

Deficit and Neoliberal Discourses, Urban Teachers' Work, and the "Blame Game"

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"It is significant to note that through the hegemonic process of standardized testing, teachers, as workers, have become the new scapegoat of the system. As a result of the political struggles in education rooted in the civil rights era, it became unfashionable to blame students, their parents, or their culture. Teachers, whose status is located at the next lowest rung of the educational hierarchy, became the most likely suspects" (Darder, 2005, p. 214).

Blaming public school teachers for the troubles of the U.S. education system is the name of the game. This paper considers how teachers navigate two forces that shape this blame game and that shape their work in urban schools: 1) the racialized *deficit discourse* that constructs poor urban youth and youth of color as deficient, as objects in need of control and correction, and 2) *neoliberalism*, with its anti-public, market-based "audit culture" (Apple, 2005) where worth is determined by test scores. This paper considers how, under these current pressures, urban teachers can be blamed for the "failures" of urban school and, in turn, can engage in deficit thinking that blames urban students and their families—"unfashionable" as this practice may be or not.

This paper is part of a larger, multi-sited ethnographic study that traces urban teachers' negotiations with deficit and neoliberal discourses in both Teach For America (TFA) and non-TFA contexts. This project asks not only how the deficit discourse harms urban students but studies the risks of deficit discourse for urban *teachers* and their work: How does deficit thinking work in relation to the constraints of neoliberalism? How do urban teachers experience the blame and control that characterize urban schools? How does deficit discourse shape the teacher-student relationships that are possible? For the scope of this paper, I draw together literature on deficit thinking in urban education with literature on neoliberalism's effects on education—particularly how the practices of accounting and surveillance shape teachers' work. I draw these two bodies of scholarship together to begin to highlight some of the intersections where

neoliberal and deficit logics function together within urban schools. I also discuss data that show urban teachers navigating these two forces simultaneously. Specifically, I explore instances where urban teachers engaged in what I call *critical talk* in ways that traded one unhelpful discourse for another. Teachers sometimes critiqued practices that scapegoated and unfairly blamed them as individual teachers but then slipped easily into the powerful deficit discourse that unfairly blames urban students for problems in urban education.

Purpose

Social justice and urban education scholars have demonstrated that deficit thinking, a framework that essentializes poor people and people of color and blames them for their own oppression, prevails in urban schools (Alonso, Anderson, Su, & Theoharis, 2009; Delpit, 1995; Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005; Valencia, 1997; 2010), but scholars focus mainly on its dangers for students, not teachers. The deficit discourse, a racialized approach that constructs poor urban students as problems to be fixed, and that blames urban students and their communities for the state of their schools, often results in excessive attempts to control “out of control” students and lowers expectations for student achievement. I consider what has not yet been identified: the risks of the deficit discourse for urban *teachers* and its connections to the current neoliberal era. While researchers recognize there is a “tattooing...of ‘lack’ onto most Black, Latino, immigrant, and/or poor students” (Fine & Ruglis, 2009, p. 20), I consider how these discourses inscribe themselves onto urban teachers and render them deficient, as well, and examine how the deficit discourse joins with and intensifies existing notions of teachers as untrustworthy, feminized public workers and catches urban teachers in the blame game crosshairs.

This research shines a light on urban teachers, not to add to their hypervisibility as problems, but to explore the complexities of urban teachers’ work which are largely invisible.

The research is part of a larger qualitative interpretive study tracing teachers' experiences with the blame game in two urban educational contexts: TFA, a national program that recruits college graduates to teach in poor schools, and Smart Kids, Visual Stories, a small, university-based research project that aimed to develop a model for adults to collaborate with urban students to improve their schools. This multi-sited ethnography asks how urban teachers in these two different settings negotiate the blame game and make meaning of their work, their students, and their identities as urban teachers.

Methods

Research Sites

It is significant to study how teachers from TFA and Smart Kids, Visual Stories negotiate the deficit discourse because both groups aim to combat this ingredient of the blame game. Both programs are concerned with educational inequality but understand and approach the problem of inequality differently. Smart Kids consists of three teachers working in an urban public school who are from the area where they teach, who became teachers through the traditional route, and who are still working in the district. TFA teachers join a competitive organization that is popular among young people, they go through a much shorter alternative training route, and they are required to teach for only two years. Studying teachers from these two contexts in tandem permits examination of how blaming discourses are taken up at different levels and in different locations.

Smart Kids is a funded project that worked with urban students and teachers to make films about school, positioning students as experts on their schooling experiences and intending to combat the deficit discourse. I was a research assistant on the project, which lasted for two years. The three racially diverse teacher participants from the first year of fieldwork were respected teachers who we chose to take part because they had high expectations for students.

Studying TFA teachers allows me to explore how not all urban teachers are created equal. While most urban teachers and other public school teachers are not highly regarded (Biklen, 1995), TFA is seen as a competitive, “hip” program (Azimi, 2007). TFA urban teachers escape some of the blame put on ordinary urban teachers, so their negotiations with the blame game are different than other teachers. As one Smart Kids teacher described it, TFA teachers are seen as “doing something for higher order,” whereas a teacher like her is considered “just status quo that mooches on the system.”

Data and Procedures

This qualitative study employs discourse analysis to examine the social structures underlying language (Rapley, 2007), and a multi-sited ethnographic approach, an approach that makes connections between seemingly separate sites, to seek the “...chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations...” (Marcus, 1995, p. 105). This design is well-suited to studying discourse because it “shifts attention from the actual places where things happen to focus on how meanings get taken up, shift, and circulate across different situations” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 76). Multi-sited ethnography allows me to trace how the deficit discourse shifts as it entwines with neoliberal logics and how teachers across different urban settings negotiate it in their talk.

