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Elyse Hambacher
University of New Hampshire, elyse.hambacher@unh.edu

Winston Charles Thompson
University of New Hampshire, Winston.Thompson@unh.edu

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Elyse Hambacher
University of New Hampshire

Winston C. Thompson
University of New Hampshire

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Elyse Hambacher and Winston C. Thompson
University of New Hampshire

In an attempt to understand widespread school failure among children of color and children from low-income backgrounds, dominant discourse points to pervasive deficit ideologies that blame a student's family structure, cultural and linguistic background, and community (Dudley-Marling, 2007; Valencia, 2010; Weiner, 2006). By accepting such a simplistic explanation of blaming the child for a lack of success[i] without examining systemic inequities, deficit thinkers ignore real and complex issues of structural inequity. We agree with Pearl (1997) who argues that deficit thinking ignores "external forces— [i.e.], the complex makeup of macro- and micro-level mechanisms that help structure schools as inequitable and exclusionary institutions" (p. 151). Systemic inequities in the U.S. have manifested themselves in a variety of ways— for example, in matters of racial profiling and restrictive housing contracts for people of color. In schools, practices such as academic tracking, disproportionate funding, and the overrepresentation of Black and Latino children in punitive school disciplinary procedures contribute to the maintenance of structural racial inequality and social reproduction (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Kozol, 2005; Oakes, 2005). In reference to these and similar trends, researchers argue that children of color are not dropping out of school; rather, they are being *pushed out* through the presence of a school-to-prison pipeline that criminalizes Black males in particular—and prepares them for incarceration (Ferguson 2000; Wald & Losen, 2006). Viewing students as summarily deficient has long been deeply embedded in the culture of urban and low-income schools.

This paper proposes to contribute to a paradigm shift that aims to counter the seductive logic of deficit thinking. In this paper, we share an account of Ms. Bentley, a fifth-grade teacher who worked with students who have historically floundered in school, as it is illuminative of more nuanced understandings of potential alternatives to the dominant deficit model. This paper employs a double-pronged approach, drawing upon the ethnographic and conceptual analytic expertise of its authors to bear upon questions of deficit thinking in both practice and theory. In the next section, we describe the context in which the project took place and how we chose Ms. Bentley. Then, we share the personal history of Ms. Bentley gathered from ethnographic data. Next, we present Ms. Bentley's work against the backdrop of deficit thinking in two interrelated domains, offering some insight into her potential views and dispositions in those efforts. Finally, we explore the allure of deficit thinking in educational work, transitioning into concluding remarks of interpretation regarding the ways in which the educator of this study resists deficit approaches to education.

Context and Participant Selection

Ms. Bentley's story emerges from a larger study that sought to understand how effective teachers think about and work with students who exhibit challenging behavior. For this project, we defined an effective teacher as one who has been nominated by the school's principal for obtaining high academic student achievement, holding high

expectations of all students, and exhibiting successful approaches to working with student behavior. The principal was also asked to present a list of those who rarely refer students to the office for behavior issues. Teaching in a general education classroom was an additional criterion for selection. The elementary school, located in an urban section of South Florida, receives Title I funding[ii], as about 85% of the students receive free or reduce priced lunch. Approximately 820 students attend the school and are from the neighborhood community. Students reflect diverse racial backgrounds—51% Latino, 38% Black, 8% White, 3% Asian, and 23% of the students are English Language Learners.

In an initial interview, our ethnographic researcher asked about particular students' behavior that concerned Ms. Bentley in the belief that this would help lend focus to the ways she worked with students in relation to their challenging behavior. When probed about particular students' behavior that concerned her, Ms. Bentley frankly stated, "To be very honest with you, I'm not concerned as far as behavior issues in the classroom…I've never had that problem" (B-I2)[iii]. After repeatedly asking this question in different ways, our ethnographic researcher received the same response: Behavior problems were absent from her classroom. Concerned that she would be a poor candidate for a study that sought to understand teachers' perspectives and practices about student behavior, our ethnographic researcher nevertheless continued to visit her classroom 14 times over two months and remained curious about her assertion. Not surprisingly, this paper does not specifically address student behavior. Rather, we describe the practices and potential thinking of Ms. Bentley and her efforts to counter deficit thinking that marginalizes students who have been historically identified by society as inferior.

Thick descriptions are a significant feature of ethnographic research that moves beyond reporting details and events. These descriptions often represent webs of meaning, or cultural constructions under investigation (Geertz, 1973). As such, we share background information about Ms. Bentley's life because we believe that her teaching is deeply connected to her personal history.

