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Recommended Citation

Pica-Smith, C., & Veloria, C. (2012). "At Risk Means a Minority Kid:" Deconstructing Deficit Discourses in the Study of Risk in Education and Human Services. *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences*, 2 (1), 33-48. Retrieved from <http://scholarworks.merrimack.edu/phs/vol2/iss1/4>.

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“At risk means a minority kid:” Deconstructing deficit discourses in the study of risk in education and human services

Cinzia Pica-Smith¹ & Carmen Veloria²

Abstract. Unexamined use of ubiquitous terms such as “at risk” in education and human service courses can lead to reifying raced, classed, and gendered deficit perspectives of youth and youth work. This paper examines the social construction of the term “at risk,” following students in four education and human services undergraduate and graduate courses and the work of two counselor and teacher educators as they engaged their students in the process of deconstructing and interrogating this term. Findings reveal that students enter the classroom with raced and classed assumptions of who is at risk. Students demonstrate a deficit orientation that contextualizes risk at the individual level, with students’ definitions of “at risk” often not including white youth engaged in risk behaviors. By engaging in explicitly taught critical inquiry and analysis of the discourses of risk, students began to voice more critical views of the term “at risk,” understand the socially constructed nature of the concept, and adopt a more systemic perspective of the social and political implications for educational and human service practice.

I.

Introduction

The terms “at risk” and “at-risk youth” are as ubiquitous in educational, counseling, and human service settings as they are in popular media, and they are widely used in both professional and academic as well as non-professional contexts. At the time of this writing, using the key words “at-risk youth,” a search in the scholarly search engine in education, ERIC, finds 6,811 articles while the scholarly search engine in psychology, Psych Info, yields 10,099 articles. In the popular media, a Google Scholar search using the same key words finds 1,380,000 documents while a search on Google Images using the same terms reveals an archive of 13,500,000 images.

Given the vast amount of information at students’ disposal and the dissonance surrounding these labels, it is imperative that educators help develop their students’ competencies when exploring these terms in the context of the academic classroom. For example, “at risk” is not clearly defined in the academic and/or educational literature and is used to describe youth in different ways. Some professionals use the term “at risk”

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in reference to anticipated negative trajectories and outcomes; others use the term to refer to youth currently experiencing emotional, behavioral, educational and psychological challenges (Nakkula & Thoshalis, 2006). In both cases, the term connotes a dimension of identity, i.e. “at-risk youth.”

While the term has not been operationalized, it would appear to represent a tangible construct instead of a socially constructed one that has been critiqued for reifying a new social identity of risk that pathologizes youth of color and poor youth (Fine, 1995). When the term “at risk” became popularized, Lubeck and Garrett (1990) argued that it was simply a new manifestation of a cultural deficit model. Swadener and Lubeck (1995) point out that the construct has placed the locus of dysfunction in individuals of color, single-parent families (especially mothers who are not married), low-income communities, and people with disabilities. The discourse of risk ignores institutionalized structures of inequality and a systemic analysis of what places youth at risk.

Therefore, we argue that the construct of risk and “at risk” must be deconstructed, interrogated, and problematized in order for students to develop a critical consciousness that extends beyond the individual level of analysis. We learned that for our students, who are predominantly white, middle-class women, the term is understood as synonymous with students of color, poor youth, or youth with disabilities. These students demonstrate assumptions that other students are inherently at risk based on their racial, class, and disability identities. These assumptions must be recognized, analyzed, and engaged as part of the process of counselor and teacher preparation programs, as future counselors and educators must be able to help foster equitable learning environments for all student populations (Bennet, 1995).

The following two research questions guided our inquiry: 1. How do undergraduate and graduate students preparing to be teachers, counselors, and human service providers understand risk and the construct of “at risk” as they enter our classrooms? and, 2. How could explicitly taught critical inquiry focused on deconstructing the term “at risk” affect the classroom discourse on risk and student perspectives on what “at risk” means?

II.