Data sources include transcripts from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with teachers from both TFA and the Smart Kids project. I interviewed ten TFA teachers—current and former—from urban districts throughout the country. Central data for Smart Kids are transcriptions from one and a half years of weekly meetings with the three original teachers involved in the project, as well as in-depth interviews with each teacher. Qualitative interviewing emphasizes participants’ meaning-making efforts and can unearth teachers’ assumptions and the taken-for-granted values in urban schools (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Theoretical Framework

Disrupting Discourse: Teachers' Critical Talk as Agency

Postmodernists and poststructuralists are part of a wave of scholarship that sees language and discourse as active, as productive. They argue, “Language does things” (Applebaum, 2010, p. 94): “language or utterances are related to large social patterns of power and the ways in which language may do things *through* us without our knowledge or consent.... Focusing on the intentions of the speaker can *actually hide* how power works through discourse” (p. 94). As Flax (1992) puts it, “Language speaks us as much as we speak it” (p. 453). Foucault (1979) argues that the subject—the idea of a stable, agentive self—is itself produced by power: “Discipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise. It is not a triumphant power, which because of its own excess can pride itself on its omnipotence; it is a modest, suspicious power which functions as a calculated, but permanent economy” (Foucault, 1979, p. 170). Foucault is not as interested in obvious and repressive power, a power that is “triumphant” over us. Rather, he focuses on how power works subtly through us to *constitute* us. Instead of a pre-discursive, pre-power self as the stable starting point that *then* engages in politics, has experience, and uses language to describe or reflect objects of the world, poststructuralism flips this commonsensical formation on its head: politics and discourse produce the subject.

Part of my task as a researcher is to connect urban teachers' stories to the “structural conditions that influenced the interpretations teachers made of their experiences” (Biklen, p. 50). This means I need to take their voices seriously but also the discourses which help to produce their voices. Drawing on theorists like Foucault (1979), de Certeau (1984), and Sawicki (1994) is helpful to conceptualize teachers' agency without letting go of an analysis of the power of dominant discourses. I recognize the structural conditions of urban schooling and the discourses

that are central to the organization of daily life in schools, on the one hand, but de Certeau's (1994) focus on "making do" allows me to get at how teachers reproduce and interrupt, resist and maintain the structures and discourses of urban schooling, on the other hand. In order to keep teachers' power relative to their students in the forefront, I approach teachers as "pivot" figures working within complex fields of power. Studying urban teachers means I neither study only "up" nor study only "down"; urban teachers are neither fully oppressors nor wholly victims. I examine how urban teachers at some moments use *strategies*—"ways of operating" afforded to those in power—to uphold the deficit discourse (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 30-36), and at other moments use *tactics*—the "art of the weak" (p. 37)—to creatively "make use of the cracks" in the deficit discourse, and to take the "order by surprise" (p. 37).

While some feminist scholars, post-positive realists and others have critiqued Foucault for forgoing a conception of agency, Sawicki (1994) argues that he maintains a theory of agency. While Foucault believes that we do have a "modern sensibility" and that we cannot somehow step outside of power, history or discourse, "this does not mean that one cannot attempt to bring to light the anonymous historical processes through which this sensibility was constituted in an effort to create a critical distance to it" (Sawicki, 1994, p. 351). For Foucault, agency is precisely the ability to "bring to light" this constitutiveness and to point to and—if only fleetingly—"free a space for the invention of new forms of rationality and experience" (pp. 352-3). Sawicki quotes Foucault in a footnote:

There is always a little thought even in the most stupid institutions; there is always thought even in silent habits.... Criticism is a matter of flushing out that thought and trying to change it: to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed.... [A]s soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult and quite possible. (p. 362)

Literature Review: Deficit Discourse and Neoliberalism in Urban Education

The Deficit Discourse in Urban Education

Literature on urban education suggests that “deficit thinking” predominates in urban schools. The deficit discourse has its roots in eugenicist views on race and genetics, as well as in the “culture of poverty” studies or research on the “culturally deprived child” (Alonso, Anderson, Su, & Theoharis, 2009; Reese, 2005; Shields et al., 2005; Valencia, 1997; 2010; Weiner, 1993). The language of “culture” sounds nicer than biological pathologies, but culture still can be used to “talk about essential differences among racial groups without having to use the now-loaded language of biological ‘races’” (Alonso et al., 2009, p. 53). Indeed, Valencia (2010) says that depending on the time period, “low-grade genes, inferior culture and class, or inadequate familial socialization” are all satisfactory ways to explain the “transmit [of] alleged deficits” (p. 18).

Valencia (2010) traces deficit thinking through U.S. history, as, for example, underlying compulsory ignorance laws that kept black youth from reading, as well as promoting formalized school segregation (pp. 9-12). One contemporary example of using deficit thinking can be found in Ruby Payne’s work, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. Valencia notes that she labels herself “‘The leading U.S. expert on the *mindsets* of poverty, middle class, and wealth’ (front cover, Payne, 2005)” (Valencia, 2010, p. 68). In fixing poverty as a stable “mindset”—a deficient, flawed way of thinking or characteristic within the poor themselves—Payne shifts the meaning of poverty from a material reality toward a self-defeating *attitude* that needs only to be changed (Valencia, 2010, pp. 78-79). Valencia critiques Payne’s assertion that for the poor, “education is ‘valued and revered as abstract but not as *reality*’”, and points out that it is a myth that poor people and people of color do not value education (p. 79). Valencia goes on to offer a detailed critique of Payne’s work, and draws on other scholars who also analyze how she engages in deficit thinking. It is important to note Ruby Payne’s work, however, because

although she is not subject to peer review, she has been widely used outside the academy, selling over 1,000,000 copies of *Framework* and has “provided training to hundreds of thousands of educators and other professionals” (Valencia, p. 68).

