literacy expectations (as measured by the state's standardized test). One particularly salient labeling practice participants discussed throughout our

conversation was that of using colors to indicate perceived ability "levels" of students, such as *green* ("proficient learners"), *yellow* ("average" or "bubble" learners), and *red* ("below-level" or "academically deficient" learners). Interestingly, this practice occurred even when some of our participants' CTs were uncomfortable. The following series of excerpts from our focus group data illustrate the deficit labeling practice of using colors to refer to children:

> Ava: ...And, um, so I will work with the red [students].

Mia, who was placed at Rawlings Elementary, used identical "color language" when she shared:

> Our third-grade retainers are in our red [group], which is very concerning.

Mia also told us:

> Our green group is called the proficient group.

Shauna, who was placed at Fruitvale with Ava and Leah, said:

> …[the students have been] grouped to green, yellow, red. [Later]: And I know, like we [CT and Shauna], we joked about it occasionally. Like, 'Oh, we're just going to start labeling all their stuff, red, yellow.' However, because… it is so...it makes no sense to us.

Melissa, one of the first year Residents in the focus group, told us the following:

> I know that in one of the other first-year [a first-year Resident], her teacher had her put garage sale stickers on each student's desk: red, yellow, and green.

Melissa, who was placed at Rawlings Elementary with Mia, understood these colored garage sale stickers to be correlated to the children's numeric reading levels.

We identified color-coding groups of children as an example of a deficit labeling practice because it is a method of stratifying children into a metaphorical hierarchy that would be visible to anyone observing how instruction was organized in the classrooms where our preservice teachers were placed. Based on our conversation with participants, we concluded this hierarchy was constructed using just one narrow metric: Children's reading "levels," as measured by either a standardized test (in intermediate grades) or a computer program (in Ava's primary grade placement). These tests and programs become an artifact of the figured world of "teacher" for our preservice teachers, resulting in discourse that categorizes and stratifies children. Such hierarchies risk affixing to children's identities established through speech (Wortham, 2010) and can become stable over time. As we noted previously, the discourse that surrounds fixed and

narrow "identifiers" threatens to socialize newcomers (i.e., preservice teachers) into a world of "teacher" that reduces children's multiple and complex identities down to just one aspect of what they know and can do on a state test or computer program. In other words, depending on how children score on the test, they get assigned a color, categorized by deficit language (i.e., red group babies).

The appearance of this deficit discourse in our focus group conversation prompted [second author] to ask participants, from their perspective, *'Where does this idea of the yellow… this language come from?'* This brings us to a discussion of our second finding: Evidence that our participants' "acquisition," or deployment, of these labels, came about because of their exposure to them during their practicum experiences.

Finding Two: Circulation of Deficit Discourse at School Sites

Newcomers to figured worlds find themselves on the periphery of the identity category they wish to enter as they learn the practices, language, and personified actions that allow individuals to be seen as participating members of that figured world (Holland et al., 1998; Woodside et al., 2009). For newcomers, whom Woodside et al. (2009) refer to as "boundary dwellers" (p. 21), acceptance and participation into the desired identity category require them to actively learn the practices and discourses through interactions with current members of that identity category. At Fruitvale and Rawlings, deficit language and subsequent ability grouping practices based on deficit labels were the accepted means of communicating about children's educational progress. However, they were not ideas or language our preservice teachers (the boundary dwellers) initially espoused upon entering their preparation program. Participants unanimously agreed they needed to know their schools' grouping approaches and language before their practicum placements. They made this evident when they told us things like:

Shauna**:** I have yet to learn how students are grouped in school.

Ava: ...I never thought, in a specific way, how I was going to group children.

Mia: My teachers, I do not recall them ever purposely grouping us; it was always like we chose it.

Later, when [second author] asked if participants had learned color-coded grouping practices in their university coursework, Mia answered:

I did not learn that at [her current university].

This sentiment was the consensus within the focus group. When asked, Leah (who shared an administrator with Ava and Shauna) stated she felt Fruitvale's deficit labeling practices had originated with Fruitvale's principal:

Leah: "...I mean, [principal says] the 'red.' Language came from them [principal].

Shauna immediately indicated she agreed with Leah's assessment of where the language at Fruitvale came from. Similarly, Mia, while not directly attributing the genesis of the deficit labeling practices at Rawlings to the school principal, shared that she had heard Rawlings' principal deploy the language during her grade level team meetings, stating, "I was in a data meeting with my CTs and my principal. And [the principal] said, 'Focus on the bubble kids'".

