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Challenging the Deficit Model and the Pathologizing of Children: Envisioning Alternative Models

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Editorial

Lorraine Kasprisin, editor

THEME: Challenging the Deficit Model and the Pathologizing of Children: Envisioning Alternative Models

This issue of the *Journal of Educational Controversy* focuses on a theme that has been touched on in some of our earlier issues as well as discussed on our blog. See especially the article by Curt Dudley-Marling, "Return of the Deficit," in our winter 2007 issue of the journal. Curt later engaged in a conversation on this topic with another author, Paul Thomas, in an exchange on our blog that extended from November 2014 to January 2015. Because we conceive this journal as a conversation over time, we thought that it was time to return to the topic and devote an entire issue on a subject that requires a multi-dimensional, in-depth analysis.

We asked authors to respond to the following controversy:

Martin Seligman, founder of the field of positive psychology, has said that, "Modern psychology has been co-opted by the disease model. We've become too preoccupied with repairing damage when our focus should be on building strength and resilience, especially in children." Is this also true of modern education? Political and pedagogical responses, from the "War on Poverty" through "No Child Left Behind" to address the educational gaps in academic achievement of historically marginalized and neglected groups (the poor, minorities and children with disabilities), were often deeply rooted in a language of cultural deprivation and special needs. Has this deficit model begun to surreptitiously creep into our educational discourse for all children? Have we become too focused on needs and deficiencies and forgotten that children also have capacities and strengths? Does the current emphasis on accountability and standardized testing contribute to the pathologizing of children? We invite authors to respond critically to this argument, envision alternative models, examine historical causes and precedents, analyze political and social ramifications, and share real life stories on the influence these ways of thinking have on the classroom and on the learning as experienced by students.

The issue has three sections:

Part 1: The Prospect Experience: A Strength-Based Alternative and its Legacy

Part 2: Articles in Response to the Controversy Posed

Part 3: Building on the Strengths of Families and Communities: A Preview of the Upcoming 17th Annual Educational Law and Social Justice Forum at Western Washington University

Part 1: The Prospect Experience: A Strength-Based Alternative and its Legacy

This issue is dedicated to Patricia Carini, who was instrumental in the founding of the Prospect Archive and Center for Education and Research in Vermont. The Center functioned as research center, archive, school, and small teacher education program, with Prospect School operating between 1965 and 1991. Our guest co-editor for this issue of the journal, Susan Donnelly, worked at the Center during its formative years and presents this experiment as an example of an alternative model that avoids the prevalent discourse of deficit thinking and builds instead on the strengths and capacities of children.

(Susan is currently the Co-Coordinator of the Collaborative Schools for Innovation and Success [CSIS] at the Woodring College of Education, Western Washington University and will be presenting the ways the assets and strengths of parents and community can be brought into the life of our schools in our forum this spring. See Part 3 below.)

In her dedication to Patricia Carini and the role she played in the Prospect Center, Susan describes the life of a remarkable woman and her “genius” for bringing “large, philosophical ideas into close proximity with real children and, through detailed observation and disciplined description, to make the inner work of the person visible.” Indeed, the hallmark of the center’s approach was the Prospect Descriptive Process, a careful observation that opens up “new levels of meaning and understanding about children.” We provide links to two earlier articles by Susan that were published in the journal’s winter 2010 issue. Both give the reader insight into this process. See Susan Donnelly’s “Children’s Imaginative Communities - Microcosms of Democracy” and her slide show, “Universal Power to Create,” in which she carefully depicts the evolution of a child’s creative endeavors over time. In the slide collection of artwork from one child over the course of several years, Susan traces the consistent motifs found in her artwork, which give insight into the child’s imaginative capacities, expressiveness, values, and dreams. Essentially, Susan sees this deep understanding of a child that results from the use of the descriptive processes, as “an antidote to the deficit view that is so deeply embedded in our usual and historic ways of thinking about children as ‘empty vessels’ or ‘incomplete adults’ or ‘developmentally immature.’” For Patricia Carina, each child has a “characteristic way of relating to the world” that becomes the guide for the teacher in nurturing that child’s growth.

Although the school has since closed, the longitudinal studies and collection of children’s creative work are archived at the University of Vermont and continue to be the source for ongoing seminars and study groups for Prospect Fellows. In her article, “Resisting the ‘Single Story,’” Ellen Schwartz describes the unique ways four teachers have used the archival material in a variety of different school environments. After each teacher tells a story of his or her particular experience in the classroom, Ellen draws some pivotal conclusions for our readers to reflect upon.

In Part 2, we have articles published in response to the controversy.

In an invited paper, “Surpassing Sisyphus: The Tenacious and Promising Struggle to Push and Support a Strengths-Based Ideology and Practice in Education,” Sara Truebridge, author of a new book published by Teachers College Press, shares her developing ideas about the role of beliefs and resiliency in moving from a deficit-based ideology to a strength-based ideology and practice. (We have also provided a review of her book, *Resilience Begins with Beliefs: Building on Student Strengths for Success in School*.)

In the opening to her article, Truebridge responds rather emphatically to the questions we posed:

“Has this deficit model begun to surreptitiously creep into our educational discourse for all children?”
Yes.

“Have we become too focused on needs and deficiencies and forgotten that children also have capacities and strengths?” Yes.

“Does the current emphasis on accountability and standardized testing contribute to the pathologizing of children?” Yes.