Linking deficit thinking to psychological, behaviorist models, Valencia (2010) notes that deficit thinking “offers a *description* of behavior in pathological or dysfunctional ways—referring to deficits, deficiencies, limitations, or shortcomings in individuals, families, and cultures” (p. 14). Deficit thinking also offers an “*explanation*” of the behavior by locating a factor *within* the individual (or family or culture), like “limited intelligence or linguistic deficiencies” (p. 14), and then offers the “*prediction*” that the behavior will continue unless there is an *intervention* (p. 14). In schools, low-achieving students are often described as “at-risk” (Shields et al., 2005; Valencia, 1997; 2010). Theoharis (2007) notes that this at-risk behavior or identity is explained by difference: “Deficit thinking is pervasive across school and communities. This view of children and families assumes that difference—meaning, not White, not middle class or affluent, and not without disability—is deficient” (p. 11). The difference explanation places blame in or on the student him or herself, and thus the *student* is in need of repair or fixing.

García and Guerra (2004) say educational programs that have worked for dominantly positioned students and families are often assumed to work for students from “low-income and culturally/linguistically diverse (CLD) communities,” and that when these programs fail, CLD students and families are blamed, and “deficit beliefs are likely to be reinforced” (p. 151). On the flip side, special programs—interventions—for poor students focus on fixing a “supposed cultural deficiency”: “teaching students how to look at the teacher, dress right, and act and speak accordingly” (Alonso, et al., 2009; p. 201). Both approaches locate the deficiency within the student him or herself and do not take into account the privileged norms of whiteness and

middleclass-ness to which urban students are meant to assimilate. When urban students do well, in fact, only then is a systemic or structural explanation pursued. For example, when “too many” students of color qualify for advanced math classes, the deficit discourse makes this difficult to believe: “The mere fact that Black and Latino students are doing well at something is taken to imply a lack of rigor in the something that they are doing” (Payne, 2008, p. 78). In this example, we can see how the deficit discourse *persists to produce* urban students as “low-achieving” or “at-risk” even when they actually achieve high. To use Fine and Ruglis’ (2009) wording again, through the deficit discourse, there is a “tattooing...of ‘lack’ onto most Black, Latino, immigrant, and/or poor students” (p. 20).

A large piece of the deficit discourse is the belief that families of urban students do not value education and that students do not enter school ready to learn (Alonso et al., 2009; Burke & Burke, 2005; Delpit, 1995; García & Guerra, 2004; Payne, 2008; Shields et al., 2005; Valencia, 1997; 2010). As Charles Payne (2008) argues, this conviction in the “ineducability of most children and the apathy of their parents” can let urban teachers off the hook: “The modal teacher belief is that by the time students start school, the great majority of them have already been so damaged that only a handful can be saved; thus, it doesn’t matter much what teachers do” (p. 73). García and Guerra (2004) found in their study that when asked about students’ characteristics, urban teachers often discussed “students’ life experiences or behaviors (e.g., burdened, underprivileged, disrespectful, or disorderly) rather than their learning characteristics or needs” (p. 160).

Burke and Burke (2005) argue, “Much of the current focus on improving underperforming schools, specifically in socio-economically disadvantaged neighborhoods and communities, is framed as an outreach effort to ensure that students come to school ‘ready for school’” (p. 282). The interests that urban students bring to the classroom are devalued, and their

diversity of experience is seen as “an obstacle to overcome rather than a resource to embrace” (p. 282). While the deficit model’s inherent assumptions of student “lack” can be harmful for any student, it is especially harmful for students of color who have been historically devalued. Burke and Burke propose reframing current school reform that is based on students’ lack of “readiness” for school by instead thinking about ways in which *schools* can be made “student-ready.” Deficit discourse can hide in the way teachers say they care for and love their students because there is an implicit blame placed on parents who are perceived as not doing this care work. García and Guerra (2004) found that in seeing students as in need of care, they were seen less as in need of learning: “Expressions of caring often occurred at the expense of academic instruction, which led us to question how much of the students’ low academic performances...was a reflection of limited academic time on task versus their learning abilities” (p. 161).

The deficit discourse is complex because it is not only about race or class, but it also can be about language, culture, disability, and—importantly, I think, for how it functions in urban schools—space. García and Guerra (2004) note that scholarly work analyzing deficit discourse or thinking does not always address the interlocking systems that shape students as “deficient.” The deficit approach is not something that just white teachers who teach students of color are guilty of, for example, although white teachers are the majority of U.S. teachers (p. 155). Payne (2008) writes that he was surprised at the way both white and non-white teachers in urban schools made negative comments about students in front of students, but says he should not have been surprised: “Being nonwhite hardly makes one impervious to dominant narratives about race” (p. 78).¹

¹ Pathologizing students and families is not unique to poor students and students of color in the U.S. (See, for example, Shield et al., 2005, for a discussion on the deficit discourse’s harm on Maori students in New Zealand.) Special education and disability studies scholars, too, have recognized and critiqued deficit discourses that construct students with disabilities as lack (e.g., Hehir, 2002; Shakespeare, 2006).

The deficit discourse not only produces the “at-risk” student who needs to be controlled, remediated, disciplined, tracked, (insert intervention here), but it also helps to produce powerful public conceptions of urban schools and the space of “The Urban”. To provide a sense of the Urban and how it is a meaning-packed, “already known” concept, I quote Henke’s (2008) description of the film *Dangerous Minds* at length; it so captures how the deficit discourse constructs the Urban not just for educators, but for those in dominant social locations in the wider public:

‘Gangsta’s Paradise’ plays as the camera flashes images of graffiti, a homeless person, housing projects, and so on. A typography of the inner city as white, middle-class audiences want to see it, as it is ‘already known’ it exists, is presented before viewers much in the manner of a well-set table; all the senses are attracted to come and dine, simply because that is what is done at such a table. Suddenly, on the screen, a yellow school bus appears, a symbol of education and ‘normalcy,’ but it is decayed and decrepit. Viewers are driven through a contemporary ‘hell,’ outside one’s self and yet within a comfortable viewing distance; of course, the viewer will stay and dine. (p. 101)

Shields et al. (2005) explain why space becomes central under the deficit discourse:

It is the pathologizing metaphor, with its root meaning in disease, that suggests, as a cure for the malady, ‘quarantining the victim’ as in the establishment of separate schools, classes, programs, or special curriculum, often compensatory, to ‘make up’ for the deficiencies of the student. (p. 17)

The space of the urban school becomes a sealed-off container where Others can be “disposed,” (Fine & Ruglis, 2009), in which the logic of the inherently “diseased” urban students legitimizes the quarantining.

