

PART III

Creating Multicultural Classrooms



The Miseducation of a Beginning Teacher: One Educator's Critical Reflections on the Functions and Power of Deficit Narratives

Terry M. Pollack
San José State University

Everyday "storied" teacher talk about students and families can reveal and reinforce deficit thinking about racial/cultural "others." Through personal narrative and critical reflection, the author draws on results from a previous investigation into the nature and content of informal teacher discourse to discuss the miseducative potential of deficit narratives and their contribution to the uncritical acceptance and perpetuation of educational inequities. The author argues for the need to help preservice and beginning teachers surface unacknowledged beliefs about students and families of color and to "hear," challenge, and reframe informal, deficit-based teacher discourse by engaging them in targeted, critical listening and reflection on the deficit narratives they hear.

Through this article I wish to bring attention to a topic that has been largely neglected within discussions of how power and privilege are inscribed in dominant discourses within K-12 schools—namely, informal deficit-based "teacher talk" about students of color and language minority students. Overly simplistic explanations for why some students succeed in school and others do not tend to become unchallenged orthodoxies that may negatively

affect teaching and learning (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). Many of these orthodoxies are transmitted and reinforced through informal *conversational narratives* (van Dijk, 1987), which have the power to disseminate beliefs, attitudes, and expectations about students of color, their families, and their communities. My own investigation into everyday teacher discourse about students and families of color (Pollack, 2009) has revealed dominant narrative themes that work together to: (1) reinforce educators' deficit thinking about, and differential behavior toward, students of color; (2) contribute to a school culture characterized by low expectations for students of color; (3) contribute to an abdication of responsibility and a diminished sense of agency among teachers; and (4) contribute to the workplace socialization of beginning teachers and newcomers.

By recounting some of my own firsthand experiences with deficit narratives, I will illustrate how these stories can act as potentially powerful mechanisms for socializing and miseducating novice teachers. I conclude by suggesting that teacher educators engage prospective teachers in targeted critical listening to, and reflection on, informal teacher discourse about students and families as a means for: (a) surfacing and interrogating unacknowledged assumptions about racial/cultural "others," and (b) developing a critical consciousness of the ways in which deficit-based teacher talk can act in unseen ways to help maintain existing educational inequities.

Correspondence should be sent to Terry M. Pollack, 445 Muller Rd., Walnut Creek, CA 94598. E-mail: terrypollack@gmail.com

Informal Teacher Talk and Deficit Narratives

When K–12 educators gather to talk informally among themselves, they tend to discuss their work and their students. This informal teacher shop talk about students is often “storied” or story-like because it contains at least some story components (setting, characters, action, problem, resolution). These conversational narratives can portray individuals in a positive or negative light, and they can be long and detailed or quite brief. For example: “This is the third day in a row that Jamal came to school with no lunch or lunch money. Poor kid! How hard is it to pack a lunch for your kid in the morning?” Though brief, this narrative contains story components, and it clearly casts Jamal’s parents in a negative light.

Conversational narratives are not unique to the workplace or to the field of education; in fact, they are a common, everyday discursive practice. In everyday social discourse, stories serve several important sociocultural functions, such as teaching and learning about ourselves and others, communicating deeply-held individual and group beliefs and values, and maintaining and legitimating existing power hierarchies and dominant ideologies (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; McAdams, 1993; van Dijk, 1987). Stories can also function as evidence by presenting “experience-based facts” that strengthen an assertion or argument. Personal narratives can be particularly persuasive because they engage us emotionally and convey an air of credibility. In this way, negative stories about racial or cultural “others” can sound plausible and defensible without violating the socially accepted norm of ethnic and racial tolerance (van Dijk, 1987).

Teachers’ everyday conversational narratives about students and families can reveal deeply held beliefs and assumptions in ways that other types of discourse cannot. Stories shared among K–12 educators around the table in the faculty lunch room, while chatting during yard duty, at staff meetings, or during common prep periods, frequently tell of incidents and personal experiences that convey and may strengthen educators’ belief that disparities in academic achievement and other school outcomes are caused by students’ culture, class, and supposed endogenous deficiencies—factors over which teachers have no control (Pollack, 2009).