These comments made by our participants indicate they would not necessarily have thought to group and instruct children according to deficit labels had it not been for the emergence of such deficit discourse in their practicum placement. They told us that from their perspectives, these kinds of grouping practices were not present in their own K-12 schooling experiences. Even if we assume that, to some degree, these grouping practices were present in participants' schooling experiences. However, they were unaware of them. Notably, they were not part of our participants' figured world of "teacher" until, regrettably, their school mentors introduced them to their vocabulary and practice.

As K-12 students, our participants were on the other side of the proverbial hegemonic teacher's desk. They thus would have been exposed to something other than the school-based grouping conversations that encompassed decisions made for them and their peers. This unfortunate aspect of our conversation with our preservice teachers leads us to believe that these full-time Residents were being socialized into a world of deficit discourse that they asserted they did not learn in the university context during coursework and were unaware of before their practicum. If a school perpetuates hegemonic social structures, impressionable preservice teachers may be vulnerable to "socializing targets" (Bell, 2008; Goffman, 1959; Pollack, 2012a) who are likely to reproduce such structures.

This finding aligns with prior research that demonstrates teachers primarily construct their identities and conceptions of what it means to be "teacher" through (a) their previous

experiences as K-12 students, (b) coursework in their preparation program, and (c) their practicum context (Beijaard et al., 2000; Britzman, 1986; Cochran-Smith, 1991; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Hammerness et al., 2005; Harper & Rennie, 2009; Haverback & Parault, 2008; Kosnik & Beck, 2008; Vasquez & Arzúna, 2009). It is common for tensions between preservice teachers' pedagogical ideologies and practicum contexts' teaching practices (Cochran-Smith, 1991; Gu, 2010; Trent, 2010; Vetter et al., 2013). Unfortunately, to complete their training programs, preservice teachers often feel the need to comply and conform to the pedagogical approaches and world of the practicum school (Thomas, 2005; Trent, 2010; Vetter et al., 2013); such was the case for the participants in this study, for example:

Mia: I am guilty of that sometimes. It is more so because I do not know how else to, um, not like it is putting them down because they are low. It is; I do not know how else ...

Leah: Am I guilty of saying that, too? For sure.

As the evidence in the next section demonstrates, they experienced cognitive dissonance.

Finding Three: Dissonance About the Language

Cognitive dissonance theory suggests a disruption amid and among an individual's thoughts about a lived experience such that the individual then strives to resolve this uncomfortable physiological and psychological tension (Festinger, 1957). Interestingly, although we found evidence that our participants had been socialized into using deficit discourse, we also found evidence that they unanimously disapproved of it. Put differently: Our participants appeared to use deficit language as a coping mechanism to function in the context of their practicum experiences because it was the language offered to them. However, they also clarified that this discourse did not resonate with their ethos as future educators. Further, participants demonstrated thinking about how children could be grouped. The instructions diverged from their school's approaches and focused on children's needs more broadly conceptualized than in terms of the expectations of one or two standardized tests. We observed their dissonance and their divergent thinking when they made statements like the following:

> Shauna: I am guilty of that [using a deficit label] sometimes…It is just that I do not know how else...I feel bad when I say 'red group,' too. It hurts me to say, but that is how they are categorized.

Leah: To us, it is [categorizing by color] so ridiculous.

After Shauna brought this dissonance into the conversation, Mia expressed her dislike for the focus on testing that accompanied deficit language:

Mia: I think it is ridiculous…I think it would benefit many kids if you focused on the standards or at least the concepts they were not getting, [as] opposed to a test.

In response to these statements by Mia, Melissa told the group:

No, I like that. That is like what I said [earlier in the conversation], hitting each need. So, group them by what they need right then, not necessarily what they need from their [testing] data from last year.

Melissa, who had previously shared that she knew a first-year Resident who had been asked to label children's desks with yellow, red, and green garage sale stickers, went on to express her feelings about that stratifying practice:

Melissa: So then, not only do they know their level, but everybody else knows what level they are on. Furthermore, like that... that is heartbreaking**.**

At one point, as some of our participants described how they were asked to support English Language Learners (ELLs), Mia told us disapprovingly that, from her perspective, "people think they're stupid." Leah and Shauna (who co-taught) then expressed their belief in their ELLs' ability to be successful despite the deficit narrative and labels surrounding them in their school:

Leah: ...the ELLs, too, in math, however. When you take away the word problems and stuff we have to do...

[Crosstalk]

Leah:...you give them the numbers, they *can* do it.

[Second author]: Okay.

Shauna: They got it. Yeah.

In sum, the preservice teachers we spoke with adopted a language that was not their own through socialization (Bell, 2008; Goffman, 1959) to function in the figured world of "teacher" in their practicum settings, yet they did not feel right about it. Our data suggests they experienced a tension between the *naming devices* (Stein, 2004) used at their schools to group children, the

implications those naming devices had for instruction, and their personal beliefs about how children should be thought about and instructed. However, when faced with this inner turmoil, they remained silent. Therefore, theirs was a *silent resistance*: Their protests existed in their minds but did not prompt them to action (likely because, from their perspective, their school-based mentors were the source of the deficit language), most likely because they will need to work with these CTs for the entirety of their practicum, or student teaching.