Urban Teachers and the Deficit Discourse

While many scholars have documented the multiple damages that the deficit discourse causes urban students, some have signaled that this discourse can also be dangerous for urban *teachers*. Here I consider that teachers are not only perpetrators of the deficit discourse, but they along with their students have to negotiate and struggle against it at times. Weiner (2003) has pointed out that there are two common approaches to understanding the failure of urban schools:

the student-deficit paradigm which blames students and the teacher-deficit paradigm which blames teachers: “[The deficit paradigm blaming students] has frequently been challenged with another explanation that shifts attention away from student deficiencies and instead scrutinizes deficiencies of individual teachers” (p. 305). I want to explore how this deficit paradigm is one in the same, blaming *both* urban students and urban teachers for the state of their schools, and subjecting both to various “interventions” and controls. Drawing these two “explanations” together seems productive in disrupting the teachers-versus-students-and-parents trap that we get caught in when education is in “crisis”—when the nation is at “risk”—and someone has to be the scapegoat.

Not all scholars who study the deficit discourse see teachers as merely perpetrators of it. García and Guerra (2004)’s work focuses on professional development for teachers that aims to disrupt deficit thinking, but they do not want to make teachers the new objects of blame: “Rather than make educators the new targets of deficit thought, our work reinforces the importance of professional development that identifies elements of the school culture and the school climate that lead to institutional practices that systemically marginalize or pathologize difference” (p. 154). Despite good intentions and not consciously or purposefully holding deficit ideas about their students, many urban educators blame students for their own low achievement (García & Guerra, 2004; Theoharis, 2007). Teachers suffer from the “blinding power of the deficit paradigm that is reinforced continually by school practices, policies, and organizational arrangements” (Weiner, 2003, p. 311). For example, teachers are often caught in the catch-22 of well-intentioned policies that require students to be labeled “at-risk” (Shields et al., 2005, p. 18). The label may intend to secure extra support or funding for students, but the negative designation sticks to the student and makes it hard for teachers to see them otherwise.

I would argue that the trumping of good intentions and this constrained view of their students are *themselves* impairments to urban teachers and their work, but the deficit discourse also creates more direct dangers for teachers. For one, the deficit discourse interferes with teachers' relationships with other colleagues. Weiner (2003), citing a study by Goddard et al. (2000), say that when teachers do not feel a "*collective* sense of efficacy" with their colleagues—"a conviction that despite the obstacles they face, the faculty as a group can teach successfully"—student achievement levels are lower (Weiner, 2003, p. 307). Such faculty collaboration is difficult when urban schools are ruled by a culture of blame. While not using the terms "deficit" thinking or discourse, Payne (2008) describes a similar concept—what he calls "the Principle of Negative Interpretation." Effecting not just students and parents, urban teachers and administrators also operate within and are interpreted through this principle or atmosphere of blame:

Whatever other people do is interpreted in the most negative way possible. If parents don't show up at school, what does it mean? That they don't care. If a colleague fails to make hall duty, what does it mean? That she's blowing off her responsibility....But if parents do show up? They're just coming to stick their noses in our business. If the colleague show up for hall duty? Sucking up to the principal. (p. 25)

The deficit discourse can make teachers feel helpless or ineffective. Fine (1992) argues that urban teachers "themselves have been silenced over time": "It is worth noting that correlational evidence (Fine 1983b) suggests that educators who feel most disempowered in their institutions are most likely to believe that 'these kids can't be helped'" (Fine, 1992, p. 121). Weiner (2003) notes that when an administration strictly regulates urban teachers, teachers can feel inadequate and, in turn, believe their students to be inadequate. She cites a study (Metz, 1987) that found that when a school attended by students with a negative "reputation" reopened and began admitting "students according to competitive entrance criteria," the teachers remained stuck within a deficit paradigm, continued to teach in "routinized" ways, and continued to feel

ineffective (Weiner, 2003, p. 308). Because of “administrative directives that made teachers feel inadequate,” and because of the power of the deficit discourse, teachers persisted in their old ways, even without “the physical presence of the students who [had] historically been characterized as deficient” (p. 308).

Clearly, urban teachers have more power in school than urban students (Biklen, 1995, p. 19), so we might expect that students suffer more harm through the deficit discourse that circulates within their schools. However, teachers are workers—workers who are not afforded a high public opinion (Biklen, 1995). We cannot forget that as workers, urban teachers are *part* of an institution (Connell, 2009), and that this institution and its discourses form the space that is *both* the teachers’ working environment and students’ learning environment; although teachers and students are positioned differently within the urban school, they both struggle against its discourses and practices.

Neoliberalism and Teachers’ Work

This study begins with a critical view of the current neoliberal context in which public school teachers and other public workers are devalued. Educational researchers need to address the ease with which the public blames teachers—particularly urban teachers—for school failure. Neoliberalism refers to the set of ideas and practices that make the market paramount. Under neoliberalism, the world is seen in exclusively economic terms, and individuals are understood as “human capital,” “entrepreneur,” “labor power” or “consumer.” Neoliberalism is usually opposed to collectivism and favors “personal freedom and possessive individualism” (Robertson, 2008, p. 13). Neoliberalism is a term that has been used increasingly in the academy, but not as much in U.S. popular discourse. “Neoconservatism” or “market-based policies” are the terms we are more likely to hear (Ong, 2006). The guiding neoliberal (or neoconservative) belief is that “human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and

skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). Government becomes Big Government and is understood as an over-regulating intrusion into our quest for “freedom” and “flexibility.” While in traditional liberalism the role of the state is small or nonexistent, neoliberalism actually does require some state involvement. However, rather than the state being the sole granter of sovereignty, the state becomes an *agent* or tool of the market; the state helps make an appropriate market (Apple, 2005; Compton & Weiner, 2008; Harvey, 2005; Ong, 2006).