Theoretical Framework

Numerous research studies have reaffirmed that what educators know and do and what they believe their students are capable of learning make a difference (Haberman, 1995; National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 1996; Darling-Hammond & Falk, 1997, in Nieto, 2010). Therefore, guided by principles of critical pedagogy and sociocultural theory, we believe that our students benefit from understanding how they make meaning of youth, “at-risk youth,” and the deficit-oriented discourses used for meaning-making that influence beliefs about intelligence, potential for success, or likelihood of “failure.”

Deficit perspectives must be recognized and analyzed, as they are detrimental and based in stereotypes. These perspectives ascribe individuals’ “failure” to the deficits and problems of people from marginalized communities rather than to inequities in access and opportunities (Rank, 2004; Tozer, 2000). Deficit theories assume that some

children, because of genetic, cultural, or experiential differences, are inferior to other children. This ideology is problematic as it places complete responsibility on the individual and ignores a systemic analysis. In addition, deficit ideologies foster despair because of the suggestion that youths' problems are pre-determined by cultural-group affiliation. Thus, Nieto (2010) argues that employing this deficit paradigm may create hopelessness in both youth and educators who work with them. These deeply held assumptions, biases, and prejudices are often unexamined manifestations of economic, political, and social power of people belonging to dominant or privileged groups. Providing students with the opportunity to expand on their standpoints by identifying alternative discourses and language to draw upon is the first step in helping them acquire the competencies toward improving their practice (Nieto, 2010).

Epistemology, in general, refers to the nature, status, and production of knowledge (Harding, 1987). According to Ladson-Billings (2000), epistemology is better understood as a "system of knowing" that is linked to worldviews based on the conditions under which people live and learn. Therefore, students whose lived reality is vastly different from the students with whom they will eventually work need to engage in the process of critical reflection as a way of examining biases, challenging assumptions, and problematizing deficit-oriented images and discourses.

Because of our theoretical perspective, we understood that we had to begin our classes on risk prevention and culturally responsive pedagogy in a manner that would unpack the multiple meanings of risk and "at risk," and explore and critique how those meanings were socially constructed.

Discourses of Risk

We began our study with the assumption that an understanding of risk in educational and human service settings is steeped in raced and classed discourses that demonstrate a worldview that "risk" is tied to the deficits of individuals, especially individuals of color, working-class and poor individuals, and individuals with disabilities. We gained this perspective from our own experiences as a counselor and counselor educator and an educator and teacher educator, as well as from our theoretical orientation. Like McDermott, Raley, & Seyer-Ochi (2009), we purport that

The diagnosis of risk is embedded in cultural preoccupations and circumstances that, because rarely specified, invite a general bias: White, middle-class lives offer children the best of all worlds. The message to educators: Fix the children, and race and class barriers can be overcome one person at a time. (p. 101)

We argue that the term "at risk" is conflated with other marginalized identities. As an example, in a study examining the discourses of white teachers in urban school settings, Watson (2011) discusses teachers' use of terms such as *at risk*, *inner city*, *urban*, and *disadvantaged* youth as language that refers to race while circumventing explicit race language. She points out that white teachers use these terms to discuss youth of color without referencing race; the teachers semantically encode the youth's race and "transmit particular sets of meanings" (p. 24) through the use of these terms.

White children are also affected by the raced meaning of this term. Child development scholar, Suniya Luthar (2003) explains that the study of "at-risk" youth has focused on youth of color and low income youth and that "in contemporary child

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development literature, the phrase ‘at-risk children’ usually implies those from low income families” (p. 1581). Yet, she notes that much evidence suggests that white, middle-class, affluent, and suburban youth are experiencing high levels of risk behaviors such as substance abuse and drug abuse. Luthar & D’Avanzo (1999), for example, conducted a study of 264 predominantly white, suburban, middle-income 10th grade students and their “inner city” counterparts, 224 low-income students who were predominantly youth of color. They found higher rates of alcohol, marijuana, and hard drug use in the white, middle-class, suburban sample. Similarly, Luthar & Becker (2002) found significantly high substance abuse in both male and female participants in their study focused on affluent, suburban youth. Although middle class, affluent, white, and suburban youth experience high levels of risk as well as lack of supervision, this is not a population that is defined and understood as “at risk.”