Who is Ms. Bentley?

A native of Miami, Florida, Ms. Bentley was born into a working-class family of seven siblings—four brothers and three sisters. When her father died at an early age, her mother was left to raise them as a sole parent, which Ms. Bentley described as no easy task for a single mother earning a music teacher's salary. Her family moved several times within the Miami area because they could not afford to pay rent. Growing up in poverty, the Baptist church emerged as one location that provided a reliable measure of solace. With her mother's experiences in music education, Ms. Bentley's childhood was rich with music; she recalls singing in the church choir during every Sunday service. She expressed that she was "not a model student" (B-I1); instead she did just enough to get by in school. However, she proudly described herself as a strong, energetic, personable, and assertive Black woman.

Together for 28 years, Ms. Bentley and her husband have two teenaged children. Her husband is of Haitian decent and holds a doctoral degree. Her family lives in a culturally diverse community in a suburban part of Florida, demographically composed of middle- to upper-middle-class families from all over the world including Haiti, Bangladesh,

India, China, and Cuba. As a public school teacher for 19 years, Ms. Bentley entered the teaching profession to "touch some souls" (B-I1) and has taught only in urban, low-income communities in South Florida.

To more fully understand Ms. Bentley, one must be aware of the socio-political awareness that was a significant feature of her character. In our interviews, she openly critiqued race-based assumptions and brought the topic of race to the forefront in our conversations. For example, she shared, "You need to understand being Black...the struggles that Black people have gone through...[As a Black person], you need to learn how to deal with adversity because you're going to be faced with it big time"[iv] (B-I3). Keenly aware of the discrimination and prejudice Black and low-income people experience in society, Ms. Bentley shared that she has been accused of "acting White" because she speaks in the dominant American dialect (Ogbu, 1996). People have said to her, "Oh you're not really Black... Black people are very poor and illiterate and not educated" (B-I3). When she talked about Black boys in particular, she appeared frustrated and asserted, "To be very honest with you, a lot of Black boys are misunderstood. Sometimes teachers don't know how to tap into their interests, and I can say that because I have an Black son who is misunderstood" (B-I3). Ms. Bentley recognizes that many teachers of Black children view them as deficient and incapable, and knows this from her lived experience of having Black children.

When describing her relationship with students, she viewed them as similar in many respects to her biological children: "I let my students know that I treat them the same way that I treat my children; I have the same expectations of them that I have of my children. They are like my children away from their parents" (B-I1). Her interviews and observations communicated her deep care and concern for students' wellbeing. This desire, in conjunction with her socio-political consciousness motivates her to teach students how to "break the mold."

Breaking the Mold

"Break[ing] the mold" was a phrase Ms. Bentley used deliberately and often to refer to her larger goal of preparing students for successful lives despite the realities of their circumstances. Knowing the challenges of racism, living in poverty, and marginalization from her lived experience, she asserted:

> You look at [my students'] family backgrounds, the struggles, and the challenges that their families have to go through. I tell my kids, 'I want you to break the mold. That's what I want you to do.' I tell my kids, 'Do what I tell you to do and you will have success; do what I tell you and you will have success. I want you to be successful.' (B-I1)

The directive, "Do what I tell you to do," might sound forceful, but according to Ms. Bentley, her intention is to equip students with the necessary tools to help them achieve success. Without these tools, she worried that students would be confined in a perception of deficiency, one that pathologizes individuals and their communities, thereby internalizing their deficit labels. "The world is a competitive place," and "these students

won't have a chance" (B-I1), she declared. Understanding that students will eventually compete with others from more privileged backgrounds, she believed it was necessary to assist them in both succeeding academically and developing a disposition of resilience. She explained,

> Kids are going to come across adversity. How do [they] deal with it? Is it too early to teach them in the fifth grade? No, you need to teach them how to deal with adversity, how to deal with challenges and that's what I'm going to do for my children. That goes beyond the reading, writing, reading, [and] math. (B-I1)

In order to break the mold, Ms. Bentley believes that students need to learn a comprehensive set of skills, including respect, confidence, leadership, and the ability to work with others.

Ms. Bentley acknowledges that deficit thinking renders students' backgrounds and communities as flawed and is mindful of her use of language. For instance, she made sure to distinguish the differences between "low performing students" and "students performing at a low level" in her first interview. She explained, "I'm not going to say 'low performing students.' I'm going to say 'students performing at a low level'… because I think students will rise to the occasion if they're given the correct tools" (B-I1). Even though some students received low scores on academic assessments, she insisted on acknowledging them primarily as persons rather than by their scores as a means to counter deficit thinking. From Ms. Bentley's perspective, "failure [was] not an option"— students had the ability to succeed, and her actions helped them break the mold to reach that success. In other words, *breaking the mold* meant emancipation from the social barriers that restrict students from access to successful lives. In the following section, we describe two main ways she assisted students to break the mold: 1) She helped students see the potential in themselves; and 2) she empowered them to exercise their voices.

