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Dismantling Contemporary Deficit Thinking

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Review

Valencia, R. (2010). *Dismantling Contemporary Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
ISBN: 978-0415877107

Valencia has been working for more than fifteen years in the deconstruction of the deficit thinking discourse. In this book he defines the notion of deficit thinking as an internal explanation for the academic failure of low socio-economic status students of color (i.e. African American, Mexican American, Puerto Rican and other minorities; hereafter referred as low-SES students). Valencia discusses some competing explanations and makes some suggestions to promote a more equitable and democratic schooling for all students.

The author 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. It is "the process of blaming the victim" (p. XIV). This way of thinking has its roots in the racist discourses of the 1600s and the late 1800s, and it obtained academic support and great diffusion in the first decades of the 20th century. Although it has been questioned and discredited, it is experiencing resurgence among scholars, policy makers and educators in relation to the strengthening of conservative thinking.

Valencia warns that deficit thinking is a pseudoscience in which ideology is embedded with science. He points out that deficit thinking is supported by research that lacks scientific rigor: unsound assumptions, psychometrically weak instruments, data collection in defective manners, absence of control of important independent variables and omission of rival hypothesis. Deficit thinking is a chameleonic concept

which has taken several variants which are analyzed in Valencia's book: low grade genes (Neohereditarianism), inferior culture and class (culture of poverty) and inadequate familial socialization (at-risk discourse).

In contrast with the deficit thinking discourse, many researchers have observed that systemic factors have strong linkages with the academic failure of low-SES students. In accordance with this line of work, Valencia presents data to support the influence of some schooling conditions (e.g. teacher quality and inequities in basic school resources) on the academic outcomes of low-SES students.

Deficit thinking challenges the basis of democratic education. For this reason Valencia discusses in the last part of the book some questions concerning democratic schooling. First, he reviews research on deconstructing deficit thinking in the areas of educational ethnography, teacher education and educational leadership. Second, he examines the standard-based movement school reforms, arguing that it is misdirected: “it treats the symptoms of school failure (i.e. poor academic achievement indices such as low reading test scores and high dropout rates), rather than the root causes (inferior schools)” (p. 152). Finally, Valencia traces out the components for a democratic education (e.g. equal access to optimal learning, inclusion and development of citizenship skills).

In sum, Valencia's book is an advisable text. It deals with deficit thinking, “a model founded on imputation, not documentation” (p. XIV), which is widespread in the international educational thought and practice. Furthermore, it faces the general question of democratic schooling conditions in the context of plural, multicultural and economically stratified societies.

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