Hence, raced and classed constructions of “at risk” harm all youth. These discourses harm children of color, poor youth, and youth with disabilities, who are labeled and pathologized. In addition, the term’s association with youth of color also harms white youth, whose high-risk behaviors do not garner needed attention and intervention from teachers and counselors alike.

Sociocultural Theory, Critical Teaching and Learning, and Social Justice

Sociocultural theory places individuals squarely in their social context, one that involves their cultural, political, and economic realities (Giroux, 1992; Nieto, 2002). This view of individuals and their lived experiences allows for the exploration of social relationships and political realities as embedded in institutional structures (Nieto, 2010). Hence sociocultural theory, critical teaching and learning, and a social justice-oriented curriculum are movements, philosophies, and methods that challenge the claim that education is racially, culturally, and politically neutral (Jehangir, 2010). In the context of the college classroom, these perspectives seek to “draw out student voices and put these voices in dialogue with others” (including that of the professor) to engage in meaning-making that is, as put by Rivera and Poplin, “constructed around and within larger socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural realities” (as cited in Jehangir, 2010, p. 537).

Our pedagogical approach is based on Bermudez’s (2008) extensive interdisciplinary review of the literature on critical thinking and her “four tools” of critical inquiry: “problem-posing,” “reflective skepticism,” “multi-perspectivity,” and “systemic thinking.” She argues that these aspects of thinking critically can be conceptualized as tools or “intellectual devices” that allow thinkers to deconstruct conventional and simplistic discourses to uncover more sophisticated understandings while avoiding stereotyping and dogmatism. We believed that we could teach these tools explicitly and set out to do so.

III.

Methods

This qualitative study was designed to enable the documentation and interpretation of naturalistic phenomena from “the perspective of those being studied” for the advancement of educational knowledge and practice (Merriam, 2001). We relied on participant observation methods that allowed us to also have an “emic” view of our

classroom (Pelto & Pelto, 1978). Being part of the environment under study provided us with an opportunity to engage in the content of the course with our students, reflect on previous discussions, and use those as a springboard for additional conversations. This is the process of learning through involvement in the routine activities of participants in the research setting (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). It provided us with an opportunity to check for non-verbal expression of feelings, determine the level of interaction in the classroom, and check how are students reacted to classroom activities (Schmuck, 1997).

Long-term participation allowed us to redefine our research focus, co-construct classroom assignments, and pay closer attention to classroom discursive practices. Goetz and LeCompte (1984) posit that methods are “adjusted, expanded, modified, or restricted on the basis of information acquired during the mapping phase offield-work . . . only after final withdrawal from the field can researchers specify the strategies they actually used for a particular study” (p. 108). Participant observation as a method not only allowed us to participate and observe, but also to interrogate (Stocking, 1983). The interrogation process consisted of that of our students’ comments, classroom assignments, artifacts, and journal entries. In addition, we also kept a reflective journal where we interrogated our own interpretations of events and theoretical implications of our pedagogical approaches.

IV.

Study Context

We are two professors in counselor and teacher education—a white woman born and raised into adulthood in Southern Italy, and a homegrown Latina. We teach courses on risk in education and human services. Our institutions are predominantly white institutions of higher education offering both undergraduate and graduate courses and degrees in human services, counseling, and education. Both institutions are located in large urban centers that are racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse. Within our classrooms, however, our students are predominantly white, middle-class, monolingual, women preparing to be teachers, counselors, and social workers.