Helping Students See Their Potential

Ms. Bentley is aware of the implicit and explicit pathologizing of her students by others, yet she refuses to allow harmful deficit discourse to influence her beliefs about students' abilities. She expressed concern that students would be unsuccessful if they continued to view themselves from the deficit-based labels that had been given to them. In fact, in our first interview she asserted,

> I don't look at the kids like they're dumb, stupid, or they don't know anything. What are [teachers] doing, then? What are [teachers] doing? How can we change our attitude? It's about changing our attitude. When we change our attitude, our students will be much better . . . students. We have to change our attitude, and when we do that we can produce some very good fruit. That's what I believe. (B-I1)

To help students see their potential, she believed that it was crucial to unlearn deficit ideology by building their self-confidence. Students could not view themselves as dumb or

stupid if she wanted them to experience success. Expressing how students described their own identity change and the identity changes in their peers she stated,

> One kid said, 'You know last year Ms. B., I didn't feel comfortable raising my hand, I never said anything in class.' Another kid said, 'I was afraid to talk.' Another kid said, 'Oh, Ms. B., he wasn't like that last year. He was a troublemaker', but you look at that same student and he's totally a different student. He raises his hand, she raises her hand, they participate, they're not afraid, they're not timid, they're not shy. So it's building a level of confidence within the kids, and if they feel confident, the opportunity for them to learn is so great; it's so vast. (B-I2)

Ms. Bentley works to transform students' identities by helping them imagine themselves as capable, strong individuals. For example, when it was time for Henry, a soft-spoken and shy student who loved football to present in front of the class, Ms. Bentley smiled and said, "Henry, let's do it, babe. I want you to talk like you're on the PE field. Like you're the coach now, okay?" (B-O1115). Then, Ms. Bentley reassured Henry that his classmates were eager to listen to his presentation:

> You guys are really interested in what he has to say and you want to be able to hear him. You know what he wrote was great and you want to hear the great things he has to say. That's why I need you to speak from your diaphragm, Henry. (B-O1211)

By helping students see themselves in new ways, Ms. Bentley works to convince them that they were persons capable of greater results than others assume of them.

Ms. Bentley believed that learning could not be done alone, and that she and her students were responsible for encouraging one another. Breaking the mold had to be accomplished by developing independent thinkers but also by a communal responsibility to help each other to see potential within the group. Ms. Bentley asked, "If there's an area in which one is weak, how do we make that person stronger? What is it we can do to build that person up?" (B-I2). Students helped one another by offering constructive criticism on their writing assignments, and presentations, and recognized their classmates' academic progress to encourage their continued improvement. Clapping, offering words of encouragement (e.g., "Lucas, I'm so proud of you guy!," "Wow, fabulous!") for students who tried their hardest, and celebrating their peers' improvement by acknowledging what the student did well (e.g., "Oh, Ms. B., she's answering more questions … Oh, she's reading fluently now") were additional ways students encouraged each other to bring out the potential of the entire group.

Ms. Bentley also worked to help students see their potential by getting them to envision possibilities. The excerpt below illuminates how she showed students that she believed in them and they were capable of fulfilling their aspirations:

> Ms. Bentley: Marcus, what do you aspire to be when you grow up?

Marcus: I want to be an architect.

Ms. Bentley: Well, imagine that you are a 24 year-old young architect and people are like, Oh, wow, this guy is intelligent and people really respect his knowledge. People might be intimated at times but you're on top of the world, Marcus. (B-O1218)

Helping students to imagine what a successful life would feel like motivated them to continue to reach for their goals.

One morning in particular, Ms. Bentley displayed the lyrics of a pop song on the SMART-Board[v]. Analyzing the lyrics and meaning of the song, the following conversation took place:

Ms. Bentley: Okay, so if she's on top of the world, what character trait would someone like that exude?

Students: (shout out) Bold, determined, confident!

Ms. Bentley: Yes, those are all character traits. Okay, (points to one line in the song) what does that statement mean? What does that signify? THINK THINK! You are analyzing.

(Students give answers.)

Ms. Bentley: Uh-huh. I'm so grounded but my head is in the clouds. We are making things happen here in the community we live in. We're on such a natural high. I can do anything I want to do. Boys and girls, doesn't this really make you think?

