
Volume 2

Number 1 *Jonathan Kozol's Nation of Shame Forty
Years Later*

Article 5

2007

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Curt Dudley-Marling

Lynch School of Education, Boston College

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Recommended Citation

Dudley-Marling, Curt (2007) "Return of the Deficit," *Journal of Educational Controversy*: Vol. 2 : No. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://cedar.wvu.edu/jec/vol2/iss1/5>

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ARTICLE

Return of the Deficit

Curt Dudley-Marling

Lynch School of Education, Boston College

What is it about school that manages to transform children who are good at learning . . . regardless of their economic and cultural differences, into children who are not good at learning, if they are poor or members of certain minority groups?" (Gee, 2004, p. 10)

Education as the great leveler of social class is one of the enduring myths of American culture. With hard work and a good education "any American can grow up to be president." It was in this context that the *Brown v. Bd. of Education* decision of the US Supreme Court held such hope for African Americans. After decades of "inherently unequal," separate schooling sanctioned by the Supreme Court's *Plessy* decision, integrated classrooms and schools required by the *Brown* decision promised an antidote to the poverty and discrimination that limited the life chances of African Americans.

The persistent achievement gap between Black (and Hispanic) students and their White counterparts (NAEP, 2003) and the re-segregation of American schools (Kozol, 2005a; Orfield & Yun, 1999) mock the promise of *Brown*. The reality of increasingly segregated schools in American cities has led many Americans, including Black Americans

to set aside the promises of *Brown* . . . to settle for the promise made more than a century ago in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 Supreme Court ruling in which 'separate but equal' was accepted as a tolerable rationale for the perpetuation of a dual system in American society. (Kozol, 2005a, p. 34)

The evidence indicates, however, that accepting *separate* schools means settling for "savage inequalities" that characterize segregated schooling in the United States (Kozol, 1992, 2005a). Compared to affluent, predominantly White suburban schools, urban schools overpopulated by poor Black and Hispanic students are more likely to suffer from poorly maintained and overcrowded facilities, shortages of qualified teachers, an insufficiency of instructional resources and materials, and impoverished curricula that emphasize "basic skills" to the exclusion of challenging curricula enacted in more affluent school districts (Kozol, 2005a).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has rightly focused on children who have, academically, been "left behind," a group in which poor Black and Hispanic children are over represented. Arguably, the testing and accountability mandates of *NCLB* insure that even *separate* schooling is *equal*; however, the evidence indicates that the principal effect of *NCLB* on students "left behind" is a narrow, skills-based "pedagogy of poverty" (Haberman, 1991, p. 290) "alleged to be aligned with governmentally established goals and standards and . . . suited to what are regarded as 'the special needs and learning styles' of low-income children" (Kozol, 2005a, pp. 63-64). The "special needs and learning styles" of low-income children are, in reality, code for presumed deficiencies in the language, culture, and experiences of poor and minority children and their families (e.g., Hart & Risley, 1995; Payne, 2005). The danger is that a "pedagogy of poverty," by limiting low-income students' opportunities to experience rich, engaging curricula that characterizes the education of children in affluent schools, contributes to a process by which "intelligent, creative, cultured children [are] transformed . . . into seemingly 'slow,' deficiated, acultured beings" (Gee, in Rogers, ix, 2003).

The purpose of this paper is to interrogate the deficit model that undergirds the impoverished, "proto-militaristic" curricula that dominate the educational experiences of students attending poor, urban

schools (Kozol, 2005b).