Deficit Narratives as Miseducative

My interest in issues of race and ethnicity in education began during my preservice teacher training two decades ago. Nothing in my life up to that point had prepared me for the sharp disparities along color lines that I witnessed in the racially and ethnically diverse urban schools where I began teaching. I was genuinely surprised to see the disproportionately large numbers of African American

and Latina/o students who were “identified” as low achievers, learning disabled, and as having behavior problems. I saw that these same students were far less likely than their white¹ and Asian peers to be afforded opportunities to participate in learning experiences that involve creative thinking, problem solving, and a more engaging and challenging curriculum. I did what most beginning teachers do; I learned by observing, listening, and questioning. Although solutions—to what is now termed the “achievement gap”—were in short supply, there was no shortage of explanations for the disparities I saw. Many of these explanations were conveyed through compelling stories told by experienced, caring, and well-intentioned classroom teachers, principals, and support staff.

I recall one particularly memorable and troubling story that my cooperating teacher shared with me during a student teaching assignment; it began with a piece of advice: “Don’t bother trying to keep Darnell awake during class. Just let him sleep.”² According to this veteran teacher, Darnell (a bright, good-natured African American fifth-grader) should be allowed to sleep in class because school was supposedly the only place he could get any sleep. The story told of Darnell’s welfare-dependent mother and the chaotic home in which they lived. A detailed account of an angry encounter with Darnell’s mother, of Darnell coming to school in the same clothes two or three days in a row, and the criminal record of Darnell’s older brother constituted a large part of the narrative. In short, this teacher’s story functioned as an explanation for why any effort to engage Darnell in class was a waste of time. I will never forget how she ended the story: “Darnell is lost to us. He’ll probably never see his 18th birthday.”

This story came from a warm but strict “motherly” woman who was as generous with her time as she was with her resources. In her classroom she kept a closet full of nutrition snacks for those who arrived too late for the free breakfast for which nearly every child at the school qualified, and she was available to her students before and after school. Having taught at that school for many years, she was well acquainted with the students and the school community. But I, on the other hand, was a stranger in an unfamiliar world. I was more than ready to believe that this experienced teacher, who openly expressed caring and concern for her students, must surely know what she is talking about, and at the time I appreciated her guidance. I felt fortunate to have a mentor who was willing and able to give me the “inside scoop” on the students, their families, and the community.

¹I do not capitalize ‘white’ in order to maintain parity with other racial identifiers (e.g., students of color)

²The narratives in this article appear in an unpublished dissertation by this author (Pollack, 2009). Pseudonyms are used throughout.

On the surface, a story such as this expresses sympathy and caring for students, while providing a kind of reality check for “idealistic” and “naïve” beginning teachers. It explains why less demanding school work and lowered expectations for academic achievement is a kind, humane way to deal with “kids like that.” However, just below the surface, this story employs a deficit view of students of color (Valencia, 1997)—a view that has a negative influence on the educational opportunities and learning experiences of students seen as “at risk” (primarily poor students of color and language minority students).

Through everyday storied teacher talk, I was “taught” that the reasons for racial disparities in student achievement boiled down to poor parenting and/or cultural deficiencies (e.g., unsupportive, uncaring, or undereducated parents; limited or “non-standard” English spoken at home; poverty; chaotic home environments; and a lack of value for education). The conventional wisdom conveyed through these deficit narratives is that schools will always be severely limited in how well they can educate academically at-risk students: “Teachers can teach well and care deeply about their students, but they cannot ‘fix’ kids, families, and communities.” Although teachers and schools are often unfairly held responsible for student outcomes that are linked to factors over which they have no direct control or influence, deficit narratives, such as the story about Darnell, clearly convey a sense of resignation and tacit permission to abdicate responsibility for those things that are within the sphere of influence of teachers and schools.