Student: Yeah, it's like deep.

Ms. Bentley: It's like deep, isn't it? This girl in the song has her head in the game and there are some students in this class that have their head in the game but y'all need to get your head in the game! (B-O1114)

In this example, Ms. Bentley used a popular song with which students were familiar to send the message that these character traits were ones to help them break the mold. Her reference to enacting change in the community alludes to Ms. Bentley's belief that students needed to be responsible for uplifting their own communities. However, her students had to first see themselves in new ways if they were going to change the inequitable *status quo*, and she worked to help them achieve new identities.

Empowering Student Voice

In her work to counter deficit thinking, Ms. Bentley recognized the importance of creating the conditions for cultivating student voice: "I allow kids to have a voice and . . . I

think it makes them stronger individuals" (B-I1). She explained the connection between empowering students by giving them voice and becoming leaders:

> [Students] may feel that as a child, 'I can't say this; I don't know if Ms. B. is going to get upset.' But how do you empower students to become leaders? How do you empower them? By not having a voice? When do you give that kid a voice? You have to cultivate that voice. You have to provide opportunities for that student to have a voice. You need to let them know that it's okay in here. (B-I1)

Empowering students by giving them voice meant creating opportunities in which students exercised input in their learning. According to Ms. Bentley, empowering students by giving them voice would make them resilient individuals, preparing them to take on the obstacles and opposition that would lie ahead. Ms. Bentley expected students to take on leadership roles in their communities and worked to empower students' voices by providing them with opportunities for decision making, being responsive to their wonderings, and inviting students to share their perspectives.

The context in which Ms. Bentley taught was one characterized by standardized testing multiple times throughout the year. She taught in a district that required additional testing for students with scores ranked below their grade level, and, as such, the stakes were high. Working against these constraints, she sought to give students some choice when possible. For example, students were sometimes allowed to choose partners to work with as well as whether they wanted to work at their desks or another location in the classroom. During a project where students studied their own cultural backgrounds, Ms. Bentley provided a few guidelines under which she wanted the students to make choices about what they highlighted. Despite working in these circumstances, she tried to create occasions for students to make decisions.

Ms. Bentley's students were quite a bold, inquisitive group that unabashedly brought up society's issues that concerned them. These included women's reproductive rights, racism, and homosexuality. The following observation illustrates her responsiveness to their comments when a discussion arose about racism as a means to empower student voice:

> Student: There's a little boy in my neighborhood who doesn't like them.
>
> Ms. Bentley: Who is them? You mean Black people?
>
> Student: (nodding her head) He says they smell and look like ca-ca.
>
> Student: Yeah, he's racist.
>
> Ms. Bentley: I think you're right, he is racist. You know what? That could be something that is a LEARNED behavior. Let me ask you, if there was something you could all say to him, what would you say?

Student: I would say, 'You need to respect other people.'

Student: That's not right.

Student: Everyone is human.

Ms. Bentley: Right, remember we talked about learning different cultures and accepting different cultures? It's okay to say Black, you understand? Maybe we could teach him something about having tolerance and acceptance of other people. (B-O1127)

One might observe that it is uncommon to engage in such a frank conversation about racism, but Ms. Bentley understood these topics were significant to her students and in her work to counter deficit thinking. Their wonderings are not surprising given that these students are members of historically oppressed groups. To empower students by giving them voice in the classroom, she often followed their lead, engaging in the topics salient to them.

Relatedly, Ms. Bentley created the conditions for students to be empowered by encouraging them to share their own perspectives. During a presidential election, Ms. Bentley invited students to discuss the two candidates' platforms. During this observation, students asserted their opinions by sharing, "I wouldn't vote for him because he doesn't care about women's rights" (B-O1107), and "It's your body, not their body and that's not right! Men shouldn't be telling you what to do" (B-O1107). By cultivating a space where voiced perspectives were encouraged, Ms. Bentley sends the message that her students' voices are valued and respected. Furthermore, she explained to students the importance of standing up for what they believed, even while in the fifth grade. Ms. Bentley expounded, "When students get out into the real world they have to learn how to deal with opposition and they have to realize that 'I am valued and my voice… I do have a voice and . . . it's okay for me to express how I feel" (B-I2). Creating the affordances for students to practice using their voice was crucial for Ms. Bentley, as she knew that her students would be silenced in the world if they did not learn how to do so.