Return of the Deficit

Responding to a racially and economically divided country in the 1960s, President Lyndon Johnson called for a national “war on poverty” (Johnson, 1964). Ultimately, President Johnson believed the poor would lift themselves out of poverty by acquiring the skills demanded by a complex society; therefore, one of the places where the Great Society would be built was in the classrooms of America. Early education programs like *Head Start* and *Project Follow Through*, an extension of *Head Start*, evidenced the federal government’s commitment “to giv[ing] people a chance” to share in the nation’s riches by improving the schooling of disadvantaged children (House, Glass, McLean, & Walker, 1978). Although a range of pedagogical practices were enacted in *Head Start* and *Project Follow Through* classrooms, these programs were firmly rooted in a discourse of *cultural deprivation* (Ladson-Billings, 1999) that explains “disproportionate academic problems among low status students as largely being due to pathologies or deficits in their sociocultural background” (Valencia, 1986, p. 3). From the gaze of cultural deprivation theory, the lives of poor children are deficient in opportunities for acquiring “the knowledge and ability which are consistently held to be valuable in school” (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966, p. 24). A particularly pernicious version of cultural deprivation theory seeks to explain persistent social and economic inequities in terms of genetic differences (e.g., Hernstein & Murray, 1994). Cultural deprivation theory has been severely criticized for pathologizing the language and culture of poor and working class people (e.g., Labov, 1972; Ladson-Billings, 1999). However, a concomitant of educational reforms associated with *NCLB* has been a revival of deficit explanations for the relatively poor academic performance of poor Black and Hispanic children.

Cultural deprivation theory emerged during a period in history when the policy of school desegregation promised to remedy the failure of separate schooling to provide Black Americans with “equal” education. Ironically, deficit-based explanations for the high proportion of school failure among poor, African American and Hispanic students have re-emerged during a period when re-segregated, unequal schools are diminishing the educational opportunities of many Black and Hispanic children (Gee, 2004; Kozol, 1992, 2005a). The *return of the deficit* signifies a depressing symmetry in demographic trends and public policy. Deborah Stone (1997), writing on the art of political decision-making, argues that “political reasoning is [about] metaphor-making and category-making . . . strategic portrayal for persuasion’s sake, and ultimately for policy’s sake” (p. 9). Portraying disproportionate school failure among Black and Hispanic youth in terms of “personal troubles” (Mills, 1959) or cultural deficiencies sustains public policies that emphasize individual self interest and personal responsibility (e.g., welfare reform, high stakes testing), leaving no reason to consider the effects of poverty and discrimination or underfunded schools and deteriorating facilities on children’s learning.

In the next section, I examine three illustrative examples of deficit theories that are currently exerting considerable influence on educational policy makers: Ruby Payne’s “culture of poverty”; Hart and Risley’s research on vocabulary development; and, the *family literacy* movement. I then consider the perverse effects of educational policies and practices informed by deficit models for poor and minority students, their families and communities, and for a democratic society.

Ruby Payne and the “Culture of Poverty”

Ruby Payne has created an immensely popular professional development program based on her claims about a “culture of poverty” that underpins the generally low academic performance of poor children. Her self-published book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Payne, 2005), has sold over one million copies and, according to a recent article in *Education Week*, Payne and her organization are in high demand for keynote speeches, seminars, and professional development workshops (Keller, 2006).

In general, Payne asserts that learning about the cultural underpinnings of intergenerational poverty will positively affect teachers' work with poor students.

Payne's *framework* for "understanding" poor children and their families holds that there is a self-perpetuating "culture of poverty," based on "hidden rules," that prevent the poor from rising out of poverty (Payne, 2005). Hidden rules are "the unspoken cues and habits of a group" (p. 37) and Payne identifies many hidden rules that, she asserts, are tied to economic class. For instance, people living in generational poverty view the "present as most important [and] decisions are made for the moment based on feelings or survival" (p. 42). In contrast, for the middle class, the "future is most important [and] decisions are made against future ramifications" (p. 43). Similarly, the "driving forces" for people living in poverty are "survival, relationships [and] entertainment" (p. 42) while "work [and] achievement" (p. 43) are the driving forces for the middle class. People living in poverty value education in the abstract "but not as reality" (p. 42); the middle-class . . . view education as "crucial for climbing the success ladder and making money" (p. 43).

According to Payne, learning the hidden rules of poverty is an adaptive skill, necessary for coping with the material circumstances of poverty. To illustrate the adaptive nature of hidden rules, Payne offers the example of a recently divorced woman who found herself in situational poverty. To survive in her new circumstances, Payne argues that this woman "may need to use [her] body. Sex will bring money and favors. Values are important, but they don't put food on the table" (pp. 24-25). The poor must learn the hidden rules of the middle class, however, if they are to climb out of poverty and achieve success in school and the workplace. "For our students to be successful," Payne states, "we must . . . teach them the rules that will make them successful at school and at work" (p. 3).

