

MOORE-LAWRENCE, SHANEEKA, Ed.D. The Impact of an Action Research Study on Deficit Thinking in an Elementary School. (2017)
Directed by Dr. Rick Reitzug. 154 pp.

In education, the government has raised the bar related to expectations placed upon school districts to ensure that school letter grades are high, schools meet growth measures, and proficiency increases. While the bar is heightened, so is the student achievement gap between white students and students of color. Currently, there is not an existing policy, program, or practice that has resulted in the achievement gap closing. Therefore, instead of looking for external solutions, school leaders must look within their school buildings to identify what perceptions, biases, attitudes, and beliefs educators bring with them into the school that influence the work they do with students, especially those within marginalized populations.

Deficit thinking is the practice of holding lower expectations for students with demographic, linguistic, and socioeconomic characteristics that do not align with the American dream, also known as the American way. Deficit thinking asserts that the low academic achievement of low-income students from culturally, racially, and socioeconomically different backgrounds is to be blamed on these external factors—factors not related to the school and the work done within the four walls of a classroom. Those whose thought is based in a deficit perspective attempt to “fix” marginalized students by assisting in their assimilation. School leaders must help educators search within to recognize the biases, perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs that they possess that are laced with deficit notions.

This action research study examined the benefits of a focus group within an elementary school setting in which educators and the principal worked together to discuss their thoughts and practices aligned with deficit thinking. The goal was for the dialogue about race, deficit thinking, and achievement to spark educators to take action in which they would eliminate deficit thinking and practices within their classrooms and seek ways to spread the dialogue to their peers to do the same. Based on the findings, recommendations include having intentional discussions about deficit thinking to create school settings that promote a safe and supportive space for all students, including those who are often marginalized.

THE IMPACT OF AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY ON DEFICIT THINKING
IN AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

Greensboro
2017

Approved by

Committee Chair

And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity. —1 Corinthians 13:13 KJV

This work is dedicated my amazing family who prayed for me, believed in me, cheered for me, and supported me. Thank you for always challenging me to dream big and work hard. It is because of you that I have accomplished this milestone and I know that the best is yet to come.

APPROVAL PAGE

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October 16, 2017
Date of Acceptance by Committee

October 16, 2017
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank God for life, health, and strength to do the work that He has created and equipped me to do. It is because of His grace and mercy that I am here today. Next, I would like to collectively thank my awesome Dad, Mom, Sister, Husband, Son, Niece, and Brother-in-Law. Y'all know this has been a long journey and without your support, I never would have made it. You mean more to me than you will ever know. Thank you for the selfless and pure love that you have for me. I am blessed beyond measure to have you as my family.

But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love

him. —1 Corinthians 2:9 KJV

EDUCATION + SALVATION = SUCCESS

To My Parents, Timothy and Florine

It would be an understatement to say that you two are simply the best parents in the world. Thank you for never letting me quit and for always encouraging me to keep going. You have listened to and watched me go through every possible emotion during this process. Thank you for giving me life, faith, love, and an example. The two of you have done so much for our family. God has gifted you with super power because that is the only way to explain how you do what you do and are who you are.

To My Little Big Sister and Best Friend, Keesha

Thank you for talking me off the edge so many times. You know how to put just enough fire under my feet so that I can get it done. Whenever I had a story of triumph or disappointment, you were there to listen. I appreciate how you always have the right words to say or knew not to say a thing. You are truly one of a kind. My first and best friend, cheerleader, motivator, and cut-up partner for life.

To My Husband and Son, Nate and Demetrius

Thank you for sharing me with so many people and projects without complaint. Thank you for allowing me to share my heart, joy, and life with you each and every day. I am proud of who you are and prouder of who we are together. This is our accomplishment; it is a testament of what is possible when you work, love, and pray in unity. Together we are a force to be reckoned with and I cannot wait to see what is next. The sky is the limit but we are not stopping there.

To My Dissertation Chairs and Committee Members

Not many can say that they had the privilege of having this journey under the guidance and support of two phenomenal coaches but I can. Dr. Camille Wilson Cooper started this work with me many years ago and when she relocated, Dr. Rick Reitzug stepped in to see me to the light at the end of the tunnel. Their support, time, and dedication during this journey have been phenomenal. To sum the two of you up in three words—Motivating Collaborative Mentors. I could not and would not have done this without you. I have known the two of you for over a decade; my life and work have been

positively enhanced by your presence in my life. I would also like to thank Dr. Brian Clarida, Dr. Carl Lashley, and Dr. Craig Peck for serving on my committee. I am genuinely grateful for your feedback, leadership, and assistance during this process. I have learned a great deal from this work. Indeed, I am thankful to have had the chance to work in partnership with each of you.

To My Research Participants

I would like to express gratitude to the principal and teachers who participated in my study. If not for you, there would be no dissertation. I am appreciative that you opened your minds and hearts to share your perspectives, beliefs, and life lessons with me. Your time, dedication, and commitment were exceptional. Thank you will never be enough.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background and Problem

As an elementary school principal, I am aware of the reality that educators often hold different expectations for students of color and low socioeconomic status (SES) than they do for other students. There have been several occasions when I have engaged in discourse with a teacher and uncovered that the teacher made deficit assumptions about a group of students simply based on their status—minority, Title I, poverty low socioeconomics, single-parent household, etc. Within these conversations, common phrases included troublesome, unmotivated, unprepared, and difficult. These responses are aligned with deficit thinking; a concept that is detrimental to children of color and low socioeconomic status (García & Guerra, 2004). In my seventh year as an elementary school principal, I am quite aware of the impact of having educators plagued with deficit thinking educating students for whom they have so little expectation.

The idea of this study came from experiences during my first three years as an elementary school principal. The school I served was in a city in North Carolina; the student population was about 54% African American, 36% Latino, 6% Caucasian, 2% Asian, and 2% Multi-Racial. Over 80 percent of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch. During my first three years, while the student population was diverse, the teaching staff was not. The staff was 70% percent Caucasian and came from middle to upper

middle class backgrounds; the staff had a median experience of 18 years. Although most of the staff were experienced, their practices were ground in outmoded techniques and strategies; from desks in rows to single-word responses to worksheets. My educational philosophy was quite contrary to what I encountered. I was an advocate for cooperative learning, discourse, and inquiry-based learning. My first three years as a principal were spent learning how to navigate the administrative arena and convincing staff that a change had to come.

Daily, when having conversations with staff about our current reality, I was inundated with statements such as “they’ve (the students) always been low,” “their (the students) parents don’t care,” and “they’re (the students) doing the best they can.” This attitude weighed me down like a ton of bricks. How could our students grow academically, socially, and emotionally when those significantly responsible for this growth had such little faith in them and their families. Before our real work could begin, staff perceptions had to change; that was my mission. Nelson Mandela said, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” I strongly believe that students can accomplish extraordinary things regardless of their economic, cultural, or linguistic backgrounds. As educators, we have to tap into their potential and do all within our power to give them the highest quality education possible. To do this, there are educators who first have to shed their deficit thinking.

Research on urban schools shows that an impersonal, bureaucratic school culture undercuts many of the teaching attitudes and behaviors that draw on student strengths (García-Pérez, 2012). This inflexible culture fosters the universal theory that when

students misbehave or fail academically, they must be “fixed” because the problem exists essentially in the students and/or their families, not in the social setting of the school, grade, or classroom. School practices and assumptions emerging from the deficit paradigm often hide student and teacher abilities. These assumptions are especially powerful because they are unspoken and overlook our ideas and practices.

For several reasons, deficit thinking is troubling because marginalized student populations experience the greatest challenge in the current educational system in the United States. Garcia and Guerra (2004) defined marginalized students as those of low socio-economic status, and/or students from families whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds differ from that of their Caucasian peers. Lipman (1998) and Milner (2008) defined these students as at-risk, or more specifically students and families that are perceived to be uneducated, uncaring, and unable to provide their children with the skills, values, and social support they need to succeed in schools. Marginalized students are the students with the highest dropout percentage, lowest achievement on standardized testing, and least amount of access to high quality education. Cummins (2001) found that children of color had the highest dropout rate, misplacement and overrepresentation in special education, and underrepresentation in gifted and advanced placement programs. According to Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi (2004), deficit thinking is pervasive in contemporary schools across the world.

It is evident that many educators do not see nor understand the impact that their deficit thinking has on the achievement of students. Educators who operate through a lens of deficit thinking are conditionally practicing an approach that “blames the victim”

(Lightfoot, 2004). Whether deliberate or unintended, educators often unconsciously lay the blame for the lack of academic success and perceived academic failure on factors that relate to the student's home life, including the socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic background of the student. In the United States, deficit thinking dates back as far as early exploration and racism. People of color were considered biologically or culturally inferior (Lee & Bowen, 2006); these beliefs were rooted in the colonial economic interests as it involved slavery (Ladson-Billings, 2007). Non-northern European Whites were deemed inferior and therefore unworthy of the same rights and opportunities of their White counterparts (Hill & Torres, 2010).

Deficit thinking is an ironic concept; Weiner (2006) suggested that educational institutions often attempt to “fix” students who were performing poorly, placing the blame on the student and their family, rather than the social structure of the school and classroom, thus preventing any real institutional change. In contrast, legislators addressed teacher characteristics and deficits as the only factor that counts in hindering student learning. Cummins (2001) contended that teachers do have power and influence in the current setting to impact deficit thinking, but they are often hampered by structural practices—constraints with respect to curriculum, working conditions, standardized testing, etc. If educational institutions continue to blame those marked by deficit thinking, they will only preserve the low achievement and meager academic opportunities of students who are marginalized; blaming must cease.

It is the responsibility of school leaders to address and eliminate the roots of deficit thinking by providing strategies to help teachers move beyond ideas of

marginalization and toward an equitable education. Schools cannot continue to blame student failure on their social, cultural, and economic factors. Instead, they must take responsibility by addressing the issues of power and dominance that hide students' and teachers' abilities (Weiner, 2006). A truly public education will allow for all stakeholders to be prepared to assume responsibility for the future (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olsen, 2001). Instead of trying to fix deficit thinking, school leaders must strive to address it, eliminate it, and replace it.

Educating 21st century youth is challenging and it is not something that schools can accomplish in isolation. According to a West African proverb, it takes a village to raise a child. In this context, the “village” refers to the engagement of all members of the community around the school for the benefit of all children (Carignan, Pourdavood, King, 2005). With the daily changes that occur in the educational arena as it relates to standards, accountability, expectations, and assessments, there is a great need to more effectively engage families. Early adolescence is an eventful and difficult period for most youth, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status. During this time and beyond, the level of family engagement influences social, emotional, physical, and academic development (Gordon & Louis, 2009).

Problem Statement

Several studies have established that a deficit thinking model is universal in both K-12 and higher education institutions (Valencia, 1997a). Ladson-Billings (2007) found that various segments of the public school population experienced negative and inequitable treatment on a daily basis. When compared to their White middle-class peers,

students of color, students of low SES, students who speak languages other than English, and students with disabilities steadily faced considerably lower teacher expectations, allocation of resources, and achieved significantly lower test scores (Alexander et al., 2001; Delpit, 1995).

Although the problem of deficit thinking is evident in classrooms across the country, little research has examined the challenges faced by school staff when they attempt to address deficit thinking (Shields et al., 2004; Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999). There is little to no research on how the implementation of an action research study in an elementary school setting would impact staff perceptions as it relates to the topic of deficit thinking and educating marginalized student populations. Literature on school leadership has maintained that principal leadership is the single most important factor in eliminating deficit thinking (Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999). Thus, the leadership of the principal has great potential to eliminate deficit thinking and provide marginalized students with an equitable education. Due to the lack of existing literature on deficit thinking and academic outcomes, more research is needed to understand the perceptions of educators in affecting student outcomes based on student backgrounds (Milner, 2008).

Purpose Statement

The attitudes of educators towards their minority students is of great significance. Considering the increasing number of retiring teachers, the high attrition rate, and the difficulty of recruiting teachers, preparing excellent teachers is an appropriate goal. However, it is also necessary to examine in-service teachers' attitudes and self-proclaimed practices in hopes of turning the tide for minority students (C. W. Cooper,

2003; Frankenberg, 2006). The purpose of this study was to understand the impact of educators' perceptions of their students' backgrounds and what lead to the development and persistence of these perceptions. The study focused on an elementary school because of the lack of relevant literature pertaining to deficit thinking within elementary schools. While I was greatly interested in conducting this research in the school in which I am the principal, my school district's research department did not approve and required that I select another site. The district was unsure how my prior relationship and supervisory role would influence staff as it relates to their participation, responses, and more. Therefore, I sought the support of a colleague to conduct the research in another elementary school with similar staff and student demographics, family engagement rates, and student achievement data. Once the site was selected and approved by the principal and district officials, a recruitment email was sent to the staff of the Title One school requesting their participation in the study via six focus group sessions. After participants signed the consent form, the first focus group session was held to discuss the purpose of the study, review the timeline, and administer the Pre-Participant Survey and Anonymous Participant Survey. Additionally, the semi-structured one-on-one interview date was scheduled for each participant. The remaining five sessions, each a maximum of 120 minutes in length, involved discussion topics, articles, and other artifacts related to deficit thinking, marginalized student populations, student achievement, and family engagement. Data collection involved observational notes taken during focus sessions, survey responses, journal reflections, and one-on-one interviews. An analysis of participants'

responses before, during, and after focus group sessions gave insight on how participants' perspectives and beliefs were impacted by their participation in the study.

The knowledge gained from this study is expected to be beneficial to all educators, particularly educational leaders such as superintendents, district-level administrators, and building-level administrators. It is my hope that this study will enhance the work done to improve schools for educators, families, and students. The aim of this study was to shape an understanding of the practices, techniques, and strategies that can be employed to defy and alter the beliefs and attitudes of educators who submit to deficit thinking. This is critical because teacher attitudes and relationships are more important and directly related to student achievement than funding or facilities (Shields et al., 2004).

According to R. Bishop, Berryman, and Richardson (2002), when teachers overcome deficit thinking, student achievement increases. Thus, it becomes the duty of the principal to be an agent for social change. The single most important influence in the academic achievement of minority students is the rejection of deficit thinking by the school-based administrator (Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999). Therefore, this study sought to understand the role of an elementary school principal who openly rejected and replaced deficit thinking to provide a more just education to students who are marginalized by deficit thinking practices.

An outcome of this action research study is an enhanced understanding of how implementing a study of this kind in an elementary school can aid in the exploration, understanding, and elimination of deficit thinking and deficit-based practices in order to

advance educational opportunities and experiences for all students. According to Shields et al. (2004), this is essential more than funding or facilities; teacher attitudes and relationships are most directly related to student achievement.

In public education, deficit thinking places the blame of low achievement scores on those groups that are considered ‘gaps.’ Ironically those targeted in the ‘gap’ are those least in position to solve the problem. As the school leader, the elementary school principal must be the facilitator for social change; he/she must identify what can be done to eliminate the causes, effects, perspectives, and practices that preserve deficit thinking (Noguera, 2008).

Literature suggests that school leadership, namely the principal, is the single most important factor in eliminating deficit thinking and the most influential factor in achievement of minority students (Kalifa, 2013; Parrett & Budge 2012; Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999). When principals are actively engaged in preventing and eliminating deficit thinking we know that teachers can overcome deficit thinking and challenge attitudes and practices, and student achievement can increase (R. Bishop et al., 2002; Shields et al., 2004). Wagstaff and Fusarelli (1999) contended that the school-based administrator must explicitly reject deficit thinking.

It is my belief that it is the teachers’ responsibility to bridge the racial and cultural gaps that may exist between student and teacher. “We can’t teach what we don’t know” (Howard, 2008). According to Gay (2000) and Vavrus (2002), it takes concerted effort, time, and focused reflection to move towards cultural competency so we must go through a continual process of self-examination and self-reflection. Current trends in public

school demographics indicate that minority students most frequently experience white, female teachers. The cultural mismatch between minority students and their white teachers contributes to inadvertent consequences that include issues of poor achievement and inequity (Cross, 2003; Irvine, 2003; Kunjufu, 2011).

Research Questions

1. How do elementary school educators perceive the role of their students' backgrounds in academic outcomes?
2. What factors have contributed to the development and persistence of these perceptions?
3. What is the impact of a focus group focused on deficit thinking on the participants' thinking about students?
4. What are the activities and experiences in which the focus group engages that seem to be helpful in changing thinking?
5. What did I learn about the possible role of the principal in addressing and combating deficit thinking of staff members?

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study the following definitions will be used.

At-Risk Student: An at-risk student is a student who, by nature of their circumstances, is statistically more likely than others to fail academically. The following factors are considered to lead to an "at-risk" label for students: low socioeconomic status, living in a single-parent home, changing schools at non-traditional times, below-average grades, being retained in school, dropping out of school, and/or negative peer pressure.

At-risk students are often described as victims of racism, poverty, and inferior school conditions, location, addiction, and the legal system (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006).

Deficit Thinking: Deficit thinking suggests that a student who fails in school does so because of internal deficits or deficiencies (B. Cooper, 2012).

Diverse Student Population: A diverse student population is a blend of ethnicities, languages, socioeconomic statuses, and abilities where there is no clear majority or minority group (Sharma, 2009).

Equity in School: When all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills regardless of personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, or family background (Simone, 2012).

Perception: Perception is a way of regarding, understanding, or interpreting something; a mental impression (Singam, 2010).

Socioeconomic Status: Socioeconomic Status (SES) is an economic and sociological combined total measure of a person's work experience and of an individual's or family's economic and social position in relation to others, based on income, education, and occupation (Zeichner, 2009).

Significance of the Study

There is minimal research that examines the specific strategies educators employ and the challenges they face when addressing deficit thinking (Milner, 2008; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2009). In addition, there is a lack of research that assesses the impact of an action research study on the theme of deficit thinking and the impact a study of this can have on eliminating deficit thinking on the intellectual, social, emotional, and cultural

life of students (Shields et al., 2004). There are a few studies that examine deficit thinking and how school leadership can improve equity (Lacey, 2012; Sharma, 2009). There are only a few studies that focus on the racial aspect of deficit thinking (Eldridge, 2012; Simone, 2012).

Findings from this study may aid school districts and teacher education programs in increasing the knowledge base of educators. Also, policymakers may use outcomes of this study to influence decisions they make related to educational policies. Most importantly, this study has allowed current educators to reflect on their perceptions, experiences, and practices related to deficit thinking. Educators have distinct perceptions about their job; these perceptions are influenced by their upbringing, family dynamics, socioeconomic status, education, and professional experiences. This study aimed to understand educators' perceptions of their students' backgrounds in their elementary school, what led to these perceptions, how these perceptions impacted student outcomes, and how reflection can influence these perceptions.

The study provides relevant information regarding the effect of culturally stereotypical beliefs on the academic achievement of minority students. The study also provides relevant data on identifying culturally stereotypical beliefs that are characteristic within the teacher population. The way an educator perceives the deficiencies of any group of students has a profound effect on how these students will perform academically within the classroom. Deficit thinking theory contends that teachers' low expectations of minority students have an impact on their educational success (Lee & Bowen, 2006). This theory asserts that students of color (and other marginalized groups of students),

have intellectual deficiencies resulting from their linguistic background, family structure, and culture (Lynn & Jennings 2005).

Research suggests that when teachers have the benefit of multicultural teacher education preparation, they are less likely to embrace cultural deficit views (Irvine, 2003). DeCastro-Ambrosetti and Cho (2005) and Davis and Reiter (2011) advise that the preparation of teachers can influence teachers' perceptions toward culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse students. Teachers trained about the multicultural differences of students can develop a deeper knowledge and understanding of the challenges faced by these students. As a result, these teachers can create a more sensitive and supportive environment; this supports the need to evaluate diversity and multicultural training of teachers as classrooms become more diverse (Milner, 2008). As a result of this study, the participants have continued work of this nature in their school; facilitating open conversations about deficit thinking, race, language, culture, and achievement.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Across the country, the number on non-white students in public schools is rapidly increasing by leaps and bounds. Just as the demographic is growing, so is the achievement gap between white and non-white scholars. Therefore, it is imperative that policy makers, educators, and school leaders, address the factors that influence academic achievement of non-white students (Peske & Haycock, 2006). No longer can governmental, educational, faith-based, and non-profit entities ignore the elephant in the room. Historically, white students have outperformed brown students and those in power have allowed the gap, disparities, and inequities to plague the educational experiences and opportunities of all involved. While much has been done to pinpoint the student, home, language, socioeconomics, and family as the basis for this age-old incongruence, there is a need to dig deeper and unmask the true barriers to the success of brown students (Milner & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2003).

According to the National Center for Education Information (NCES, 2008), more than 84% of K-12 public school teachers are white. Hispanics are the largest growing demographics of teachers, representing 22% of teachers while only 7.6% are Black. White females comprise 83% of elementary teachers, and there is no staff of color in 44% of the United States public schools (Irvine, 2003; Kunjufu, 2011). According to this data, it is likely that a class that is comprised of primarily minority students will have a white

teacher standing in front of it. Many minority students may go through school without ever having someone of their race or culture at the front of the class (Gay, 2000; Irvine, 2003). Au (2013) inferred that many teachers are not prepared to teach the growing diversity of students entering K-12 educational institutions across the United States.

