Introduction

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The publication of *A Nation at Risk* by the National Commission on Education in 1983 unleashed a torrent of criticism of American education that has only intensified over the years. Although *A Nation at Risk* was intended as a general indictment of K-12 education, the focus of concern about American schooling has shifted over the last 25 years. Various critiques (e.g., Berliner & Biddle, 1995; McQuillan, 1998), data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and findings from international comparisons of students in math, reading, and science indicate that many students are well served by current structures of schooling, including such practices as ability grouping and instructional tracking. Recent NAEP data, for example, indicate that nearly one third of fourth- and eighth-grade American school children performed at proficient or advanced levels in reading and math (NAEP, 2007). US school children attending schools that serve few or no children living in poverty also do well in international comparisons like PIRLS and PISA (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). White students also perform well in math, reading, and science compared to students in other countries (Nichols & Berliner, 2005). Black and Hispanic students, however, do not, on average, fare as well in comparison to either their White counterparts in this country or students in other countries. Additionally, poor students do less well in school compared to more affluent students (NAEP, 2007). It is worth emphasizing, however, that these statistics refer to averages for various groups. Certainly, many Black and Hispanic students do very well on PIRLS, PISA, the NAEP, and other assessments. Similarly, many White students, including some affluent White students, do poorly on these assessments.
The relatively poor academic performance of Black and Hispanic students and economically disadvantaged students points to what most observers agree is the real crisis in American education: an “achievement gap” that favors White students compared to their Black and Hispanic peers and relatively more affluent students compared to students living in poverty. Recent NAEP (2009) data, for example, indicate significant disparities in reading, math, and science between White (non-Hispanic) students and Black and Hispanic students. Poor students also score poorly on NAEP assessments compared to the rest of the student population, regardless of ethnicity or race. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 established the elimination of the achievement gap as a national priority. Progress toward this goal has been modest at best, however. For example, although the gap in reading achievement between White and Black students has narrowed slightly since 1992, the average reading scores for Black students in 8th grade still lag 27 points behind their White classmates, down from a 30 point gap in 1992. The difference between White and Hispanic in 8th grade is now 25 points, down from 26 points in 1992. Similarly, the gap between poor 8th grade students (defined as those eligible for free lunch) and students not living in poverty has decreased only slightly since 2003\(^1\) (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2008). These disparities persist despite enormous federal resources that have been provided to improve reading achievement in underperforming schools. At the current rate of improvement, it will take another 135 years for the average NAEP reading performance of Black students to pull even with White students. Using the same logic, it will take 375 years for the average reading performance of Hispanic students to catch up to their White classmates.
The situation in math and science is even more discouraging. Among 8th graders, the discrepancy in NAEP math scores between White and Black students and White and Hispanic students actually increased between 1990 and 2005 while the achievement gap between Blacks and Whites and Whites and Hispanics in science is relatively unchanged. The achievement gap has also grown between 8th grade low-income students and their peers in science, although there is a slight reduction in the disparity between poor students and their fellow students in NAEP math scores (NCES, 2008).

High school completion rates, another widely used measure of school success, show similar trends. According to US government statistics for the year 2000, 16- through 24-year-old Black students were nearly twice as likely to drop out of high school as White students (6.9% vs. 13.1%), and Hispanic students were approximately four times more likely to drop out of school compared to their White peers (6.9% vs. 27.8%). Low-income students dropped out of school at a rate four times greater than high-income students (2.5% vs. 10.4%) (Balfanz & Legters, 2006). Since the government data do not include students who leave school before 10th grade, the disparities between these groups may actually be even worse than these statistics suggest.

College attendance figures complete this dismal picture of educational achievement for many Black and Hispanic students living in poverty. College attendance rates within the Black and Hispanic population are substantially lower than college attendance rates for Whites. Thirty-seven percent of Whites compared to 26% of Blacks and 15% of Hispanics in the US attend four-year colleges (Forster, 2006). Not surprisingly, poor students from all groups are much less likely to obtain a college degree than students from more affluent families. A US Department of Education study that
followed 8th graders for a period of twelve years indicated that only 29% of high-achieving, low SES students obtained a bachelor’s degree, compared to 74% of high-achievement students from high SES families. Indeed, the lowest-scoring students from high SES families were as likely to complete college as the most talented students from low SES families (Fox, Connolly, & Snyder, 2005).