Our years of experience with our students led us to the observation that they come to our courses with a limited understanding of systems theory, a focus on individual dysfunction in children and adolescents, and with deficit discourses of “urban” children and families. This study was conceptualized after a conversation during which we both expressed frustration at the types of discourses with which the students entered the classroom and used to talk about “at risk” and “at-risk youth.” We both noticed that raced, classed, and gendered terms were operationalized to denote pathologized identities. While disturbed by this, we felt that we had the agency, the desire, and moral responsibility to explore ways to engage students more critically while teaching theory and content that would inform their practice. Our conversation below captures both our frustration and impetus to move forward:

When I first arrived at the College, I was asked to teach a class titled *Prevention and Intervention Strategies for ‘At Risk’ Youth*. Given the course title could not be changed and it contained the term “at risk,” I decided to approach the class critically and begin the course with an analysis and deconstruction of the term. On the first day of the class, I ask students to write anonymously about whom

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they think the term “at risk” describes. I ask students to write five descriptive sentences or adjectives about “at-risk youth” and write a narrative on the factors that impact risk. Their homework for that day is to interview five people they know asking the same questions. When I collect their responses, I categorize and compile these descriptors onto a handout, which I give back to the students during the second week of class. We refer to this handout throughout the course as we read theory and research on youth to challenge the initial assumptions that students make about the construct of “at risk” (Pica-Smith, personal communication, June 9, 2010).

I teach a class titled *Culturally Responsive Education*, which is for both undergraduate and graduate students who are either education minors, seeking an educator’s license, or taking the class to fulfill a university diversity requirement. Given that the students enroll in the class for multiple reasons, there is a good mix of experience and perspective. However, most students at first oppose or reject the diversity focus albeit in subtle ways. In the past, I have struggled with how to approach this course and the course topics especially since up to this point, I am the only person in Education Studies teaching it and I’m a woman of color. In addition, critical issues around multiculturalism are not woven into our other course offerings, which makes my approach to the class very difficult. (Veloria, personal communication, June 9, 2010).

Based on our theoretical framework, literature review, and experiences in the classroom, we created classroom activities, wrote case studies and assignments, chose video resources, and generated discussion topics to scaffold the practice of the four intellectual tools of critical thinking (Bermudez, 2008). We explicitly taught each of the concepts and asked students to practice them throughout the semester in order to analyze discourses of risk and “at risk.”

Furthermore, when responding to student journal entries, we prompted students with requests to practice these tools. For example, if a student expressed a particular emotional reaction, considered an important element in the practice of problem posing, we asked the student to analyze the emotional reaction to understand its provenance, meaning, and impact on her thinking. If a student analyzed a case study from a one-dimensional individual perspective, we guided the student to practice multi-perspectivity and systemic thinking by providing alternative explanations and requesting that she generate more.

V.

Participants

Participants in this study were undergraduate students in human services preparing for graduate school or careers in social work, counseling, and other human services, and graduate students in elementary education. A total of 67 students participated in the study. Below is a specific breakdown of our sample by race/ethnicity and gender:

Table 1

Study Participants by Race/ethnicity and Gender		
	Female	Male
Asian/Asian American	1	
Black/African American	2	1
Latino/Hispanic	2	
Multiracial	3	
White, non-Latino	47	11

Participants reported that they wanted to work with children and adolescents. Undergraduate students were enrolled in “Prevention and Intervention Strategies for ‘At Risk’ Youth,” “Culturally Responsive Education,” and “Individuals in the Community,” an internship course in which students are placed in educational or therapeutic settings for children and adolescents. Some graduate students were also enrolled in “Culturally Responsive Education.”

VI.

Data Sources

Data were collected over the period of two academic terms (Fall 2010-Spring 2011). Our data sets include descriptions of our classes and homework activities as well as student responses including reflective journaling writing exercises (where we ask students to share their thoughts, reactions, analyses and reflections of their learning experiences), participation in experiential in-class exercises, class discussions, and final papers.

Data analyzed include student responses to classroom exercises and case studies on youth and risk, students’ analyses of case studies, and reflective journals. Professors wrote field notes and memos in each class throughout the academic terms. In addition, we met a total of three times during the course of the semesters to discuss progress and share notes and information. The content of these meetings along with data from email communication between professors and students were also analyzed. We organized our findings into five major themes discussed in the next section.

VII.