As the demographics of schools across the United States rapidly become more culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse, so do the families which school leaders have to engage. Unfortunately, too often school leaders believe that minority families have very little to offer (Guerra & Valverde, 2007) and define the students from these families as at-risk. At-risk students are often described as victims of racism, poverty, inferior school conditions, location, addiction, and the legal system. When conversations occur around at-risk students, their family and individual characteristics are often a paramount part of that conversation. The NCES (2008) lists characteristics of at-risk students and most of these are attributed to a student's gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. These factors include students:

- from single-parent families,
- who are overage for their peer group,
- who frequently change schools,
- whose parents are not actively involved in their school,
- whose parents never talk to them about school-related matters,
- whose parents hold low expectations for their future educational attainment,
- who repeated an earlier grade,
- who have histories of poor grades in mathematics and English,

- who do little homework,
- from urban schools or from schools with large minority populations.

Deficit Thinking Defined

According to Valencia (2010), the deficit model of thinking is based on the belief that children of color have intellectual deficiencies or handicaps resulting from their family structure, linguistic background, and culture. The primary assumption associated with deficit thinking is teachers' low expectations of poor and minority students and this has an impact on their education success. Valencia explains that deficit thinking assumes that internal deficits (such as the limited intellectual abilities, the lack of motivation and the linguistics shortcomings) are the cause of the academic failure among low-SES students. This way of thinking can be traced back to the racist dialogues of the 1600s and the late 1800s. Although it has been discredited, it is experiencing a recovery among scholars, policymakers, and educators in relation to the strengthening of deficit thinking. Modern deficit viewpoints conclude, "there is little schooling can do to 'fix' these students and so interventions are created to help them fit into the dominant school culture (Simone, 2012). The ability for students and their families to overcome these obstacles seems overwhelming (Ferrer, 2007). Greater school diversity challenges school leaders to meet the needs of all students and their families. Even with unlimited access to financial resources, schools are unable to educate every child without support. In order to close the achievement gap, accelerate student learning, and increase student achievement, discussion and action must occur to address deficit thinking and deficit-based practices.

The deficit-thinking framework roots students' academic failure in the students' and their families' asserted deficits. When attempting to explain the prevalent underachievement of students of color and low socioeconomic status, many educators and policymakers localize the problem within the students, their families, and their communities. Under this belief, schools are free from their responsibilities to educate all students appropriately, and the accountability shifts almost entirely to students and their families.

Deficit thinking is a practice that holds lower expectations for students with demographics that do not fit the traditional agenda of the school system. This theory associates the poor academic achievement of students from low-income and culturally and linguistically diverse communities with factors outside the control of the school. Essentially, deficit thinking suggests that there is little the school can do to "fix" these students so instead it resorts to providing these students with interventions to help them fit the standard of the dominant school culture. Yet, literature shows that trying to "fix" students only further isolates them from the modern school setting by spreading deficit attitudes and practices toward marginalized students (Milner, 2008). Deficit thinking is a form of domination; it creates a structure that champions an unbalanced distribution of power. This uneven division of power can lead to oppression of the victim.

Impact of Deficit Thinking

The true impact of deficit thinking is measured in the manner in which it affects students. Students are clearly aware of the perceptions of their teachers that include lowered academic expectations. Students are aware that minorities and poorer students

are disproportionately retained and tracked into non-academic college preparatory programs. Research has shown that teachers' beliefs and practices impact student learning (Gomez, 2009; Herrera, 2010; Pohan & Aguilar, 2001). Teachers' beliefs drive their instructional decisions and the opportunities for students to learn in their classrooms. Milner and Woolfolk-Hoy (2003) suggest that teachers' beliefs affect their decisions regarding students, especially as it relates to culturally, linguistically diverse students.

Teachers have the greatest impact on students (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008) and because of the significance of this relationship, it is important that they overcome any deficit thinking. Teachers demonstrate deficit thinking when they have negative, stereotypical, and counterproductive views about minority students (Ford & Grantham, 2003). Teachers who have these thoughts lessen the expectations of their students. They are unable to see the wealth of strengths and knowledge (cultural capital) that can be brought into the classroom (Miller, 2005). In some schools, deficit thinking is "the exception" and in other schools it is "the rule." When attempting to explain the widespread underachievement among students of color and students from lower socioeconomic status in schools, many teachers, administrators, school representatives, and others locate the problem within the students, their families, and communities. Students in these groups come from different places and have difference experiences than those of their teachers; this creates a mismatch between the two in terms of language, value, and social norms. Race is a significant factor in this mismatch; however, adults are often unaware that race matters in schools. Many are unfamiliar with the fact that these

differences affect the way in which adults view and interact with their Black and Latino students.

According to Fuligni (2007), the dominant culture of power influences curriculum design, school organization, instructional methodology, language use, accountability systems, and disciplinary methods that often exclude and conflict with marginalized students and their experiences. The dominant group making the majority of decisions affecting Black and Latino students is composed of White middle class and affluent individuals who do not hold the same social understandings as their marginalized students, nor do they value the capital held by these groups (Carter, 2005). Ferrer (2007) and Noguera (2003) agree that student failure in urban schools is largely due to conflicting cultural realities and identities within schools and in classrooms between teachers and students. Furthermore, they contend that teachers' misconceptions regarding disadvantaged students influence the construction of their cultural identities, contribute to cultural clashes, aggravate negative student behavior, or mistake culturally normed behavior to misbehavior. Also, they address the misconception that black students do poorly in schools compared to their white and other ethnic counterparts because education is not a priority to them or their parents. These stereotypes and misconceptions that teachers have about students socially construct their identities in ways that adversely influence student academic achievement, peer relations, and especially behaviors in schools. The teacher beliefs noted above relate to the deficit thinking model. This means that many teachers perceive their ways of thinking and behaving to be correct and that of marginalized students to be incorrect.

B. Cooper (2012) notes that deficit thinking accounts for students' academic and social struggles at school by pointing out those desirable attributes students or their family's lack. She calls deficit thinking the misguided belief that deficient genes, poor neighborhoods, poor parenting, and bad culture determine what children can or cannot do in school and life. Deficit thinking is associated with blaming a student's academic and social struggles on the lack of "desirable" qualities in a student's family (Singam, 2010). These beliefs are held by the people involved in these students' daily lives—their teachers and school administrators. These students typically live in communities with lower socioeconomic status and have different ethnic backgrounds from their teachers and administrators. According to Singam, their schools are usually underfunded, overcrowded, non-white, and poorly managed.

Deficit thinking maintains the status quo through social conditioning and compliance enforcement. Gorski (2010) identified schools as microcosms of the larger society, thus allowing deficit ideas to infiltrate schools. This deficit thinking model attributes students' lack of educational success to characteristics often rooted in their cultures and communities. A significant body of research documents the deficit thinking that permeates the field of education and its influences on the academic performance of students of color (Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Gay, 2010; Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbell Jones, 2005; Ullucci, 2007). In his book, Valencia (2010) defines the notion of deficit thinking as an internal explanation for the academic failure of low socioeconomic status students of color (i.e., African American, Mexican American, Puerto Rican and other minorities).

Deficit thinking is a very common way of thinking which affects our general way of being in and constructing the world. Differences from the ‘norm’ are immediately seen as being deprived, negative, and disadvantaged. It never questions the legitimacy of what is deemed to be normal nor does it consider that differences may actually go beyond expected norms. It discourages teachers and administrators from recognizing the positive values of certain abilities, dispositions, and actions. Deficit thinking leads to stereotyping and prejudging. It marginalizes certain people based on misinformation and misconstructions. (Based on Portelli, 2010, 2013)

Tatum (2003) suggests that prejudice and racism are the predictable consequences of living a culture where individuals are socialized to believe in the “assumed superiority of Whites and the assumed inferiority of people of color.” For instance, when teachers and administrators believe African American and Latino students are not as intelligent as Asian or White students it can cause them to lower their expectations for African American and Latino students (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). Consequently, these limiting beliefs and assumptions are communicated through informal school networks by teachers and administrators potentially tainting the students’ entire educational experience (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). McKenzie and Scheurich’s (2004) study on Equity Traps or the “conscious and unconscious thinking of administrators and teachers that prevents them from creating equitable schools,” found that teachers believed students did not achieve because their parents did not care about education. The most disturbing thing that was found was that teachers did not treat students as they would want their children to be treated by teachers. This study suggests that because of teachers’ negative beliefs about their students, who were mostly students of color, they judged them as unworthy of receiving good instruction and treatment.

One aspect of deficit thinking includes the notion of blaming the victim. Blaming the victim is the idea that the poor academic achievement of a student is due to factors associated with the student's low socioeconomic status, his or her minority status, or his or her limited English proficiency (Valencia, 1997a). A result of blaming the victim has resulted in an abundance of low-income, minority students being overwhelmingly tracked into special education and lower level classes (Farkas, 2003). Teachers who are conditioned with deficit thinking believe that minority students cannot succeed or are incapable of learning; they are destined to blame the victim for low academic achievement. According to Garcia and Guerra (2004), blaming students' cultural backgrounds or families for their lack of academic achievement directly and negatively affected the academic success of minority students; it absolves teachers and principals from any responsibility for their learning.

Educators often believe that students and the families are at fault because "these children' enter school without the necessary prerequisite knowledge and skills their uncaring parents neither valued nor supported (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Valencia, 1997a). Weiss, Lopez, and Rosenberg (2010) found kindergarten teachers also blame parents of marginalized students for inadequately preparing students for the social and emotional challenges of kindergarten. Their findings indicated that teachers perceive White students to be more academically, socially, and emotionally prepared than minority students in their ability to complete an activity, pay attention, and cooperate with their peers at the beginning of the school year. If this perception of students exists as they entered kindergarten, then these students face unwarranted challenges before they even begin

formal education. Furthermore, blaming behavior of administrators and teachers only serves to further alienate students from schools, which, in turn, causes them to disengage from learning (Nieto & Bode, 2008).

Deficit thinking spotlights the academic achievement of low-income, ethnically or linguistically diverse students and links their deficiencies as learners to deficiencies in their culture and family (Rodriguez & Rolle, 2007; Yosso, 2005). Instead of looking at the strengths students bring from their culture, families, and communities that can aid in the learning process, educators defer to stereotypes, ultimately blaming the students for their inability to progress. Instead of challenging the embedded school structure that is built on deficit thinking, school practices too often try to change the student to fit the mold of the traditional White, middle-class student (Cummins, 2001).

When we examine achievement, suspension and expulsion data; assignment certain categories of special education; or the lack of assignment to gifted, accelerated, and advance placement classes, it becomes clear that those who bring a different culture to the school do not receive equitable treatment and fail to attain equal levels of success (Terrell & Lindsey, 2009).

Currently, public education systems often support low-standards, negative labels, standardized tests, and low expectations for marginalized students because many educators still exercise deficit thinking practices in schools (Valencia, 1997a). Subsequently, marginalized students are restricted to meeting these low-standards and expectations set for them by many oppressive educators (Valencia, 1997b).

The result of this persuasive deficit approach is that students from low-income homes and students of colour routinely and overwhelmingly are tracked into low level classes, identified for special education, segregated based on their home

languages, “dropouts,” under-identified as “gifted and talented,” immersed in negative and “subtractive” school climates, and sorted into a plethora of “remedial,” “compensatory,” or “special” programs. (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001)

Today, some perspectives portray poverty as a result of low-income people not doing enough to help themselves (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001). This reemphasizes deficit-thinking notions rooted in the idea that the failure of students lies in factors outside the control of the schools. It is a universal problem that surpasses nearly every aspect of education (Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999). Oakes (1995) referred to deficit thinking as assumptions that low-income children, children of color, and their families are limited by cultural, situational, and individual deficits that schools cannot alter. As a result, these children received fewer educational and social advantages. The most notable impact of deficit thinking is the achievement gap. Literature stresses the importance of taking action to eliminate deficit thinking and replace it with a democratic education that provides all students with the opportunity to succeed in the education world (Pearl & Knight, 2010). Traditionally, deficit thinking blames the student for school failure (Valencia, 1997b). Deficit viewpoints infer that “there is little schooling can do to ‘fix’ these students and so interventions are created to help them fit into the dominant school culture (Simone, 2012).

Based on the idea that academic failure is the result of the student’s internal deficiencies, deficit thinking theory places the blame for academic failure on students and their families. In keeping with this theory, students of color fail in school because they and/or their families have deficits that impede the educational process. This theory, traced back to the 1600’s, evolved with three variations: 1) genetic pathology model, 2) culture

of poverty model, and 3) marginalization of poor students, students of color, and their families (Valencia, 2010).

Traditionally, educators have viewed families of color and low-income status through a deficit lens. This lens assumes that these families do not care about or support education and unfortunately diminishes their contribution to student achievement. As a result, these families are apt to be marginalized by school leaders and their ideas that family engagement should be geared towards the dominant culture (see Auerbach, 2002, 2007; Olivos, 2006). These families are often rejected, disregarded, or stifled by school leaders (Auerbach, 2007; C. W. Cooper & Christie, 2005; Olivos, 2006). They would be more likely to be involved if they felt welcomed, honored, and valued by school leaders (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Tillman, 2004).

Deficit thinking is seen and felt by numerous marginalized students. Katsarou, Picower, and Stovall (2010) claim that teachers who hold deficit views of marginalized students often:

[s]ee their students only as a laundry-list of problems, these educators are unable to look past students' more challenging behavior, [thus] making meaningful and reciprocal relationships impossible. Unable to connect to their students, their efforts at classroom management and instruction fail, and they in turn blame their students for what has ultimately stemmed from their negative and stereotyped views for their students. (p. 139)

This deficit perspective is an unconscious temperament of well-intentioned teachers plagued by stereotypes about students with whom they are unable to identify (Katsarou et al., 2010). Deficit expectations and views seem to be deeply fixed in school culture and pedagogy that are sometimes invisible but powerfully felt (Valencia, 2010). Beginning

teachers may be particularly vulnerable to the influence of deficit thinking. Lower performing, under-resourced schools that predominantly serve poor students of color are disproportionately staffed by beginning teachers—the vast majority of whom do not share their students’ racial, cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic backgrounds (Zeichner, 2009).

Deficit Thinking Frameworks

There are three frameworks of deficit thinking that will be discussed to help us understand how various individuals and groups often have deficit thinking about marginalized student populations. These frameworks are pseudo-scientific, sociological-cultural, and socioeconomic.

Pseudo-scientific Framework

According to Hyslop-Margison and Naseem (2008), the pseudo-scientific framework for deficit thinking emerged from using scientific methods in unethical ways that often reproduce untrustworthy “factual” evidence. Pseudo-science offers a causal explanation of why humans act in certain ways (Hyslop-Margison & Naseem, 2008). These norms set the standards to which everyone is compared and contrasted (Hyslop-Margison & Naseem, 2008) without being culturally sensitive. Scientific research in education has often been misused, misunderstood, and misconceived. Hyslop-Margison and Naseem (2008) add that as teachers and learners, we are agents and objects who influence and are influenced by the background and consequences of our social, economic, and cultural conditions.

Pseudo-scientific ideology supports deficit thinking towards marginalized children. Deeply felt, it often remains with the marginalized child for the duration of his/her life. Valencia (1997a) states that the effects of using a pseudo-scientific methodology to diagnose deficit thinking which aims to “describe, explain, predict and prescribe” its victim’s behavior, has caused a stigma against “minority students.”

. . . [T]he effect of these interventions were primarily felt by several minority students as they were misjudged, labeled and underwent all kinds of discrimination...the long-term effects of this discrimination have shaped and influenced educational thought and practice. (Valencia, 1997a, p. 7)

As a result of being mislabeled or misclassified, marginalized students often feel displaced, alienated, disengaged and frustrated with the school system (Portelli, Shields, & Vibert, 2007).

Sociological-cultural Framework

The sociological-cultural framework creates, supports, and often “justifies” deficit thinking; sometimes it uses the results of standardized tests to build stereotypical opinions of marginalized students. Aragon, Culpepper, McKee, and Perkins (2014) state

. . . because teachers do not want to see Brown and Black children as being impacted by both institutional forces and individual choices, they commit the fallacy of interpreting the collective low achievement of Brown and Black children as being due to their individual lack of tenacity, hard work, or merit, which ends up being a racist belief. (p. 548)

Valenzuela (1999), Garza and Crawford (2005), Yosso (2005), and B. Cooper (2006) argue that the treatment shown by some educators towards inner-city students is arrogant and often disrespectful. This improper treatment is clearly noted in the interactions

between teacher and students (Valenzuela, 1999). Contrasting curricular and assessment practices emphasize different cognitive and behavioral skills and contribute to the labeling of these students as “bad,” “high risk,” “immigrant,” and “special needs” (Anyon, 1980; Brown, 2010).

Instead of seeing these students as capable of using agency, critical thinking, and being resistant to the school’s lack of connectedness to them, many school officials label them as disengaged individuals who act out against school rules (Valenzuela, 1999). This results in a sense of alienation and these marginalized students are labeled as disrespectful, disengaged, unappreciative, and rebellious because they do not adhere to the dominant norms that form school culture (Valenzuela, 1999). Garza and Crawford (2005) explain that “the cultural capital of the dominant group and their related manners of interacting and producing knowledge are the basis from which ‘normality’ is constructed within the broader society and upon which value is assigned,” thus making anyone outside the dominant group to be abnormal.

Our role as teacher educators is to increase our students’ [i.e., teacher candidates] experiences beyond what they believe about the [marginalized] families they will serve. Engaging teacher candidates in working with families will certainly extend their understanding and will provide them with the tools to become effective teachers. (Riojas-Cotez & Flores, 2009)

Students, based on the context in which they live, experience and attain different forms of cultural and social capital that potentially affords them a higher status in society. Cultural capital comes in the form of knowledge, skills, dispositions, and other advantages. Daily, students bring different forms of social and cultural capital to school.

Middle class parents provide their children with cultural capital conducive to the dominant culture that our educational system embraces. Marginalized students often possess a different type of capital not understood or accepted in classrooms.

Anyon (1980) highlights this view on deficit practices and finds that it is because working class children receive a weak and confined set of educational skills and acquire limited dispositions (i.e., no critical thinking skills, open-mindedness, creative capacity, compassion, etc.) they end up restoring the status quo. When the standards of education are low and the potential of inner city students is not reached (Valencia, 1997a), these students are confined by the limited knowledge and skills that they are exposed to at school (Anyon, 1980). Moreover, they often remain in the low socioeconomic class that faces oppression, marginalization, poverty and several inequities (Anyon, 1980). As a result, the student is harmed, oppression remains, and thus school becomes a negative experience for most minority students.

Socioeconomic Framework

The socioeconomic framework validates the relationship between social class, economic status, and deficit thinking. Teaching practices, strategies, and techniques utilized when teaching working-class students is overtly instructional and often involves repetitive tasks (Meier, 2002; Nieto & Bode, 2012). Instructional and rote teaching are rooted in the deficit assumption that working-class students are incapable of learning and utilizing critical thinking skills (Meier, 2002). In working-class schools, many teachers “attempt to control classroom time and space by making decisions without consulting the students and without explaining the basis for their decisions” (Anyon, 1980). Application

of the socioeconomic framework withholds the knowledge and skill set required for powerful social positions (e.g., lawyers, doctors, managers) from the working class (Apple, 2011). Consequently, working-class students are not given the opportunity to excel at attaining positions of social power (Apple, 2011).

The quality of education that working class children receive is inferior to that of the majority population because the demands put on inexperienced or new teachers are often so overwhelming that these students end up with limited possibilities for their future (Portelli et al., 2007). “Savage inequalities in the public education available to children of different racial and class backgrounds reflect growing social and economic polarization- and squander the potential of our youth” (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 1996, p. 145). Middle class students are encouraged to think independently/critically, develop managerial/business skills, and are encouraged to pursue their education (Reid, 2005). Curriculum design and delivery benefit middle class students and not the minority working class students. Hoschschild and Scovronick (2004) claim,

[i]nequalities in family wealth are a major cause of inequalities in schooling [e.g., the physical conditions of the school, the unqualified teachers, the bias standardized tests, the streaming of classes], and inequalities in schooling do much to reinforce inequalities of wealth among family in the next generation. (as cited in Books, 2004, p. 106)

The deficit teaching approach in schools helps reinforce socioeconomic inequities towards the working class. Due to having a low socioeconomic status, working-class students are treated with a deficit approach because they are incapable of “success” due

to their low economic status (Gaab, 2004). Such thought has reinforced and justified deficit thinking attitudes and practices toward working-class students (Gaab, 1993).