Milner (2007) states that with preservice teachers, "the most important unseen danger is in what is not stated in the classroom—that is when silence ensues during discussions" (p. 394) about race and culture. Although Milner's (2007) "classroom" and discussions of "race and culture" are about university contexts and not necessarily the practicum classroom, this narrative applies to our participants' experiences because these soon-to-be teachers remained silent about their feelings towards the use of deficit labels. The participants even took up deficit language and labels because they told us there were no other narratives to discuss the children in their classrooms.

Urrieta (2007) explains that within "figured worlds lies the possibility for making/creating new ways, artifacts, discourses, acts, perhaps even more liberatory worlds" (p. 111). However, our participants did not create new artifacts, discourses, or a "more liberatory" world during their practicum: Although they did not feel comfortable using deficit language to categorize/group children, they did not receive alternative language in the context of their schools' institutional lexicons from which to draw when grouping and discussing children constructively. Holland et al. (1998) state, "People tell others who they are, but even more importantly, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are" (p. 3). To survive as boundary dwellers, the preservice teachers in our study used deficit language and practices modeled in their practicum setting as they learned to "perform" their role as "teacher." In other words, they took up the deficit discourse that labeled (artifact) the children (also artifacts) in their classrooms and used those labels to discuss children in marginalizing ways. We fear they will continue to do this once they become full members of the figured world of "teachers" unless otherwise mentored.

Discussion

Evidence from this research suggests participants took up these deficit labeling practices because there were no other available narratives to discuss the children in their educational context, and many of their students were Black and Brown. Figures 1 and 2 show that 90 percent of Rawlings and 93 percent of Fruitvale consisted of primarily Black or Hispanic children. Thus, these preservice teachers deployed deficit labels that further reified negative stereotypes for the diverse children in their classrooms, even if unintentionally. However, exploring potential direct connections between the use of deficit labels and traditionally marginalized populations of children was beyond the scope of our study and, thus, is a subject that needs further intentional investigation.

However, to build on previous research (Brown, 2010; Pica-Smith & Veloria, 2012; Salerno & Kibler, 2016), our qualitative study was designed to uncover possible explanations for the ways preservice teachers "pick up" deficit discourse during their time in teacher preparation programs. Our findings imply that one answer to this question is that they acquire such language from the individuals charged with their development. Notably, the preservice teachers we interviewed felt uncomfortable with the discourse at their schools but did not indicate to us that they openly resisted it, either to their CTs or school administrators. Similarly, some shared that their CTs privately resented deficit discursive practices but did not mention those CTs taking their concerns to their school administrators.

This begs the question: Why did neither the preservice teachers nor their in-service teacher mentors appear to resist the language and teaching practices they disapproved of? We believe that thinking of their school contexts through Holland and colleagues (1998) notion of "figured worlds" will help us make sense of this finding. At Fruitvale and Rawlings, deficit discourse acted as a shared language amongst educators and school leaders, as it carried implications for instruction and the construction of children's identities in classrooms. Even though they disliked it, using this shared deficit language ensured membership in the school community for our preservice teachers and their CTs. It allowed them to function within that community's unofficial code of instructional conduct. Resisting the language could have placed

our novices or their CTs on the school community's outskirts, a scenario that needs a radical reversal.

We suggest one way to achieve such a reversal is for schools to "rehumanize" the assessment practices (Johnston, 1997) they have adopted that were shaped by former federal policies (e.g., NCLB) which inadvertently dehumanized children and acknowledge that the words we choose to describe children's learning and progress matter. Johnston (1997) notes that part of assessing literacy development is representing literacy learning for the task at hand and reminds us "[e]ach representation…has consequences for those involved. Assessment conversations are about how we treat one another as human beings" (p. 5). As Browning (2018) has told us, rehumanizing can be achieved through core reflection. Suppose we wish to produce future educators who use assessment thoughtfully, effectively, and in nuanced ways that do not reduce children's identities down to colors or labels relative to standardized test scores. In that case, preservice teachers must be apprenticed into more appropriate assessment and instruction practices than the participants in this study had available to them. As Haberman (1991) has noted, the pedagogy of poverty associated with inequitable conceptions and expectations of students "appeals to those who do not know the full range of pedagogical options available" (p. 292). Teacher education should emphasize the development of preservice teachers' PCK (Shulman, 1986) and understanding of good teaching (Gelfuso, 2018; Haberman, 1991) through means such as content-specific coaching (Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014). This may serve as a helpful starting point for explicitly teaching novices more professional language.