Despite these affirmative responses to the questions, Truebridge still remains optimistic that changes are on the horizon. Coming from a background in policy, research and practice, however, Truebridge offers a view of praxis that is grounded in an understanding of the discrepancies between the intent of our policies and laws and the reality of their implementation, a realization that had produced great cognitive dissonance in her own life. How does one confront the often taken-for-granted set of beliefs that lead to a deficit-based ideology and its influence on practice? With her focus on strength-based practices, Truebridge concentrates on the development of resiliency as a dynamic, relational process rather than simply a trait one has, and the role of beliefs and the use of language that undergird it.

Andrea Davis also looks at praxis with a careful examination of ways teachers become complicit. In “How We Are Complicit: Challenging the School Discourse of Adolescent Reading,” Davis looks at the way the political pressure for accountability and the resulting abusive use of quantifiable measures have created a “discourse of deficit about adolescent reading.” The author’s analysis urges teachers to raise questions about the nature of reading itself, the complexity of making meaning, the socially situated context of reading, the role of their students’ own funds of knowledge, and the allure that a single objective measure as a shared professional discourse can have on reducing a real understanding for what is being studied. Examples of more authentic and complex literary experiences are offered.

In “Against Rubbish Collecting: Education and Restively Ambivalent Youth,” Tracy Psycher also looks at complicity by illuminating praxis within the theoretical frameworks of poststructuralism, disability theories, critical sociocultural and post-colonial analysis. Focusing on the treatment of students with backgrounds of domestic violence, Psycher’s analysis reveals the way language used to describe such youth has become institutionalized in practices with the resulting “resistant ambivalence” in students who experience these pedagogical treatments as a form of violence. Psycher suggests ways to disrupt this discourse of the “disordered other” that has led to the objectification and marginalization of youth and instead recommends an approach that gives agency to their lives.

In “Breaking the Mold: Thinking Beyond Deficits,” Elyse Hambacher and Winston C. Thompson bring out the complexity of dealing with deficit thinking by well-meaning teachers in the study of a dedicated, determined teacher, called Bentley, whose actions and understandings are both challenging and complicated. By highlighting the central tension surrounding the seductive logic of deficit thinking in her article, the author leaves it to the reader, who indeed may be conflicted also, to decide how effectively or even if Bentley has succeeded in resisting deficit thinking.

In “Deficit and Neoliberal Discourses, Urban Teachers’ Work and the ‘Blame Game,’” Heidi Pitzer studies the complexities of teaching in urban schools with a critical attention to its often prevalent use of racialized deficit discourse and its neoliberal market-based approaches to education. By focusing on teachers’ “critical talk” with its moments of insight into the underlying conditions and structures that are producing their problems, the author sees in those moments the possibility of agency that might have the potential for change. But because deficit thinking may often be exacerbated within a neoliberal culture, the author argues that such moments of insight into the constraints posed by neoliberal policies often prevent teachers from fully realizing their critical focus without falling back on deficit thinking.

In “Bottom Line Choices: Effects of Market Ideology in Florida’s Voluntary Preschool Policies,” Angela Passerno and Roderick J. Jones move our look at deficit thinking to the policy level. While many policies like the voluntary preschool education program often have the appearance of a progressive, well-meaning attempt to meet the needs of underserved and often marginalized children, the authors find that a deeper analysis of its language and assumptions reveals the ways that such policies often intensify

discriminatory and exclusionary practices. Specifically, the authors examine the underlying market-based ideological assumptions underlying Florida's Voluntary Preschool Policies and the consequences of such policies. Following Michael Apple's notion of repositioning, the authors try to look at these policies from the "standpoint of those who have the least power."

Finally, in "Precarity and Pedagogical Responsibility," Ann Chinnery's conceptual study attempts to reframe our concepts of vulnerability and pedagogical responsibility in the context of our increasingly diverse society. Since so much of educational discourse today is drawn from the field of psychology, the author emphasizes that her reframing of the problem draws primarily on ethical, social, and political theory. It is fitting that we end this section with an ethical, social and political analysis since we began it with an article that examined these questions by relying much more on a psychological model.

Part 3: Building on the Strengths of Families and Communities: A Preview of the Upcoming 17th Annual Educational Law and Social Justice Forum at Western Washington University

In the spring of 2015, we will follow up this issue with a discussion of another project that our co-editor for this issue is coordinating for the 17th Annual Educational Law and Social Justice Forum at Western Washington University. We hope to provide a video of that forum for our readers later. Co-editor Susan Donnelly, formerly of the Prospect Center, is currently the Co-Coordinator of the Collaborative Schools for Innovation and Success (CSIS) partnership between the Elementary Education Department at Western Washington University and Washington School in Mount Vernon, Washington. It is the result of a grant awarded by the Washington State legislature to build a partnership that would improve the achievement of the students. Among a variety of approaches that the college and the school are experimenting with is a Parent Action Team, an attempt to bring the assets and strengths of the parents and the community into the life of the school. Our upcoming spring forum will bring parents, teachers, administrators and students to the campus to talk about these efforts. Professor John Korsmo and his team provide a description of this current work-in-progress in Part 3 of this issue. His article discusses the goals of the project along with questions and concerns. We invite our audience to engage with the panel at our upcoming forum. Watch for information on our blog.

The article is entitled, "'Everyone Should Feel so Connected and Safe': Using Parent Action Teams to Reach all Families," by John Korsmo, Miguel Camarena, Andrea Clancy, Ann Eco, Bill Nutting, Basilia Quiroz, Azucena Ramirez, Veronica Villa-Mondragon, Stacy Youngquist, and Anne Jones.

We began this issue with a dedication to Patricia Carini for the work and vision of the Prospect Center in Vermont, a center that unfortunately no longer exists though its work continues through its archives at the University of Vermont. But we end the issue with the new ongoing work at Washington Elementary School and the Woodring College of Education in Washington with a special recognition to the Parent Action Team. The hope still lives.