As their teacher, Ms. Bentley considered herself responsible for highlighting her students' strengths instead of harping upon their weakness by focusing on students' progress rather than reaching perfection. She was focused on nurturing their desire to learn, which drove her to teach students far more than academic skills. By helping students see their potential and empowering their voice, Ms. Bentley seeks to help students break the mold, a phrase she used to express her desire for students to transcend the deficit thinking epidemic inherent in the description of students of color and of impoverished backgrounds.

Understanding Deficit Thinking in Light of Ms. Bentley
The previous sections of this paper provide a context in which to conceptually analyze deficit thinking in educational environments, a task we take up in the two sub sections below.

As she largely refrains from indulging the seductive logic of deficit thinking, Ms. Bentley might represent a dedicated educator attempting to challenge the assumed collective fate of her students by returning to the abiding call of breaking the mold. In what follows, we analyze key elements entailed in this approach in the service of clarifying attention to the deficit framework that it counters. In these pages, we resist boilerplate responses to both deficit thinking and Ms. Bentley's attitudes, avoiding unduly simple categorizations of right and wrong so that we might pursue a more rich and complicated understanding of the concepts and phenomena of our study.

Deficiencies, Differences, and the Seductive Logic of Deficit Thinking

That deficit thinking has emerged as, and to a large degree, still remains, a dominant approach to analyzing and responding to students ought not be terribly surprising, especially in regard to its motivations. Menchaca (1997) outlines a historical reading of deficit thinking linked to, *inter alia*, a classist, ableist, and strongly racist history of the justifications offered in light of educational differences. Valencia (1997) follows this argument and suggests that an early twentieth century genetic rationale supporting a presumed pathological resistance to traits of educability may have been structured on the back of similar motivations related to justifications of the educational outcomes of marginalized groups. To the careful reader of history and power, these views are, unfortunately, less than shocking, but they may tell an incomplete tale that seems to suggest a relatively straightforward story of heroes and villains in the rise of deficit thinking. Our analysis suggests a deeper and more insidious concern.

Aside from these flawed beliefs, we focus upon the very logic of deficit thinking as deserving of special attention; its structures appear to be particularly attractive to educational discourses. Towards better engaging and countering deficit thinking, we assert that educational frameworks are particularly susceptible to deficit models in at least three ways. First, education is predominately occupied by a discourse of development; second, that developmental language is easily shifted towards statements of shortfall in that persons are implicitly measured against an ideal; and finally, these evaluations can be leveraged towards accounts of culpability entailed in the presumed justification of educational disadvantages that are at the core of deficit thinking. To outline the significance and scope of these claims, as well as to provide an account of our understanding of deficit thinking, we more fully expand upon these ideas below.

As suggested above, in some sense, most mainstream educational efforts are centrally concerned with development. Students are presumed to represent some developmental need, such that an educational experience will bolster a previously lacked skill, disposition, or the like. Education is widely treated as concerned with additive or generative interventions such that better results can be obtained.[vi] This is the normative core of most common usages of the term *education*, and a good deal of the work of educators is presumed to rest in recognizing and appropriately addressing these developmental aims. For example, while mainstream educational debates erupt regarding what ought to be taught and how, there is little disagreement in these spaces over the

notion that students ought to be brought to adequacy or even to surplus within the agreed upon domains.

Ms. Bentley herself exemplifies this when she asks her students, "If there's an area in which one is weak, how do we make that person stronger? What is it we can do to build that person up?"(B-I2). Entailed in this question is an assertion of development that can (and, according to Ms. Bentley's approach, should) be addressed in the classroom community. Ms. Bentley acknowledges that her students are "performing at a low level" and that she aims to help them "rise" (B-I1). In these statements, it would appear that Ms. Bentley is susceptible to elements of deficit thinking. Perhaps she finds difficulty in describing a normative account of education without comments like these? In truth, we cannot say definitively. However, these claims can be contrasted with the views of development that are central to the deficit framework. In highlighting an account of present abilities, Ms. Bentley's deficit thinking might be understood to avoid statements of a deeply entrenched aptitude, rather than relatively superficial activities. Of course, this is not an easily made distinction, but it may allow us to read Ms. Bentley as walking a fine line, employing development thinking while not necessarily fully entering the domain of deficit thinking.