Oppressive Factors of Race and Social Class in Society

Ladson-Billings and Tate (2009) argued that racism is pervasive and deeply ingrained in society; they wrote the “cause of poverty in conjunction with the condition of their schools is institutional and structural racism” (p. 5). Hence, race and poverty account for the inequities minority students experience and the reasons they are not afforded more equitable educational opportunities. Dixson and Rousseau (2005) discussed the inequities in the education of students of color and maintained, “race continues to marginalize and oppress people of color” (p. 23) and that until we “dismantle the years of inequitable schooling policies and practices” (p. 23) racism in education will continue to negatively affect Latino students. As cited in Howard (2008), Bells’ use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a conceptual framework in analyzing the underachievement of minority students by acknowledging the “presence and perniciousness of racism, discrimination, and hegemony . . . race-based epistemological approaches are important analytic lenses. . . because they offer the opportunity to challenge dominant ideology” (p. 2). The inclusion of CRT as a framework is warranted because it centers race at the core of the analysis and highlights important implications for students and parents in the educational system. Ultimately giving parents and school leaders an opportunity to examine these issues may be the motivation for greater dialogue about ways all stakeholders can work together for student success.

Lynn and Jennings emphasized the existence of oppressive structures and how they are enacted within classrooms and “take on many different forms and include the power of students, teachers and administrators . . . who hold degrees of power that are constantly negotiated, defined, and enacted in relation to other power brokers within and outside the classroom” (p. 26). Power relationships and the consequences of school failure create a multitude of negative results manifested in the achievement outcomes for minority students. Examining power relationship may serve as a catalyst to improving relationships between educators and families.

Anyon (1995) discussed the oppressive factors of race and social class that are embedded in school structures, policies, and practices in ways that ultimately create academic failure. She further contended that there are three significant factors that determine what occurs in minority schools where the student population is racially and economically marginalized: sociocultural differences between students, parents, and teachers; an abusive school environment; and educator expectations. Often the deficit model leads to the assumption that poor student performance or behavior stems from problems with the students or their families that must be “fixed” and this has been a part of the schools for quite some time. This model has led to the implication that the cause of the achievement gap is the family’s culture or deficient practices. It seems that when parents do not engage in dominant culture modes of showing support, they may be perceived negatively or judged as not caring about their children’s education. Accordingly, deficit thinking perpetuates the notion that families of color are uneducated, viewed as part of the problem; thus, the primary reason children are not better prepared

academically (Valencia, 2002). Additionally, Valencia (2002) notes that deficit thinking blames the student, who is actually the ‘victim’ in this instance, rather than looking at ways in which schools and education policies systematically impede the learning and success of poor students and students of color.

Relationship Between Leading and Learning

Cultural competency offers educators a process for developing the knowledge, skills, and abilities to overcome deficit thinking ultimately enhancing their effectiveness as school leaders. Students come from diverse cultures with different beliefs and values; they bring culture to school that often creates problems because they do not behave or learn according to established social-cultural norms (Lindsey et al., 2005; Nuri-Robins, Lindsey, Terrell, & Lindsey, 2007). Administrators and educators evaluate the cultures of their students through a dominant cultural lens that reduces the students’ cultural capital causing them to disengage from the learning process (Lindsey et al., 2005). Cultural capital is “cultural wealth” that students learn from their families or communities that serve to empower them (Yosso, 2005). One example would be resiliency that enables students to recover from difficult situations. Deficit thinking corrodes the students’ sense of self-efficacy and they often internalize a consciousness of academic deficiency (Banks & Banks, 2010; Nieto & Bode, 2008). Students who come from marginalized groups often have a negative image about their cultural identities, which can affect their academic performance. To move beyond deficit thinking, educators must be willing to examine their beliefs about different groups. They must also be willing to expand their knowledge of other cultures.

Hansuvadha and Slater (2012) propose that the relationship between leading and learning cannot be addressed by focusing on test results alone. If schools are to be successful in addressing the academic disparities of marginalized student groups, educational leaders must guide, model, and provide resources for stakeholders to gain the skills needed to create learning environments that are inclusive, respectful, and sensitive to cultural differences. Principals' assumptions and beliefs form perceptions that can affect students' ability to learn. Ladson Billings and Tate (2009) assert that educators are told they need skills to work with diverse student groups but no one tells them how to do it.

Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) argue that leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school. Administrators shape the culture of their schools by communicating its mission and purpose to stakeholders (Sergiovanni, 2006). Principals set the tone for the school's culture, their assumptions and perceptions command how stakeholders should think, feel, and act. Transforming school culture involves the principal's ability to connect with stakeholders around a moral purpose to create a shared vision, whereby stakeholders can create personal meaning, as well as the motivation to reach a desired goal (Fullan, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2006). This action research project is an attempt to promote a more equitable and democratic educational experience for all students, free of deficit thinking and deficit based practices. It is my belief that principals play an active role in preventing and eliminating deficit thinking. When this occurs, teachers can overcome deficit thinking and practices and as a result, student

achievement can increase (R. Bishop et al, 2002; Shields et al., 2004). A principal is able to challenge deficit thinking by leading for social justice—transformative leadership (Shields, 2009). The vision of a school is created by the principal and should focus on changing the culture to improve student achievement (Sergiovanni, 2006). To improve the academic success of students, the principal has to play a major role in creating a learning environment that confronts deficit thinking and deficit-based practices.

Necessity of Transformative Leadership

To see real change within the school culture, a principal's transformative actions must be in place to change the beliefs of teachers. According to Shields (2010), transformative leadership:

Begins with questions of justice and democracy; it critiques inequitable practices and offers the promise not only of greater individual achievement but of a better life lived in common with others. Transformative leadership, therefore, inextricably links education and educational leadership with the wider social context within which it is embedded. Thus, it is my contention that transformative leadership and leadership for inclusive and socially just learning environments are inextricably related. (p. 559)

In order to promote change, tough and sensitive discussions must occur with educators. This can be accomplished with professional development that enhances teachers' abilities to work with students of diverse races, ethnicities, genders, languages, abilities, and socioeconomic status (Shields, 2009). Communication is a critical ingredient that school leaders need to utilize to help promote relationships between students who are marginalized and those of the dominant culture.

The group most capable of eliminating deficit thinking is school leaders; instruction is the leading factor in student learning and leadership is the second most important factor (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). When these two are combined into instructional leadership, there is a very powerful force at work for student learning. Instructional leadership is direct principal involvement in curriculum and instruction—monitoring classroom instruction and student progress and working with teachers to improve teaching and student outcomes (McKenzie & Locke, 2010). To overcome educational inequities, an instructional leader focuses on equity and high quality teaching. This important task can be accomplished by focusing on “all” students being successful. As the instructional leader, the principal is responsible for helping staff understand that the students and families they serve today require a different set of skills. Staff need training in culturally responsive behaviors and instructional practices. They also need continuous support and professional development to facilitate their growth. If school policies and practices do not reflect cultural competency then the culture of the school is out of touch with the students and families they serve. Principals who are willing to examine their biases, prejudices, and stereotypes can change their beliefs and values in which in turn changes their perceptions. Gaining self-awareness allows leaders to see how their cultural beliefs, values, and behaviors affect the educational experiences and achievement of marginalized student groups. The continuing achievement gap between African Americans, Latinos, and White students suggests the current school culture is contrary to the academic success of black and brown students. Likewise, school culture promotes practices and policies that privileges some student groups and

disadvantages others (Ullucci, 2007). Principals must champion the discussions regarding practices that serve as barriers to the advancement of culturally and linguistically diverse student groups. Engaging all stakeholders in a dialogue about structural inequities is the first step in changing school culture.

Impact of Preconceived Notions

Deficit thinking negatively affects the education of all students; it fosters the acceptance of an inequitable educational system that limits the growth and potential of every student. For many students whose cultural and linguistic background differs from their White peers, and for students of families of low socioeconomic backgrounds, deficit thinking creates obstacles to obtaining a rigorous and equitable education. The false assumption is that the mainstream culture's institutions, policies, and practices are the correct ones, and that those of the marginalized populations must be helped (Shields et al., 2004). Efforts to fix a student's cultural and linguistic differences, along with the hidden message of incompetence sent by an educator, limit students' potential and further hampers their academic growth as they enter each successive grade with a less rigorous academic experience and lowered expectations (Garza & Garza, 2010). Noguera and Wing (2006) attests that attempts to correct cultural and linguistic differences have created a racial achievement gap between White students and their marginalized peers. Deficit thinking is as much about the preconceived notions of stakeholders as it is about the actual practices that stem from such notions. When deficit thinking exists, every student suffers.

Change cannot be meaningfully implemented until all stakeholders in the dominant discourse engage in the rejection of deficit thinking. Wagstaff and Fusarelli (1999) found the explicit rejection of deficit thinking was the single most important initiating factor in improving the academic achievement of marginalized students. Schools that practice cultural competency appreciate and respect the cultural differences of their students. These schools elevate the diversity of cultures to improve academic achievement by engaging in culturally responsive practices (Hernandez & Koze, 2012; Kunjufu, 2011). According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (2009), culturally responsive practices illicit students' cultural knowledge, as well as knowledge acquired from their experiences to create dynamic learning environments that in turn validate the students' perspectives. Culturally responsive practices empower students, parents, families, and communities by enabling them to share knowledge that enriches the school community and facilitates learning. As leaders alter themselves "inside out" to become culturally competent they then work to integrate cultural competence within their schools (Lindsey et al., 2005; Terrell & Lindsey, 2009). Ultimately, when school leaders challenge deficit thinking and foster an equitable education, room will exist to provide equity and equal access to every student in.

As it relates to teachers, there are two areas where deficit thinking can be overcome—professional development and teacher preparation programs. According to Delpit (2005), teacher education usually focuses on research that links failure and socioeconomic status, failure and cultural difference, and failure and single parent households. After their teachers have been so indoctrinated with these negative views, it

is difficult to believe that these students can possibly be successful. Before pre-service teachers are given a classroom and students to teach, pre-service teachers are given reasons for student failure. Teacher preparatory programs should prepare teachers to challenge deficit notions, to challenge students to think critically, and to consider what is right with their students as opposed to what is wrong with them. Garcia and Guerra (2004) insist that deficit thinking saturates society; schools and teachers mirror these beliefs. It is too easy to rely on deficit theories and continue the practice of blaming students, their families, and their communities for educational failure. Instead, as Nieto (2010) suggests, schools need to focus on where they can make a difference—their own instructional policies and practices. Teachers need to recognize that students have essential strengths and value; in addition, they need to establish a better relationship with students and their families.

The purpose of education is to prepare young people for life, work, and citizenship. In the 21st century, race, culture, language, socioeconomics, and more still divide us. Unfortunately, some believe that equal opportunity exists for all and therefore low levels of achievement on the part of minority students must be related to DNA, culture, or lack of motivation. However, the truth of the matter is that minority students have unequal access to vital educational resources, such as effective teachers, quality curriculum, and high expectations. These educational resources are directly connected to perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of those most connected to and responsible for student achievement—teachers.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The primary purpose of this study was to explore educators' attitudes and perspectives towards their minority students and their families and how deficit-based thinking and practices impact the work of educators. My interest in this research stems from my experiences as an elementary school principal of minority students. It is my hope that information from this study may broaden the understanding of the relationship between race and teaching and learning.

Qualitative Research Design

There are various types of research; each has its unique character that develops and changes as the study is implemented (Hatch, 2002). With the multiple research methods utilized in educational research, I considered my research best suited to a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is a powerful tool for learning more about our lives and the sociohistorical context in which we live; it is collected from the natural setting and the researcher is the data collection instrument (Merriam, 2002). Data collected during a qualitative study is descriptive and utilizes histories, attitudes, and behaviors; meaning from these descriptions are connected to the participants. My study sought to reveal the relationship between school leadership, deficit thinking, and the practices of school staff. To address my research questions, the appropriate methodology would allow for the analysis of a particular social situation, event, or interaction

(Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2004; Mullen, 2004). This study aimed to identify the role of deficit thinking and deficit-based practices on staff practices and student experiences. The characteristics associated with qualitative research best suited this study.

According to Silverman (2004), qualitative research aims to make clear how events occur and the value people attribute to them. While quantitative studies utilize a great deal of calculation and extensive inferences, qualitative studies allow the words, observations, and experiences to create a vivid picture. As a qualitative researcher, my goal was to study multiple points of view in an effort to gain insight into the situation. Qualitative is best suited for data collection that uses observations, focus groups, and interviews (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative research methods have been instrumental in researching beliefs and cultural issues because they allow an in-depth investigation of a phenomenon. In their book, *Designing Qualitative Research*, Marshall and Rossman (2006) describe qualitative researchers as those who:

espouse some common considerations and procedures for its conduct and certain habits of mind and heart. They are intrigued by the complexity of social interactions expressed in daily life and by the meanings that the participants themselves attribute to these interactions. (p. 2)

A qualitative researcher's interests "foster pragmatism in using multiple methods for exploring a topic. Thus, qualitative research is pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 2). According to Hatch (2002), qualitative research, "seeks to understand the world from the perspectives of those living in it" (p. 7). As the researcher for this study, I sought to understand the impact deficit thinking had on the practices of educators, and school leaders' engagement

from the point of view of those who are directly responsible for student success—educators and school leaders.

The purpose of this study was to examine how educators in an elementary school setting examined deficit thinking in order to improve the academic, social, emotional, and cultural growth of students who are marginalized. In this study, marginalized referred to students of low socioeconomic status, and/or to students from families whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds differ from that of their Caucasian peers and who are treated differently because of these differences (García & Guerra, 2004). As an action research study, its purpose was specifically to understand the impact that an action research study can have on deficit thinking and deficit-based practices within participating elementary school staff members. The aim was to shape an understanding of the practices, techniques, and strategies that can be employed to confront and alter the beliefs and attitudes of educators who submit to deficit thinking. This is critical because teacher attitudes and relationships are more important and directly related to student achievement than funding or facilities (Shields et al., 2004). This chapter describes the methods used to identify the impact that educators' participation in an action research study on deficit thinking has on the work they do with students and their families.

This chapter includes an overview of methodology, including site and participant selection, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, a discussion of my subjectivity, and limitations. The primary focus of this study was to examine the role educators play in addressing deficit thinking. The following questions were considered:

1. How do elementary school educators perceive the role of their students' backgrounds in academic outcomes?
2. What factors have contributed to the development and persistence of these perceptions?
3. What is the impact of an action research group focused on deficit thinking on the participants' thinking about students?
4. What are the activities and experiences in which the group engages that seem to be helpful in changing thinking?
5. What did I learn about the role of the principal in an action research group on deficit thinking?

Action Research

The primary research methodology used in this study was action research (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Action research is a collaborative approach that provides people with the means to take systematic action to resolve specific problems (Silverman, 2004). Freng, Freng, and Moore (2006) define action research as a cyclical process consisting of observation, reflection, planning, and action. It stresses participative inquiry—communication and collaboration with community group participants throughout the course of a research study. Action research relies on the conjunction of three elements: research, action, and participation.

Action research is often seen as a tool for professional development, bringing a greater focus on the teacher than before (Noffke & Stevenson, 1995). It is increasingly becoming a tool for school reform, as its very individual focus allows for a new

engagement in educational change. Action research emphasizes the involvement of teachers in problems in their own classrooms and has as its primary goal the development of the teacher rather than the acquisition of general knowledge in the field of education (Borg, 1981, p. 313).

Action research is inquiry that is completed by or with insiders in an organization or community. It is a reflective process, but is different from isolated, spontaneous reflection in that it is deliberately and systematically undertaken and generally requires that some form of evidence be presented to support assertions. Action research is oriented to some action or cycle of actions that organizational or community members have taken, are taking, or wish to take to address a particular problematic situation. The idea is that changes occur either within the setting and/or within the researchers themselves.

This study was a qualitative action research study. Kvale (2006) recognizes that “qualitative designs are naturalistic to the extent that the research takes place in real-world settings and the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest” (p. 39). In this particular study, the phenomenon of interest was the exploration of deficit thinking within the study’s participants and how it can be minimized or eradicated. Attention was focused on exploring participants’ perspectives related to deficit thinking and how this impacted their thoughts related to student outcomes, family engagement, and other aspects of school culture and climate. The study examined how deliberate efforts to raise awareness regarding deficit thinking affected perspectives and actions, and how it sparked participants to challenge the presence of deficit thinking within the school.

The underlying assumptions of action research include issues of power, active participation, giving voice to participants, raising awareness of those involved, and linking theory and research to practice. Noffke and Stevenson (1995) cite Lewin's work from 1952 that notes that there are four phases of action research: plan, act, observe, and reflect. Essential to using this four-phase action research methodology is for the participants to understand that they may each be at different phases and points of awareness throughout the study; however, regardless of these differences, they are still able to individually explore issues of power, their participation, and possible opportunities for action.

My Subjectivity

For various reasons, I am compassionate about the marginalization of students of low socioeconomic status, and students from families whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds differ from that of their Caucasian peers and who are treated differently because of these differences (García & Guerra, 2004). In addition to being an African American female raised in an economically challenging environment, I have several close friends of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. My educational experiences and those of the friends I previously mentioned influenced my decision to enter the teaching profession. Having been in the educational field for over 15 years, I am a constant witness to the damaging treatment of students who do not receive access to opportunities, privileges, and experiences provided to those from the dominant culture due to their linguistic, cultural, and economic differences. Having witnessed incidents plagued by deficit thinking, I was motivated to pursue this topic as an advocate for those consistently

marginalized, often unintentionally, by the educators whose deficit beliefs and actions serve to limit the capacity of students from culturally, economically, and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds.

For this study, I was primarily interested in exploring, understanding, and analyzing how the implementation of an action research study focused on exploring and transforming deficit thinking can impact educators' attitudes and actions so that a more equitable educational setting is established. Deficit thinking is the practice of perceiving students from lower socioeconomic status and/or with different language and cultural standards as having deficits because they do not have the same cultural capital as students from the dominant cultural group. This study sought to address practices associated with deficit thinking in schools and how educators seek to eliminate such practices by examining their beliefs and actions.

Site and Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling was utilized for this study because of the desirability of selecting study participants who recognized the importance of examining deficit thinking practices and strategies. Random sampling was not appropriate for this study because of the unique characteristics needed for the participants in the study.

The study was conducted at River Creek¹ Elementary an urban elementary school in North Carolina; it is a 100% Title I school with a minority student population of over 90%. Of the student population, Blacks make up 67%, Hispanics make up 25%, and Whites/Others make up 8%. In addition, the school receives Title I funding under the

¹ A pseudonym

ESEA; Title I funding is calculated based on the percentage of students that qualify for free or reduced lunch. The elementary school was chosen based on specific demographic conditions such as socioeconomic status of the students and the presence of a diverse student population. I sought permission from the local school board aligned with their Research and Accountability Department's guidelines in conjunction with the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

White females represent over 60% of the teaching staff. An attempt was made to solicit a diverse pool of the staff members. For participant selection, I contacted staff members via an emailed letter to gauge their interest in participating in the study. Participant selection was based upon participants' willingness to participate and explore meanings and actions associated with deficit thinking. Specific criteria for inclusion in this study was twofold: a) participants had to be staff members and b) participants had to commit to participate in the various group sessions planned for this study. The aim was to form a group of staff members, ideally five to ten, who would agree to form and participate in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) aimed to collaboratively analyze individual and school-wide practices for evidence of deficit thinking. This PLC was aimed to identify strategies, techniques, and structures that would enable participants to more effectively collaborate with students and families of color and diverse cultures. Within this analysis, how words and actions align with deficit thinking and influence school culture and climate was explored. Following participant selection, an introductory meeting was held to let staff members know the aim and structure of this study and the activities they would participate in over the course of the study including but not limited

to PLC sessions, pre- and post- surveys (Appendix E), journaling, action planning, and professional development. The incentive for staff participation in this PLC was professional and personal growth that would impact their work as educators, especially as it related to engagement with students and their families.

Eight educators participated in the study; these educators consisted of five teachers, one school-level administrator, and two Instructional Facilitators. These educators were asked to describe their relationships with students and the students' backgrounds.

Participant Descriptions

The participants in this research study included a kindergarten teacher, first grade teacher, second grade teacher, third grade teacher, an English as a Secondary Language (ESL) teacher, and two Instructional Facilitators. I also interviewed the principal of River Creek Elementary School (see Table 1).

Table 1

Research Participants

Name (Pseudonym)²	Position	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
Margarette Gouzoule	Kindergarten Teacher	Female	White
Cammie Kemper	First Grade Teacher	Female	Black
Kathie Yukawa	Second Grade Teacher	Female	White
Merrel Lobdell	Third Grade Teacher	Female	White
Zonnya Ring	English as a Second Language (ESL) Teacher	Female	White
Kellen Gallu	Instructional Facilitator	Female	Black
Reece Yuan	Instructional Facilitator	Female	Black
Marjy Ellison	Principal	Female	Black

² Pseudonyms

Data Collection

Focus Groups

In 1946, social scientists Robert Merton and Patricia Kendall developed the focus group method. Data has been gathered using focus groups for political campaigns, marketing research, patient and customer satisfaction. The use of focus groups for gathering data in the social sciences, including education, became popular again in the 1990s. The most common purpose of a focus group is for an in-depth exploration of a topic to provide information about why people think or feel the way they do. According to Creswell (2007), a focus group is a “group discussion organized to explore a specific set of issues . . . the group is ‘focused’ in the sense that it involves some kind of collective activity” (p. 5).

