

**Final Paper**

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## **Part A**

I used to work in Chicago Public Schools on the West Side of Chicago. This school is a Title 1 school in which 78% of students are from low income families, the majority of the students receive free or reduced breakfast and lunch, and 22.3% of the students have limited English. The demographics of the school are 47.1% African American, 37.4% Hispanic, 7.8% White, 4/9% Asian, and 2.9% other. What stands out to me the most is that 34.3% of students receive special education services. I have never been at a school with such a high percentage of children receiving special education services. After working at this school for one year, it was very evident that the teachers were using forms of deficit thinking and were viewing students as enabled based on their identities. On top of the deficit thinking happening, the school curriculum is bias, and the teaching is not culturally responsive which results in a low number of student success. The problem of practice at this school is that the majority of teachers use deficit thinking, which results in a big percentage of students being labeled and referred to special education services. I still communicate with the families that attend this school and they are clear that this is still an ongoing issue concerning deficit thinking and the number of students getting placed into special education classes. Upon my research I came across this quote from Joseph Simone, a doctoral student in his Dissertation paper. He states, “It is evident that even the best educators do not see nor understand the impact their beliefs have on the achievement of students- a belief that has marginalized generations of students in the United States” (Simone, 2012, p. 9). The teachers at this school have no idea that their thinking is resulting in harmful impacts on these students for the rest of their lives. It is time for the school leadership to step up and make changes.

## **Part B**

Deficit thinking can be described as, “the form of thinking and the idea that minority students labor under intellectual handicaps because of their family structure, linguistic background, and culture. Deficit thinking is tantamount to the process of ‘blaming the victim’”(Valencia, 2010, p. XIV). Deficit thinking is nothing new, rather it dates back to before the time of slavery when racialized beliefs stated that people of color and minorities were biologically or culturally inferior (Simon, 2012). This is a cycle that keeps repeating itself. The majority of the teachers at this Chicago Public School are blaming the victim for not achieving academically and are not engaging or encouraging the families to work as a team to figure out how to best support their children. The teachers are viewing these students as deficits and as abnormal and are acting as referral agents rather than creating relationships with the students and families. After the students are referred to special education classes, the majority of the students are being pulled out from classes and are given curriculum that is not challenging or age appropriate. These students are missing most of the school day in the general education classroom due to being pulled out and are failing to meet academic standards and achievement. “Since the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* in 1975, it is the law that students with disabilities are guaranteed a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment” (Connor & Ferri, 2005, p.454). Even after 45 years since this law passed, individuals with disabilities remain separated from non-disabled peers. Disability has become a normalized category of marginalization for students of color (Connor & Ferri, 2005). Throughout this process, the administration and teachers limit the conversation and engagement with the families. The school has a strict rule that when the bell rings in the morning at 7:30am, all families have to evacuate from the school property so that

they will not be a distraction to the learning happening, which demonstrates the weak relationship between the community and the school. Instead of viewing the families as strengths and as individuals that have important resources and information about their children, the school views them as distractions.

### **Part C**

The administration and school leadership do not communicate the in-depth problem of the teachers using deficit thinking and the high number of students being placed into special education classes, rather they are not topics that are discussed and completely ignored. The administration and school leadership are very concerned with test scores and student behavior. The majority of the professional development revolves around test taking and the importance of good test results. The students, families, and community are not welcome into the school and rarely did they work as a team. The only time that you will see families entering the school is when they are required to come to Individualized Education Programs meetings where the family's advice is barely taken into consideration or parent-teacher conferences. Some culturally proficient practices that the school leadership should implement are inviting the families and community members into the school to learn from them and work with them as a partnership. The school needs to view the diverse community as a strength and work as a team to best support each student.

