

Interrupting Deficit Narratives in Literacy Education

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The intersection of literacy education, marginalized individuals and groups, and poverty from an international perspective is the focus of this issue of *Global Education Review*. These three topics are inextricably intertwined. Within this labyrinth, to initiate change becomes a massive undertaking. For many, the schools seem to be the logical place to begin. The assumption being, if student achievement levels are increased, so too is access to better, high-paying jobs. As those levels rise, poverty should decrease. In theory, individuals can rise from marginalized economic, social, and cultural status to a more powerful position in the dominant society; or, they can empower themselves within their own economic, social, and cultural setting. However, factors outside the school setting often hamper the opportunity for success in school and become a counter influence to well-intentioned educational reform

There are many narratives constructed about the impoverished, marginalized and undereducated. In the United States, the one told by politicians and policy-makers supports starting change in the schools. It is discussed with “standards” and “achievement gaps” and intimidates through the fear of falling behind the other countries. This narrative doesn’t address the underlying problems that cause the lack of academic success by the marginalized in

societies world-wide. Thus, in order to continue to benefit a particular group, a narrative must be constructed to explain this inequality. These stories of inability, inferiority and immorality become institutionalized, they become ideology.

It may seem paradoxical that educational reform alone cannot be expected to be the panacea for increasing the achievement levels of those at the bottom of the economic ladder. David Berliner noted of U.S. schools, “Although the power of schools and educators to influence individual students is never to be underestimated, the out-of-school factors associated with poverty play both a powerful and a limiting role in what can actually be achieved” (2006, p.950). Additionally, Joseph Stiglitz, recipient of the 2001 Nobel Prize in economics, decried the growing inequality and economic class bifurcation in America arguing that it leads to decreased opportunity, including decreased educational opportunity (Stiglitz, 2012). This is especially true for children whose impoverished surroundings contribute in a significant way to poor health and nutrition, unstable family life, school absence, and, ultimately, to low

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educational achievement as measured by present standards, such as standardized tests. Another advocate of social and economic reform to accompany educational reform is James Traub, an American journalist, who wrote, ““Educational inequality is rooted in economic problems and social pathologies too deep to be overcome by school alone. And if that's true, then there really is every reason to think about the limits of school” (Traub, 2000, p. 54).

Recently, Michael Katz (2013) released the 2nd edition of *The Undeserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation with Poverty*. In a frank and accessible manner, Katz explains the evolution of personal and political beliefs about the poor in the United States. In his view, poverty is not just an economic problem; it is also a moral problem; a biological problem; a cultural problem. These long-standing beliefs about those living in poverty are replicated in the educational system. Students and their families are viewed as deficient; they are lacking proper drive and desire for education; families don't care about their kids or value education; they don't read to their children or value literacy.

Thus, successful literacy practices or literacy practices valued by the dominant group are also constructs. The number of books in a household often has been used as an indicator of levels of literacy and attitudes toward education. However, the ownership of books may not be possible for a number of reasons, especially financial. There are many ways to access books and be involved in literacy activities. The literacy practices of different groups arise from different needs.

There is no one way of “doing” literacy. While this may be a gross oversimplification, this is just one small example of a type of construction.

How can researchers disrupt these narratives? The articles in this issue serve as examples of research that interrupt narratives of deficit and pathology. The researchers avoid generalizations. However, as the articles illustrate, unequal educational outcomes for marginalized students is documented in three countries. All the articles study impoverished communities, but the poverty experienced is very different and is a reflection of particular histories and social constructs associated with each place. The overarching goal of the research in this issue is to report success evidence-based approaches to enhance literacy internationally. The researchers begin with strengths, not deficits, of the students, literacy practices and communities they study. They build upon what is known and has already been successful for students. Each article in this issue describes the plight of impoverished, marginalized, and disenfranchised individuals or groups in public schools and surrounding communities. More specifically, they address areas where change is possible.