Data Analysis

We employed a thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) to analyze our data as it allowed us to consistently compare data in order to contribute to the validity of our interpretations (Boyatzis, 1998). Furthermore, this analysis may be used within many analytic traditions including grounded theory (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Because we wanted to code inductively while recognizing the influences of our theoretical perspective, we employed a hybrid process of inductive and deductive thematic analysis to interpret raw data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Thus, as Strauss & Corbin (1998) would describe, we were “moving” between induction and deduction.

As outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), our process of analysis included identifying our data set from our larger data corpus; further identifying our data

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extracts; initial coding; collating codes into both focused and latent themes; generating a thematic map; and conducting a final analysis to relate themes to our research questions.

VIII.

Findings and Discussion

The findings below are organized in response to our two research questions cited in the introduction of this paper. Hence, they describe both how our students make meaning of risk and “at risk” when they enter the classroom, and how their discourses shift throughout the course of their learning process. To address how classroom discourses may shift, we also highlight some emerging critical student voices.

In response to our first research question, we learned that our students are influenced by dominant popular discourses on risk and “at risk” that pathologize youth of color, poor youth, and youth with disabilities, while holding up white and affluent youth as models. We believe these binary perspectives on risk, and who is at risk, are barriers to the complex understanding of risk by critical thinkers, educators, and human service providers. Raced and classed understandings of “at risk” and “at-risk youth” are limited and simple perspectives that do not allow for a critical and systemic understanding of what constitutes risk and how to mitigate it. Instead, these ways of thinking normalize white experiences.

In response to our second research question we learned that by explicitly teaching the tools of critical inquiry, more reflective, critical, and systemic thinking emerged in our classroom. While we do not claim that all or most of our students adopted a more nuanced analysis of “at risk” discourses, we do note that our classroom discourses became increasingly more critical and many students demonstrated alternative discourses rather than dominant ones. We labeled the section on these shifts *Emerging Critical Discourse*.

Deficit Discourses: “Urban,” “poor,” “ghetto,” “inner-city,” “minority kids,” “mostly boys.”

As stated earlier in the paper, we asked students to engage in a class exercise at the onset of class during which they were to respond to several questions regarding whom is at risk and who “at risk” youth are. An analysis of responses to this assignment determined that our students’ definitions of the term “at risk youth” were raced, classed, and gendered. Students used demographic descriptors that referred to race, class, and gender such as *minority kids*, *poor*, *low-income*, and “*mostly boys*.” Students also used geographic descriptors that connote and encode race and class (Watson, 2010) such as *inner-city* and *urban*. None of the students noted that white or middle class youth could be “at risk,” or that suburban or rural youth may be at risk. Deficit perspectives on families and neighborhoods of the above-mentioned youth of color and poor youth were also ubiquitous in student responses.

These included descriptions of families as *uninvolved parents*, *single parent*, *abusive parent*, *parents with substance abuse*, *not cared for*, *family genetics*, *lack of role models*. Descriptions of the neighborhoods in which “at risk youth” live included: *unsafe*, *rough*, *violent*, and *gangs*. None of the responses we analyzed included systemic factors that lead to conditions of risk. For example, none of the students named racism,

classism, inequity in access to quality services and institutions as factors, which contribute to risk among youth.

“These young people are at risk because they have no role models.”

(Anna, undergraduate, white woman³)

Fundamentally, as educators, we advocate a strength perspective, which focuses on the strengths youth possess and brings attention to the areas where educators can make a difference and impact change.

In our classes, youth were consistently placed in a cultural deprivation paradigm. The emphasis highlighted was what youth “do not have” as opposed to “what they do have.” Anna suggests that the reason youth are at risk is because “they have no role models.” This view demonstrates an unexamined assumption that impedes reflexivity and systemic analyses. It is a view devoid of critical awareness and understanding; one that emphasizes what the students supposedly lack. The reaction is often to “fix” children and families according to the dominant, normed, and widely accepted standards of white, middle-class culture.

“Yeah, kids in my high school did drugs, but it was all normal teenage stuff.”

(Brian, undergraduate, white man)

As noted earlier, our students are predominantly white undergraduate and graduate students attending predominantly white institutions. Unless educators purposefully offer other “voices,” “perspectives,” and “alternatives” to explore “risk,” we run the danger of perpetuating a “master script” that legitimizes dominant-white discourses.