Overall, these data support the obvious conclusion: Schools fail a disproportionate number of Black and Hispanic students and students living in poverty (often these are the same students), exacerbating the effects of poverty and discrimination that already limit the life chances of these students. The important question is: why should this be the case? Through the lens of the deficit thinking that dominates many current versions of educational reform, the problem resides in the language and culture of students and their families (Dudley-Marling, 2007; Valencia, 1997). From this perspective, the background knowledge, language, and experiences of some students – specifically, poor students and students of color – is insufficient for success in school. An alternative perspective implicates the structures of schooling in high levels of academic failure among poor and minority students. From this point of view, disproportionate failure among poor and minority students is linked to inequities in the experience of schooling. Jonathon Kozol (e.g., 1992, 2005) and Jeannie Oakes (e.g., 1985, 2005, 2008), for example, have written extensively about how inadequate resources and circumscribed, low-level curricula diminish the educational prospects of many poor, urban students.

We begin by critically examining the deficit perspective that has dominated thinking about high levels of educational failure among poor and minority students. We then consider an alternative, social constructivist perspective to explain disproportionate
academic failure among Black, Hispanic, and poor students. Finally, we provide a brief overview of the chapters for this volume illustrating the possibilities of challenging, high expectation curricula with students who have experienced high levels of academic failure.

**Deficit Perspectives: Blaming the Victims**

In the 1960s, President Lyndon Johnson declared a “war on poverty,” relying on programs like *Head Start* to help the poor lift themselves out of poverty. The pedagogical practices that emerged during this period 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 perspective of cultural deprivation theory, the lives of poor children, their families, and the communities in which they live are *deficient* in opportunities for acquiring “the knowledge and ability which are consistently held to be valuable in school” (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966, p. 24). Bereiter and Engleman (1966), for example, claimed that poor, Black children lacked the ability to use language “to explain, to describe, to instruct, to inquire, to hypothesize, to analyze, to compare, to deduce, and to test . . . the uses [of language] that are necessary for academic success” (p. 31). A particularly pernicious version of cultural deprivation theory explains persistent social and economic inequities in terms of genetic differences (e.g., Hernstein & Murray, 1994). From this social-Darwinist perspective, programs designed to lift the poor out of poverty are doomed to failure since poor children and their families lack the necessary cultural, linguistic, and cognitive resources to succeed.
Over the years, cultural deprivation theory appeared to wane in the face of severe criticism that this stance pathologized the language and culture of parents and children from non-dominant groups (e.g., Labov, 1972; Ladson-Billings, 1999). However, the cultural deprivation explanation for persistent educational failure among students living in poverty, particularly poor Black and Hispanic children, re-emerged in the age of “at risk” students-- what Ayers has called “cultural deprivation recycled for the 1990s” (p. 29). Betty Hart and Todd Risley (1995), for example, beginning with their observation that the War on Poverty had failed to eliminate intergenerational poverty, undertook a study that examined the language and culture of the poor to explain the persistence of poverty in American society. Based on their longitudinal study of language practices in the homes of poor, working-class, and middle- and upper-class (professional) families, Hart and Risley concluded that poor children are deficient in language, particularly vocabulary development, and the responsibility for this situation rests with parents who fail to provide their children the quality and quantity of language experiences common in homes of more affluent families. According to Hart and Risley (1995),

by age 3 the children in professional families would have heard more than 30 million words, the children in working-class families 20 million, and the children in welfare families 10 million” (p. 132). Compared to the welfare families, the professional parents not only exposed their children to more words, they displayed more words of all kinds to their children, “more multiclause sentences, more past and future verb tenses, more declaratives, and more questions of all kinds (pp. 123-124).
In this view, children’s linguistic and academic deficits are traceable to deficiencies in parenting. Despite numerous critiques of the deficit stance that underpins Hart and Risley’s research (see Valencia, 1997 for a collection of critiques of deficit thinking as well as Dudley-Marling, 2007; Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009), their research has been enormously influential. The report of the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) (Walsh, Glaser, & Wilcox, 2006), for example, describes the Hart and Risley study as “groundbreaking work . . . essential reading in any course dealing with early literacy skills” (p. 38). The Hart and Risley study has been cited in Congressional hearings (“The critical need for evidence-based programs,” 2003) and in numerous articles in the popular press, usually in support of early intervention programs targeting poor children and their families (e.g., Tough, 2006). A Social Science Citation Index search revealed close to 600 references to the Hart and Risley study in scholarly journals, nearly half of these in the past five years (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009).