Payne also argues that understanding how the "culture of poverty" affects the day-to-day lives of the poor will help teachers work more effectively with their poor students. Payne describes a number of characteristics of poor people that she believes typify a culture of poverty. According to Payne, people living in poverty know how to get guns; know "which grocery stores' garbage bins can be accessed for thrown-away food" (p. 38); move often; have common law marriages; and, know how to function at laundromats. The poor view jail as an ordinary part of life. Their homes are disorganized, noisy, violent, and nonverbal. Men are often absent in poor families and single mothers engage in frequent, casual sex. The poor are also more likely to know certain words like *roach*, *dissed*, and *deportation*. The scenarios Payne uses in her book to illustrate the problems with which poor people must cope feature children and adults whose lives are complicated by drugs, domestic and gang violence, sexual and physical abuse, prostitution, drunkenness, and teenage pregnancy.

The validity of Payne's essentialist accounts of people living in poverty is challenged by Bomer, Dworin, May, and Semington (in press) who have examined the research base unpinning Payne's assertions about a "culture of poverty." Based on their analysis of Payne's "truth claims" and citations linked to those claims, Bomer and his colleagues conclude that Payne's assertions about the ways poor people live their lives are without foundation, at best misrepresentations of other people's work, reflecting the basest stereotypes about the poor that have existed for over 100 years.

Ruby Payne portrays the lives of the poor as pathological, deficient in the cognitive, emotional, linguistic, and spiritual resources needed to escape poverty and move into the middle class. At a moment when "scientifically-based" research is a dominant theme of educational reform, Payne's work is without a research base. Yet, Payne's sensationalist caricatures of people living in poverty have achieved enormous popularity with teachers, administrators, and policy makers (Keller, 2006).

The Language of the Poor: The Case of Hart and Risley

Perhaps the most persistent version of blaming the poor for their poverty implicates the (deficient) language of poor people as the cause of their academic and vocational failures. As far back as 1776, Scottish philosopher George Campbell observed, "as the ideas which occupy [the minds of the poor] are few, the portion of the language known to them must be very scanty" (in Nunberg, 2002). In the 1960s, Bereiter and Englemann (1966) concluded that poor Black children had hardly any language at all. A few years later it was claimed that lower-class children spoke a "restricted code" that limited their ability to cope with abstract knowledge and ideas associated with formal schooling (Bernstein, 1971). More recently, Hart and Risley (1995) reported a widely cited study linking language-learning environments in the homes of poor children with school failure.

Like Payne, Hart and Risley sought an explanation for the persistence of intergenerational poverty. Hart and Risley (1995) began with the belief that Lyndon Johnson's *War on Poverty* in the 1960s had succeeded in removing "barriers [to upward mobility] . . . and a boost up was provided" (p. 2) to people living in poverty. They concluded, however, that early intervention programs like *Head Start*, underpinned by the proposition that "that a concentrated dose of mainstream culture would be enough to raise intellectual performance [of poor children] and lead to success in mainstream schools" (pp. 2-3) had failed poor children. Hart and Risley observed that

competence as a social problem is still with us. American society still sees many of its children enter school ill-prepared to benefit from education. Too many children drop out of school and follow their parents into unemployment or onto welfare, where they raise their children in a *culture of poverty* [italics added]. (p. 2)

Hart and Risley (1995) focused their attention on the relationship between vocabulary learning and intergenerational poverty; specifically, they examined language interactions between parents and children in the homes of upper- and middle-class, working-class, and welfare families over a period of two and one-half years, beginning when children were seven to nine months old. Their data highlighted a number of differences in the language used in the homes of these families, particularly between affluent professional families and welfare families. They found, for example, that the average three-year-old from the welfare families demonstrated active vocabularies of around 500 words compared to the three-year-olds from professional families who demonstrated vocabularies of over 1000 words. Hart and Risley reported that these differences persisted after children entered school and were strongly predictive of children's vocabulary development and reading comprehension in third grade.