Many of the stories that I heard as a beginning teacher—and continue to hear in schools and from my graduate students—about students of color and language minority students communicate judgments about cultural practices and values that do not line up with white, middle-class norms. During my first year teaching I became familiar with a particular set of stories that I would hear repeated many times over the years; these stories are about the extended trips that some Mexican immigrant families take to Mexico, and the number of school days that their children miss as a result. The storytellers would often remind their listeners that these families cannot really afford such trips and that their time, effort, and money would be better spent helping their children learn English: “Don’t they get that their kids are already way behind? And then they wonder why their kids are failing.” Inherent in these narratives is a judgment that “these parents” do not value education, that they do not have their own children’s best interests at heart and, therefore, teachers cannot be held responsible when “these kids” do poorly in school. Rather than being helped to understand that such trips to reconnect with family and homeland arise from a strong and enduring sense of “moral, social, and personal responsibility,” and for what is believed to be *best* for their children—in short, their

children’s *educación* (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 23)—these stories serve as “evidence” of poor parenting and cultural deficiencies. To make more explicit the faulty notion that cultural deficits are to blame for Mexican American students’ difficulty in school, the stories about Spanish language immigrant students are often juxtaposed with stories about so-called “model minority” students (Lee, 1996): “Asian and European immigrant parents value education and have higher aspirations for their children. That’s why their kids do so much better in school.” These assimilationist success narratives serve to support the belief that adherence to the “right” values and priorities is the key to academic and economic success. Unfortunately, and despite compelling research to the contrary, the belief that Latino and African American families do not value education or aspire for their children is still prevalent among K–12 educators (Marsh & Turner-Vorbeck, 2010). Like Darnell’s teacher, the narrators of these deficit-based stories are for the most part well-intentioned individuals who genuinely care about their students. Although their stories may not explicitly state overt racist views, they clearly reveal an uncritical, taken-for-granted acceptance of historically based systems of social, economic, and educational inequities and the failure to see how these structural inequities affect school outcomes for students of color.

Deficit Narratives and the Communication of Expectations

Although stories and comments about students and families are shared informally among teachers throughout the year, the start of the school year is a time when stories are often told with a particular purpose: to warn colleagues about “problem” children and “difficult” parents and to communicate certain expectations. I do not suggest that all teacher talk about students is negative; in fact, it can often be quite positive and helpful. Information shared at the beginning of the school year can help teachers better understand the unique needs and strengths of their students. However, it is also important to keep in mind that individual instances of teacher discourse about students and families can be simultaneously helpful *and* harmful, especially when cast in a way that conveys a deficit view.

In addition to looking at student records (previous test scores, report cards, and the like), teachers exchange information, prognostications, advice, and stories about students and their families. This practice, which typically begins as soon as teachers receive their class rosters, is clearly focused on getting the “heads up” on students who are most likely to cause problems for any number of reasons, such as poor behavior, low achievement, learning difficulties, or “family issues.” I, too, have been a willing

and complicit participant in this practice. Through these conversations we got the “inside scoop” on particular students and parents, sometimes before we even had an opportunity to meet them. These conversational stories were sometimes helpful, but more often they conveyed negative, unhelpful views and expectations of students—views that reflected deficit thinking, especially about students of color and language minority students.

I recall one such story about a student who was scheduled to be in my third-grade class—an Asian Indian boy named Sarvesh who, despite having repeated first grade, continued to struggle academically and socially. According to his school health records, birth trauma was believed to have caused developmental delays related to speech and fine motor skills. However, a far more detailed explanation was shared with me at the beginning of the school year. Several teachers informed me that Sarvesh did not receive the timely medical care he needed as an infant because of his parents’ neglect and professional ambitions. According to this story, rather than provide the love and expert care their “damaged” baby needed at the time, his parents left him for several years with his grandmother in India so they could finish medical school in the United States. The typical commentary on this story was: “It must be a cultural thing but, really, what kind of mother could leave her baby behind?”