The popularity of Ruby Payne’s “culture of poverty” (Payne, 2005) further illustrates the “return of the deficit” (Dudley-Marling, 2007). 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. Payne portrays the lives of the poor as deficient in the cognitive, linguistic, emotional, and spiritual resources needed to escape poverty and move into the middle class. Payne’s claims about people living in poverty have been severely criticized for pathologizing the language and culture of people living in poverty (see Gorski, 2008 for a summary of critiques of Ruby Payne’s work). Further, Payne’s claims about the language and culture of the poor, based largely on Oscar Lewis’s discredited work on a “culture of
poverty” (Foley, 1997), have been found to be without any research base (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semington, 2008). Yet, despite severe critiques of her work, Ruby Payne has become one of the most influential figures in US education (Gorski, 2008). Her self-published book, *A framework for understanding poverty* (Payne, 2005), for example, has sold over one million copies and Payne and her organization are in high demand for keynote speeches, seminars, and professional development workshops (Keller, 2006).

In the context of *No Child Left Behind*, deficit thinking has re-emerged as a powerful explanation for disproportionately high levels of school failure among students living in poverty (Dudley-Marling, 2007; Kozol, 2005). Deficit-based family literacy initiatives, for example, seek to *fix* families from non-dominant groups by getting them to adopt literacy practices associated with middle-class families (Taylor, 1997).

Similarly, full-day kindergarten and expanded pre-school programs for children living in poverty are often premised on the need to provide poor children with stimulating learning environments (DeCicca, 2007; Jacobson, 2006) based on the implicit – and sometimes explicit – assumption that the home environments of poor children are not stimulating (i.e., they are *deficient*) and external intervention is needed to prepare these children for school.

Deficit thinking holds poor children and their families responsible for educational and vocational failures, a classic form of blaming the victim (Valencia, 1997). Valencia concludes, however, that deficit thinking is “unduly simplistic, lacks empirical verification, is more ideological than scientific, grounded in classism and racism, and offers counterproductive educational prescriptions for school success” (p. 2). No child
profits from a perspective that portrays her, her family or her community as deprived or deficient, but it isn’t a deficit stance per se that’s problematic as much as what comes from this stance. The position here is that a deficit gaze that pathologizes individuals, families, and communities is often instantiated in pedagogical practices and dispositions that are primarily responsible for disproportionate levels of failure among poor and minority populations.

**Social Constructivist Perspectives: Implicating the Structures of Schooling**

“What is it about school,” James Gee (2004) asks, “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?” (p. 10). We would argue that the problem lies not in children’s heads, their families, their language, or their culture, but with uninspired, tedious, basic skills curricula that dominate instruction for low-achieving children. Valencia (1997) concludes:

The historical emphasis upon capacity for learning has been to perceive school learning as primarily dependent upon the presumed ability of the student, rather than upon the quality of the learning environment. However, there appears to be a growing recognition that school failure and student achievement are socially determined. (p. 8)

In her seminal study of curricular practices in schools populated by students from working-class, middle-class, and affluent, professional class families, Jean Anyon (1980) found that children from different socioeconomic groups experienced qualitatively
different forms of schooling that affected students’ educational and vocational aspirations. The curricular experiences of students attending working class schools, for example, emphasized mechanical, rote behavior “involving very little decision making or choice…. Teachers rarely explain why the work is being assigned, how it might connect to other assignments, or what the idea is that lies behind the procedure or gives it coherence and perhaps meaning or significance” (Anyon, 1980, p. 73). This “pedagogy of poverty” (Haberman, 1991) contrasts sharply with the practices Anyon found in affluent, professional schools where students experienced a curriculum in which schoolwork was carried out creatively and independently and where students were “continually asked to express and apply ideas and concepts.” Schoolwork in the affluent, professional schools emphasized “individual thought and expressiveness, expansion and illustration of ideas, and choice of appropriate method and material” (p. 79).

More recent research on curricular tracking largely mirrors the results of Anyon’s research. Watanabe (2008), for example, reported that, compared to students in lower academic tracks, students in “academically gifted tracks” spent less time on explicit test preparation, which meant they had more time to engage in other curricula that teachers deemed important; received more opportunities to practice a wider range of reading and writing skills and, therefore, overall did more reading and writing; engaged in more challenging instruction and assignments; and, received more written and immediate feedback on essay assignments. Additionally, students in academically gifted classes had more opportunities to write different genres for authentic audiences beyond the five paragraph essay and had more opportunities to complete assignments out of class, freeing up time in class for more challenging and interesting work. Watanabe’s findings are
consistent with a substantial body of research documenting the predominance of qualitatively inferior curricula in “lower” academic tracks (e.g., Allington, 2000; McDermott, 1976; Oakes, 1985, 2005; Smith, 1998), places overpopulated by poor students and students of color.

Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) observed, “children living in high-poverty areas tend to fall further behind, regardless of their initial . . . skill level” (p. 98). The controlling, directive pedagogy of poverty that dominates in lower academic tracks and underperforming schools creates high levels of academic failure by severely constraining students’ opportunities to engage with the challenging, thoughtful curricula common in higher performing schools and classrooms (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2004; Haberman, 1991). Ultimately, the corrosive effects of “low expectation” curricula have undermined substantial efforts to reform education for children attending underperforming, under-resourced schools (Haberman, 1991).

Ray Rist (1970) observed that there is a greater tragedy than being labeled a poor learner: being treated like a poor learner. Put differently, the problem isn’t so much the deficit gaze that pathologizes some children and their families as much as what comes from this stance. The typical treatment of students in lower academic tracks or ability groups – because of what they are taught and what they are not taught (Harklau, 1994) – virtually insures that these students will struggle academically regardless of their learning needs when they enter school. What struggling learners need most is to be afforded the same opportunities and quality of instruction as that afforded to more academically able students (Allington, 1983, 2000; Oakes, 1985; Rhodes & Dudley-Marling, 1996; Rist, 1970). However, more evidence is needed on the effects of high expectation curricula on students for whom school has been a struggle.
We began this book inspired by the challenge posed by McDermott, Goldman, and Varenne (2006) that “to counteract the cultural inclination to focus on what is wrong with individual children, we must seek data showing children more skilled than schools have categories or time to notice, describe, diagnose, record, and remediate” (p. 15). We have taken up the challenge by assembling a collection of reports from educators and educational researchers who have endeavored to bring high expectation curricula to settings typically characterized by instruction in low-level skills and tedious pedagogy. Some of the chapters present a broad framework for creating high expectation curricula. Hugh (‘Bud’) Mehan, for example, discusses detracking as a means of giving all students access to the kind of rich, engaging curricula common in affluent, high achieving schools. Eric Demeulenaere, Timmary Leary and Chad Malone offer an overview of a curriculum based on trust that they argue is fundamental to students’ success with challenging curriculum.

Other chapters survey research that supports high expectation curricula with students who are often subjected to an overdose of basic skills instruction based on the assumption that academic success for these students depends on the remediation of deficits. Dick Allington and Anne McGill-Franzen review decades of research that supports rich, challenging literacy instruction for struggling readers. Similarly, Nadeen Ruiz cites 40 years of research to argue that scripted reading interventions and other programs originally developed for monolingual English speakers do not reflect the needs of English Language Learners.

Several chapters illustrate specific high expectation instructional strategies and curricula that have enabled students perceived as low achievers to demonstrate their
competence. Janette Klingner, Alison Boardman, and Subini Annamma discuss Collaborative Strategic Reading, a high-expectation, evidence-based practice that has been found to enhance students' reading comprehension, content learning, and higher-level thinking in diverse classrooms that are often denied this kind of challenging instruction. Debi Goodman offers an abundance of evidence demonstrating the power of a rich literacy practice like Whole Language with students in a failing school. Marty Rutherford describes how a project called Poetry Inside Out reveals the potential of students from low-achieving schools to translate, write and discuss great poetry.

Chapters by Chris Kliewer, and Jenny Urbach and Janette Klingner show how expanding our definitions of literacy reveals the knowledge of literacy students bring with them to school while providing teachers opportunities to build on that knowledge.

Finally, several chapters illustrate the power of discussion to create a context for students to learn rich, challenging curricula and demonstrate their native competence in math (Suzanne Chapin and Cathy O’Connor), science (Richard Sohmer), and reading (Sophie Haroutunian-Gordan and Curt Dudley-Marling and Sarah Michaels).

Taken together the contributors to this volume present powerful illustrations of how high expectation curriculum can engage students and promote high levels of learning. These chapters offer an indictment of the “deficit-driven” (low-level, basic skills) curricula that dominates in underachieving schools and classrooms. As the chapters of this book make very clear, given the right sort of opportunities, all children will confirm our belief that they are competent thinkers, speakers, readers and writers. Put another way, under the right circumstances, ordinary people (students and teachers
alike) are capable of extraordinary things. And we should be suspicious of any evidence to the contrary.

Endnotes

1. The first year reading data are available for students from low-income families.
2. To be fair, not all family literacy initiatives are deficit based.

References


teachers about the poor: A critical analysis of Ruby Payne’s claims about poverty.

*Teachers College Record, 110*, 2497-2531.