The quantity and quality of parents' language directed to their children is clearly implicated in Hart and Risley's analysis of differential rates of vocabulary learning among the children they studied. For example, children of the professional parents, compared to children in the welfare families, simply heard more words spoken to them. Extrapolating from the data collected during monthly observations, Hart and Risley concluded that "by age 3 the children in professional families would have heard more than 30 million words . . . and the children in welfare families 10 million" (p. 132). Hart and Risley also judged the language interactions between professional parents and their children to be of higher quality compared to the language directed to children in welfare families.

We saw that in an average hour the professional parents displayed to their children more words and more different words of all kinds, more multiclausal sentences, more past and future verbs, more declaratives, and more questions of all kinds. The professional parents also gave their children more affirmative feedback and responded to them more often each hour they were together. (pp. 123-124)

Ultimately, Hart and Risley linked differential language practices in professional and welfare families to cultural differences, arguing that all the children they studied acquired the language they needed to

function in their families and communities. However, according to them, adapting to life in a “culture of poverty” places fewer linguistic demands on children and adults with the concomitant that the language of welfare parents transmits cultural values not well suited to academic or vocational success in contemporary American society. Hart and Risley (1995) concluded that

the differences we saw between families seemed to reflect cultural priorities parents casually transmit through talking. In the professional families . . . parents seemed to be preparing their children to participate in a culture concerned with symbols and analytic problem solving. . . . In the welfare families, the less amount of talk with its more frequent parent-initiated topics, imperatives, and prohibitions suggested a culture concerned with established norms. . . . [Welfare] parents seemed to be preparing their children realistically for the jobs likely to be open to them, jobs in which success and advancement would be determined by attitude [and] how well the children presented themselves. (pp. 133-134)

Paralleling Payne’s argument about “hidden rules,” Hart and Risley theorized that children living in poverty learn the vocabulary they need to get along in their families and communities but not the vocabulary required for success in school.

The Hart and Risley study has been enormously influential. A *Social Science Citation Index* search revealed more than 350 references to the Hart and Risley study in journals representing a wide range of disciplinary perspectives. Their findings have also been cited frequently in the popular press, usually in support of early intervention programs for children living in poverty. A recent report on the teaching of reading in US colleges of education recommends Hart and Risley’s (1995) work as “essential reading” (Walsh, Glaser, & Wilcox, 2006) for future teachers.

Hart and Risley’s data have been used to make strong claims about the language of poor children and their families. The rhetorical force of these claims is undermined, however, by serious limitations in their methodology and analysis. Families living in poverty are an ethnically, linguistically, and racially diverse group (US Census Bureau, 2003). Essentialist claims about the language and culture of families living in poverty based on a sample of six Black welfare families living in Kansas City are, therefore, unwarranted. Further, assertions about the language and culture of the poor, based on a sample of six welfare families, all of whom were Black, and thirteen professional families, twelve of whom were white, puts a Black face on poverty, reinforcing pernicious racial stereotypes. The reality is that only 25% of the 33 million Americans living below the poverty line are Black. Forty-six percent are white (not Hispanic) (US Census Bureau, 2003).

Hart and Risley’s analysis is also burdened by an ethnocentric bias that led them to interpret the cultural and linguistic practices of welfare families from the perspective of their own middle-class values. Hart and Risley report, for example, that poor and working class African American parents tend to use more direct request forms with their children (e.g., “pick up the toys”) compared to white, middle-class parents who favor indirect requests (e.g., “why don’t you pick up the toys for me?”). Other researchers have reported similar findings (e.g., Bernstein, 1996; Delpit, 1988; Heath, 1983); however, Hart and Risley, make strong, evaluative claims about cultural differences in the use of request forms. To Hart and Risley, the more indirect request forms favored by the professional families are emblematic of a (middle-class) culture that is more polite and affirming, gives children choices, and encourages problem solving. Hart and Risley judged the direct request forms used more often by poor families to be negative, impolite, and restrictive. “Just as the children in the professional families at age 3 shared the prevailing affirmative tone of family interactions, the children in the welfare families at age 3 shared the prevailing negative tone” (p. 177). It is not at all clear that this is how children and parents in poor and working-class families experience more direct forms of request. Yet, Hart and Risley concluded that “it will take thousands of hours of affirmative feedback even to begin

to overcome what [a welfare] child has learned about herself in her first three years” (p. 188).