This type of deficit narrative blames the parents (especially the mother) and supposed cultural deficiencies for the child’s learning problems; and, perhaps more importantly, it makes it clear who is *not* to blame. Although it was not stated explicitly, this story’s main message was clear: since his parents did not care enough about their own son at that crucial time of his life, why should we be made to feel responsible for “fixing” him. Moreover, this story served as a warning that, as Sarvesh’s teacher, I could expect very little interest or involvement from his parents because their careers obviously take precedence over the well-being and educational needs of their son. At the time, this narrative subtly reinforced my own unacknowledged bias for a white American middle-class model of the nuclear family—one that fails to recognize and appreciate the unique strengths of close extended families in which childrearing responsibilities are shared among parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. I am certain that this unfavorable depiction of Sarvesh’s parents had a negative effect on my future interactions with them and, consequently, on Sarvesh’s experiences in my classroom.

Critical Listening and Reflection

As a young, white, novice teacher who had had very limited experiences within multicultural settings, I initially accepted and repeated these storied explanations

for why certain kids have difficulty in school. But the better acquainted I became with these so-called “bad parents” and “deficient” home environments, the more I was reminded of my own parents and upbringing. I come from a large, struggling, working-class family with seven children. My father left school at 12 and my mother at 16. Our household was noisy, busy, and often chaotic. Our parents were seldom able to assist us with homework or attend parent-teacher conferences, but they consistently encouraged us to do our best in school. We were not expected to attend college; their aspirations for us had little to do with academic achievement or future financial success. Our home was filled with an abundance of love and a strong sense of responsibility, but to an outsider it may have appeared that our parents had low expectations for their children and did not sufficiently value education. Despite these “disadvantages,” my siblings and I did well in school. However, had we been a family of color, it is likely that our apparent deficiencies and our low socioeconomic status would have taken on a racialized and far more negative significance.

A Journey of Critical Self-Reflection

Early in my teaching career, I began to wonder what role teachers’ beliefs and expectations play in the persistence of racially based academic disparities. I began to question my own thinking about which students are academically and behaviorally at risk, and why. Around this time, a fellow kindergarten teacher loaned me her copy of *White Teacher* by Vivian Gussen Paley (1979). I will be eternally grateful to Ms. Paley, and to my former colleague, for challenging me to begin the work of critical self-reflection on my own complicity in the construction and dissemination of deficit narratives—work that would have been impossible had it not been for the children and families with whom I have worked and the stories, knowledge, and perspectives they have so generously shared with me over the years.

Recognizing the power and ubiquitousness of deficit narratives has expanded my understanding of how schools can simultaneously reflect and reproduce racially based social inequalities. Perhaps most importantly, it has helped me to examine how I had internalized some of the racial/cultural orthodoxies embedded in deficit narratives, how these stories have influenced my teaching practices and interactions with parents and students, and how this casual, everyday discursive practice can operate “below the radar” to miseducate teachers about the children and families they serve. Moreover, my heightened awareness of negative, racialized teacher talk has convinced me of the importance of helping prospective and beginning teachers develop the capacity and courage to “hear,” challenge, and reframe deficit-based discourse about students and families.

Uncovering and Challenging Deficit Narratives: Implications for Teacher Education

Beginning teachers may be particularly vulnerable to the influence of deficit narratives. Lower performing, under-resourced schools that predominantly serve poor students of color are disproportionately staffed by beginning teachers—the vast majority of whom do not share their students' racial, cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic backgrounds (Zeichner, 2009). Moreover, because novice teachers tend to be preoccupied with their own performance in relation to the technical, practical, and managerial aspects of teaching (Kagan, 1992), they are often less likely to attend to the needs of diverse learners and the educational inequities their students experience (Achinstein & Barrett, 2004).

Scholars and practitioners of multicultural education and anti-racist pedagogy emphasize the need for prospective teachers to both reflect critically on their own racial identities, backgrounds, and cultural assumptions, and to gain knowledge and understanding about the students, families, and communities they serve (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2001). To help them develop a greater cultural self-awareness, many teacher educators engage their students in activities such as writing racial autobiographies, reflective journaling, and critical readings and discussions on racism and multicultural education. However, much of what prospective and beginning teachers learn about their students—especially students whose backgrounds are different from their own—is gained through the kinds of conversational narratives I described earlier in this article. Unfortunately, these everyday conversational narratives remain largely unexamined within teacher preparation programs. I argue that prospective and beginning teachers need to engage in critical listening to, and reflection on, informal teacher talk about students as a means of surfacing underlying beliefs and biases about racial/cultural “others”... and for developing a critical consciousness of the ways in which informal deficit-based teacher discourse can act in unseen ways to rationalize and perpetuate existing educational disparities.