Ladson-Billings (1995) contends that it is precisely this “master scripting” which mutes and erases other voices that challenge dominant culture’s authority and power. As such, students with little or no exposure to contending views do not locate “risk” in their own communities of privilege. This is why other multicultural educators such as Banks (2006), Gay (2000), and Nieto (1992) have called on educators to employ culturally relevant pedagogical methods, particularly those that challenge dominant narratives that have been normalized.

We noticed that white middle-class students, even when explicitly noting high-risk behaviors witnessed in their own middle- and high-school experiences, often explained them away as “normal stuff.” Thus, while they are able to name alcohol and drug abuse among youth of color as risk behaviors, they did not categorize it as such for themselves or others like them. Hence, raced, classed, and gendered discourses of risk obfuscate students’ capacity to assess risk in white, upper-middle class youth. This is problematic, as teachers and counselors should be able to understand risk behaviors in order to effectively plan for and intervene with all youth. As our public school and community centers increasingly serve diverse populations of youth and their families, it is imperative that teachers and human service providers engage in inquiry-based activities to examine how different aspects of identities are affirmed, rejected, stereotyped, and normalized across history and in different contexts (Rolón-Dow, 2004).

³ All students’ names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

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Emerging Critical Discourses: Exploring the “Four Tools” of Critical Inquiry

“I can’t believe he [Latino student] got in trouble for standing up for himself. Anything he does is seen as negative even when it’s not.”

(Joy, white woman, undergraduate student in a school internship)

When deficit discourses are named, analyzed, and understood by students, their capacity to think critically, systemically, and reflectively is enhanced. As the semester progressed we noted that more critical voices emerged in our classes. Students began to provide examples from the literature, their own personal experience, and their experiences in placement sites that highlighted their increased attention on their own assumptions, the assumptions of other white educators and human service providers, and inequities in the ways that children are perceived, understood, and labeled.

When I first saw *The Lost Children of Rockdale County*⁴ I was shocked that white, upper middle class kids could be doing everything that they were doing. That neighborhood was like the one I grew up in. I just couldn’t believe it. When you gave me feedback on my paper, you asked me to think about why I was so surprised and shocked. . . . I realize that most white people, including me, and the adults in the movie, don’t think about white kids as ‘at risk.’ We have learned that other kids are at risk. . . . After I read your comments, I felt bad about how I thought this, too, but it was helpful to remember when you did that Google image search with us and most of the images of at-risk youth were minority kids.

In the quote above, a white, undergraduate woman in the “Prevention and Intervention” course responds to an earlier written assignment. In the reaction section of the paper, she noted that she was “shocked” about the youth’s behavior. As part of a process to scaffold problem posing, which is meant to uncover emotional reactions to identify that which we accept as normal, she was asked to analyze her “shock.” She comes to the conclusion that she is shocked by the “at-risk” white youth, because she has never thought of white youth, who look like her and grew up in a similar context to hers, as “at risk.”

She connects her reaction to a larger white narrative on who is at risk and concludes with nascent insight on where she may have learned this dominant narrative. She connects an earlier exercise in which we searched for images of “at-risk youth” on the search engine Google Images to find that, at first glance, most of the images depicted youth of color. Hence, she is connecting her raced assumptions about “at-risk youth” to a larger raced discourse on risk.

Similarly, Beth, a white undergraduate student, discusses the connection between institutional racism and racist assumptions of who is at risk by thinking systematically:

⁴ This documentary case study depicts the lives of affluent, suburban, white youth engaged in high-risk behaviors and is used in conjunction with literature on the high-risk behaviors of affluent, white youth to disrupt some raced and classed notions of “at risk.” The discussion and subsequent written analysis can provide a springboard for discussing dominant discourses of “at risk,” as most of the white adults in the film react with shock at the discovery that “normal” white youth in their affluent, suburban community could be engaged in such high-risk behaviors as alcohol and substance abuse, group sex, and violent behavior.