### **Part D**

Culturally Responsive School Leadership is made up of four subtopics which are 1. Critical Self-Awareness, 2. Culturally Responsive Curricula and Teacher Preparation, 3. Culturally Responsive and Inclusive School Environments, 4. Engaging Students and Parents in Community Context (Khalifa et al, 2016). The administration and the teachers should work

together to strive to be a more culturally responsive school. To do this, they need to start with Critical Self-Awareness. The administration needs to educate the teachers by using bias self-assessments so they can discover their own racisms and deficit thinking. There are many bias assessments such as the *Personal Self-Assessment of Anti-Bias Behavior* from the Anti-Defamation League (2007). This can help the administration and teachers identify the areas that they need to improve. Administration needs to start the conversation by encouraging the teachers to learn about themselves and their experiences that contribute to their own mindset and beliefs. The next subtopic is Culturally Responsive Curricula and Teacher Preparation. To work towards this, the administration can invite experts into the school to educate and provide professional development concerning deficit thinking and racism. Most of the time teachers do not know the harmful effects of mindsets, so this can help them become aware. Also, the administration and the teachers should examine, research, and analyze the curriculum being implemented in their classrooms. They need to ask the questions, 1. Is this multicultural? 2. Can my students see themselves in the material? 3. Are they interested in the material? 4. It is age appropriate and does it correspond with the state standards? 5. Does it include different races, genders, identities, and abilities? 6. Does it require certain background knowledge that my students might not have experienced? 7. Do we know our students and are we differentiating for each student? 8. Are we using a strength-based mindset? 9. What are we doing to support students who are struggling? These questions can help teachers analyze themselves and the school environment. The next subtopic is Culturally Responsive and Inclusive School Environments. At this school the teachers are “pathologizing” or treating the student differences as deficits, they are blaming the child rather than the education system (Simone, 2012). To create a Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Environment, teachers need to build strong relationships with each student. Instead of

labeling and referring students to special education services, teachers need to get to know each student, so they can figure out the students' strengths and areas that they need more work in. Teachers and administration need to know about the students' cultures and view diversity from a strength-based mindset. The last subtopic of Culturally Responsive School Leadership is Engaging Students and Parents in Community Context. The administration can start by inviting the families into the school during the normal school day, ask parents to come in and educate the class about different topics, and open up many means of communication such as email, home-to-school folders, phone calls, and in person informal meetings. The administration and teachers need to work hard at creating a welcoming environment, so all community members feel comfortable coming into the school.

### **Part E**

Valencia describes deficit thinking as, “the assumptions that students fail because of internal deficits including limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation, immoral behavior, and cultural differences” (2010). Now that we have identified the problem that the teachers are using deficit thinking, what are the next steps? The first step is that the school leadership needs to attempt to completely reject deficit thinking. It starts with the administration being transformational leaders by educating about deficit thinking and the power imbalance, modeling the correct behavior, and working as a team for change. Teachers need to be aware of their thinking and their preconceived thoughts that they are bringing into the school environment. They need to critically assess themselves, the classroom environment, and the relationships that they have with the students and families. There needs to be continued professional development that communicates the importance of our own thinking and expectations of our students. The professional development should encourage the administration

and teachers to have the critical conversations that are needed for change. Instead of placing blame on the students for low test scores or believing that it is the family's fault for not being engaged, the teachers need to assess the power imbalances and figure out to they can better support the learners. In turn, this should result in the teachers creating relationships with the students and figuring out strengths and areas that need more work. Also, finding the inequities within the school system that needs to be changed. The next step would be creating an environment where the voices of the marginalized must be heard in order to promote a sense of shared democracy (Simone, 2012). The power imbalances in schools are unfair and cause students to be powerless within the education system. Similar to banking education, most teachers believe that they hold all of the power and get to make all of the decisions inside of the school walls. They are pouring information into the students and if the students do not understand it and are not achieving academically, the blame is put on the students. This needs to change, the school leadership needs to make adequate changes to promote student choice and student voice. To promote student voice, the administration and teachers need to engage stakeholders in the daily dialogue (Simone, 2012). The community members and the families need to be invited into the school, updated with what is happening in the classroom, and encouraged to share their ideas and thoughts. There needs to be a partnership between the families and the school to best support the students. In the classroom, students need to have voice and choice. Teachers should build off of students' interests and provide a culturally responsive environment where students can see themselves and strive. Teachers need to use a strength-based mindset and create challenging curriculum and activities that students are interested in, can connect with, and enjoy.

To conclude this paper, I want to reiterate the importance of rejecting deficit thinking. It is a mindset that is so completely imbedded into the educational system in America. We are not giving our students fair opportunities when we bring these negative mindsets into the school environment and it is a cycle that continues to repeat. As we continue our journey as educators, I want to urge you all to act on change. Be the difference that our students deserve. As Barack Obama would say, “Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek” (Obama, 2008). We need to be the change that we all wish to see.



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