Teacher education students can engage in this type of *targeted critical listening* through an observation/reflection journaling activity—ideally over the course of an entire semester, during the field experience or practicum phase of the teacher preparation program³. Through this weekly journaling assignment, teacher education students are asked to observe, listen to, record,

and critically reflect upon the ways in which teachers at their respective schools talk among themselves about students—especially students of color, low-income students, and language minority students—and the racial and cultural orthodoxies that such talk can reveal. I suggest that students include the following in each journal entry: (1) a brief summary or retelling of a conversational narrative they have heard about a student (or group of students), the student's family, and/or the student's culture/community; (2) relevant contextual information; and (3) a critical reflection on the content, tone, and their general impression of the narrative.

When shared and discussed within supervision, coaching, or classroom settings, these journal entries can provide teacher educators with valuable points of entry for initiating and facilitating critical conversations concerning basic underlying beliefs and assumptions about racial and cultural “others” and the influence deficit thinking can have on teaching, learning, and family-school relations. Discussions about issues of diversity, equity, and racism are often fraught with difficulty and discomfort, especially within racially and culturally diverse classroom settings. Uncertainty about word usage, and the self-silencing and defensiveness that often results (especially among white students), can be mitigated, however, when participants are discussing other peoples' words. The narratives that students share through their journal entries often contain racialized language that they themselves may be reluctant to use in a university classroom setting, but because this language has already been introduced through the narratives, it can now be more openly discussed and challenged (Case & Hemmings, 2005). Because they are analyzing and questioning narratives told by others, prospective teachers may be less likely to feel personally judged. I have found that this approach can more successfully facilitate discussion and critical reassessment of both the narratives students have heard *and* their initial and subsequent reflections on them (Pollack, 2009).

Additionally, I recommend augmenting the journaling assignment with the use of *counterstories* that are grounded in the knowledge and lived experiences of people of color, language minorities, and the poor (Yosso, 2006). When used as a pedagogical tool within the context of teacher education, these *counterstories* can help prospective teachers reject, reframe, and challenge negative racialized teacher talk. I argue that targeted critical listening and reflection, especially when combined with the use of counterstories, can raise preservice and beginning teachers' awareness of the ubiquitousness of deficit discourse and its contribution to a culture of low expectations, a diminished sense of teacher agency, and uncritical acceptance of racially based educational disparities.

³Ideally, prior to this journaling assignment, students will need to have had opportunities to discuss key readings related to multicultural education, white privilege, and anti-racist teaching practices.

Conclusion

My own firsthand experiences with, and investigation into, this ubiquitous, discursive practice strongly suggest that informal teacher talk about students reveals and strengthens deficit thinking and differential behavior toward children and families of color while contributing to the workplace socialization of beginning teachers to a culture of low expectations and a diminished sense of responsibility and agency. Clearly, the reasons for the racially based achievement gap are numerous, complex, and difficult to tease apart, and I certainly do not suggest that deficit thinking reflected in informal teacher discourse is somehow more responsible than other factors. However, in my view, discussions of everyday teacher talk about students and families of color—and the unchallenged racial orthodoxies they often convey—are largely absent within discussions of why significant disparities persist in student achievement and other school outcomes. I argue that the influence of educators' thinking about students of color, and the ways in which that thinking is conveyed, sustained, and strengthened through deficit narratives, should be examined closely and included in discussions of equity in education—especially in relation to teacher preparation and development. If left unexamined and unchallenged, everyday deficit based teacher talk can operate behind the scenes to undermine teacher educators' best efforts to help beginning teachers develop a genuine multicultural teaching practice—one that recognizes, honors, and builds upon students' individual and cultural assets.

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