Aptitudes—in our usage, a reference to the limited or abiding potential or capacity to gain a skill, disposition, or the like—may also have a central place in mainstream educational thought. Students are often understood to have aptitudes or dispositions (about the cause of which we can be, for the moment, agnostic) that dispose them towards or away from some or another educational goal, behavior, or design. Ms. Bentley suggests as much when she recognizes the individual needs of her students in relation to meeting the standards of her curriculum. For example, the attention that she lends to Henry is *different* than that given to Lucas, suggestive of her sense of the patterns of behavior in each of the two pupils. Henry may respond more quickly than Lucas to a particular prompt; Lucas may readily engage with some other activity via a less fully formed invitation than Henry. Terzi (2005) suggests that many educators, like Ms. Bentley, are able to access this consideration because they recognize the individuality of their students and acknowledge that similar practices will not necessarily have similar effects upon different students. Simply put, due to differences between and among students, some respond better or worse to particular actions. By relying on normative comparisons, these differences may seem to be identical with shortfalls or deficiencies. Such is the appeal of deficit thinking.

Unlike our analysis of Ms. Bentley's orientations, some streams of deficit thinking claim that statements of aptitude (or other categories) entail an assertion of one's educability. These forms of deficit thinking issue statements of summary deficit of persons rather than a claim of specific difference in patterns. That is to say, like Ms. Bentley's remarks, deficit thinking acknowledges differences between aptitudes, but then goes further to also take those differences to suggest a hierarchical ranking such that one student could be labeled *less educable* (rather than, say, *differently engaged*) than another. The deficit model expands this thinking and asserts that some students fall below a threshold of reasonable educability. As any account of deficiencies requires a reference point, we might therefore understand that this assertion implies some standard of the

educable student. Returning to Menchaca's (1997) and Valencia's (1997) observations, that standard is likely some idealized version of so-called normal students that fails to include students of color, students living in poverty, and other marginalized groups.

The preceding insights suggest that deficit thinking may be attractive to educational discourse because multiple structural elements of deficit thinking can extend potentially reasonable observations of development and difference. While it may be true that a sense of shortfall or development is present in many accounts of education, our interpretation of Ms. Bentley suggests that one can resist that view's transformation into a statement of whether a student meets a standard of educability as evaluated in reference to a problematically biased ideal. If Ms. Bentley is to be admired here, it may be in that she avoids a small but powerful central element of deficit thinking: the assumed culpability of students.

To our analysis, the preoccupation with deficit thinking about questions of student culpability, rather than student or social responsibility, is a key component of its devastating effects. In conceptual analyses of equality in education, Jencks (1988) and Howe (1989) outline approaches that recognize a usefully nuanced distinction between responsibility and culpability. Under this distinction, a person might be understood to bear some *responsibility* for their educational shortcomings, perhaps due to choices made under imperfect circumstances, they have contributed to a particular set of outcomes. But this responsibility does not necessarily entail that one is to be held *culpable* for those results such that punitive consequences are rightfully due that individual. That is to say, for our present purposes, even if one were to endorse some of the previously identified premises of deficit thinking such that one takes some students to fall below a threshold of educability (likely attributed to the genetic, environmental, or social factors previously mentioned), it is not immediately obvious that those pupils should necessarily bear the full burden of their positions on that spectrum of content knowledge and capacity. One could hold the previously mentioned views and resist assertions of culpability, treating students far more humanely than deficit thinking dictates. By holding that students are in some sense culpable for their differences relative to development, deficit thinking attempts to justify the poor treatment of those students. Given this, the implications of the shift implied by this account of culpability can be understood as the most powerful premise in the presented logic of deficit thinking.

To illustrate this notion, we might imagine a version of Ms. Bentley, who endorses all elements of deficit thinking save this ascription of culpability. This alternate Ms. Bentley could still treat her students with the same active consideration as the genuine Ms. Bentley. Unlike the caring, real Ms. Bentley, our hypothetical educator would perceive her students as standing below a threshold of good studentship, but she would also find them undeserving of diminished educational opportunities, outcomes, or attention simply because they had the bad fortune of being born with the genetic inferiorities or marginalized class membership that Menchaca (1997) and Valencia (1997) attribute to the minds of deficit thinkers. In short, she would not necessarily perceive their deficits as damning, or view her activities as corrections of fundamentally flawed persons, cultures, or classes.

The deficit model assumes that the characteristics it identifies are morally relevant facts, valued in decisions of what students are owed, such that bearers of these characteristics are justified in receiving burdens or disadvantages[vii]. Without this notion of culpability, deficit thinkers might still draw upon the regrettable conclusions identified above, but they would still be able to justifiably act in relatively caring and compassionate ways. In light of this, we conclude that this account of culpability is central to the logic of deficit thinking.