While neoliberalism promises freedom, choice, and self-determination under the rules of the market, the result seems to be less freedom and rights for most of us. Harvey (2005) argues that neoliberalism has restored the concentration of wealth to a small capitalist class, giving “rights and freedoms on those ‘whose income, leisure and security need no enhancing’, leaving a pittance for the rest of us” (p. 37, using Polanyi). He suggests that invoking the common sense ideology of personal freedom is what has allowed neoliberalism to take hold, despite the harm it causes to most people.

But how do we get from an individual who is “free” from state intrusions to one who is a bound to the market? What is the link that makes neoliberalism (at least rhetorically) about freedom, but that results in the “audit culture” conditions of evaluation and measurement (Apple, 2005)? Apple (2005, quoting Olssen) says “that in an age of universal welfare, the perceived possibilities of slothful indolence create necessities for new forms of vigilance, surveillance, ‘performance appraisal’ and of forms of control generally....The state will see to it that each one makes a ‘continual enterprise of ourselves’” (Apple, 2005, p. 14, quoting Olssen). We are allowed to be self-interested entrepreneurs, as long as we prove we are being so: “Neo-liberalism requires the constant production of evidence that you are doing things ‘efficiently’ and in the ‘correct’ way” (Apple, p. 14).

Under this “rigorous and unforgiving ideology of individual accountability” (Apple, 2005, p. 15), the public (goods) are bad, and everything private is good. “While personal and individual freedom in the marketplace is guaranteed, each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being” (Harvey, 2005, p. 65), thus, eliminating social and public programs makes sense. Teachers, seen as leeching off of the public rather than being “good,” efficient, free market entrepreneurs on their own, must be brought into the neoliberal logics of competition:

It takes long-term and creative ideological work, but people must be made to see anything that is public as ‘bad’ and anything that is private as ‘good’. And anyone who works in these public institutions must be seen as inefficient and in need of the sobering facts of competition so that they work longer and harder. (Apple, 2005, p. 15)

Scholars have studied how neoliberalism reshapes “the good teacher” (Connell, 2009; Lipman, 2004) and redefines “teacher quality” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006) in harmful, constricting manners. NCLB and other neoliberal reforms include flawed assumptions about the nature of teachers’ work. For instance, “NCLB constructs an image of teachers that links their verbal and cognitive abilities directly to student outcomes” (Cochran-Smith, 2006, p. 677). In this view, teacher quality can be improved by simply testing incoming teachers’ cognitive abilities, “thereby discounting the value of master’s degrees or pedagogical coursework” (p. 677). NCLB also focuses heavily on subject-knowledge, denying the importance of “knowledge of pedagogy and the knowledge gained from teaching practica” (p. 672), and it instead bases interventions and “what works” practices on “SBR”, or scientifically-based research (p. 673).

Connell (2009) traces the emergence of the audit culture, where “field-specific expertise (e.g. from prior experience as a teacher or principal) was devalued in favour of generic managerial skills and practices, using technical measures of organizational efficiency and

effectiveness” (p. 217). Connell argues these audit culture pressures are compounded by two developments in education. One, school and teacher “effectiveness” research that “treats schools and teachers as bearers of variables (attitudes, qualifications, strong leadership, etc.)” can easily be “correlated with pupil outcomes, measured on standardized tests” (p. 217); and two, the neoliberal distrust of professionalism as “anti-competitive monopolies” means that, “specifically, neoliberalism distrusts teachers” (p. 217). This ability to measure—and the *need* to measure that this distrust creates—makes testing *the* mode of education reform under neoliberalism, and it is hard to be critical of standardized testing in this “narrow discourse of quality and accountability” (Darder, 2005, p. 209). Sirotnik (2004) notes, however, that while neoliberalism redefines teachers and their work through business-like practices, such as motivating teachers with rewards and punishments, “remarkably absent in this rationale is the need for ongoing professional development so prevalent (and costly) in the corporate world” (p. 9).

Scholars note the way these developments make teachers into “clerks” (Giroux, 2008, p.3) or technicians. Teaching to the test transforms teaching and learning into what some have called a “teacher-proof” process (Saltman, 2009; Sawyer, 2003; Darder, 2005). Teachers feel the pressure to produce high test scores but feel limited in what and how they can teach (Moulthrop, Calegari, & Eggers, 2006). The reliance on testing misrepresents teaching as transmission and wrongly assumes “knowledge as an object that can be given more or less directly by one party to another” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006, p. 674). Darder (2005) argues that a “teacher-proof instructional approach makes it extremely uncomfortable and disturbing for those teachers who know their subjects well, who teach in ways that critically engage their students, and who want teaching to be linked to the realities of students’ lives” (p. 212), and this reliance on testing and prepackaged curricula “fails to consider the wealth of research and literature on teaching and learning to inform its execution” (Darder, 2005, p. 212).

Indeed, to be a good teacher, one does not have to gain teaching experience, collaborate with colleagues, or learn from past literature—one has to only go shopping! A good teacher must be a consumer of certain products, and government guidelines like the What Works Clearinghouse are more than happy to provide these products: “Teachers are to be prudent consumers of the reservoir of resources for instructional decisionmaking that can be found in products created by experts in the field and certified by SBR” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006, p. 678). Teachers cannot rely on themselves and their professional knowledge: “Teacher-generated curriculum becomes an absurdity, because it cannot be competitively assessed” (Connell, 2009, p. 218).