Using a focus group to conduct my study allowed me to gather data in multiple (6) sessions from a number of participants whose opinions and ideas were of particular interest to me. Focus group sessions lasted approximately 90 minutes and the conversations were digitally recorded. Conversations and informal interactions were also recorded through hand-written field notes. In this focus group, I served as the moderator/facilitator promoting a free flow of dialogue. My intention in this study was to conduct a focus group discussion that was minimally directed because my interests lay in the multiple perspectives of the participants. As Kvale (2006) explained,

in focus groups . . . the objective is not primarily to elicit the group’s answers . . . but rather to stimulate discussion and thereby understand (through subsequent analysis) the meanings and norms which underlie those group answers. In group interviews the interviewer seeks answers, in focus groups the facilitator seeks group interaction. (pp. 42–43)

While a general discussion was started for each session, members of the study were encouraged to discuss issues specific to teaching in their setting, in order that their underlying norms, beliefs, values, and experiences could be uncovered (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

The researcher must pay close attention to the recruitment of participants for a focus group (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). If the group dynamics work as intended, a synergy will form between the participants, contributing meaningful data to the discussion. On the other hand, despite collective interests and commonalities, participants may impede the desired synergy (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Participants may be reluctant to engage with each other, or they may know each other so well that the interaction becomes focused on socializing rather than the intent of the research. Marshall and Rossman (2006) concur that, because of desired outcomes,

the recruitment of group participants is not something which should be carried out simply on an ad hoc or random basis . . . Issues of sampling and selection are likely to prove crucial in relation to the form and quality of interaction in a focus group and therefore the kinds of data one gathers. (p. 27)

Participant recruitment can be a significant challenge when utilizing the focus group method.

The number of members within the group was carefully considered for this study. Concentrating on small numbers allowed for a deep understanding of the topic through the perspective of the individual (Maxwell, 2004). By keeping the group small, I was better able to facilitate rich discussions unhampered by participants' reluctance to share.

I began my recruitment process by working with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to obtain approval of the recruitment letter (see Appendix A). Additionally, I also submitted the adult consent form to the IRB for approval (see Appendix B). Both documents were approved and stamped and used in the recruitment of all participants. In order to be able to conduct the research with Dexter Public Schools,³ I had to submit follow the district's Research and Accountability application process for research studies. Within several weeks, I received an official approval letter from Dexter Public Schools giving me permission to conduct research at River Creek Elementary School.

Once approved to begin the research study, I first sent the recruitment letter via email to the principal at River Creek Elementary School. The principal shared a list of teachers who met the criteria that I was seeking with their contact information. Next, I sent the recruitment letter via email to those identified requesting participation. The recruitment strategy proved successful; ten staff members expressed interest in participating in the study.

Data collection consisted of one individual interview with each participant, six focus group sessions, and surveys. Data collection occurred in late November and early December 2016; each session was a minimum of 90 minutes. (See Table 3.3 and Appendix F for a timeline of the research process).

Interviews

I created interview questions; the interview lengths ranged from 40 to 65 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded using a digital recording device. Interviews with

³ A pseudonym

participants were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews involve the use of structured and unstructured questions, meaning some of the questions were developed in advance while others evolved as the interviews progressed (Merriam, 2009). At the end of each interview, participants were given an opportunity to provide any additional information they wanted to add to provide further insight. Additionally, I asked these educators questions pertaining to students' backgrounds and educational attainment. Once interviews were transcribed, I sent each participant a copy of her transcribed interview for review. Participants were asked to review the transcription for accuracy. In addition, they were encouraged to add information significant or valuable to the research.

Table 2

Timeline

Date	Event(s)
October-November 2016	Submitted proposal to IRB Recruited participants, secured informed consent forms, gave overview of process, and arranged dates for sessions
November-December 2016	Held focus group sessions; each for a minimum of 90 minutes November 14, 2016 November 21, 2016 November 28, 2016 December 5, 2016 December 12, 2016 December 19, 2016
December 2016-February 2017	Triangulation of data through member checking of transcripts and summaries

My goal during this process was to facilitate and monitor the focus group sessions in a manner that was nonintrusive. At the end of each focus group session, I made notes to keep track of my overall impressions and participants' behaviors (i.e. verbal and nonverbal). The various sources of data aided me in better ensuring full interpretation of the data.

Semi-structured Interviews

The process of data collection continued with the use of Semi-Structured Interviews of participants (See Appendix D for Interview Protocol). After participants completed the Anonymous Participant Survey, a Semi-Structured Interview was conducted with each participant. Stake (2006) suggested that important research questions cannot always be anticipated. A semi-structured approach allows opportunities to formulate more purposeful questions dependent on the responses of the participant. Kvale (2006) suggested approaching the interviews as a conversation to better construct the stories of the participants. During the semi-structured interviews, I did not experience any challenges related to engaging participants in conversation.

Prior to the semi-structured interview, I spoke with each participant to address questions about the study and the interviews and to share that I would approach the interview like a conversation with a semi-structured approach. It was my goal to let the conversation drive the interview rather than being dictated by structured and prepared questions. Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately one hour and was recorded, transcribed, organized, and coded. Although I had prepared questions regarding the participant's knowledge of deficit thinking and his/her ability to identify, address, and

implement strategies to eliminate such practices, I anticipated that additional questions would arise during the interviews and they did. The semi-structured interview approach allowed me to probe into responses. During the semi-structured interviews, I had participants talk about two or three students who were struggling academically and/or behaviorally and asked them to identify reasons why the students were struggling. At end of the action research process, I repeated the same process, noting if and how participants' thinking changed.

Surveys

Participant Cultural Diversity Survey. The Participant Cultural Diversity Survey provided significant information regarding characteristics of each participant's background such as educational history, years of teaching experience, and participation in cultural diversity training and professional development. Information gathered from this survey was analyzed and aided me in initiating the facilitation of the focus group sessions. This survey was

Pre- and Post-Participant Survey. Once participants were selected and I received permission from each participant, I began the process of collecting data by having each participant complete the Pre-Participant Survey. The Pre-Participant Survey was completed prior to the first Action Research PLC session. Participants responded to the Pre-Participant Survey in writing on paper. Participants completed the Post-Participant Survey at the conclusion of the action research project. Analysis compared participants' responses prior to Action Research PLC sessions and after the final Action Research PLC Session. I created the Pre- and Post-Participant Surveys.

Anonymous Participant Survey. After the administration of the Pre-Participant Survey, participants completed an Anonymous Participant Survey. This survey was used to determine the existence of deficit thinking and efforts to eliminate these practices. The survey was e-mailed to the participants via Survey Monkey. Anonymity was guaranteed to participants and a consent form was embedded into the survey. The survey was incomplete until the consent box was checked. This survey was a product of a dissertation written by Joseph Simone (2012).

The Anonymous Participant Survey addressed several components as related to deficit thinking. An overview of the questions is included below (see Appendix C).

Question 1: Participants were asked to consider a failing student and why the participant felt the student was failing.

Question 2: Participants were asked to gauge their perceptions as they related to how well stakeholders addressed the needs of every student.

Question 3: Participants were asked to gauge their perceptions as they related to how well the education structure supported students who were marginalized.

Questions 4 and 5: Participants were asked to gauge their perceptions of how well professional development was used to address the academic, social and emotional needs of every student.

Question 6: Participants were asked to gauge their perceptions as they related to how well the principal fosters relationships with various stakeholder groups, including the marginalized.

Questions 7-10: Participants were asked to gauge the level of deficit thinking per economic status, cultural backgrounds, and linguistic differences.

Question 11: Participants were asked to share their years of experience in current school and in education in general.

The Anonymous Participant Survey was completed during the first Action Research PLC session. The researcher analyzed survey results. During subsequent Action Research PLC sessions, results were shared and used as a springboard for discussion.

Recordings and Observations of PLC Sessions

Once staff members were interviewed, data collection continued within the group sessions. Within the group sessions, participants: 1) continued to explore their own meanings of deficit thinking; 2) participated in a group discussion designed to raise awareness about deficit thinking at the school; 3) described how their perceptions of deficit thinking had been impacted through the PLC; and 4) identified actions to take to challenge deficit thinking and its impact on the school's culture and climate. All semi-structured interviews and group sessions were audio recorded and transcribed with permission from the participants. Additionally, all participant transcriptions were verified by participants for accuracy. I also used a journal to record any observations of the participants during the interview sessions and group discussions.

Observations and Research Journal

Throughout the duration of the action research project, I collected observational data and recorded my observations via field notes. The observations allowed me to capture the conversations, interactions, behaviors, and attitudes of each participant

relevant to the theme of deficit thinking. Formal observations occurred during the focus group sessions and semi-structured interviews. In the journal, I documented my thoughts, understandings, and issues regarding the research project. Initially, I planned to actively take notes during the focus group sessions. However, I made the decision after the first focus group session to abandon this practice because it was distracting and difficult. Making notes immediately after each session allowed me to record my thoughts and reactions to the group discussion. These notes proved noteworthy in my analysis and interpretation.

Follow-up Interviews

After I completed an initial analysis based on the first interview, the Anonymous Participant Survey, and observations, I conducted a second interview near the end of the action research project to gather data related to how each participant's involvement in the action research study had impacted their attitudes and behaviors related to the theme. Primarily, the follow-up interview allowed me to ask direct questions regarding each participant's lens in addressing deficit thinking. This occurred after the last action research PLC session (i.e. near the completion of the action research project) to allow enough time for participants to have learned, grown, and developed.

Data Analysis

Action research is best done in collaboration with others who have a stake in the problem under investigation. Action research projects influence thinking skills, sense of efficacy, willingness to share and communicate, and attitudes toward the process of change. Through this action research study, we learned about ourselves, our colleagues,

our students' families, and determined ways to continually grow. Isolation is one of the downsides of education. Educators are often the sole adult in a room of children and have little or no time scheduled for professional conversations with others. This action research study provided time for educators to talk with each other about deficit thinking and its impact on school culture and climate. This study allowed us to examine deficit thinking and its impact on school culture and climate. Through these discussions, stronger relationships were developed, increased sharing occurred, and collaboration was enhanced across the school. This process created new patterns of collegiality, communication, and sharing. Action research served as a chance for educators to take a look at deficit thinking and its impact on school culture and climate in a structured manner.

During PLC sessions, the action research group aided in the analysis of the following data sets—survey, interview, and observation. The focus group's reflection on the data was as important as my reflection on the data. The reflection process allowed participants to identify themes, issues, problems, and questions. As part of our analysis, we located the main ideas, concepts, and issues that emerged from each data set. In the course of the analysis process, participants were encouraged to record notes to capture their ideas formed about the data and deficit thinking. Collective analysis of the interviews, documents, observations, and surveys resulted in the discovery of patterns. These patterns revealed important findings that aided the group in its detection of deeper meaning related to deficit thinking practices and the strategies. Additionally, each participant was able to individually review our preliminary group analysis. After

interviewing this group of educators, another layer of analysis involved my interpretation of participants' responses by searching for patterns in the evidence and data. These patterns were coded for emerging themes; these emerging themes were further analyzed

Trustworthiness

For the purpose of this qualitative study, I use the term trustworthiness to refer to the accuracy of the findings. It was imperative to this study that I carried out my research in the most ethical manner possible to ensure its trustworthiness (Merriam, 2009). This included checking my data collection and analysis for accuracy by employing member-checking techniques, triangulating my data, and using not just my lens but also the lenses of participants to assist in the analysis of data (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Merriam, 2009).

Member checking ensures that there is no misinterpretation of what participants share in the interviews (Creswell, 2007). Participants were invited to proof the preliminary data after my analysis to ensure its accuracy. Triangulation is important because it provides credibility (Merriam, 2009). Triangulation occurred through an analysis and cross-checking of data from the individual interviews, surveys, and observations. Specifically, the beliefs of participating staff, the specific strategies employed during the action research project, and the impact of the action research was triangulated to ensure the accuracy of my findings.

Significance of Research and Limitations

The significance of this qualitative study lies in its ability to add meaningful data to the existing collection of research regarding the impact of deficit thinking and deficit-based practices on the educational experiences of minority students and their families. By

examining educators' perspectives towards their minority students and their families, the potential exists for new understandings to be uncovered. There is minimal research that examines the specific strategies educators employ and the challenges they face when addressing deficit thinking. In addition, there is a lack of research that assesses the impact of an action research study on the theme of deficit thinking and the impact a study of this can have on eliminating deficit thinking on the intellectual, social, emotional, and cultural life of students (Shields et al., 2004).

According to Merriam (2002), all studies have limitations. This study was designed to examine deficit thinking and deficit-based practices through participants' perspectives. A limitation common to all studies with human subjects is the need to rely on their ability to recall stories and their willingness to share (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003). A limitation was also reflected in my position as researcher. I am a principal in the school district in which the school is located that is the site of the study. While I am confident that my relationship with the subjects had a positive impact on the study, my position within the school district may have unknowingly coerced staff to participate or may have caused them to be reserved and less likely to fully respond. In addition, it could be possible that participants in this study were cautious with their responses because race, achievement, and deficit thinking are difficult for some teachers to talk about (Diller & Moule, 2005; Landsman & Lewis, 2006). Participants may have feared sounding racist or admitting to what could be considered ineffective teaching practices and attitudes (Narayan & George, 2003).

As the researcher, my presence in the study and in the participants' lives was unavoidable (Hatch, 2002). Due to my years as principal and teacher in the school district, I have direct or indirect relationships with the participants. Although I believe a level of mutual trust and respect existed between the participants and I prior to the study, I had to constantly self-assess to ensure that my presence didn't present any bias. It was important that before every aspect of the study that I left the principal at the door and entered as the researcher. This aided me in dismissing pre-conceived notions and to analyze the data from a non-personal lens.

Ethical Consideration

As required by UNCG, ethical considerations, including informed consent and participant anonymity, were carefully protected by following standard research procedures through the IRB. The use of a focus group comes with the struggle of ensuring that all participants will adhere to strict stipulations (Parker & Tritter, 2006). Concepts associated with confidentiality and anonymity were presented and participants were given the chance to select their own pseudonyms. According to Vavrus (2002) and M. A. Bishop and Trout (2008) with the possibility that some participants might find it hard to talk about issues of race and culture, a researcher must be sensitive to this predicament and allow participants to withdraw without pressure. At the start of the study, I fully disclosed my research intentions and emphasized that participation was voluntary.

Summary

Chapter Three noted the methodology of this research study including a description of the qualitative research design, overview of methodology, subjectivity, site and participant selection, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, significance of research, limitations, and ethical considerations. In Chapter Four, I present findings from the research including perspectives of participants before and after focus group sessions and how these perspectives contribute to deficit thinking and deficit-based practices.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to understand the link between deficit thinking and teacher and principal perceptions of minority students. This chapter explores the findings based on a series of focus groups sessions, surveys, and one-on-one interviews with participants in an elementary school in a suburban district. At the beginning of the study, an initial survey was administered to each participant and each participant engaged in a one-on-one interview. A final interview was conducted using the data gathered from the initial interview survey data, journal responses, and the researcher's anecdotal notes from the focus group sessions. Five themes emerged about the types of perceptions that educators related to minority students, as well as a series of subtopics within these themes.

In this chapter, I present the findings of the research conducted during the focus groups. The results arose from an analysis of the focus group discussions, one-on-one interviews, participants' pre- and post- survey responses, related documents, and my personal notes. The study focused on five research questions:

1. How do elementary school educators perceive the role of their students' backgrounds in their academic outcomes?

2. What factors appear to have contributed to the development and persistence of these perceptions?
3. What is the impact of a focus group focused on deficit thinking on the participants' thinking about students?
4. What are the activities and experiences in which the focus group engages that seem to be helpful in changing thinking?
5. What did I learn about the possible role of the principal in addressing and combating deficit thinking of staff members?

This chapter will include a description of each focus group session to include the topic(s) discussed, literature read, and key participant responses. This description is followed by a profile of each participant before, during, and at the end of the action research project. The aim is to allow the reader to identify how each participant evolved or remained the same during the study.

Description of Action Research Sessions

Focus group sessions were a paramount part of this research study and therefore it was essential that participants and the researcher had a comfortable, supportive, open, and trustworthy relationship. Initially, due to the fact that the participants knew that I was a principal, they were reluctant to open up and at times were hesitant to share. Fortunately, this usually subsided after the first 20 minutes of the session. The hesitancy resulted in my role being a facilitator for the first few sessions. Once we established common understanding, purpose, and goals, my role shifted from facilitator to observer. This developed due to participants becoming more comfortable with me and the process.

This evolution led to the strong voices communicated throughout the narratives of participants.

Focus Group Session One: November 14, 2016

Since this was the first session of the focus group, there was a great deal of logistics to be discussed with the participants. The session, held in the school's media center, began with the participants introducing themselves to the researcher. Following introductions, the researcher reviewed the study's purpose with participants and the consent process. Participants signed the consent to participate in the research study. In addition, they completed the Confidential Participant Survey and the Pre-Participant Survey. Once these documents were completed, participants were given the article titled "Challenging Deficit Thinking" by Lois Weiner.

Participants were asked to independently read and annotate the article. After completing this, participants were asked to respond to the following questions in their journals:

1. According to the article, what unspoken assumptions do teachers make about their students' struggles?
2. What impact do deficit-influenced unspoken assumptions and school practices have on teaching and learning?

The session ended with a discussion of the article and journal questions. During this session, there was a feeling of anxiety and uneasiness in the room. The level of concern was noted in how participants responded to questions. On occasion, responses appeared artificial. Each participant was cautious in what they said and chose their words carefully.

It was evident that participants had strong hesitation about being a part of a study which required discussion of a sensitive topic. Throughout this process, some participants contradicted their responses. Open discussion about this topic was clearly uncomfortable. The awkwardness was confirmed when one participant said, “Don’t make me sound racist.” The existence of a code of silence amongst educators about race, culture, and poverty may have curbed parts of the discussion.

Kellen, one of the participants, made the following statement to shed light upon why participant responses sounded artificial in nature. She said,

You are always watching what you say and how you say it--your words and your facial expressions. You don’t want to say something that can be seen as negative. We try to say what we mean but sometimes emotions can make what we say not come out the way we intended. As educators we find ourselves always being judged by what we say and do so we always are on guard. Especially in uncomfortable situations.

Prior to the next session, participants were assigned to read and annotate “Deficit Thinking and the Effective Teacher” by Kenya Walker. Prior to leaving the session, participants scheduled an appointment for a one-on-one interview with the researcher.

Focus Group Session Two: November 21, 2016

The session began with a discussion of the article “Deficit Thinking and the Effective Teacher” by Kenya Walker. During this session, a discussion ensued where participants shared what today’s educator would identify as the similarities and differences between minority and majority students. When categorizing majority students, participants used terms such as “normal,” “good,” “motivated,” “intelligent,” and “civilized.” On the other hand, when categorizing minority students, participants

used terms such as “different,” “bad,” and “rough.” Participants stressed that minority student behavior was often “out of control.” They talked about students using profanity, fighting, challenging authority, and being “street smart.”

Overall, the characterization of minority students was lacking and deficit-based. Participants concluded that educators see this lack as being the fault of the students and their families. Participants shared that many of their peers believe that minority students are constantly in need of monitoring, scrutiny, and tight discipline. During the course of this session, several of the participants shared how “overwhelming” it can be to work in schools with large minority populations. Often participants referred to minority students as “these kids”; a label expressing deficit thinking.

Margarette: These schools are the most challenging in the world. Resources are limited. Teacher turnover is high. Class sizes are excessive.

Cammie: It is challenging working in minority rich schools but a challenge I gladly accept. Although I don’t like the situations and circumstances that some of my students have to endure but I know that education is key to a positive future for them.

Kathie: We [Teachers] are constantly fighting against what students deal with afterschool hours. I fear what they go home to at night. It’s because of what they get from home and their neighborhoods that we need to give them extra support.

Merrel: When I observe the difference in how my white peer educators and even some of black peer educators try to overly control their minority students, it’s disheartening. They are so focused on the behaviors of minority students that they don’t get a chance to know their hearts and minds.

Zonnya: All day long I’m putting out fires. How can I build a family in my classroom when these kids don’t understand the positive aspects of family because everything about their families is negative. If I can

get them to walk down the hall in a straight line, without hitting and pushing each other, I've accomplished a lot.

- Kellen:** In many classrooms, teachers focus so much on behavior management. Even with programs that are supposed to be all about focusing on students' positive behaviors like PBIS, Class Dojo, Capturing Kids Hearts, many teachers keep behavior management the main thing they do throughout the day. Instead of focusing on points, dollars, and tallies, teachers need to motivate students to do what's right because it's right. Not so they can get a prize.
- Reece:** When a teacher focuses so much on a minority student's behavior, a teacher can't truly see the true intellect of the minority student. When teachers and schools focus so much on controlling minority students, they are dominated by behavior versus expectations. This results in lower academic expectations for students of color.
- Marjy:** Rather than seeing minority students as academically focused, some educators believe they just need to be controlled. Instead of their goal being student learning, it's keeping students quiet and submissive. When finally given the chance to make their own decisions, they often don't because they're so used to being controlled—told what to do, how to do it, when to do it, and why to do it.