Linguistic research over the past 40 years has emphasized the richness and complexity of language used by poor children and adults (e.g., Goodwin, 1990; Heath, 1983; Jackson & Roberts, 2001; Labov, 1972; Michaels, 1981; Miller, Cho, & Bracey, 2005). Linguist James Gee (2004), for example, observed that

linguists have known for years that all children – including poor children – have impressive language ability. The vast majority of children enter school with vocabularies fully fit for everyday life, with complex grammar and with deep understandings of experiences and stories. (p. 17)

Yet, educational policymakers have generally been deaf – even hostile – to evidence of linguistic proficiency among poor and minority students. The Oakland (California) School Board’s “Ebonics Resolution,” built on the claim that Black Vernacular English is a rich and complex language dialect, has been ridiculed by media pundits, politicians, and policymakers (Nunberg, 1997). The ready acceptance of Hart and Risley’s research, despite its flaws and limitations, reveals a particular openness to deficit views that locate responsibility for poverty in the language and culture of the poor. Through a deficit lens, concerns about separate schooling, inequitable resources and facilities, and differential curricula are set aside in favor of a discourse of individualism that emphasizes standards, accountability, and individual merit. Savage inequalities that implicate economic and political structures in the creation of poverty are transformed into another of life’s hurdles to be overcome – with hard work and a standards-based education, anyone can grow up to be middle-class.

The Family Literacy Movement

In 2003, Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney proposed full-day kindergarten for students in underperforming school districts contingent on parents’ agreement to attend week-end classes where they would learn ways to help their children in school. The governor put it this way: “I want parents in troubled districts to understand how they need to be partners in the education process with the teachers, with the administration, and with their child” (Phillips, 2003, p. A1). This sense that poor academic performance of students in “troubled” (usually urban) school districts is linked to parents who are not sufficiently committed to their children’s education or lack the skills to support their children’s schooling animates much of the discussion among politicians and policy makers on reforming urban schools.

The desire for parent involvement in schools is based on the belief that parents’ interactions with their children contain “elements of teaching that greatly influence child[ren]’s readiness for school” (Lesar, Espinosa, & Diaz, 1997, p. 163), particularly in reading (Green, 1995; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). It has achieved the level of “common sense” that effective early literacy programs must include “a home-school connection component that links the school’s efforts with children’s home experiences and enlists parents in supporting their children’s academic development” (Goldenberg, 2001, p. 215). If a “child’s success in school literacy programs . . . depends on the experiences he or she has at home” (Morrow & Young, 1997, p. 736), then it is reasonable to conclude that the literacy skills of some children fail to develop because their parents have not provided them with sufficiently rich and diverse experiences with print.

Research indicates that the quantity and quality of literacy interactions found in the homes of poor and minority children often do not resemble interactions around literacy found in middle-class homes or in school (Purcell-Gates, 1993). In general, when they enter school “low-income children appear to . . . have had less experience with books, writing, hearing stories, learning and reciting rhymes, and many

other types of experiences that promote literacy learning” (Goldenberg, 2001, p. 216). Poor children have less access to books and other print materials in their homes and communities (Neuman, 1996, 1999; Neuman & Celano, 2001) and are less likely to be read to by their parents or siblings (Adams, 1990; Come & Fredericks, 1995). When they are read to, poor children often have different sorts of interactions around books with their parents than middle-class children have with their parents (Vernon-Feagans, Hammer, Miccio, & Manlove, 2001). For instance, well-educated, middle-class mothers tend to “give more feedback and information to their children and ask more questions that orient the child to the specifics of the [literacy] task” compared to poorer, less well-educated mothers (Lesar, Espinosa, & Diaz, 1997, p. 164). Arguably, the out-of-school literacy experiences of non-middle class children put these students at a relative disadvantage when they enter school, and the family literacy movement evolved to help (some) parents provide literacy experiences for their children that are believed to be critical for success in school.