TFA as a Neoliberal Technology

TFA is an organization that trains recent college graduates to teach in poor or ‘high-need’ U.S. schools during a five-week summer institute, having prepared almost twenty-five thousand teachers in its twenty-plus year history (Farr, 2010). Joining the wave of neoliberal ‘deregulation and competition in initial teacher education’ (Zeichner, 2010, p. 1545), TFA’s business-inspired preparation program is run largely by past TFA corps members, and it includes ‘corporate culture training and team-building sessions,’ as well as field experience teaching summer school (Veltri, 2010, p. 54). As an undergraduate student at Princeton over twenty years ago, Wendy Kopp developed the idea for TFA in her senior thesis project (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Kopp, 2001). Kopp wanted to improve public schools by recruiting graduating seniors from top universities across the U.S. and placing these future leaders in under-resourced rural and urban schools for a two-year teaching commitment. This national teacher corps model has since expanded to a global scale in ‘Teach For All,’ including Teach First UK, Teach For Australia, Teach For China, and Teach First Deutschland, to name a few (Miner, 2010). There are currently Teach For All ‘fast track schemes’ (McConney et al., 2012) in 26 countries (Teach For All, n.

d.). TFA and its counterpart programs in other nations continue to attract college students who may not plan to stay in the classroom after two years, but who will advocate for education reform from whatever career path they pursue. Applicants need not have a teacher education background; the only preparation TFA recruits undergo prior to being placed in a classroom is TFA's summer institute program. TFA has grown in size and popularity. According to TFA's 2010 Annual Report (Teach For America, n. d.), there were 8,000 corps members working in 39 regions of the U.S. TFA had 46,366 applicants, accepting less than ten percent.

Although highly publicized, TFA is not unique in its alternative teacher preparation approach. Darling-Hammond (1994) critiques TFA for, among other things, using an old 'emergency' route to teaching. However, Zeichner (2010) argues that recently there has been a 'tremendous growth of alternatives to traditional college and university-based teacher education that include many new for-profit companies and universities that have gone into the business of preparing teachers' (p. 1545). Recently, New York State has helped allow TFA to grant master's degrees to its members (Foderaro, 2010; Zeichner, 2010). TFA teachers are often hired with an alternative certification and must obtain the teaching credential necessary for their region during their two-year commitment. Some choose to pursue a master's degree—either through a university program that partners with TFA, or through a degree-granting non-profit like TFA itself (Miner, 2010; Teach For America, n. d.). Although TFA's training has changed over the years, critics—sometimes TFA alumni—continue to fault TFA teachers' level of preparedness (Strauss, 2013a; 2013b).

Neoliberal logic demands that schools be put into competition with another, made efficient through privatization, and made accountable through auditing practices. This results in voucher and choice schemes and more private schools, charter schools and Educational Management Organizations (EMOs) (Saltman, 2007). Beyond its fondness for 'efficient,' data-

driven approaches and its focus on test scores, the extent to which TFA functions as a neoliberal technology can be seen by considering the educational projects started by some of its most touted alumni, such as the KIPP charter school network started by Mike Feinberg and David Levin where TFAers commonly teach (Miner, 2010).

With its ‘teaching as leadership’ mantra, TFA promotes the teacher-as-clerk or teacher-as-auditor view. Certainly leadership can be complex, but TFA uses a managerial, business-like conception of leader in which teachers must only ‘inspire’ and ‘motivate’ their students to produce high test scores. Key teaching tips are, ‘Execute effectively’ and ‘Continuously increase effectiveness’ (Farr ,2010). Instead of traditional teacher education, TFA wants corps members to utilize their leadership experiences from college and translate them to the classroom. At a university information session about TFA, a TFA representative described the kinds of applicants the organization wanted:

There’s a lot of different ways to show us that you’re really taking a hold of your own college experience and you’re being a leader. And we really think these principles of being a strong leader are very transferrable into a classroom setting.

TFA wants college students who are the presidents of fraternities and the chairs of student clubs; TFA is less interested in pedagogical theory and knowledge. This TFA representative explained her teaching philosophy in the corporate-like terms of setting goals and investing:

Similar to if you were running a student organization, or running a service project, or being a manager at a store—you set a goal for your team, you invest them in wanting to work towards it, and then you set up all of the management systems and continuously figure out how you can improve and actually get to the goal, which is exactly what I had to do in my classroom.

While TFA wants to improve student achievement, TFA also highlights the benefits that the TFA experience delivers to teachers themselves, especially after the corps. After two years, TFA members are encouraged to use the experience they gained to influence educational policy and build a movement, but also to enhance their own careers. TFA offers the chance for its teachers to ‘do good’ *and* ‘do well,’ in ways that teacher education programs do not (Labaree, 2010). The first brochures I received at an information session were titled ‘Career Spotlight,’ each describing advantages for different careers: ‘Joining Teach For America before pursuing a career in business will provide you with the management experience and leadership skills that will help you have a greater impact in the business world.’

Urban Teachers: Negotiating Parallel Discourses

“...it is important to avoid centering on teachers as the problem, which detracts from the critical examination of systemic factors that perpetuate deficit thinking and reproduce educational inequities for students from nondominant sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds” (García & Guerra, 2004, p. 154).

“If we give people an enormously challenging task and only a fraction of the resources they need to accomplish it, sooner or later they start to turn on one another, making the job more difficult still. If we are not mindful of the inadequacy of the resource base, it always seems as if the problem is just those nutty people teaching in urban schools, as opposed to the conditions under which we expect them to teach” (Payne, 2008, p. 24).

Here I draw these two literature areas of neoliberalism and the deficit discourse into one field of study, or at least parallel fields. I consider how the neoliberal technologies with which teachers struggle—such as the high-stakes tests and testing-based curricula I have discussed—greatly parallel the deficit discourses through which urban teachers must also navigate. In other words, I begin to examine how the discourses of neoliberalism and the deficit paradigm of the Urban function together to construct urban teachers’ work.²

² These are not the only discourses with which urban teachers negotiate. All teachers are subject to school organization and bureaucratic controls (Ingersoll, 2003) and face constraints such as little planning time and low pay (Moulthrop, Calegari, & Eggers, 2005). Also, teaching historically has been devalued and analyzed as a feminized profession (e.g. Biklen, 1995).