Focus Group Session Three: November 28, 2016

During this focus group session, the discussion centered around a concern brought by one of the black participants—assimilation. Reece shared that as a black woman she had real concerns about how “white middle-class educators negatively perceive minority students if they don't adapt to white middle-class standards.” She believed that it was a part of her responsibility to ensure that her minority students simultaneously appreciated their culture and acknowledged the existence of white-middle class standards. Marjy added that there is a difference in the expectations, goals, and practices that educators

have for minority and majority students. She identified this as deficit thinking on the part of many educators.

Cammie commented that the manner in which America's public schools are structured, educators are expected to take a student who is several years below grade level and make the student into the ideal student in a single year. She stated that some of her peers believe that families of minority students do not value education and they do not sufficiently prepare their children to come to school ready to learn. Also, Cammie shared the story of one of her peers who told her that a student was doing poorly because he was "damaged by his family." The teacher indicated that the student's family needed to stop allowing the student to hang out in their poor neighborhood and instead let him "hang around more positive white influences so he can learn how to act and be successful." Cammie jokingly said, "Although dirt can be found within the white American dream, from the beginning, white students and their families are seen as complete."

Merrel brought issue with the fact that some of her peers spend so much time telling others how much they care for and love their minority students.

They act as if their students' parents are not doing this at home. They've formed this idea that minority students need care more than they need instruction. It's sickening. They see minority students' families only as lacking. They criticize minority parents and are convinced that if their minority students are to be successful and learn the right way, they feel they have to be the ones to help them get there.

Even though some of the participants asserted that they did not have deficit views, the discussion during today's session indicated otherwise. There was talk of how

minority students did not learn much about their histories, languages, and cultures during the school year. However, the same discussion included talk of how Spanish-speaking families contribute to their children's difficulties in schools because afterschool and during the summer months, they allow their children to speak solely Spanish and this causes a regression.

Prior to the next session, participants were assigned to read and annotate "Deconstructing Deficit Thinking: Working with Educators to Create More Equitable Learning Environments" by Shernaz B. García and Patricia L. Guerra. After completing this, participants were asked to respond to the following questions in their journals:

1. What is your interpretation of the following quote: "What we learn through our culture becomes our reality, and to see beyond that is often difficult.
2. What impact have cultural differences that exist between you and your students had on your students' educational outcomes?
3. What "cultural clashes" exist in your school? Your classroom?

Focus Group Session Four: December 5, 2016

The discussion for this focus group session centered around how participants use their own experiences of schooling to make sense of their experiences in schools as teachers. Whether they know it or not, the participants' memories of school have influenced their definitions of what is "normal." During today's session, participants frequently shared accounts of their own schooling experiences to provide a comparison to what currently occurs in schools.

Kathie saw her minority students' education to be insufficient in many ways because she was unable to assign them tasks like the ones she completed as an elementary school student. In her opinion, her experience when completing a project on her family's history was fun and ordinary. However, her peers discouraged her from giving a similar project to her students because topics associated with slavery, immigration, and poverty may come up and present discomfort. Kathie noted that this made her job more challenging. She decided that this deprived her students from suitable middle-class experiences that she assumed that they should have because she had them at their age. Rather than starting with her students' strengths and connecting the curriculum to them, she relied on her own experiences of school and ended up seeing students as deficient.

Kellen also distinguished her childhood experiences with those of her students. She said directly that the community where she grew up was different from the community where she taught.

My students are growing up in circumstances where they grow up a lot quicker than I did. They see things I was never exposed to at their age. They've witnessed things of life that I've not seen in my 30+ years. Some of my students come to talk with me and I do what I can to help.

Prior to the next session, participants were assigned to read and annotate "Disrupting Deficit Notions of Difference: Counter-Narratives of Teachers and Community in Urban Education" by H. Richard Milner IV. This article was chosen by the researcher because in the article, the author reported research conducted of teachers and their instruction in United States urban public schools. The article detailed how teachers' racial and cultural

backgrounds impact their ideas of and accounts of their teaching. Evidence within this study showed the adversity and difficulty teachers and students experience as a result of these ideas and accounts. After completing this, participants were asked to respond to the following questions in their journals:

1. Of the three teachers' counter-narratives to which did you most relate? Why?
2. Of the items listed on the "Features of Successful Teachers and Teaching in Urban Schools," which are the three you find most important? Why?
3. Reread the final paragraph of the article. What structural and systemic forces that make it difficult for educators to succeed in your school or district?
Where do you find hope and optimism?

Focus Group Session Five: December 12, 2016

This session's discussion focused on the capacity of minority students to master the curriculum and achieve academic success. During her discussion, Zonnya gave various reasons why her minority students could not be successful, including the difficulty of the curriculum, the time available during the school year for covering the curriculum, and the pacing of the curriculum.

To be honest, I don't think that within this school year they can master it [curriculum]. I don't think it's because of what I can or cannot offer them. I think it's just that they are so far behind that to close their gaps within a year is almost impossible. Then, if you think about the near to lack of parent involvement, a lot of my students are falling behind because they need extrasupport at home and aren't getting it.

Kathie, like Zonnya, disagreed that all her students were capable of mastering the curriculum and achieving academic success. In her opinion, her students' personal and

social backgrounds would cause them to be unable to meet academic expectations. Kathie went on to explain that minority students' undetected medical and intellectual needs, life circumstances, and more are reasons her students were not achieving.

Although Reece indicated that she felt that all students could learn, her further comments during the discussion indicated otherwise.

Some of my students are so low that they're not going to be able to master the standards they're expected to master because they're reading and math are two grade levels below. I know they can be successful but I don't know for sure that they are going to be able to master the standards.

When Merrel contributed to the discussion, she indicated that in order to support her students' success, she had a role in removing obstacles.

If we deliver students material that is on their level, they can experience success with tasks and assignments. We have to differentiate. If my students believe that I don't think they can do it, they have a reason to not to succeed. That's my fault. I am responsible for my students' learning.

Not only did Merrel recognize her responsibility, she also connected her students' family and environmental factors as impacting student achievement.

Focus Group Session Six: December 19, 2016

In the final session, the participants read and annotated "More Than Words? Delving Into the Substantive Meaning(s) of "Social Justice" in Education by Connie E. North and "Recognizing and Responding to Cultural Differences in the Education of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners" by Steven P. Chamberlain. Discussion of these articles facilitated participants' brainstorming recommendations for how to enhance

teachers' knowledge of deficit thinking and their influence on its work. Within Chapter V, their recommendations will be shared in detail.

Profile of Each Participant Before, During, and at End of Action Research Project

Each participant's profile, presented individually, will provide a comprehensive look into the participant's perspective before, during, and after the focus group series. First, I will provide each participant's personal and educational background. It was noteworthy to hear some of them share their personal educational memories because they intentionally or unintentionally bring these into their own classrooms and these histories shape their work. Then, an exploration will occur to show how each participant perceives the role their students' backgrounds have on their academic outcomes. Finally, a discussion will occur related to the impact the strategies of the focus group on deficit thinking had on the participants' thinking about students.

Participant 1: Margarete Gouzoule, Kindergarten Teacher

From the time that she was eight, Margarete recalls lining her dolls up in her bedroom to teach them their ABCs; she asserts that teaching was her goal and mission from an early age. She began her teaching career as a fifth-grade teacher in a rural elementary school in North Carolina; after one year as a fifth-grade teacher, she quickly realized that fifth grade was not for her. Margarete accepted a position at River Creek¹ Elementary and has been teaching kindergarten there for the last four years. She has a bachelor's degree in elementary education and is working on her masters in counseling. Margarete is a Caucasian female born and raised in rural South Carolina; she acknowledges that she was a product of a "Hee Haw culture--milking cows, chewing

tobacco, and leaving doors unlocked at night.” While in elementary, middle, and high school in South Carolina, her teachers “never talked about any history other than white history.” It was not until Margarett went to a diverse college in North Carolina that she “had classes with black people.” During one of her college courses freshmen year, she learned her first of minority history and culture. For Margarett that course was a “waste of time and money”; she admits that the class confirmed her negative beliefs about minorities. Even when she began teaching, her day was spent educating those who looked like her.

During one session, Margarett commented that it “made sense for teachers to have lower expectations for minority students.” She connected her lower educational expectations of minority students to their and their families’ cultural, linguistic, and economic shortfalls.

When asked why the achievement gap existed and why many of her minority students were struggling, Margarett’s comments began with “if the parents would only do this,” “if the parents cared more,” and “if the parents were more involved.” Additionally, Margarett noted that “families are the main source of educational failure for diverse students. The achievement gap that exists between Blacks and Hispanics and Whites is a result of Black and Hispanic students coming to school without the knowledge and skills they need because the majority of them are born to parents who don’t value education.” When asked to define deficit thinking, Margarett said that teachers often are sympathetic when they have a minority student because they are sensitive to the fact that the student’s skin color, free and reduced lunch status, address,

and parents' education and career have an impact on what they will do in the classroom.

"They think this child has this going on and they have that going on so I need to be patient while they're dealing with all of this drama."

Margarette admitted that she didn't feel as if she had much power or control over minority students' learning because their "home lives are far too challenging." When asked what type of education she wanted for her own child, Margarette confessed that she wanted an education that was better than that she was giving the students in her classroom. Although she saw the need to have strong communication lines with the families of her students, she admitted that she did not "have time to contact parents all day about students' academic and behavioral needs because it wouldn't make a difference."

At the end of the study, Margarette made the following assessment during the post interview and post survey,

Participating in this project has made me look at myself as a teacher and the relationships I have with my student and their families. Students don't care how much I know. Until my students know that I really care, they're not going to care about what I'm trying to teach. I have to set my expectations high but my students need to know that it's okay to make mistakes. I have to give every student an opportunity to be successful; regardless of whether or not the student brings homework, the parent comes to a conference, or the student is passing tests. I have to form stronger relationships with students and their families. I know that it's important for me to change my attitude. Just because a student is low performing or misbehaving, that doesn't mean their parent doesn't care. Instead, it means that I need to work harder to form a relationship. I've often complained about having to do things like this because I felt that it was beyond what I had to do as a teacher. If I truly believe that all kids can learn, I have to ensure that they have a full opportunity to do that in my classroom. My thoughts about the kid and the family can change the work I do with the student if I let them. I have to get beyond my ideas and attitudes that look at the various issues my students have are the end all be all for their success or failure.

Participant 2: Cammie Kemper, First-grade Teacher

Cammie, a black female teacher of four years, shared a heartfelt story about how she became an educator. During elementary school, she noted that she was quiet and shy; she didn't want any attention directed towards her and didn't want to talk to anyone longer than she had to because what she had to talk about was sad and made her different. Her grades and behavior were good and she made sure of that so her teachers wouldn't have to contact her parents.

When I went to school, I heard my classmates talking about their families and inviting each other over for sleepovers but I never talked about my family and never invited friends over. There were so many humiliating and complicated things going on in my life and I didn't want anyone digging into any of it. My mom was an alcoholic and drug addict, she couldn't take care of me or my siblings. My dad was in prison for selling drugs and other crimes. Eventually, my aunt took care of raising us. I felt helpless; there were so many factors affecting my personality, confidence, and relationships. I assumed that my story was unique; everyone else had a perfect family that was normal and I didn't. I didn't feel like talking about my personal life would make my situation any better. School wasn't a comfortable place for me. I didn't feel safe. I was always anxious, panicking, and hiding.

It wasn't until Cammie entered college that she began to sift through the physical, emotional, and mental baggage of her childhood. During her first year in college, she had not decided on a major and focused on taking general college courses. One of her classes in human development required that she complete practicum hours in a PreKindergarten or Kindergarten classroom; she chose kindergarten. Little did she know that the hours she spent in the classroom would lead to a career in education.

Before walking into the kindergarten classroom, I was a bit nervous. Would they like me? Would they ask me questions about when I was in kindergarten? Would

they ask me questions about my family? As an adult I realized that no matter how much I tried to forget my childhood, it was a part of me. When the teacher introduced me on the carpet, the kids ran up to me and of course wanted to know all about who Ms. Cammie was. Looking around the room, I noticed that there was one student who was still sitting at her desk. She was totally avoiding me and everyone else in the room. I immediately felt a heaviness in my heart; this was me. Although I didn't know her story, I could relate to the pain and sadness I saw in her eyes. During that visit, I respected her silent request for space but knew that over time, I would make it a point of my visit to connect with her some way. That day, I decided that I not only wanted to connect with her and her story but also other kids like her and I who felt voiceless, broken, and discouraged. That day, I chose to pursue a major in the School of Education so that I could make sure that no child ever felt like I felt. As I continued to complete experiences in other classrooms during my college years, I discovered that there were many children with stories similar to mine. Those who, without an educator who took the time to get to know them beyond their race, economic status, and parent participation, would be lost in an educational abyss.

According to Cammie, teachers who lack cultural understanding often assume students who do not adhere to expected norms are unintelligent or behavior problems. She described a major function of schools to be socializing students to behave in line with cultural norms that society perceive to be acceptable. Cammie went on to explain that when students come from homes that share similar cultural norms to those taught in school, students are able to focus on academic learning because school norms reinforce those norms learned at home. On the other hand, she concluded that “when students have a different set of cultural norms from those taught at school, school becomes a place not only for learning math and reading but also where these students learn society’s accepted cultural norms.”

Throughout the study, Cammie identified strategies she and others have used to ensure that “minority students reap the full benefits of the school experience.” She

affirmed that students need to know “how to read, write, and calculate while also knowing how to work through the standards and biases that society holds for its citizens.”

We have to stop assuming that just because a student comes from a certain background that the student only has one possible life outcome. When educators have this type of thinking, it effects how we interact with students. We have to remember that our role is to teach our students in a way that prepares them to be productive citizens. An important part of our role is to have high expectations for all students with the knowledge that meeting this expectations will take some time. Our position is critical to the future of our world; we have to do what is right and best for our students regardless of the sacrifice. When educators don't want to support all kids, it's often because they are making conclusions about the kid based on stereotypes. When a teacher operates his or her classroom with stereotypes, biases, and prejudices, they will never have a positive influence on their students until they overcome it. Students know when you don't think they can do it and when you think they can.

Participant 3: Kathie Yukawa, Second-grade Teacher

For Kathie, a white female with three years of teaching experience, teaching was a part of the environment in which she grew up. Her parents were teachers and she and her older brother became teachers too. Kathie recalled dinner table talks centered on teaching and what was needed for educators and students. From the age of seven, she knew she was going to teach. As a student, Kathie said she did not feel safe or comfortable; she felt that her teachers did not care whether she and her peers were successful or not. “They [Teachers] didn't inspire me. They didn't listen to us [students] and that's why we [students] didn't listen to them. I said that when I became a teacher I would be sure that this was not what my students said years after having me as their teacher.”

Per Kathie, educators are no longer respected as they were when her parents were in the profession. “I became a teacher during a time when being a teacher no longer demands respect. The pay sucks and many in the profession give it a bad name because they’re not effective.” Another change Kathie noted was in the “broadening achievement gap between the haves and the have nots.” She held that she is saddened because “for children living in poverty there is a growing disinterest and lack of motivation from both students and their parents.” Additionally, Kathie declared that there is “a lot of unmotivated teachers just going through the motions, doing a disservice to students, and making the job tougher for those who are motivated.”

Throughout the study, Kathie applauded educators who worked in schools with large low socioeconomic minority student populations, especially white educators.

Although I applaud all educators, I especially applaud those who choose to teach in schools where the students are from different backgrounds than their own. They [White teachers] go into these schools ready to change the world, one student at a time and endure the trials and tribulations that come along with the culture and climate of these types of schools.

When discussion arose regarding how colleges and universities prepare those majoring in education to work in diverse settings, Kathie asserted that it takes more than a college course to prepare a white educator to work in predominately minority schools.

It takes heart, will power, and a determination to make a difference. When a white teacher applies to work in a school where they will be one of a few or the only white person amongst Black or Hispanic school they know that what they are about to do will make a major impact on whether the students they teach have a chance to break the cycle of poverty, poor education, and more. They are stepping on the scene as much more than a teacher—they are potentially going to save many of the students from a bleak future. Their parents won’t do what they need

to do to help their kids so it sometimes takes someone from the outside to come in and make positive things happen in the lives of these students.

On the subject of parent involvement, Kathie had strong opinions. According to her, the parent who visited the school and participated in school activities passed her test related to involvement. However, she was quite opinionated about how parents who work jobs where they cannot take time off and those who have difficulty attending meetings are not involved. Kathie went on to explain that their noninvolvement was by choice. She went on to indicate that the majority of the time that she has contact with a parent on campus is when there is an issue, either with a conflict involving a peer or adult or discipline of their child with which they did not agree.

During one session, Kathie indicated that there is a strong level of disrespect in education and that because of this, educators often are not able to focus on academic achievement. She noted a time when she was in a conference with a parent that “went left” quickly. Throughout the conference, of which the student was present, each time Kathie began to discuss the student’s academic and behavioral challenges, the parent became defensive. As time went on, the parent began to raise her voice, use profanity, and make threatening comments towards Kathie. Kathie felt that the student seeing her mother’s behavior during the conference gave her authorization to disrespect her and others in authority.

During the post interview, Kathie shared a belief that some parents do not know what to do for their children. “They [Parents] don’t have the knowledge, experiences, or resources so they just look at educators as the professionals who know what’s best for

their children. We are expected by government, school leaders, and parents to save all children; even though some of them can't be saved.”

Participant 4: Merrel Lobdell, Third-grade Teacher

Merrel, a white female with eight years of elementary school experience, all at River Creek¹ Elementary. She credited her sixth-grade teacher with instilling in her a love of science and with nurturing her self-confidence. “When others discouraged me from pursuing science because it was a male-dominated field, my sixth-grade teacher pushed me to move forward because she believed in my ability and talent.” Merrel revealed that she tries to give all of her students what her sixth-grade teacher gave her. “I make every effort to get to know each of my students as individuals and to let them know they can do it.” However, she indicated that she sometimes has to check herself to make sure that her getting to know what she can about the students personally does not cause her to feel sorry for them or make excuses. “Even though I respect their backgrounds, I’m still going to challenge them; I won’t be afraid to push them to do what they’re supposed to do.”

Merrel suggested that the achievement gap between white and nonwhite students had a great deal to do with race, culture, and poverty. She revealed that when it came to educating students from diverse populations she was inadequately prepared by the university she attended for her teacher education program. Merrel recalled having an awareness of cultural differences but was quick to clarify that this awareness did not prepare her for the diversity that awaited her the first day of school in her own classroom.

When Merrel described the typical day in her classroom, she noted that it was structured to show that she “had high expectations for all students, even those who were

behind one or more grade levels.” She strongly asserted that even with the significant academic gaps of her students, she refused to “water down the curriculum.” Merrel finds it challenging to meet the federal, state, and district requirements. “Teachers are under a lot of pressure to increase test scores but it’s harder here because our students don’t have some of the basic things that students in other schools have.” She admitted to understanding that while some of her students had challenging factors that may hinder their academic progress, she believes “educators can get students to achieve at any level regardless of their circumstances.”

Merrel noted that as a white female educating students of other races, it was essential for her to establish positive relationships with her students. “By modeling my expectations, encouraging students, and supporting students, I build relationships that help making teaching easy. When my students trust me and know I have their backs, they are willing to go above and beyond.” According to Merrel, her students were comfortable sharing their personal and academic concerns with her because they knew she cared about them. “My work day doesn’t end at 3:00. To meet the needs of my students, I have to work before and after school. Many of my students need more than a teacher, they need a counselor. They need someone who is going to help them fight against everything negative that may be going on at home and school. It’s challenging but well worth it.”

Merrel held that while her views are positive about the future of her students, several of those who teach with her have a tendency to focus on what’s missing with students. “They have negative attitudes about their students because of their low test scores, lack of resources, minimal parent involvement, and money shortage.” She

suggested that this negativity impacts the work that her colleagues do with their students and their families. “Some teachers set low standards in their classroom and students suffer. This, takes away from students who are already low performing.” Merrel revealed that students who don’t think they can achieve based on their community or teacher expectations have a rough time in school. “Many of my students have already given up before they ever enter my class. I spend a great deal of time trying to motivate them to continue to strive for greatness.”

Racism is alive and well. I’m sure when some educators that look like me look at a young, Black or Hispanic male or female student they have certain views, expectations, and assumptions that cast a negative light on the potential of students’ of color. What’s really dangerous is that if asked about these adverse perspectives, these educators probably won’t acknowledge or realize that they have these views. Needless to say it’s worth considering how the low expectations that white educators have set Black and Hispanic students up for failure, especially since the majority of educators in America are white female. If I’m a white educator and I’ve already decided that a student isn’t any good, I may be communicating that to the student via my verbals and nonverbals. These types of communication will significantly impact how that student feels about their potential and will likely sway the effort that the student puts into doing well in school. Too many Black and Hispanic parents are sending their children to school without preparing them for a school system that really hasn’t changed since *Brown versus Board of Education* allegedly ending segregation. Minority parents needs to train their children for what awaits them when they step into American classrooms—perceptions and opinions laced with stereotypes, racism, bigotry, and bias. It’s true that poverty and parental involvement matter but the unfortunate thing is that we take students with less to begin with and give them less in school--poor teachers, low expectations, mediocre curriculum and assignments, and deficient access to resources that will prepare them for what awaits them after high school.