As the articles in this special issue illustrate, the deficit model in education and society has been constructed across time and place. Whether in Argentina, Costa Rica, or the United States, those affected by poverty do not have equal access to education. It is also common for the impoverished to be physically separated from those with higher socioeconomic status. Research sites for the articles in this issue are: (a) the inner city

“ghetto” in the United States; (b) the “precarios” in Costa Rica and; (c) the “villas de emergencia” in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Although these areas have physical boundaries that separate them from other more affluent areas of their respective societies, significant invisible boundaries exist as well.

Katz (2013) noted that despite empirical evidence to the contrary, “The terms used to describe the undeserving poor serve to isolate and stigmatize them Part of the reason [for this] is that conventional classifications of poor people serve such useful purposes. They offer a familiar and easy target for displacing rage, frustration and fear” (2013, p.2). The first article in this issue by Victoria Purcell-Gates provides an example of how history shapes how one group constructs a negative perception of another.

Using an ethnographic analysis, Purcell-Gates investigates the perception of marginalized Nicaraguan students in Costa Rica in the article “Constructions of Difference and Deficit, A Case Study: Nicaraguan Families and Children on the Margins in Costa Rica.” Her results reveal the historical, economic, and cultural contexts that lead to negative perceptions of marginalized and impoverished Nicaraguan immigrants. These perceptions are held by the dominant as well as the non-dominant, marginalized class. These perceptions, in turn, result in a deficit model rather than a difference model. The deficit model, in turn, influences perceptions of ability to learn, in this case Nicaraguan families living in Costa Rica. She found, “the ‘problem’ of underachievement of children from marginalized communities lies not in the

community marginalized but in the marginalizing community – in their socially constructed perceptions of deficit and difference” (p.21).

Catherine Compton-Lilly’s article “A Family Case Study: How Money Matters for Academic Learning” provides a counter-narrative to the perception of a passive parent who doesn’t value education. Drawing on data collected in a ten year ethnographic study, Compton-Lilly, reinforces Ms. Rodriguez’ agency and understanding of the issues directly related to living in poverty that are impeding the academic success of her children. Compton-Lilly reveals the struggles of an impoverished mother and her family who, although living in a high poverty area, tenaciously strived to instill literacy as a family value despite perceptions of an inequitable school system that systematically provided little support for the education of children in her neighborhood. Compton-Lilly advocates for a change in the dominant discourses that blame poor families and teachers for the literacy challenges faced by poor children, and issues a “call to arms” for all to “have a more powerful voice” to redress the pernicious effects of poverty.

Students living in poverty experience many difficulties. Ironically, before their education begins, they are already behind; they are “at-risk of failing.” In order to ensure that all students are ready for school, many countries have implemented pre-kindergarten programs. Rosemberg, Alam, and Stein’s article “Children Interactions in Literacy Tutoring Situations. A Study with Urban Marginalized Populations in Argentina,” addresses a tutoring program that pairs 4-5

year old tutees with tutors who are 12-13 year old, resulting in a mutually beneficial relationship. The “From Child to Child: A Tutor-Child Literacy Program” builds upon the literacy practices of this “urban-marginalized population” in order to develop the skills necessary for success at the kindergarten level. This article employs conversation analysis of the tutoring session to show the development of practices that promote learning.

It is with the hope of changing the narrative about literacy potential and achievement for marginalized populations internationally that we present the articles in this issue. Katz (2013) wrote that “poverty has been viewed as a problem of persons” (p.xxii). Instead of looking at the deeper social inequalities that cause certain groups to remain in poverty, marginalized groups are constructed as being responsible for their own poverty; they lack the skills, the motivation, and the intelligence to be successful. Who is deserving and who is undeserving is often a matter of perception. In education, a

perception of difference as synonymous with deficit is a misunderstanding with pernicious consequences, especially for individuals with no voice, or have been silenced in society. We hope this issue of *GER* foregrounds problems and solutions to change the “difference is deficit” model.

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