Personal responsibility, personal accountability and the medical model. As Valencia (1997; 2010) recognized, the deficit model works to pathologize urban students along the lines of the psychological behavioral or medical model of describing, explaining, predicting and treating “deficits.” Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2006) argue that neoliberal testing policies also adhere to this logic because NCLB sees teaching, as stated by Secretary of Education Spellings, as “prescribing an instructional cure” (p. 681). Thus, neoliberalism intensifies the deficit view of students; poor students and students of color, already largely seen through the deficit discourse as “ailing from lack of skills” (p. 681), come to be constructed more thoroughly as “diseased” in this era of accountability. While all teachers bear the burden of having to “treat” students and get them “healthy” test scores, urban teachers become responsible for the, in a sense, seemingly doubly “sick” urban students.

In other words, the audit culture of neoliberalism can compound the pathologizing effect of the deficit discourse because both forces house fault in the individual. This “racialized neoliberal logic” says that “private management and the market foster entrepreneurship, individual responsibility, choice, and discipline” (Lipman, 2011, p. 91) that “deficient” individuals in urban schools allegedly need. There is a parallel between the “personal responsibility” rhetoric that serves as the solution to the supposed deficits of poor students and students of color, à la Bill Cosby (Alonso et al, 2009, p. 203), and the “personal accountability” logic that is a feature of neoliberalism. These similar individualistic discourses both take the focus off of costly investments into education and the public. Referring to the “never-ending repertoire of self-help strategies” offered up to poor students and students of color, Alonso et al. (2009) argue, “There is an obvious appeal to these pedagogies of moral uplift. They come cheap” (p. 203). As well, as Connell (2009) points out, the “widespread consensus” that quality teachers

are important is *not* followed by a “pouring [of] vast resources into teacher education,” but rather further testing and regulation of individual teachers (p. 214).

Less access to the knowledges urban teachers need. Perhaps the most crucial point where neoliberalism and deficit thinking converge is in the shift in the purpose of education and the change in what counts as knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006; Compton & Weiner, 2008; Sleeter, 2008). As education’s purpose changes from “preparation partially for citizenship” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006, p. 1948) to the production of a “minimally trained and flexible workforce that corporations require to maximize their profits” (Compton & Weiner, 2008, p. 5), knowledges of social change, social justice and multicultural education have no place. With this narrowed view of knowledge under neoliberalism, the harm of the deficit discourse cannot be as thoroughly analyzed. In other words, neoliberalism maligns the very knowledge practices that *allow for* and *foster* a critique of the deficit discourse’s harmful effects on poor students and students of color. Further, neoliberalism phases out knowledges capable of offering critiques of neoliberalism, as well!

Social justice educators and others who recognize the harm of the deficit discourse (e.g. García & Guerra, 2004; Ladson-Billings; 2006; Theoharis, 2007; Weiner, 2007) aim to challenge it through various ways (reframing perceptions of students, encouraging the use of a cultural lens, culturally relevant teaching, etc.). But as Sleeter (2008) points out, teacher education is being recast as simply training to get your students to get high test scores. Under neoliberalism, teacher education moves “away from explicit multicultural, equity-oriented teacher preparation,” and teacher education programs are instead “being compelled to jettison not only explicit equity-oriented teacher preparation, but also learning-centered teaching, in order to prepare technicians who can implement curriculum packages” (Sleeter, p. 1952). Teacher education is not the only place where a social justice orientation can take hold for urban

teachers, but other opportunities like union involvement and professional development are decreased, too. When there is professional development, it is often driven by NCLB demands, “structured around learning to use commercially produced curriculum packages” (Sleeter, 2008, p. 1954). If there is no space for urban teachers to learn about and challenge the deficit discourse, it remains in place, and potentially intensifies. As Giroux (2008) argues,

As corporate power undermines all of the notions of the public good and increasingly privatizes public space, it obliterates those public spheres in which there might emerge criticism that acknowledges the tensions wrought by a pervasive racism that ‘functions as one of the deep, abiding currents in everyday life...’ (Giroux, p. 63, quoting Geiger)

Teachers’ Critical Talk

Urban teachers’ negotiation with both deficit and neoliberal discourses was visible in what I call *critical talk*. I coded the times when teachers critiqued particular school practices or approaches to education as critical talk. Teachers critiqued a variety of things and from a variety of perspectives—a school’s administration, other teachers’ teaching styles, a curriculum that promoted assimilation, students who did not assimilate enough, an overemphasis on student discipline, not enough focus on student discipline, and many others. The critical talk of teachers is central to my dissertation and this paper because it means taking teachers’ perspectives seriously—hearing their talk *as critique* and not as mere “complaints,” for instance—and it highlights both constraint and agency. Critical talk is a moment when teachers create a space for other possible constructions of schooling. Studying teachers’ critical talk includes multiple considerations: acknowledging the constraints which teachers currently face, recognizing that things could be otherwise, and examining the discourses that shape *both* their critique and their ideas for how the “otherwise” space of possibility is filled up. Studying critical talk also disrupts

the “teacher-is-to-blame” explanation that sees teachers as only objects at fault and instead works to position them as subjects of their experiences.

Critique conceived of in this way emphasizes the agency of the teachers I interviewed. If power both “breaks [the body] down and rearranges it” (Foucault, 1979, p. 138), then in the instance of rearrangement or reproduction there is a space to at least imagine a different possibility of rearrangement. While teachers’ critical talk may not always lead to transformation, it highlights this “both/and” moment of present realities and future possibilities. de Certeau (1984) also uses this metaphor of carving out space and using “cracks” in the dominant order (p. 37).