Participant 5: Zonnya Ring, English as a Second Language (ESL) Teacher

Zonnya, a white female with eighteen years of teaching experience, revealed that she became a teacher because she wanted a job that would allow her to make a

difference. “I wanted a good thing that would have a huge impact on our world. When it came to making a decision before college, I was torn between medicine and teaching. However, in the end, teaching won out and here I am eighteen years later.” After graduating from college, Zonnya got a job in the inner city.

I felt adequately prepared for this position because I had taken the mandatory multicultural education and black history classes. I prided myself on being racially aware. However, I didn't know how much I didn't know. From the first lesson I taught, it was clear that I was unprepared. Desperately I wanted to help; I wanted to fix what was wrong with my students and their parents. I wanted to make a difference in this poor minority community. Yet, I was unwilling to acknowledge that before I could be effective in this role, I had much to learn. As much as I wanted to pretend that I didn't have racist perspectives, I did. My denying it didn't make it go away.

When discussion centered around parent participation, Zonnya asserted that parents should attend important school events and be a visible presence in their children's school. Also, she believed that parents should be willing to work with teachers to do whatever was needed to help their children. When it came to the influence of the home versus that of the school, Zonnya cited “the 70-30 rule—the home environment has about 70% influence on a student and the school environment has about 30%.” She indicated that, as it relates to educating minority students, she felt a sense of powerlessness. Zonnya acknowledged that there were some factors related to her students that were totally out of her control and she felt helpless because of those things.

Zonnya described her level of frustration when it came to working in schools with significant minority populations. She went on to detail feeling as if she was always put to the test of rushing to find answers to the numerous problems within her school. “It's like

everyone thinks that we [white educators] have all the answers and come swoop in like Superman or Superwoman and save the day. Although some white educators consider themselves to be the only hope for minority students, these are not realistic expectations.” Zonnya professed that although there were other factors playing a role behind the scenes, it appears that only those hours within the school day received credit for the state of achievement and behavior amongst minority students. “Student achievement is challenging here because of the outside influences our students have to deal with on a daily basis.” According to Zonnya, conflict at home carries over into the educational environment. “When negative things arise, students sink into a place of helplessness. When you look at their families, you see patterns. My colleagues, who’ve never dealt with students who live in circumstances beyond their control find it challenging to connect with students and their families.” Hence, Zonnya believes there is a need for more professional development to teach educators how to work with diverse students.

During the course of the study, Zonnya wrestled with her notions of what she could and could not control as it related to her students’ future. She begins to concur with researchers and other presenters who established that often times in high-poverty schools, little is expected of students and teachers. Furthermore, Zonnya concluded that “until educators stopped placing blame on what occurred with and to students before they entered their classrooms, there would be a continuous cycle of educational malpractice.”

It would help if changes were made outside of schools. If parents spent more time with their children. If socioeconomic factors didn’t unsurmountable burdens on children before their time. If those with power, money, and influence didn’t attack young people with so many disparaging messages and images. But each day that I enter my classroom, I have to dismiss those notions outside of my control and

focus on what I can control, what happens in the classroom. No matter what techniques, strategies, or resources are utilized, the greatest influencer on a student's success is the interaction the student has with the teacher. A teacher's perceptions and expectations of a student have great bearing on the goals that the teacher sets for the student. Unfortunately, these perceptions and expectations are laced with the teachers' biases related to the race, culture, and socioeconomic status of the student.

Participant 6: Kellen Gallu, Instructional Facilitator

Kellen, a black female with ten years of teaching experience, noted how her educational philosophy had changed from her first few years of teaching to year ten. When she began her career, she felt as if she had all the power and that she could change her students' worlds. During those early years, Kellen perceived that there was nothing that her students could need that she wouldn't be able to provide. Now in her tenth year, she's accepted that there are some situations that are beyond her expertise yet she knows the value of pulling in other human resources to help figure out how to make the student more successful. Kellen recalled students for which she had to, with a more hands on approach, help plot their course so they could get what they needed—experiences, opportunities, and resources.

However, Kellen admitted that sometimes she feels defeated by the fact that she can try everything and nothing seems to work. Although her work is difficult, she is confident that it is not impossible; Kellen refuses to give up on her students. She's motivated to do what's best for students so they can accomplish their goals. Kellen's relationships and rapport with the students has a major influence on her motivation. However, she questions the motives of some of her white educator counterparts who come to work in schools where most of the students are Black or Hispanic.

I'm used to working in schools like River where most students look like me—black and brown. It's disheartening when some white teachers come here with their holy than thou attitudes. They claim that they mean well and want to help but they are really doing more harm. They go around saying to students and other teachers that school is not important to students and their parents because if it was the students would be doing better. They don't realize how they need to focus on encouraging and motivating students and their families, not changing them. Yea, some of these students have trouble focusing. Yea, some of them have behavior issues. But what school doesn't have students like this; it has nothing to do with race or money. Instead of coming in with this negativity, they need to come in with high expectations and goals for all students.

Participant 7: Reece Yuan, Instructional Facilitator

Reece, a black female with sixteen years of teaching experience, became an educator because she wanted to ensure that each student she taught received the best education possible. She desired to push students beyond what they and society believed they could do. "I love to prove the system wrong; minority students from all cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds can be educated. They are just as worthy as majority students. Daily, I commit to using any measures necessary to do more for students because no one else may do it."

Reece spoke of her determination to go the extra mile with her students and their families and doing whatever it took to make them successful. She affirmed that educators have to really work with minority students, find out their needs, and offer them hope. "My approaches are different from those who work in schools with mostly white students. I have to creatively approach a problem when addressing a student's needs. I have to try to find the best fit and best solution. At the same time though I have to try to get the student to understand the process. It's sometime a slow process but my ultimate goal is to reach students at all levels."

Reece acknowledged that across the country, more needed to be done by schools of education and school districts to ensure that students feel a connection between school and their future.

Until a teacher, whether they are white, black, or some other color, shows a student this connection, the teacher will constantly struggle to build a meaningful relationship with the student. There are many Black and Hispanic students around here that don't feel that they have a relationship with their White teachers. Some of them even feel that White teachers don't challenge as they challenge other students. All of this boils down to bias. Sometimes teachers don't even realize that they are judging a student based on their race or neighborhood. If you want minority students to work hard, you have to build a relationship with them first. Relationships work and I can prove it. Schools need to spend more money developing programs that help teachers see the benefit of building positive relationships with their students. And programs that make them examine their thinking about minority students and how that impacts the work they do with them. Topics like deficit thinking didn't come up in my elementary education college courses and they don't get brought up at school professional development. Educators need to be hit with the fact that many of them lower their expectations of minority students. Some intentionally and others unintentionally. Some of them think that because of a student's circumstances--address, family background, and more—they aren't able to reach certain goals. That's bs.

Participant 8: Marjy Ellison, Principal

A black female veteran school administrator, Marjy has 18 years of experience—six as a teacher and twelve as an administrator. Marjy supported the need for deficit thinking professional development amongst her colleagues.

There are some educators I've worked with who believe that certain kids can't succeed because of their background. They have this notion because of what they've been taught or exposed to. They don't give these kids a chance because they have already set in their minds that they can't. Increased awareness and knowledge are needed to counter school norms that limit the success of minority students.

Marjy asserted that school administrators are key influencers in the success of schools where minority students are the majority; part of their responsibility in these settings is to destroy policies, practices, and structures lined with deficit thinking.

Numerous comments made by Marjy related to her belief that few teacher education preparation programs adequately addressed the issue of deficit beliefs and cultural knowledge among pre-service educators.

While many [college and university] programs have a multicultural education course requirement, few truly have changed the content to reflect a multicultural perspective. A single course is not sufficient enough to change personal beliefs or develop deep cultural awareness. Lack of preparation has resulted in many educators entering the field with deficit thinking about diverse students and their families.

Marjy described a teacher who openly commented that she gave minority students “a pass” because of their situations, circumstances, and experiences.

Unfortunately, the teacher’s pass included pushing some students on who weren’t ready, pushing others to the side who with the right help could have made it, and not being bothered with others who didn’t fit in the previous categories. Instead of holding these students to higher standards, she went on and decided that it wasn’t worth her time and she didn’t need to deal with it.

Marjy declared that in order to develop positive relationships with students of color, educators needed to incorporate culturally responsive teaching practices. She noted that by doing so, educators would demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between home and school experiences. According to Marjy, culturally responsive teachers employ diverse instructional strategies and teach students the relevance of cultural diversity across all subject areas.

During the follow-up interview conducted at the end of the study, Marjy suggested that when school administrators engage in deficit thinking, they shy away from aligning managerial and organizational deficiencies to student academic failure and instead blame the failure on weaknesses of the minority students they serve. She went on to state that although difficult for to admit, deficit thinking was present in her mind and she attributed this study to helping her to directly face its existence rather than deny its existence at all. Marjy concluded that within River Creek⁴ Elementary there lived deficit thinking, stereotypes, prejudices, and lowered expectations of minority students.

Themes

The purpose of this study was to identify perceptions educators have of minority students, how their work is impacted by deficit thinking, and the influence a focus group on deficit thinking had on their perceptions. The results of this study detected numerous perceptions that participants had, all of which impact students. These perceptions shape: (1) what participants understand and believe about minority students and their families, 2) what they believe impacts the success of minority students, and 3) what they believe is the power educators have when working with minority students and their families. This study examined these perceptions and analyzed how these perceptions influence how participants approach minority students and their families. School leaders are expected to advocate for all students, especially those who do not have the power, influence, and resources to advocate for themselves. Unfortunately, the truth is that deficit thinking and other notions, beliefs, and perceptions of lack regarding marginalized students are so

⁴ A pseudonym

deeply rooted in educators and school leaders that decisions, policies, programs, and procedures continue to endure that are detrimental to the growth and progress of marginalized students. To truly be an advocate, educators and school leaders must make a strong commitment to eliminate deficit thinking. During this study, the following themes evolved; some were expected but some were not. Expected themes include 1) parent involvement and home life related to student success, 2) minority students struggle more in school, and 3) principal leadership. The unanticipated themes include 1) white hero, 2) exposure, openness, and confrontation, and 3) dialogue amongst white and black educators.

Theme 1: Participants Perceived Parental Involvement and Home Life as Being Related to Student Success

Each of the participants noted that parent involvement and home life are positively related to student success. When asked about this relationship, Marjy said that

parent involvement or the lack thereof strongly impacts a student's success. When parents are involved, even students who struggle get what they need to make progress because their parents make sure of it. On the other hand, you have some parents who aren't involved until their child has a discipline issue and is facing a consequence or their child is in danger of being retained. Either way, that reactive involvement is counterproductive. It doesn't create warm fuzzies for the parent or school staff member.

When discussing the role of parent involvement and home life, Margarett indicated that "when parents are involved, a student does better; especially when two parents are in the home. If a parent is not involved, especially when it comes to a minority student, the student is not going to do as well. This is even more so the case

when the student comes from a low income home where there is only one parent.” Kathie concurred, adding that most single parent homes produce children who struggle in school.

When a student is being raised by a single parent and the income level is low, the student’s struggles are compounded. Many of these students live in government funded housing and at times are unsure of where their next meal will come from. The single parent often has to work multiple jobs to provide for the family and this results in the parent often being out of the home when the student comes home from school. Homework help is limited. Attendance at conferences, PTA events, and other school activities are scarce too.

When participants were asked if educators had unconscious biases about minority parent involvement and home life, all strongly agreed. Marjy shared an example of when a teacher brought a black male student to the office because she thought the student had stolen her wallet. “When I asked the teacher what indicated to her that the student had stolen her wallet she immediately began to talk about his mom not having a job, his wearing saggy pants, and his previous misbehaviors in class.” The example noted by Marjy was when unconscious bias happens to be expressed vocally; however, she indicated that

there are other instances when unconscious bias festers in one’s mind. Although I would like to think that as one gets older, more mature, and more experienced, unconscious bias subsides, I know that’s not necessarily the case. Even as a black woman, I have some prejudicial notions about race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation. I have to do what I can to make sure that I acknowledge that these biases exist while at the same time not allowing them to dominate how I perceive and act upon situations.

Along these same lines, when Merrel was asked about unconscious bias, she commented on the impossibility of one to be colorblind.

Everyone has prejudices and have experienced times when they have been prejudged. These prejudices are influenced by personal experiences and this makes it impossible for us to be colorblind. When someone says they don't see color, it bother me. You see color. Don't deny it. You just don't want to be associated with the negativity of others who negatively view color. That's different from seeing color.

Theme 2: Participants Perceived that Minority Students Struggle More in School

During one of the focus group sessions, participants were asked if they felt that minority students struggled more in school. In addition, they were asked to identify who was responsible for the struggle. Each of the participants noted that minority students do struggle more in school and cited the role of the parent, or family, as instrumental to a minority student's success. Kellen explained that "there are numerous factors that impede the success of minority students—family income, parents' educational background, parents' involvement in student's educational process." Merrel concluded that "minority students with a home environment that values education would be more likely to succeed than those who do not." Several participants claimed that minority students' home lives are often troubled with difficulties including single parenthood, poverty, hunger, siblings caring for siblings, absence of worth placed in education, uneducated parents, and disregard of rules and social norms.

Along the same lines, Cammie indicated that "minority students' parents have to push their children so they are able to conquer the obstacles." Cammie also acknowledged that school staff have to work with minority parents and students to ensure that they have what they need to conquer the obstacles. Consistent with this perception, Zonnya added,

Minority students struggle at school because they struggle at home. Just as they don't readily have access to what they need at home the same is true at school. They spend so much time at home trying to survive that the day-to-day; education is often placed on the bottom of the priority list. If you look at the home environment, you see and understand why they struggle.

It is important to note that each of these participants created a connection between difficulties at home and difficulties at school. Although there is a body of research that supports this connection, the belief that all minority students have difficulties at home and at school is unfounded and an example of deficit thinking. It should be noted that overall, participants were inconsistent with their responses about who they believed to be responsible for the struggles minority students face in schools.

Reece, when asked whether minority students struggle more in school and why, responded that they do struggle and considered the lack of positive role models as being a huge factor as to why they struggle.

Most teachers and administrators are white in elementary schools where the majority of students are minority. So, when the students look for people that look like them to look up to, they search their homes, communities, and media. Television, music, social media. Sometimes those they choose to imitate are positive impacts and sometimes they are negative.

Marjy, when asked what pressures minority students may face at school, Marjy stated that sometimes minority students who academically excel face alienation from their peers and majority counterparts.

They are accused of acting white because they outperform the majority of their peers. Society rarely portrays an image of a minority student that doesn't include a basketball, football, or mic. Instead, the image is of a cool jock, Beyonce singing female, or Jay Z rapping male. These images doesn't boost the value of

education and limit the roads that minority students can travel if they want to be successful.

In another segment of the study, participants were asked to identify and describe a minority student who was currently struggling in their class academically and/or behaviorally and the reasons for the student's struggle. The purpose of this was to see whether the participants framed these students in a positive or negative manner. The following were the top five positive characteristics provided by participants--respectful, fun, friendly, outgoing, and likeable. The following were the top five negative characteristics provided by participants--loud, outspoken, frustrated, rowdy, and lazy. Each participant responded in a different way with three being overwhelmingly positive, four being overwhelmingly negative, and two being overwhelmingly balanced. This was a thought-provoking question for each participant, each taking a noteworthy amount of time to reflect prior to responding. Intriguingly, the manner in which the participants described the minority student aligned with other responses and feedback participants provided in other parts of the study. In addition, there appears to be a link between the participant's race and their perceptions of minority students struggling in class academically and/or behaviorally. Minority participants noted more positive perceptions than White participants.

Theme 3: Participants Perceived the Power of Whiteness in Education: White Hero Teacher . . . Moving Beyond the Savior Complex

According to several of the study's participants, often when white teachers come to work in minority schools their secondary desire is to deliver knowledge and their

primary desire is to promote social change. Additionally, many of them lack an understanding of how biases, stereotypes, and cultural deficit thinking are engrained in American schools. These educators fail to understand that their racial identity definitely effects how they view and educate minority students. Furthermore, several participants concluded that white educators view minority students as “exotic” and “uncivilized”; they see themselves as tasked to help minority students develop more white characteristics so they can be successful. Both white and black educators in this study felt that white educators need to look more closely for areas of opportunities and growth related to engaging minority students.

Some of the comments made by the participants indicated that they believed that many white educators working in predominately minority schools distinguished themselves as heroes. According to one participant, this classification resulted in white educators “making the journey more about them than their students.” Another cosigned this idea and added that these white educators could often be heard celebrating all they learned from the students, never indicating what the students learn from them. This places greater focus on white privilege than the stories of the students of color the white educators are serving.

When asked “Do you feel that you can make a major difference in the lives of the minority students you teach?,” all of them responded “Definitely.” Five of the participants-- Cammie, Merrel, Kellen, Reece, and Marjy--stated high levels of assurance regarding their ability to make a difference in the lives of the minority students they teach. On the other hand, when asked the same question, three of the participants--

Margarette, Zonnya, and Kathie--did not reply as affirmatively. In response to the question, Kathie answered, "I feel like I can make a major difference in the lives of minority students but they have to first take advantage of the opportunities and experiences I try to provide them."

Theme 4: Impacting Deficit-Thinking and Negativity: Exposure, Openness, and Confrontation

One of the major findings in the study was that focus group participants experienced a sense of vulnerability and insecurity as topics discussed were associated with socioeconomics, linguistics, culture, race, and ethnicity. These characteristics were observed via participants' behaviors, impulses, and tone during focus group sessions. In post interviews, a few of the participants commented that when entering the first focus group session, there was a fear of the unknown and that as the study progressed, they often experienced feelings of resistance because they felt they were losing hold of values, beliefs, and traditions that they held dear. As participants were challenged to consider aligning their beliefs and practices with principles that supported equity, they were forced to openly talk about how these new norms made them feel and steps necessary so true change would occur. When the focus group participants read different articles, reviewed various practices and structures that existed at the school, and considered the impact of their beliefs on their work with marginalized student populations, they began the process of change. During an interview, one member shared that as she worked through her own thoughts, she also felt it necessary to support others. "Even though I saw a need to change myself, I wanted to support others during the process. To do the real work required after

these meetings, we have to make tough decisions so we can move forward. If anyone in the group is afraid of change or afraid of the controversy associated with this topic, their hang-ups are going to hinder the process. That's why it's important that we collectively move forward with the change process. One for all and all for one.”

Another participant focused on the importance communication played in impacting notions of linguistics, culture, race, and ethnicity. “For change to come, we have to communicate. Participating in this study is the beginning of the real work that has to be done to change how these students are educated, nurtured, and supported. If we can't honestly communicate our fears, doubts, and challenges, we are in trouble but the kids are the ones who are going to suffer the most.” A second participant added, “when you are working through powerful topics like these, you can't make everyone happy. You have to find a way to allow everyone's voice to be heard and shared. This group is just the tip of the iceberg. There are other voices to be heard. We have to communicate to others that this is important.”

During this process, it was necessary to address the negativity that some of the participants displayed when discussion topics about linguistics, culture, race, and ethnicity countered their own beliefs. At times, the negative voices dominated and this consumed much time. One of the participants saw a need to thwart the disparaging connotations aligned with the negative thoughts and emotions. “Good does exist as this school and in this group but sometimes it's hard to drown out the negativity. When you hear negative comments and see negative actions directed to the same group of students on a regular basis, you begin accepting it in silence. You feel defeated and helpless.”

When considering the impact of the focus group, it is important to fully consider all perspectives—the positive and negative. Avoiding the conflict between the two extremes would only risk the continuation of systems, practices, and norms rooted in deficit-thinking. As the principal commented, “In this work, and the work of education in general, we can’t afford to allow one or two Negative Neds or Negative Nancys to overshadow our work of accelerating student achievement for all students.” With the presence of negative and positive beliefs present, conflict was unavoidable. Participants were outside of their comfort zones and were anxious to return to them. They frequently sought what was familiar but had to be pressed to address their fears and insecurities. A strategy that helped navigate the shaky waters was confronting the challenge with support, understanding, and compassion and with change in mind. Bold leadership was necessary to prompt participants’ willingness to question their deficit-laced thinking and behaviors. Addressing the negativity was best facilitated with open and honest communication.

Theme 5: Principal Leadership is Key: Proactivity and Participation

Part of the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how principal leadership can help to challenge deficit-based assumptions and beliefs that teachers have of students of low socioeconomic status and diversity in the areas of linguistics, culture, race, and/or ethnicity. For future work in the school, the principal and leadership team/school improvement team, will need to carefully select and use articles and activities to challenge staff’s assumptions when it comes to educating marginalized student populations. As it happened in this study, the principal will have to confront the

idea that some staff may have these articles and activities are “overwhelming,” “a waste,” and “busy work.” The principal will have to combat this by emphasizing the importance of professional learning and critical self-reflection. According to study’s principal, “Sometimes it’s easier for educators to blame the students and their families than to take personal responsibility for teaching and learning. I hope that this study stops them from playing the blame game.”