Having identified this implied core argument for justified consequences on the basis of culpability, our present expansion of these elements of deficit thinking has been fulfilled. In contrast to Ms. Bentley's approach to her students, deficit thinking maintains the inseparability of three principles:

> 1) Developmental goals can be indexed to knowledge/skill differences that exist for and between students;
> 2) These developmental concerns cohere with the presence of, *inter alia*, intellectual, cultural, or social, shortfalls as measured against some ideal;
> 3) Students are held culpable in relation to these traits and therefore deserve the (possibly often well-intentioned) diminished attentions, opportunities, and outcomes that are predicated upon their possession of these deficits.

While the first two elements of this rendering of the deficit framework may be strongly attractive to common understandings in education, thereby serving as a ready entry point to the third, all three must be present to engage in deficit thinking as we have presented it.

In this section, we have explored elements of deficit thinking through a conceptual expansion of some implied features of that approach. We have argued that educational discourse is particularly susceptible to those features that appear, on the surface, to be entailed in a general understanding of education, and that, to the deficit thinker, the additional claim of culpability may seem a relatively small addition to that more widely accepted suite of understandings. Having utilized the example of Ms. Bentley to agitate and explore those topics, we now expand upon our analysis of her embodied alternative.

Ms. Bentley as Molder, Breaker, and More

Ms. Bentley's repeated invocation of "break[ing] the mold" serves as a rallying call for her *de facto* resistance to deficit thinking. While it would be easy to assert that Ms. Bentley's approach represents a simple reversal of deficit thinking, we see her navigating a more complicated set of positions. In what follows, we suggest that while her alternative approach is definitely at odds with the assumptions of deficit thinking, it also seems to contain instances of its own internal tensions, suggesting just how pervasive deficit thinking can be.

The first tension that we identify is that Ms. Bentley wishes for her students to become indifferent to, while also acutely aware of, the ideals of the deficit thinker. In the

previous section we noted that the deficit thinker compares marginalized persons to the implied ideal student. On the one hand, Ms. Bentley calls for her students to resist the notion that they ought to be compared to that ideal. We might expect that a similar educator would encourage her students to imagine themselves as achieving their own successes, developing their own voices, and choosing their own futures; none of these endeavors are to be engaged under a diminished sense of self in relation to the deficit thinkers' ideal image of the student. On the other hand, an educator like Ms. Bentley allows the racial and economic politics of the larger society to become content in her classroom conversations. In conversation, she acknowledges her own awareness of the anticipated adversities awaiting her students. Here we see movements both towards and away from the content of the deficit thinkers' ideal, and argue that Ms. Bentley engages both in her teaching.

An educator in Ms. Bentley's position might have two goals in relation to the deficit thinker's ideals: 1) students need to become indifferent to, and not feel themselves constrained by, the oppressive force of that ideal; and 2) students need to be aware of that ideal so that they can better navigate their experiences in a world of deficit thinkers. A great degree of balance would seem necessary to manage these two seemingly impossibly incompatible goals of indifference and awareness.

The second tension that we read in Ms. Bentley's approach is that she represents herself as both a maker and breaker of molds, simultaneously. In many ways, this tension is an outgrowth of the previous remarks, as Ms. Bentley perceives herself to engage in the larger task of preparing her students for a likely life of struggle.

Again, Ms. Bentley walks a fine line as she utilizes elements of deficit thinking while also seeming to resist its core. When she implores her students to "do what [she tells them] to do" (B-I1) in order to realize successes, she is directly shaping them. She is molding them into the persons that she believes they need to be in light of the challenges of racism, poverty, and marginalization that lie ahead. This component of her identity as an educator allows her to craft the students' actions and character towards an increased likelihood of success. In this way, she molds them into what she believes they need to be.

While her interview responses do suggest that she has a developed sense of what her students lack and what they need, Ms. Bentley seems to avoid the core of the deficit paradigm. While she molds her students, she also encourages them to break the mold of external expectations and limitations in at least two related ways. First, she suggests that they break the mold of the expectations placed upon them as individuals under a framework of deficit thinking. As mentioned above, she suggests that their successes challenge the expectation of their own lived experiences. Being successful persons despite the fact that others expect the opposite breaks the individual mold shaping their lives.

Secondly, Ms. Bentley may also be read to suggest that her students' lived rebellion against the presumed social order of deficit thinking breaks a larger social mold. She may see herself as engaged in a concerted social action whereby her students' collective successes contribute towards the subversion of the dominant model of expectation and

opportunity. Breaking the mold in this context would mean breaking a system of social reproduction, upending the status quo for and about other members of the students' social groups.

These dual understandings of breaking the mold, in both personal and structural regards, suggest that Ms. Bentley may see herself as contributing to a sustained and nuanced effort of disruption, even as she herself explicitly molds her students towards that same goal. Thus, the tension between mold-making and mold-breaking is held in a unified balance, positioned in opposition to the expectations implied by deficit thinking.