Family literacy initiatives range from comprehensive, community-based programs to school- or classroom-based programs or projects including, for example: adult literacy programs (Purcell-Gates, 1993); advice for parents on why, what, and how to read with their children (Morrow & Paratore, 1993; Purcell-Gates, L’Allier, & Smith, 1995); teaching parents to label pictures and letters (Pelligrini, 1991); the use family journals (Harding, 1996); reading incentive programs (Morrow & Paratore, 1993); book giveaways (Darling, 1992); school lending libraries (Come & Fredericks, 1995); “tips” on how to motivate children to read (Come & Fredericks, 1995); encouraging parents to watch television programs like *Reading Rainbow*, *Sesame Street*, or *Between the Lions* with their children (Purcell-Gates, L’Allier, & Smith, 1995); and, book bag programs (Cohen, 1997).

A body of research supports the efficacy of some family literacy initiatives (e.g., Darling, 1992; Gamse, Conger, Elson, & McCarthy, 1997; Lesar, Espinosa, & Diaz, 1997; Neuman, 1996; Pelligrini, 1991; Shanahan, Mulhern, & Rodriguez-Brown, 1995), although the gains achieved by children who participate in these programs may be small (Purcell-Gates, 2000). In particular, intervention programs that target specific strategies for parents to use with their children around reading and writing have been found to be effective in improving children’s achievement in school *in areas directly related to those strategies* (Purcell-Gates, 2000).

The family literacy movement evolved to help non-middle-class parents provide their children with critical literacy experiences thought to be missing in the homes of many poor families. From this deficit-oriented perspective, lower levels of literacy among non-middle class students are a “family problem”; therefore, it is the family that must be “fixed” (Taylor, 1997, p. xvi) or “re-socialized” to compensate for its presumed deficiencies (King, 1994). Like Hart and Risley and Ruby Payne, the family literacy movement pathologizes poor families while situating high levels of school failure among poor and minority children in their heads, homes, and communities. Evidence that contradicts the portrayal of homes of non-middle-class children as print poor, that many poor families are “differently literate,” for example, have had little impact on the school-home relationships (Fishman, 1988; Goldenberg, 2001; Heath, 1983; Rogers, 2003; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). In the context of the deficit discourse that underpins the family literacy movement, schools and various social institutions are positioned to assist, but the ultimate responsibility for escaping the circumstances of poverty rests with the poor families who are expected to take on the language, culture, and parenting practices of more successful, middle-class families (Taylor, 1997).

Consequences of a Deficit Gaze

Theories of cultural deprivation that emerged in the context of the War on Poverty and desegregation in the 1960s have re-emerged in the context of *No Child Left Behind* and the re-segregation of American schools. No child profits from a perspective that portrays her family or her community as

deprived or deficient; however, a deficit stance per se is not problematic, but what comes from this stance is. A deficit gaze that pathologizes individuals, families, and communities is instantiated in pedagogical practices and dispositions that are primarily responsible for disproportionate levels of failure among poor and minority populations. In this concluding section, I consider the negative effects of a deficit gaze on poor students, their families and communities and for a progressive vision of a democratic society.

Consequences of deficit gaze on students

The deficit gaze is underpinned by a behavioral model of learning in which learning is operationally defined in terms of hierarchical sets of discrete skills and low-achieving students are constructed as people in need of de-contextualized skills and sub-skills. In this formulation, overcoming learning deficiencies – learning the right skills – requires more time and better methods. Linking learning to time leads to a general intensification of schooling, including longer school days, longer school years, more homework, increased use of grade retention, and, too often, the elimination of “frills” like art, music, and even recess that take time away from learning skills. Linking learning to methods leads to a “methods fetish” (Bartolomé, 1994) in which teaching is reduced to technique and students to test scores.