When probing the principal about future plans associated with this work, she indicated that she plans to have a sound focus on strategies, programs, and activities that support marginalized student populations. This would begin with the creation of a professional learning calendar to provide ongoing job embedded professional development throughout the remainder of the school year to address concerns rooted in this study. “My goal is going to be to focus on a specific element so we can repeatedly address it in an ongoing manner that really gets the staff on board. If we have a clear focus, I hope that staff will positively respond and change. Then, their attitudes will affect students’ attitudes and the manner in which their families and our community perceive we are educating all students.”

During the study, participants noted how powerful it was to have their principal participate in the study with them. One participant noted, “With the principal in the midst of the group, it created a clear focus with shared ownership. This type of school improvement builds trust and respect. It makes change happen.” The principal reciprocated this stance and added that their work regarding deficit thinking requires that

they join to improve structures and systems within the school, get rid of practices that favor one group over another, and aid staff in fostering culturally responsive practices.”

To experience change, an organization has to experience resistance. Resistance sometimes takes the form of a member isolating himself/herself from the rest of the members of the organization in order to continue with the beliefs and practices to which they are most comfortable. Tackling the root cause of resistance is critical to getting members of the organization on board. When the leader gains understanding of the resistance, the leader is then able to provide what is needed to support the team’s effort to change. Transparent communication provides members with an opportunity to understand the change, the reason behind it, and its influence on their work.

Individual and collectiveness significantly impacts how a member of an organization is able to function within the organization. When the leader creates an environment that supports change by providing what is needed to make it happen, change inevitably occurs. When pressed to reflect on one’s beliefs and actions within an organization, one is able to adjust in a manner that fosters a successful outcome.

Theme 6: Dialogue Amongst White and Black Educators

One of the biggest challenges to the advancement of strategies to combat deficit thinking in public education is the awkwardness of dialogue amongst white and black educators. When it comes to talking about issues influencing marginalized student populations including but not limited to poverty, race, limited English proficiency, culture, and other factors, white and black educators are often silent because these topics have not been addressed in the past although they are a large part of the experiences of

many of the students they teach. As one participant noted, “I’m uncomfortable having these conversations because you get worried about what people are going to think.”

Another remarked, “Having conversations about sensitive topics is not easy, especially when you are white and talking about issues most impacting those who aren’t white.”

During the focus group, it was apparent that in order for conversations to even begin, participants had to be reminded of the importance of building trust. According to a black participant, “these topics are important to us [those who are not white] and white educators have to be comfortable with being uncomfortable when we talk about this stuff.”

As we continued to meet, there was evidence that with the provision of support and encouragement, black and white participants were able to have difficult conversations to begin to identify ways to overcome challenges related to deficit thinking. One participant shared that “to address the origins of deficit thinking, white and black educators have to have critical conversations on matters that contribute to the marginalization of students.” As the study evolved, it became obvious that it was important that educators continually addressed deficit thinking in a shared manner that encouraged critical feedback.

Daily, educators not only have the most influence on their students but also their colleagues. It is imperative that they make this influence positive and that it does not endorse deficit thinking. Race relations matters are very sensitive. In confronting deficit thinking, it is important that white and black educators collaboratively remove themselves from those things that support a culture of deficit thinking. Participants noted

that the most significant impact on the elimination of deficit thinking was the dialogue shared amongst white and black participants. As noted by one participant, “Our dialogue within this group allowed us to validate our thoughts. We’ve been focused on doing what’s best for students regardless of who or what we are. White, black, or brown.”

The study revealed that a foundational part of the deficit thinking present amongst participants involved the differences amongst the demographics and backgrounds of the students and the staff. One participant acknowledged pre- focus group that the majority of the staff, regardless of race, operated as if students from different cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds were unable to succeed in school. The survey strongly suggested that participants blamed students and their families for why students fails. Per the survey, the majority of participants, black and white, did not feel that today’s educational structure was the same as the structure as that in which they attended school. However, they blamed students and their families for the lack of academic success amongst marginalized student populations, not the school structure. Furthermore, the majority of participants felt that students could still succeed in this structure despite the socioeconomic, linguistic and cultural differences. A disconnect exists between how participants understood student achievement and the educational structure; this may explain why deficit thinking exists.

Prior to the initiation of the focus group, the majority of the participants recognized that collectively they did not have a commitment to take a leadership role to advocate for marginalized student populations. At the end of the focus group series, most of the participants recognized the changes they had made in their practices as a result of

the focus group and identified how they were more conscious of their efforts to provide students the same equity, access, and opportunities. According to the differing results in the pre- and post- survey and interview responses, participants overwhelmingly noted the change in their practices. When asked how participating in the study impacted them, responses included being able to understand students' life challenges, addressing all aspects of all students, capitalizing on students' differences to cultivate the learning environment, and being able to view and utilize students' differences as strengths not deficits. These responses indicated that there was a change in the mindset of participants about the abilities of marginalized students. The principal noted an example of change she observed during the focus groups, "[As a result of the study] Staff have begun challenging deficit thinking, asking each other questions, and being more reflective in nature."

The following quote came from a participant pre- focus group and reflects the general thoughts that participants had about their colleagues.

Some teachers here don't care about the struggles that our students go through. Poverty and or ethnic background. You can too because they complicate things for the students because they do not know or do not want care to learn how to approach them.

Participants recognized that it was important for them to build a better understanding of each student. Many participants indicated that the focus group approach was successful because it facilitated their reflection upon the importance of eliminating deficit thinking by frequently presenting the situation in a manner that made sense and looked real.

Black and white participants resolved that deficit thinking was ingrained in school structures and that challenging these deep-rooted thoughts and practices was difficult. Nevertheless, participants demonstrated an ability to successfully and purposely work to eliminate facets of deficit thinking that perpetuate the marginalization of some students. Black participants recognized that trying to eliminate deficit thinking would be a challenge because the practices and beliefs of white educators were widely accepted when they were students and continued to be the norm when they became educators. While participants agreed that progress was made, they also confessed that deficit thinking still existed amongst group members. One member indicated that if deficit thinking impacted one student or family, it was one too many and that in order to continue working at eliminating deficit thinking, dialogue amongst black and white educators had to occur with consistency, transparency, and open-mindedness. Black and white participants concurred that eliminating deficit thinking was a process of helping black and white educators defeat the assumptions they make against others based on their own background knowledge and experiences.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings from this dissertation suggest that educators would benefit from greater knowledge of the meaning of deficit thinking and how it impacts their work with minority students. Educators need to understand how deficit-based practices are a hidden part of our public school system. Furthermore, it is important that they recognize and demolish their own negative assumptions about minority students as these assumptions are often rooted in the deficit thinking framework. Over time, they can penetrate their instruction and interactions with minority students. When equipped with the knowledge of deficit thinking and its influence, educators are able to hamper its influence.

In America today, educators are faced with many challenges. Students who come from traditional American families—two-parent middle class households--are decreasing in number and a cultural gap is widening between educators and their students. A common result of this cultural gap is deficit thinking. Deficit thinking blames the student for school failure (Valencia, 1997a) and concludes that there is little schooling can do to ‘fix’ these students and so interventions are created to help them fit into the dominant school culture (Simone, 2012). In our educational system, deficit thinking places the blame of low achievement scores on those groups who are considered at the bottom of the ‘gap.’ Oddly enough, those targeted in the ‘gap’ are those least in position to solve the problem. Research into deficit thinking and related topics revealed the problem of deficit

thinking is evident throughout schools in the United States (Simone, 2012; Walker, 2011). The research questions this study asked about deficit thinking and a summary of what was learned in response to each of these questions follows.

From this study, I learned that many of the participants did not know what deficit thinking was at the beginning of the study. However, at the end of the study, they wanted to continue this work. Additionally, there were several big “takeaways” that I have thanks to this study. This study reaffirmed my belief that principal leadership is key. If principals are not prepared to tackle deficit thinking and notions associated with it, the work will not take root in a school. In order for the process to begin, the principal has to work with stakeholders to open lines of communication so that dialogue on race relations can occur in an environment conducive for growth. With that said, the inclusion of professional development on deficit thinking will allow stakeholders to tell their truth, hear the voices of others, and respond. Once the discussion of race begins, the topic is no longer taboo; it becomes more discussable. Solely talking about race and deficit thinking is enough to spark progress and change. Fortunately, none of this work requires a high-priced consultant. As a result of this study, the participants have continued work of this nature in their school. They, too, noted the importance of this on the future of achievement gap and academic progress of all students.

Analysis

Research Question 1: How do elementary school educators perceive the role of their students' backgrounds in their academic outcomes?

With all of the demographic changes occurring across the country, it is likely that a teacher's experience does not parallel that of his or her students. More than 80 percent of teachers in public schools are white and according to the National Center for Education Statistics, this percentage is increasing yearly (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). What happens when you as a teacher do not know anything about the day to day experiences of your students? How does your not knowing about your students' cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds impact how and what you teach? How can you make connections with your students when there is not a single shred of commonality amongst the two of you? These were questions I had before this study and after conducting my research, I am even more convinced that today's teacher is ill equipped to teach the diverse students entering today's schools.

During my research it became clear that in order for educators to fully educate their students, they needed to have, at minimum, basic knowledge of how their students' backgrounds impact their educational experiences and how their own backgrounds impact how they teach students with backgrounds different from their own. Although those participating in the study did not initially realize how they were allowing students' backgrounds to prematurely influence their work and perceptions related to their success, the study did spark additional thought and discussion on the matter. It is clear that teachers need to be aware of their biases associated with students' cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds because ignorance or avoidance of this fact is only detrimentally impacting the work they are charged to do with their students.

An additional concept gained from this study and related to this research question is that learning about the various facets of students' backgrounds is an ongoing process and not something that happens within the four years or more of collegiate studies or the years within an actual classroom. This knowledge is neither gained by osmosis nor accident; it takes intentionality and full commitment to gain cultural understanding. Educators' lack of cultural understanding is inflicting harm on the educational experiences of marginalized student populations.

Research Question 2: What factors appear to have contributed to the development and persistence of these perceptions?

Results from this study indicate that teachers do have particular perceptions and expectations for students who have cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds different from their own. The journey to uncover the facts that contribute to the development and persistence of perceptions was not easy. Conversations around culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic, and linguistics proved difficult. However, it is clear that in order to bring change to public education, educators must acknowledge and be willing to confront the fact that their perceptions, biases, and understandings influence students' academic achievement.

The data gathered from this study aligned with long-standing assertions that our American educational system consists of many discriminatory practices that are influenced by educators' assumptions and social beliefs. These mindsets have influenced educators' practices and perpetuated system inequities. It is my belief, after collecting data from the focus group and literature, that educators' perceptions, expectations, and

behaviors help to foster the achievement gap. I am convinced that there is a correlation between the expectations of educators and student achievement.

Research Question 3: What is the impact of a focus group focused on deficit thinking on the participants' thinking about students?

To produce long-term effects on student achievement, we must first look at educational practices and policies that continue to produce inequitable results for marginalized students. Educators must become more reflective and collaborative in their work and the structure of the focus group is a means to foster these actions. Reflective practice is a critical part of the focus group and is an essential skill that professionals must possess in order to cultivate their craft. Time for reflection and collaboration are essential ingredients for professional development and a focus group. As the educators involved in this study focused on their practices, perceptions, biases, and beliefs within a collaboratively structured environment, numerous actions occurred—discussion, debate, and analysis.

When analyzing participants' dialogue during the study group, I was able to determine that the study group increased their awareness of their own biases, raised opposing perceptions and conflicting expectations of their students—students whose cultural, socioeconomic, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds did not mirror their own. Although the focus group was a first step, the next step would be for educators to change their practices to advance student achievement for all students. The focus group produced strong evidence that when educating marginalized student populations, teacher practices, expectations, and perceptions are influenced because of the various characteristics that

marginalize students possess that many educators cannot relate to or understand. While it is unlikely that the teachers in this study purposefully held different expectations for their students of color than for their white counterparts, regardless of the intent, their negative assumptions and perceptions unconsciously communicated to students and their families that their success and failure were not as important to those charged with educating them.

Research Question 4: What are the activities and experiences in which the focus group engages that seem to be helpful in changing thinking?

The work of this focus group closely parallels that of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) because both offer a chance for educators to work together for a common purpose of reflection on their practice that is needed to create change throughout our schools. Like the PLC, the focus group provided participants with the safety and support needed to investigate the topic of deficit thinking. The focus group aimed to guide educators to become more reflective on their practice and how their practice influences student outcomes. With a shared mission, vision, and purpose, the focus group worked together to collectively inquire about the effect deficit thinking had on the students they served. It became clear that in order to improve student outcomes, continuous learning, reflection, and inquiry had to occur.

Those within the focus group made a commitment to identify what made them equally a part of the problem and solution associated with deficit thinking. It was not enough to just get this group of educators together. More was needed and that more included focused conversation, strong reflection, and the transfer of new skills, knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions. As a result of this work, participants' commitment,

shared responsibility, and shared understanding were enhanced. Although reluctantly at first, these educators were willing and able to ask and answer difficult questions about their own practices, beliefs, assumptions, and biases. From this soul searching, they began to uncover layers that were working and not working for their students.

Research Question 5: What did I learn about the possible role of the principal in addressing and combating deficit thinking of staff members?

To make the greatest positive impact on deficit thinking of staff members, principals must focus less on supervising teachers and more time on collaborating with them to examine what impacts teaching and learning. Principals must move professional development efforts surrounding the topic of deficit thinking from isolated experiences to what will spark schoolwide change. Educators need opportunities to wrestle with the questions and problems associated with deficit so that true progress can be made that will influence policy, practice, and perspectives.

Principals must create professional development experiences that cause educators to engage in meaningful dialogue that leads to action. The professional development must be characterized as active, engaging, and practical so that participants have the opportunity to apply gained knowledge and understanding to their practice and to reflect upon it in an authentic manner. It is only when professional development is structured in this manner that we will see true impact on teaching and learning. The work of the principal needs to include a focus on teachers' attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs because these greatly impact practice and student outcomes.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Teacher Education

Educators are tasked with promoting equitable educational experiences for marginalized students and to employ culturally responsive teaching strategies that make learning more relevant and effective for each student (Gay, 2000). Much attention has been directed at the urgent need to prepare educators to work with diverse children and their families. As the cultural gap widens, a critical issue in education today is teacher preparation. In addition, more attention is being directed at the need to prepare educators to work with diverse students and their families. Teacher education research indicates that more has to be done to prepare preservice teachers to work with diverse students and their families (Graue & Brown, 2003; Blasi, 2002; Broussard, 2000).

The challenge for teacher education programs is providing authentic experiences and opportunities which allow students to become aware of, analyze, discuss, and reconsider their beliefs (Vartuli, 2005). Although there is research on the influence of teacher education programs on preservice teachers' beliefs, results are mixed. Some studies have emphasized that preservice teachers' beliefs are formed well before they enter teacher education programs and that these beliefs are resistant to change (Aldrich & Thomas, 2005); yet, others have found changes in preservice teachers' beliefs.

Field experiences are considered a vital component in teacher education programs. However, the direction preservice teachers receive during those experiences has received less attention. Likewise, while the influence of field experiences on preservice teachers' beliefs or dispositions has been studied in great detail, the influence

of cooperating teachers, or mentor teachers, on preservice teachers' beliefs has not. It is recommended that more research be conducted to explore the influence cooperating teachers have on preservice teachers' beliefs, especially as they relate to family involvement and cultural diversity.

A great deal of attention has not been placed on the discussion of family involvement in many teacher education programs. Consequently, most beginning teachers feel unprepared to work collaboratively with parents and other family members, especially when families are ethnically, culturally, or socioeconomically different from themselves (de Acosta, 1996). While research has documented the positive effects of family involvement on children's school achievement and overall well-being (Broussard, 2000), preservice teachers across the nation leave teacher education programs underprepared to work with families, in general.

It is my recommendation that teacher education programs provide preservice teachers with direct, hands-on experiences and opportunities that will facilitate a greater awareness and understanding of diversity. In order to strengthen and emphasize the relationship between theory and practice, coursework and field experiences must be aligned. This will strengthen the likelihood that preservice teachers will develop necessary knowledge, skills, dispositions, and experiences that will allow them to recognize the existence and effect of deficit thinking. Inevitably, this will positively enhance the work of participating educators with diverse students and their families. This work will allow educators to realize the importance of valuing and respecting families as their children's first and most important teachers. Additionally, it will prospectively

result in educators acknowledging that diverse students and their families are not deficient.

Recommendation 2: Principal Leadership and Transparent Communication

Literature advises that school leadership, specifically the principal, is the single most important factor in eliminating deficit thinking and the most influential factor in achievement of minority students (Kalifa, 2013; Parrett & Budge, 2012). When principals are actively engaged in thwarting and eradicating deficit thinking, we know that teachers can overcome deficit thinking and challenge attitudes and practices, and student achievement can increase (R. Bishop et al., 2002; Shields et al., 2004). One of the most important findings in this study is the need to create opportunities for school staff to have deliberate conversations about the intentional and unintentional assumptions that educators carry daily into their classrooms. When positive, the assumptions support the fostering of a quality educational program for all students. However, when the assumptions are adverse, they produce outcomes including but not limited to lowered expectations and other practices, policies, and systems immersed in deficit thinking ideology.

Wagstaff and Fusarelli (1999) found that the single most important factor in the academic achievement of minority students is the clear rejection of deficit thinking by the school-based administrator. Principals must address personnel with the purpose of destroying practices linked to deficit thinking. This study established that purposeful discourse concerning the marginalization of students will promote superior options for the academic achievement and quality of life of students who are marginalized. There are

immediate strategies in which school leaders and educators can use to positively impact the achievement and quality of life of marginalized groups. When a principal provides an equitable learning experience to minority students who were once denied access, the principal's risk-taking for minority students demonstrates moral and ethical courage.

Principal leadership via classroom walkthroughs and the evaluation process has the potential to improve instructional delivery. When principals have purposeful conversations with teachers regarding interactions noted between the teacher and minority students during classroom walkthroughs and evaluations, the level of those conversations can address the teacher's perceptions and expectations of minority students. Another influence that the principal has on the spreading or elimination of deficit thinking is via the hiring process. Principals need to seek candidates who understand the experiences of minority students yet do not allow this understanding to lessen their idea of their success. This informed understanding advances relationships and community. When staff dialogue shifts from addressing students' shortcomings to students' potential, a great deal has been achieved as it relates to fostering an inclusive and equitable school community that treats all students with the highest regard.

It is my desire that educators at all levels, kindergarten through college, use these results to start asking questions of themselves and one another about the assumptions we bring to our classrooms:

- What assumptions have we made about the potential of our students?
- What practices have we engaged in that limit our students' capabilities?
- What opportunities are

- we providing for marginalized students to be a part of educational decision-making processes?
- What blame, if any, are we placing on our students and their families for their circumstances and situations?

Once we start having transparent and frequent conversations along these lines, we will open the door for educators to address the disparities that exist within our educational institutions.

Due in part to deficit thinking, students from marginalized populations often leave classrooms with the message that they do not belong. Not only do our schools teach the 3 Rs--reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic—they are the chief institutions within which we socialize children and communicate messages about which aspects of culture, race, and socioeconomics we value and devalue. Within our classrooms, we convey messages relates to culture, politics, and history; students learn about their connection, value, and place of power in our world. Daily, students hear make meaning of the messages, verbal and nonverbal, that educators impart; from these messages students resolve if there is a place of belonging or a place of isolation for them and their families.

Work associated with this study highlighted the importance of genuine and transparent communication. When educators—teachers and school administration—engaged in targeted discussions around matters within the school that needed to change in order to eradicate deficit based practices, policies, and beliefs, progress was made toward change. While it is easy for one to say that high expectations are in place for all students regardless of socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and linguistics, true commitment and

advocacy must occur to truly determine if this is the reality. Principals must aid educators in shifting their thinking from the deficit model to the asset model; from making excuses and placing blame to finding solutions. No longer can principals sit in silence as marginalized student populations are continuously oppressed, dismissed, and disregarded. Instead, they must first consciously analyze their beliefs and practices and the manner in which they shape their work as leaders. This analysis precedes any work that the principal can do with staff. One cannot sweep around someone else's front door until one's swept around one's own.

Educators have assumptions about their students and their families that manifest themselves in the daily work they do with these stakeholders. Intentional dialogue is paramount to make challenge these assumptions and beliefs. Coupled with intentional dialogue is problem solving and capacity building; these work hand-in-hand to address beliefs surrounding the influence that diversity has on the educational experiences of marginalized student populations. When principals support teachers through professional development, teachers start to consider the success that improves learning conditions for all students. Instead of conversations laced with doubt, professional development will likely foster high expectations for all students regardless of their educators' biases, perceptions, and assumptions.