The final tension that we observe is that Ms. Bentley has high expectations of her students, while she also has realistic predictions for their prospects. This tension may be the most difficult to navigate as Ms. Bentley replaces the deficit thinker's expectations of failure with her and her students' own expectations of success. While this seems straightforward and coherent with previous reflections on her alternative approach, we must note that Ms. Bentley states that, "The world is a competitive place," and "these students won't have a chance" (B-O1031).

It is tempting to read Ms. Bentley as suggesting that her students will not have a chance without her influence, but we do not interpret her view to be that simple. Ms. Bentley seems to know, as many teachers do, that despite their best efforts, many students are battling an onslaught of social and environmental forces such that they are unlikely to realize the full importance of the vision of revised expectations outlined above. In some sense, as Blum (2012) reminds us, though an educator may value and communicate high expectations for students, those expectations can be held only in the face of realistic expectations about likely outcomes.

The tensions outlined in this section give a fuller, richer sense of the practices and paces of Ms. Bentley's experiences. These seemingly incompatible and superficially conflicting elements constitute the central challenges and provocations of her exampled *de facto* engagement with deficit thinking. The remarks above ultimately suggest that the alternative she embodies is far more than a simple refutation of or detachment from deficit thinking. She is engaged in a nuanced and skillfully navigated set of perspectives in pursuit of students' successes.

Conclusion

In the previous pages we have presented the person and practices of Ms. Bentley towards better understanding how an educator might resist the allure of deficit thinking. Ms. Bentley does not represent a simple, clean, or easy reversal of that mentality. Instead, we highlight the many contradictions and tensions of her efforts to show that she might, in truth, hold some elements of deficit thinking. To some degree, given larger societal expectations, this awareness may be necessary for her work with her students. The example of her practices is not neat; it is as messy and discordant as life itself. In some ways, this is the core of the lesson learned by our focus upon Ms. Bentley.

Perhaps it is the beauty of this stance, of appearing to hope for and expect more despite often overwhelming odds, that makes Ms. Bentley's approach so compelling, so admirable. Though there are tensions in her actions and articulations, they are necessary tensions that cannot be easily resolved, contained, or sidelined. To teach the students that she does, to love them as she claims, requires that she hold views that conflict in some ways. It requires her to recognize that she will often be pulled, conceptually, in opposing directions simultaneously.

But, to some degree, these are the costs of attending to her students against a backdrop of deficit thinking. Ms. Bentley, and educators like her, cannot be naive about looming dangers; nor can they be dejected in the face of them. Ms. Bentley stands as a reminder of the daunting yet dutiful task of resisting the effortless slide into deficit thinking, while actively thinking about deficiencies and potentials. She challenges us to remember that, perhaps, the only path forward is to join her in breaking the mold, fighting the impulse to submit to simple answers and forgone conclusions.

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[i] We use the term *success* and its derivatives as a signifier of multiple species of desirable outcomes, as defined by subjects.

[ii] A school designated as high-poverty is one that receives federal Title I funding to provide students with additional materials and programs. At least 40% of students attending these

schools come from low-income families. Low-income is defined by the receipt of free or reduced-cost lunch.

[iii] Ms. Bentley's words are represented verbatim in codes described here: B=Ms. Bentley, I=interview, 2=number of interview, O=observation, 1031=date of observation. As an example, the code (B-I3) should be interpreted as Ms. Bentley, interview number 3.

[iv] Ms. Bentley uses the terms *Black* and *African-American* interchangeably. We leave that usage intact.

[v] Keyes, A.; Bhasker, J.; Remi, S.; Squier, B. (2012). Girl on Fire [Recorded by Alicia Keys]. On *Girl on Fire* [Album]. New York, NY: RCA Records.

[vi] Even in most educational projects that are explicitly preservative or degenerative (seeking to retain some element of the child's disposition or else remove some toxic influence), some measure of aid is offered in that work such that a conceptual core of addition remains (e.g., the skill necessary to resist or refute is developed). As our anonymous reviewer kindly reminds us, this might be due to a pervasive behavioral model of human learning. Other rationales might also support this claim.

[vii] For instance, one might note difference in gender or race, but take them to be morally irrelevant for judgments about access to educational opportunities. Similarly, as a structural example, one might note differences in student motivation or self-directed preparation and take them to be morally relevant for similar judgments, such that they justify unequal educational outcomes. This language of moral relevancy illuminates what one takes to be legitimate and/or deserved in, *inter alia*, educational outcomes.