Teachers described much of their work in relation to testing and the *measurement* of students and their progress. Despite wanting success for students, teachers often blamed students for the problems of school, in part to escape being blamed themselves by a constraining audit culture focused on testing. One TFA teacher described herself as a “numbers person.” She, like other teachers in the study, struggled to reconcile her negative experiences with testing—she was not asked back to her school after her first year in TFA because of student scores—with her perspective that testing should be tied to her performance. While she became critical of tests, she was critical in particular ways that ended up relying on a deficit view of students and that allowed the neoliberal logic of accountability to remain largely intact:

Erica: ...[G]oing into Teach For America, I was so excited that they’re using numbers and performance, and this and that, and going into it, I was just like, “Duh! If you’re a teacher, you should be good at it, and your kids should be making all this progress,” and like, it made so much sense to me. But after *doing* it, it’s like... Okay, I had a kid who came in the day of our spring test,

Heidi: Right.

Erica: ...and he had gotten into a fight with his mom that morning, he hadn't had breakfast, he was angry, and he was one of my students who had a 504 plan for his behavior. He had explosive personality disorder, and so all of these things—what would have been like a brush-off-your-shoulder day for anyone else was like enough to make him self-sabotage his test.

Heidi: Yeah.

Erica: The day of, my second year teaching, I was able to convince my principal to let him postpone taking the test for two days.... But really, like my job performance is tied to *this kid*.

Erica invokes the deficit language of “these kids”—or “this kid”—signaling that testing should work with some students, but not urban students who lack breakfast, who are “angry,” and who have “disorders.” The power of neoliberalism makes testing and performance *the* educational framework, and Erica wants to be successful according to these measurements. Urban students are reinscribed as lacking and constructed as *unworthy* to be tested, allowing both the deficit discourse and neoliberal logics to continue to operate.

In another example, a teacher from the Smart Kids project was critical of how district administrators understood her work. Christine said that all she heard from the district level was talk about the “number of chairs” in the classroom. She was upset that the district administrators conceived of teachers’ jobs in terms of efficiency and empty seats, and that class size was everything. This teacher knew her work was more complex than that, and for a higher-up to understand the main problem with schools in terms of counting empty seats infuriated her. However, she then reframed the problem as *these kids* in these seats. She was upset that the administrator did not understand that her job was complicated because she had to deal with these kids. Her critical talk disrupts neoliberal accounting logics, but in the space that her critique

opens up, deficit thinking sneaks in; counting seats might make sense if she were teaching “normal kids” rather than this “population.”

In another interview with Christine, she discussed the challenges she faces in an urban district and the pressures of being designated PLA or “persistently low achieving.” Here, she seems to fight the deficit discourse that gives up on “these kids” and sees them as helpless, but her critique of the harsh controls placed on urban schools winds its way back to the responsibility of individual urban families:

Christine: You’re being punished for being a city school teacher instead of getting a job in the suburbs. I don’t think suburbs are the Promised Land. I guess what I’ll say[is] if you teach an at-risk population you’re being penalized. I really believe... My co-worker...we were saying this the other day. She said this school is full of good teachers, but you wouldn’t know it based on our results. I don’t think that’s a cop out. There could be some people sitting back going, “This is really hard, and how can you expect me to do better? What I’m up against. Look at these kids.” I’m not talking about people that have that approach. I said to my students last year...this was kind of an interesting thing. They were really acting up. This was not this group, but this was a good story. I asked them, “Do you know why our school ... why everything changed? Because you know I’m a new teacher, and you know there’s lots of new teachers. We put were put on a state list. Do you know about that?” They were like, “Yeah. But we don’t know what...” They’re fourth graders. I said, “We’re called a low-achieving school. I said that means that we’re not doing a good enough job, teachers or students. That we have to work hard and we have to learn what we need to know as fourth graders.” This one kid says to me... Oh no, when I asked the question at first, their response to me was when I said, “Why did we change the school?” is, “Because we’re bad.” I said, “Really?” Then I went on and I

explained about the PLA, and we have to do more and all this stuff. This other kid said, “That’s why no one new comes to this school.”

Heidi: No one new?

Christine: No new kids choose to come to this school. That was pretty telling. It’s like, no one wants to come here.

Heidi: So did they..? How do you think they meant bad?

Christine: “We’re bad kids. We’re bad overall.” When you look around if I’ve got kids that are all acting out and they don’t have any good role models... I truthfully look at kids in my class and think, your family needs to get you out of here.

Christine distances herself from teachers who have the mentality of, “Look ‘what I’m up against. Look at these kids.’” But she seems to buy into the authority of the PLA label and believe that she and the students have to in fact “work hard.” Further, she seems to latch onto the deficit logic that sees urban students’ families as lacking—in this case, lacking “good role models”—and *simultaneously* latches onto the individualistic and middle class approach that assumes parents can and should simply “choose” another school. This kind of thinking is supported in the neoliberal policies of choice and vouchers, as well.

Conclusion

Rose (2009) recognizes that while “... ‘qualified teachers’ are praised in public documents and speeches, teachers are often pegged as the problem” (p. 57). While Michelle Rhee, Joel Klein, and other education policy makers and researchers claimed in their “manifesto” that public schools are places *for* teachers and *for* unions, and not students (“How to Fix Our Schools”, 2010), deficit and neoliberal discourses help to produce urban schools that are for *neither* student nor teacher. I aim to add to the growing body of scholarship that discusses the effects of neoliberalism and the racist, classist deficit discourse. This literature is important, not

only because it highlights the harm that urban teachers and students experience, but because of the ways the blame game played on teachers *misdirects* our attention from—and keeps intact—racist, capitalist systems that are largely to blame for educational injustices. Discourse scholar Wetherell (2008) notes, “When we talk we have open to us multiple possibilities for characterizing ourselves and events....An interesting question for discourse analysts, therefore, is why *this* version or *this* utterance?” (p. 17). Heeding this call to question “why *this* version,” I hope my work can better understand and challenge the deficit discourses that construct the Urban, and that are dangerous for both urban students and teachers.

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