It is recommended that principals challenge inappropriate practices, policies, and processes that use power and privilege of white Americans to preserve injustice and inequities. As Hansuvadha and Slater (2012) indicated there is a relationship between leading and learning that cannot be addressed solely by focusing on test results. In order

to successfully address the academic discrepancies that exist for marginalized student populations, school principals must guide stakeholders towards an educational arena that promotes inclusivity, respect, and sensitivity to cultural differences. While principals are expected to have the skills to work with diverse student groups, Ladson Billings and Tate (2009) notes that they are not told how to do it. This study reminded me that principals shape the culture of their schools by communicating their vision, mission, and purpose to stakeholders (Sergiovanni, 2006). Without a principal gearing his or her leadership towards the creation of a shared vision, a more equitable and democratic educational experience will not exist for all students (Fullan, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2006).

Recommendation 3: Further School-based Study

The answers are not easy nor are they clearly written in black and white. To clearly understand the experiences of marginalized populations and their families, more study needs to occur. It is imperative that our teachers and administrators make this study an essential part of their work. The work cannot be isolated in nature; it must be daily and honest. Educators must be ready to talk about issues that are uncomfortable. Alone this process will be fruitless; however, we all can recognize deficit thinking and critically examine them. An unwillingness to undertake change can often reflect attitudes of complacency on the part of educators, that their school is doing an adequate job in educating its students, or resignation that they can do no more to educate them more effectively (Finnan & Swanson, 2000).

While conversations around deficit thinking and the marginalization of certain student populations can bring about conflict, Alemán (2009) discovered that leaders can

“utilize conflict for the leveraging of social justice change and the transformation of current practices” (p. 187). I agree with Villarreal (2010) that teachers require consistent support to strategies and practices that meet the diverse needs of marginalized student populations. Although this study illustrates that professional development, reflection, and dialogue shift beliefs from being based in deficit to being based in strength, additional research is still necessary to strengthen this argument.

This study spotlighted the urgent need for transformational leadership to occur in order for schools to advance learning and growth. More research in the area of transformative leadership is needed to address the social and academic needs of the changing demographic of students. Consistent with Shields (2010), I believe that transformative leaders are to challenge “inappropriate uses of power and privilege that create or perpetuate inequity and injustice” (p. 575). By way of transformational leadership, a principal will be able to command organizational changes related to racism, power, fortune, language, and privilege.

From this study, it became apparent that there is a need to closely investigate the principles of growth and fixed mindsets. According to Dweck (2006), alignment with these mindsets support positive changes that create equitably and socially just learning environments for all students.

With a growth mindset, individuals can change in a meaningful way as they critically reflect on how they perceive themselves. As educators and educational leaders change their behaviors and mindsets from deficit to asset-based ideology, they can create a climate that deeply values racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural diversity within a socially-just school. (p. 30)

Additional work needs to be done in the area of enhancing educators' awareness of deficit thinking. Educators need to become aware of how their attitudes, beliefs, biases, and values related to race, culture, and poverty can affect the work they do with their minority students. More research needs to be done regarding the ways that university and college teacher education programs and school district programs prepare public school teachers. Furthermore, individuals participating in professional development must take responsibility for implementing what they have learned. According to Rush, Shelden, and Hanft (2003), they cannot remain trapped in institutionalized practices and dialogue that prevent the restructuring of organizational learning. Effective change occurs when members of the organization do things differently; change fades when members preserve the current reality

Recommendation 4: Professional Development

A vital approach to eliminating deficit thinking in schools is professional development; ongoing embedded professional development results in fostering an opportunity for change. Within an organization, change comes with the acquirement of knowledge, skills, resources, tools, and understanding by its members. Professional development will improve teaching, learning, and student achievement. Additionally, professional learning and reflection provide what is necessary. Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) revealed that although educators recognize the importance of learning about diverse learners, few of them have established efficient ways to implement essential strategies in their classrooms. Shields (2009) established that professional development enhanced teachers' abilities to work with diverse students who are different by race,

ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, ability or socioeconomic status. Principals need to utilize professional development as a means to eliminate deficit thinking.

Professional development around the topic of deficit thinking should start with staff having conversations about the practices that negatively impact minority students. In addition, the professional development should create and cultivate a culture in which dialogue is used to develop relationships with other people and with the subject of deficit thinking itself. When educators are provided opportunities for reflection and analysis, action will truly follow. Educators benefit from rich dialogue about deficit thinking, deficit based practices, and minority students because it allows them to better know their students. Additionally, it creates positive relationships and a united community.

When dialogue ensues, existing assumptions, biases, and deficit thoughts about minority students are recreated based on what developed from the dialogue. A benefit of dialogue is a gained understanding of those who are different, have a different view, or alternate perspective. Conventional professional development provided to educators does not create the space for educators to dialogue about how minority students are impacted by deficit thinking and deficit based practices. Deliberate dialogue allows educators to recognize how their actions, attitudes, and beliefs do not create positive opportunities and experiences for students who do not fit the traditional student template. These students' differences are considered deficits until educators are allowed to "walk in their [minority students] shoes" and acquire understanding. As a result, the differences that were once looked at as deficits are now viewed as strengths.

Work needs to occur that will reinforce the importance of professional development that identifies elements of the school culture and climate that lead to practices and policies that systematically marginalize. It is my belief that the majority of teachers are well-intentioned but are unconscious of the deep, hidden aspects of culture that have a noteworthy hold on their identities, role as educators, and instructional practices. Professional development related to diversity should nurture teachers' abilities to think in terms of the culture of the school because, as educators, we endorse roles that may steadily favor some groups more than others. Awareness and understanding of this in the classroom can alter their beliefs.

The expected outcome is that educators who engage in this type of process will demonstrate an increased awareness of culture in educational settings. They will be able to probe and, in many instances, reject their previously embraced negative views. In addition, it is likely that they will be able to identify their role in student learning and success. All in all, professional development structured along these lines will heighten educators' readiness to examine instructional practices and modify those practices to be more culturally responsive.

Even with the inclusion of professional development opportunities, there is the possibility that some who participate will not apply what they learned to alter their instructional practices and promote equitable educational methods. However, this possibility is outweighed by the potential that educators participating in the professional development will allow the contents to positively influence their work. Without

professional development around the topic of deficit thinking, related concepts are left to chance.

Conclusion

As an elementary school principal, it my desire to be bold and brave enough to challenge all thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors that sustain biases in our schools. Therefore, I must question decisions that do not advocate for every group of students in our school. Because of this study, I have concluded that in order for principals and teachers to impact student achievement and close the achievement gap, they must closely inspect their own expectations toward marginalized students. Following this inspection, purposeful work towards change must occur. With the various challenges associated with educational reform and accountability, schools must tackle the learning needs of all students.

To do this important work, principals must test the status quo, risk confrontation, and overcome avoidance of change; all of these hinder the work necessary to support marginalized student populations. When schools continue the same systems and structures that created the achievement gap, they fortify barriers to problem solving and dialogue that aid in detecting the root cause. In order for schools to effectively address the achievement gap, research must be done to identify and understand the beliefs and behaviors of educators. Change in this area will broaden the elimination of deficit thinking. For true change to occur, principals must guide teachers to acquire new values, behaviors, and attitudes.

The aim of this study was to deliberately upset established systems of deficit thinking. When the principal and teachers adopt a new set of beliefs, behaviors, and norms, institutionalized injustices are called into question. This work occurs via quality professional development and crucial conversations but takes times and strong transformative leadership. Although the role of the principal is so complex, it is so necessary. Our students are depending on us. This study showed how much minds and feelings can be changed about race by simply talking about in a structured fashion.

According to Yehuda Berg,

Words are singularly the most powerful force available to humanity. We can choose to use this force constructively with words of encouragement, or destructively using words of despair. Words have energy and power with the ability to help, to heal, to hinder, to hurt, to harm, to humiliate and to humble.

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APPENDIX A
RECRUITMENT LETTER

September 14, 2016

Good evening!

You were recommended by Principal X to participate in a focus group that studies the impact of deficit thinking and deficit-based practices within elementary schools. As a part of this work, we would meet once per week beginning September 22nd. The focus group would start at 2:45 and would be held at X. Work from this focus group would be instrumental in developing a professional development module that would be available for school leadership teams to utilize. Focus group participants would earn CEUs ☺.

To confirm your participation, please email me. If you have questions, please contact me as well. I look forward to seeing you September 22nd; snacks will be provided ☺

Other meeting dates include...

September 27th

October 4th

October 18th

October 25th

November 1st

Thank you,

**Shaneeke Moore-Lawrence, Doctoral Candidate
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro**

APPENDIX B

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

University of North Carolina at Greensboro Greensboro, North Carolina

Title of Study: **The Impact of an Action Research Study on Deficit Thinking in an Elementary School**

Investigator's Name: **Shaneeke Moore-Lawrence**

Department: **Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations in School of Education**

Phone Number: **919-491-3630**

Introduction

You are being asked to take part in an action research study that aims to understand the impact that an action research study can have on deficit thinking and deficit-based practices within participating elementary school staff members. The aim is to shape an understanding of the practices, techniques, and strategies that can be employed to defy and alter the beliefs and attitudes of educators who submit to deficit thinking. This is critical because teacher attitudes and relationships are more important and directly related to student achievement than funding or facilities (Shields et al., 2004). You are being asked to take part because you signed up at the interest meeting for this study. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study. Ultimately, this research may be published as part of a dissertation.

Description of the Study Procedures

What the study is about: The purpose of this study is to understand the impact that an action research study can have on deficit thinking and deficit-based practices within participating elementary school staff members. The aim is to shape an understanding of the practices, techniques, and strategies that can be employed to defy and alter the beliefs and attitudes of educators who submit to deficit thinking.

What we will ask you to do: If you agree to be in this study, you will participate in a four to six-week focus group series with each session being a maximum of 120-minutes and including journal prompts, participant pre-assessment, confidential participant survey, participant post-assessment, and a semi-structured interview. The survey and

interview questions will be related to cultural deficit thinking in educational settings and cultural diversity training provided to educators. With your permission, we would also like to tape-record the sessions and interviews. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the recording as described below.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study

Risks and benefits:

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. There is the risk that you may find some of the questions during this action research study to be sensitive.

Benefits of Being in the Study

In addition to knowledge gained, for participating in this study, you will earn Continuing Education Units (CEUs) that will go towards your North Carolina licensure renewal. You will also assist in developing a professional development module related to this study's focus area.

Confidentiality

Your answers will be confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we make public we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file cabinet; only the researchers will have access to the records. If we tape-record the interview, we will destroy the tape after it has been transcribed, which we anticipate will be within two months of its taping. Electronic data (including audio recordings) will be stored in a locked file cabinet. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

Taking part is voluntary: Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide not to take part or to skip some of the questions, it will not affect your current or future relationship with Durham Public Schools. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns

If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact Shaneeka Moore-Lawrence (shaneeka_moore@icloud.com, stmoore2@uncg.edu, 919-4913630) or Dr. Rick Reitzug (reitzug@gmail.com). If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351."

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature _____ Date _____

Your Name (printed) _____

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the sessions tape-recorded.

Your Signature _____ Date _____

Signature of person obtaining consent _____

Date _____

Printed name of person obtaining consent _____

Date _____

APPENDIX C

ANONYMOUS PARTICIPANT SURVEY

ANONYMOUS PARTICIPANT SURVEY

Welcome to a brief survey regarding the educational experience of marginalized students. For the purpose of this survey, the term “marginalized” refers to students of low socioeconomic status, and/or to students from families whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds differ from that of their Caucasian peers. Your participation in this action research project is completely voluntary. Your participation will be confidential. All information that is obtained during this action research project will be kept secure and will be accessible only to project personnel. It will also be coded to remove all identifying information. We anticipate no risk by participating in this research. The results of this study may be used for a dissertation, a scholarly report, a journal article, and a conference presentation. In any publication or public presentation, pseudonyms will be used. If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact us.

If you DO want to participate, please print a copy of this letter for your records and select “I agree to complete this survey” at the bottom of this page.

If you do NOT want to participate in the project, please close this window.

1. Think of a student who is not succeeding in your class. Please list the reasons for this lack of success.

2. On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being very little and 5 being very much, indicate the extent you feel:
 - _____ You address the learning needs of every student
 - _____ Your colleagues address the learning needs of every student

3. On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being very little and 5 being very much, indicate the extent you feel:
 - _____ The current educational structure is the same structure in which I attended and succeeded during my K-12 school experience.

_____ Every student has the opportunity to succeed in the current educational structure despite differences in language, culture, or socioeconomic status

_____ The current educational structure needs to reinvent itself by incorporating the latest research to address the change in student demographics.

4. What, if any, professional development have you been exposed to regarding the shift in demographics and student learning?

_____ Address the learning, social, and emotional needs of every student

Briefly explain the professional development you received regarding the learning, social and emotional needs of every student?

5. In the following question, “marginalized” refers to students of low socioeconomic status, and/or to students from families whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds differ from that of their Caucasian peers.

To what extent do you:

_____ Foster positive relationships with students

_____ Foster positive relationships with parents

_____ Engage in conversations with other stakeholders regarding marginalized students

_____ Keep the learning of every student as the focus of your mission

6. Please read each of the following statements and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement. 4 being strongly agree, 3 being agree, 2 being disagree, and 1 being strongly disagree.

_____ Students of low socioeconomic status have more challenges to overcome in their pursuit of an education than students of middle and upper socioeconomic status

_____ In our building, students of low socioeconomic of low socioeconomic status have the same academic opportunities as students of middle and upper socioeconomic status.

_____ I feel confident in my ability to hold the same high level of expectations for my students of low socioeconomic status as I do for all my students.

Please explain any limitations or challenges you have come to identify with students of low socioeconomic status.

7. Please read each of the following statements and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement. 4 being strongly agree, 3 being agree, 2 being disagree, and 1 being strongly disagree.

_____ In general, students of linguistically different backgrounds have more challenges to overcome in their pursuit of an education than students from a predominately English-speaking background.

_____ In our building, students of linguistically different backgrounds have the same academic opportunities as students from a predominantly English-speaking background.

_____ I feel confident in my ability to hold the same high level of expectations for students of linguistically different backgrounds as I do for all my students.

Please explain any limitations or challenges you have come to identify with students of linguistically different backgrounds.

8. Please read each of the following statements and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement. 4 being strongly agree, 3 being agree, 2 being disagree, and 1 being strongly disagree.

_____ In general, students of culturally different backgrounds have more challenges to overcome in their pursuit of an education than their Caucasian peers.

_____ In our building, students of culturally different backgrounds have the same academic opportunities as their Caucasian peers.

_____ I feel confident in my ability to hold the same high level of expectations for students of culturally different backgrounds as I do for all my students.

Please explain any limitations or challenges you have come to identify with students of culturally different backgrounds.

9. In the following question, “marginalized” refers to students of low socioeconomic status, and/or students from families whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds differ from that of their Caucasian peers. Please read each of the following statements and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement. 4 being strongly agree, 3 being agree, 2 being disagree, and 1 being strongly disagree.

_____ It is important to identify with the challenges marginalized students bring to their educational experience

_____ It is important to identify with the challenges marginalized students bring to their educational experience, but it is not my responsibility to address them as an aspect of my instruction.

_____ I recognize that some of the norms associated with marginalized groups impact their educational experience.

_____ I recognize that some of the norms associated with marginalized groups impact their educational experience, but it is not my responsibility to address them as an aspect of my instruction.

10. Please read each of the following statements and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement. 4 being strongly agree, 3 being agree, 2 being disagree, and 1 being strongly disagree.

_____ All students are provided with the same opportunities to learn in our building.

_____ Gifted programs should be reserved for only the top, academically performing students.

_____ I believe only high achieving students should be afforded access to the most rigorous courses.

_____ I believe tracking/ability grouping is essential to the success of every student.

11. How long have you worked in the building?

- _____ 1-3 years
- _____ 4-6 years
- _____ 7-10 years
- _____ More than 10 years

12. How long have you been an educator?

- _____ 1-3 years
- _____ 4-6 years
- _____ 7-10 years
- _____ More than 10 years

APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT CULTURAL DIVERSITY SURVEY

Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements by circling the appropriate letters following the statement.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
	SD	D	N	A	SA
I Believe....					
1. my culture to be different from some of the children I serve.	SD	D	N	A	SA
2. it is important to identify immediately the ethnic group of the children I serve.	SD	D	N	A	SA
3. I would prefer to work with children and parents whose cultures are similar to mine.	SD	D	N	A	SA
4. I would be uncomfortable in settings with people who speak non-standard English.	SD	D	N	A	SA
5. I am uncomfortable in settings with people who exhibit values or beliefs different from my own.	SD	D	N	A	SA
6. in asking families of diverse cultures how they wish to be referred to (e.g. Caucasian, White, Anglo) at the beginning of our interaction.	SD	D	N	A	SA
7. other than the required school activities, my interactions with parents should include social events, meeting in public, places (e.g., shopping, centers), or telephone conversations.	SD	D	N	A	SA
8. I am sometimes surprised when members of certain ethnic groups contribute to particular school activities (e.g., Bilingual students on the debate team or Black students in the orchestra).	SD	D	N	A	SA
9. the family's views of school and society should be included in the school's yearly program planning.	SD	D	N	A	SA
10. it is necessary to include on-going parent input in program planning.	SD	D	N	A	SA
11. I sometimes experience frustration when conducting conferences with parents whose culture is different from my own.	SD	D	N	A	SA

Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements by circling the appropriate letters following the statement.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
	SD	D	N	A	SA
I Believe....					
12. the solution to communication problems of certain ethnic group is the child's own responsibility.	SD	D	N	A	SA
13. English should be taught as a second language to non-English speaking children as a regular part of the school curriculum.	SD	D	N	A	SA
14. when correcting a child's spoken language, one should role model without any further explanation.	SD	D	N	A	SA
15. that there are times when the use of non-standard English should be ignored.	SD	D	N	A	SA
16. in a society with as many racial groups as the USA, I would expect and accept the use of ethnic jokes or phrases by some children.	SD	D	N	A	SA
17. that there are times when racial statements should be ignored.	SD	D	N	A	SA
18. a child should be referred for testing if learning difficulties appear to be due to cultural differences and/or language.	SD	D	N	A	SA
19. adaptations in standardized assessments to be questionable since they alter reliability and validity.	SD	D	N	A	SA
20. translating a standardized achievement or intelligence test to the child's dominant language gives the child an added advantage and does not allow for peer comparison.	SD	D	N	A	SA
21. parents know little about assessing their own children.	SD	D	N	A	SA
22. that the teaching of ethnic customs and traditions is NOT the responsibility of public school programs or personnel.	SD	D	N	A	SA
23. it is my responsibility to provide opportunities for children to share cultural differences in foods, dress, family life, and/or beliefs.	SD	D	N	A	SA
24. Individualized Education Program meetings or program planning should be scheduled at the convenience of the parent.	SD	D	N	A	SA
25. I make adaptations in programming to accommodate the different cultures as my enrollment changes.	SD	D	N	A	SA

Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements by circling the appropriate letters following the statement.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
	SD	D	N	A	SA
I Believe....					
26. the displays and frequently used materials within my setting show at least three different ethnic groups or customs.	SD	D	N	A	SA
27. in a regular rotating schedule for job assignments which includes each child within my classroom	SD	D	N	A	SA
28. one's knowledge of a particular culture should affect one's expectations of the children's performance.	SD	D	N	A	SA

APPENDIX E**SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL****SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

1. Identify a student who is currently struggling in your class academically and/or behaviorally. In what area(s) is (are) the student struggling? What have you identified as reasons for the student's struggles?
2. Identify a second student who is currently struggling in your class academically and/or behaviorally. In what area(s) is (are) the student struggling? What have you identified as reasons for the student's struggles?
3. Identify a third student who is currently struggling in your class academically and/or behaviorally. In what area(s) is (are) the student struggling? What have you identified as reasons for the student's struggles?

Additional questions during the semi-structured interview will arise as a result of a participant's response.

APPENDIX F

PARTICIPANT PRE- AND POST-SURVEYS

PARTICIPANT PRE-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Define deficit thinking. Proceed to question two if you are able to answer question one.
2. What is the impact of deficit thinking?
3. What strategies can schools employ to address deficit thinking?
4. What challenges do schools face in addressing deficit thinking?
5. Describe the impact of school's addressing deficit thinking.

PARTICIPANT POST-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Define deficit thinking.
2. What is the impact of deficit thinking?
3. What strategies do schools employ to address deficit thinking?
4. What challenges do schools face in addressing deficit thinking?
5. Describe the impact of school's addressing deficit thinking.

APPENDIX G**ACTION RESEARCH FOCUS GROUP TIMELINE****Thursday, September 22nd**

Introductory Meeting with participants to discuss deficit thinking, action research, purpose of group, journaling, and calendar; participant completion of Pre-Participant Survey; Anonymous Participant Survey; Journal Prompt #1; schedule dates to conduct semi-structured one-on-one interview with participants

Tuesday, September 27th

Participant participation in 120-minute PLC session, and Journal Prompt #2

Tuesday, October 4th

Participant participation in 120-minute PLC session and Journal Prompt #3

Tuesday, October 18th

Participant participation in 120-minute PLC session and Journal Prompt #4

Tuesday, October 25th

Participant participation in 120-minute PLC session and Journal Prompt #5

Tuesday, November 1st

Participant participation in 120-minute PLC session, completion of Post-Participant Survey, and Journal Prompt #6