I liked when you showed us the pictures of Whites and Blacks in New Orleans and how the papers described the Whites as looking for food to survive and the Blacks as looters robbing the convenience stores. It really made me understand what you were saying about institutional racism in our institutions such as the media. If that is what people see all the time, they begin to think of Black people as dangerous and criminal. Then, it's easy to see Black kids as at risk of becoming criminals no matter what they have done or not.

While the connection between systems of inequity and deficit discourses of youth may seem apparent to many critical educators, it is important to note that in our sample, none of the students noted any systemic or institutional factor as contributing to risk at the onset of our classes. Thus, these germinating thoughts and connections between dominant racist and classist systems and discourses and the realities of how we understand youth of different racial and class backgrounds are noteworthy here.

The excerpt below is from a final reflection assignment written by a white, male student who conducted an internship in a transitional home for men who have been incarcerated. In his early journal entries John expressed much optimism about "helping" the men to gain the skills they would need to transition into the community. Throughout the semester John was encouraged to practice multi-perspectivity and systemic thinking. He was asked to present a case study from his internship experience using an ecological systems framework. Furthermore, he was introduced to the work of Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow*, a book about institutional and systemic racism in the criminal justice system in the U.S. creating a sub-class of citizens who, because of a history of incarceration, have been socially and politically marginalized. At the end of the semester, John incorporates much of this learning into his reflection:

When I first started my internship I thought that the men who were re-entering society from prison needed motivation and skills to live out in the community again . . . I believed that rehabilitation would give them the attitudes and knowledge they needed to move on in life. Throughout this semester, though, I learned that it is not so simple . . . If you have a criminal record and have been to prison, it isn't enough to want to change your life. This semester I saw that systems are totally stacked up against these men . . . Because they have committed a felony, they can't get assistance. They can't live in government housing and can't get a lot of benefits for low-income people. Most employers don't want to hire them because of their records. So, what are they supposed to do? They lose hope . . . It was really important to do the systemic analysis of our cases . . . I realized that it is a lot easier to think on the individual and micro level. Most people will think that any problem can be fixed by addressing the individual's needs and problems. It is much harder to understand that the exosystem and macrosystem impact the problem because it is harder to figure out how to change those.

The above excerpt demonstrates how John began to shift from thinking about the individual to systemic thinking. While we acknowledge that not all students will respond to the critical inquiry process as John did, we believe that by asking our students to consistently note and analyze their own assumptions and provide alternative perspectives on any given dominant discourse, we allow students to practice the tools of critical inquiry necessary to dismantle conventional explanation to complex social issues.

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In his reflection John understands the limitations of his thinking on “rehabilitation,” thus practicing reflective skepticism and systemic thinking.

“You know, I was scared of those boys, too. I didn’t know them. I hate to admit it, but I was intimidated.”

(Jill, a white female undergraduate student working with youth of color in a residential setting)

When raced and classed discourses are made explicit and connected to our own racist and classist assumptions, and reflective practice is encouraged, students begin to examine their own deficit orientations and raced and classed assumptions of risk. Yet, we found that critical reflection about one’s own assumptions, which begins with personal problem posing, are the most challenging aspect of practicing critical inquiry for students. Perhaps because this type of reflection involves analyzing one’s racist and classist assumptions, few students are willing to engage in this level of self-analysis.

We have found for that this type of exercise, students must be continuously supported throughout the semester. At the onset of the semester, we see little evidence of critical self-reflection. The best strategy we have adopted to encourage this work is to ask students to write anonymously for several weeks. The students exchange papers and read them out loud. They begin to hear others’ attempts at this reflection and become less defensive about identifying and analyzing their own assumptions and stereotypes. We as their teachers also read examples from our own reflective journals as they pertain to a class topic to encourage and model the critical analysis and reflection we are asking them to provide.

In the two excerpts below, white students express their initial emotional reaction to working with people of color and “ex-offenders” of color. Both students experience fear. We believe that without this level of meta-cognition and capacity to identify one’s thoughts and feelings, it will be impossible to challenge the assumptions that accompany these emotional reactions. We believe that without highlighting and confronting these ways of thinking, students will ultimately reproduce racism and classism, often without being conscious of this process.