Inevitably, the behaviorist theories that undergird the deficit gaze lead to standardized curricula – really methods – as a means of ensuring quality control; that is, making sure that everyone learns the right skills, at the right time. Students are constructed as so many widgets – put in raw material (skills) at one end, treat it all in exactly the same way, and there will emerge at the other end a predictable and standardized product (Kohn, 2000). This deficit gaze renders students’ background knowledge and experiences irrelevant, or worse, *risk factors*. In the context of *method*, students’ background knowledge, culture, and experience are separated from the curriculum and are unavailable as resources to support students’ learning, making learning more difficult. Bartolomé (1994) warns that separating students from “their culture, language, history, and values,” reduces students “to the status of subhumans who need to be rescued from their ‘savage’ selves” (p. 176). Separating school learning from students’ background knowledge and experience also makes it difficult for many students to see schools as places that have anything to do with them. To the degree that students’ knowledge and language are permitted in the classroom, they are there so that they can be evaluated for “correctness.” However, as the discussion of Ruby Payne and Hart and Risley illustrates, the language of children from affluent homes is more likely to be valued by schools and the larger society as “correct” than the language of children from poor families which is typically portrayed as deficient. Arguably, the representation of students’ language, culture, and lived experience as deficient contributes to student alienation, which many school critics see as the root cause of high levels of school failure in non-middle-class communities (McCarthy and Crichlow, 1993).

Linking learning to narrow constructions of *method* leads to dreary, de-humanizing, “proto-militaristic” (Kozol, 2005a) curricular practices in which there is little meaning or joy. The relentless focus on “best methods” (for teaching skills) separates learning to read from reading, for example, denying many students opportunities to read authentic, connected texts, a crucial experience in learning to read (Allington, 2005; Gee, 2004). Absurdly, in the context of the methods fetish, books may be seen as a threat to learning reading skills. Overall, the obsession with “skills” leads to impoverished curricula that deny large numbers of poor children, the rich, meaningful learning opportunities common in more affluent communities (Anyon, 1980; Bartolomé, 1994; Kozol, 2005a). Arguably, these differential curriculum practices contribute to increased failure among poor and minority students as they pass through the grades (Gee, 2004), a process by which the rich get richer. This circumscribed “pedagogy of poverty” (Haberman, 1991), enacted in many poor, urban schools, “manages to transform children who are good at learning . . . into children who are not good at learning, if they are

poor or members of certain minority groups?" (Gee, 2004, p. 10).

Consequences of deficit gaze on families, communities, and a democratic society

In Annie Proulx's (1994) novel, *The Shipping News*, Quoye, the main character, shares his worries about his daughter, who is about to start school, with his aunt, to which she replies:

Why don't you just wait, Nephew. See how it goes. I agree with you that she's different, you might say she is a bit strange sometimes, but you know, we're all different [but] we learn how to disguise our differentness as we grow up. Bunny doesn't do that yet. (p. 134)

We all learn to hide many of our idiosyncrasies, but the deficit model demands more – much more. For many non-middle-class Americans, cultural and linguistic differences are constructed as deficiencies that must be overcome – or fixed – by learning the appropriate or correct cultural and linguistic practices of the middle-class. For these students, the price of success in school (and in society more generally) is rejection of the language and culture of their communities and families. For many non-middle-class students, this is too high a price to pay for school success (Ogbu, 1999).

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) identified *respect* – for students, for their families, and for their cultures – as a fundamental trait among successful teachers of African American students. Characterizing students' ways with words and their ways in the world as deficient is a quintessentially disrespectful act. To quote Geneva Smitherman: “[W]hen you lambast the home language that kids bring to school, you ain't just dissin' dem, you talking bout they mommas!” (in Wheeler & Swords, 2004, p. 472).

Finally, deficit approaches to education that aim to remake poor and minority children in the image of the dominant, middle-class are antithetical to fundamental principles of a participatory democracy. A US Department of State website offers the following observation about the relationship between diversity and democracy.

Democracies make several assumptions about human nature. One . . . is that any society comprises a great diversity of interests and individuals who deserve to have their voices heard and their views respected. As a result, one thing is true of all healthy democracies: They are noisy. (US Department of State, International Information Programs, online)

Political philosopher Chantal Mouffe (2006) argues that democracies are necessarily noisy – and messy. For Mouffe, democracies are characterized by intense, vigorous clashes among various ideas and values. A leveling of cultural and linguistic differences – in the name of school success – undermines the schooling of poor and minority children as it does violence to democratic participation. From this point of view, providing rich, engaging curricula that is respectful of the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of all American school children is in everyone's interest.

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