Shifts in language will require teacher educators to intentionally notice the teaching and assessment practices (and corresponding discourse) modeled for novices in teacher preparation programs in the context of both coursework and practicum placements and, if necessary, challenge those practices. Instead of working subversively within testing and discourses that threaten equity, teacher educators must support preservice teachers to develop the agency needed to push beyond these constructs.

However, the deficit discourse problem will only be partially eradicated through developing preservice teachers' PCK and personal sense of agency to resist such language. Deficit perspectives that lead to deficit language reflect underlying ideological paradigms "borne

of faulty belief systems that, if not reshaped, would undermine their [preservice teachers'] potentials to be…equitable teachers" (Gorski, 2016, p. 379). This means preservice teachers' initial beliefs and conceptions about children, teaching, and learning matter to the work of preservice teacher education and needs to be addressed (Gelfuso, 2018; Pajares, 1992).

In addition to teacher educators, policymakers have a responsibility to fulfill in the process of eliminating deficit language from our field. Constructs such as "high," "low," and "at-risk" echo education policy-speak that requires children to reach restrictive and predetermined attainment "levels" as mandated by narrowly standardized tests (a connection that several of our participants made). While we do not believe this excuses schools for conforming to a felt need to "teach to the test" or place children in disenfranchising categories, we also recognize the crucial role that a change in policy and policy language could play in releasing schools from even the thought of approaching children and instruction from inequitable paradigms. Policy language has, at the very least, contributed to the culture of deficit language that now circulates throughout too many schools. Even when in-service teachers wish to problematize deficit discourse, the moment testing enters the conversation, "deficit thinking….comes along to legitimize that testing works, just not with these kids" (Pitzer, 2015, p. 13). For educators, resistance to deficit discourse wanes once confronted with test-based discursive practices. If practicing teachers struggle to move from discomfort with deficit language to resistance, can we expect the preservice teachers in their care to contest these practices? This is a question the findings of our study push teacher educators to grapple with.

It is difficult to find empirical evidence that provides concrete measures preservice teachers can take to combat the deficit. Nevertheless, Browning (2018) found, through core reflection, that preservice teachers resisted deficit discourse that "seemed to play a role in shaping the field experience in more expansive ways" (p. 95). For Browning (2018), preservice teachers could change the dehumanizing narratives they were being taught to use about children and replace those deficit perspectives with empathy and understanding. Similarly, Smagorinsky and Barnes (2014) found that "activities and experiences that encourage TCs [teacher candidates] to reflect may contribute to the reconstruction of their schooling experiences" (p. 42), thus providing preservice teachers a conduit to reshape their oppressive educative experiences and

approaches. Therefore, deploying reflective practices in practicum student-teacher settings does provide an outlet for preservice teachers to overcome negative authoritarian tensions in those contexts.

Conclusion

In our exploration, we acknowledge the extensive body of research that delves into the development and consequences of deficit discourse within educational settings. However, there needs to be more literature regarding how preservice teachers adopt this language during their teacher preparation. This study aimed to address this gap, revealing that participants (a) Utilized reductive labels when describing children, (b) attributed their usage of these labels to exposure during their practicum, and (c) displayed both cognitive dissonance and silent resistance toward deficit language.

As highlighted by Pollack (2012a), "The act of making the 'invisible' visible, and the un'heard' heard, is often the first step toward the development of transformative, equity-oriented educators" (p. 885). Scholars' statements emphasizing every child's entitlement to a high-quality and equitable education must be underscored. Paradoxically, we observe individuals within research, education, school leadership, and policymaking endorsing language that disenfranchises children who learn differently or outside the expected instructional pace.

Aligning with Johnston (2012), we argue that "changing our talk requires gaining a sense of what we are doing, our options, their consequences, and why we make the choices we make" (p. 7). To facilitate critical reflection among preservice teachers regarding their language and practices, mentors must engage in their critical reflection. As Dyson (2015) charges, "our work to transform schools and ourselves continues" (p. 206).

Future research should delve into direct connections between deficit labels and traditionally marginalized populations of children, particularly among preservice teachers. This exploration should extend beyond language, investigating its impact on perceptions of ableness as educative humans in elementary classrooms. Additionally, research should examine students' perceptions of teachers' discourse, recognizing the pivotal role of student voices in shaping strategies that combat stereotypes and deficit thinking in the school setting.

Moreover, exploring how administrators engage in deficit versus asset-based language is crucial. Our findings indicate the need to assess whether administrators recognize the impact of their language on school climate and culture, specifically concerning how children are referenced. This holistic examination will contribute to the ongoing efforts to transform schools and enhance educational practices.

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