When I pulled into the parking lot I saw a few men outside on the porch smoking and I immediately felt scared and intimidated . . . Why was I scared of these men? Honestly, because they are different than me . . . I was given a tour of the entire club and the whole time it was extremely hard for me to focus because I could not stop watching those around me, making sure that they did not get too close to me as well as observing what they were doing.

I got scared of the term ‘ex-offender,’ but then I thought of my brother who is an ex-offender, and also has a substance abuse problem. When I think of my brother I do not think of him like this. I do not label him . . . What he has done in the past does not define him and does not make him a bad person. I am not scared of my brother and I have never been, so why should I be scared of these people who I do not even know?

These reflections are not meant to be “confessionals” of white people or people in dominant positions, but rather to demonstrate how “reflective skepticism” and “multi-perspectivity” can enhance students’ thinking, expand on their knowledge base, and

problematize how such knowledge is constructed. For instance, by viewing the term “ex-offender” through the perspective of a family member, the student quoted above realizes that this label can be used to define a person by their past actions, thus potentially limiting his opportunities. Asking students to reflect on labels “in relation to education and life in general” expands on the discussion of how labels can limit how individuals and groups are viewed (Nieto, 2010, p. 36).

On reflecting on the “limitations of labels,” Nieto (2010) recommends that students think about the myriad of unconsciously used labels as well as the connotations that they embody, and how they are used to describe people. If the connotations are negative, she suggests that students think about “suitable alternatives” (p. 37). This is an activity that we have used in class as a way to promote self-disclosure. Certainly self-disclosure is not an end in and of itself. Rather, this rare capacity to express one’s own prejudices and assumptions may be used as a starting point for further discussion of where we “learn” these emotional reactions so that we can “unlearn” them.

IX.

Conclusions on Educational and Pedagogical Significance of this Study

Like for other academics informed in critical frameworks, the lack of critical and systemic analysis in our classes was frustrating, challenging, and demotivating at times. In conversations with other colleagues this seems to be a pervasive concern across academic disciplines. There seems to be an expectation that students should be able to come into the classroom and automatically demonstrate critical thinking and analytical skills. The reality is that P-12 institutions barely scratch the surface when it comes to actively teaching and promoting this particular skill set. As a result, students transitioning to institutions of higher education need to be exposed to classroom practices where these skills are explicitly taught, modeled, and supported. This is certainly the case in education and human service courses, where we want students to go beyond simple racist and classist stereotyped conversations of youth’s success or failure and potential or risk.

As critical and reflexive practitioners, we began this work by looking at our own assumptions and modifying our practice by identifying spaces where we could combine actively teaching the intellectual devices of critical thinking (Bermudez, 2008) with the academic content of our classes. We learned that we needed to support each other in this process and share our experiences, best practices, and unsuccessful attempts at engaging students with this new framework. We learned that this work need not be done in isolation, but rather in communities of practice where authentic conversation can be had.

This is particularly important in counselor and teacher preparation departments that are charged with preparing the next cadre of educators who will work in increasingly diverse communities. Students often arrive with deeply held assumptions and biases that have been unproblematized. Rivera and Poplin argues that, for multicultural pedagogues, the “the construction of meaning is a social and cultural act” (as cited in Jehangir, 2010, p. 537) and acknowledges that learning is an interplay of expectations, language, culture, and experiences. Subsequently, the expectation set and the language used in the context of the college classroom allow for both professors and students to

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expand on the understanding of the complexity involved in discursively positioning students, and participating in the production and representation of images.

In the context of our study, this pedagogical approach allowed for (re)imagining of new possibilities of "at-risk" youth, which contributed in some students resisting (mis)representations and the educational and social inequality they can engender if left unproblematized (Rolón-Dow, 2004). We posit that this type of work is our obligation as critical educators. As we continue our conversations, we continue to improve on our practice with the hope that *all* students will benefit from our questioning, problematizing, and willingness to shift our perspectives and practice.

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