INNER CITY STUDENTS:
STAMPED, LABELED AND SHIPPED OUT!
Deficit Thinking and Democracy in An Age of Neoliberalism

by

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Abstract

My thesis topic on deficit thinking, democracy and an ethic of care emerges as a result of the clashes that take place under political and socio-economic agendas which are deeply connected with the conflicting interpersonal challenges that inner city students face. My thesis focuses on two major aspects regarding deficit thinking: 1. What are the different frameworks that create and support deficit thinking and deficit practices, and are there any philosophical inconsistencies or overlap amongst them? Moreover, what is the conceptualization(s) of deficit thinking that arise from these different frameworks? 2. Why is deficit thinking toward inner city students philosophically problematic and inconsistent with creating true democratic education possibilities? After presenting and highlighting my concerns about deficit thinking practices, I briefly provide an alternative vision for education. This truly democratic vision of education is comprised of four main components: critical thinking, participatory democracy, moral responsibility, and an ethic of care.
I would like to acknowledge and give my deep gratitude to
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To all the children that I have been so lucky to work, play, and learn from!
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Chapter One

Introduction, Background and Context

A Vivid Childhood Memory

I clearly remember growing up as the only “carmel-brown” girl other than my sisters in a neighbourhood overflowing with “white” people and a couple of “blacks”. I thought of my neighbourhood as ‘normal’. I never thought much about people’s differences, rather I was consumed by quick games of badminton or basketball in my neighbourhood streets. I was out playing often, chatting with everyone and was ready to help if it was possible. According to my parents, because of these habits, someday someone would do me some serious harm for reasons that I was too young to understand at that time. I remember them saying, “not everyone is the same here and I better not think everyone had good intentions”. However, I barely took their worries seriously, I wanted to have fun and socialize with style! Unfortunately, the day did come that I was forced to see “difference” and was personally hurt because “I was not the same”. To this day, I remember how this experience took me by a whirlwind of surprise.

It was on a crisp fall day after school when I decided that I would tryout for my elementary school’s basketball team. I came excited and ready to play my very best, until a sideline remark came from my gym teacher. Making no eye contact, having no intonation in her voice, barely noticing me, she briefly said; “your people won’t allow you to be on a school team. Why don’t you just go home and learn how to cook some samosas as that will be useful to you in the future and bring me some tomorrow.” I could not believe what I had heard. I felt a surge of strong emotions come through me, yet simultaneously my mind was confused and I felt the world stop. I felt my heart tremble,
my eyes water, and my hands lose grip of my favorite blue basketball. I came home and went straight to my room that I shared with my sisters changed my clothes and went straight to bed by 4pm. It was the longest evening of deep disappointment I had experienced in the total of ten years of being in the world. At the age of ten, I blamed myself for everything, for who I was and for where I had come from. However, the worst part of this sad evening was that I thought and felt that I had no way of changing any of it and it was the “way it is supposed to be.”

Reflecting back now, as an Indian-Canadian who embraces her culture and identity I recognize the deeply seated roots of discrimination in my grade five gym teacher’s sideline remark. She had assumed that because I was Indian I could not tryout for the team and generalized her limited knowledge of Indian culture to rationalize her decision of not allowing me to tryout. The underlying problem was not my identity but it was her deficit thinking toward my identity. It took me a long time to understand this underlying problem but even longer to begin to understand why some educators have a deficit thinking approach towards students of colour. It is with this vivid childhood memory, and the surprisingly increasing number of similar deficit thinking incidents I have encountered in my personal life and my professional life as a teacher that I have decided to write my thesis on this topic.

**Background and Context of Thesis Topic**

As an inner city educator¹ and as someone who can identify with several of the struggles and frustrations that inner city students face in an age of neoliberalism (Ross and Gibson,

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¹ From my perspective an “inner city educator” refers to being an educator of “inner city” students. “Inner city” acts as a label marker for marginalized low-socio economic backgrounds (and who could be immigrants) students. The schools for “inner city students” often work on a low/none existing budget and are in poor physical conditions.
I offer a timely and critical examination about how and why deficit thinking is a barrier toward creating truly democratic education. The purpose of this thesis is to draw attention to my critical examination of deficit thinking and have people (including students, educators, professionals, workers etc.) use this critical knowledge as a part of their agency to create change in public education. In light of this, my thesis topic and the concerns it raises originally stem from disheartening and troubling students’ narratives. Moreover, I believe through critically thinking and engaging with literature about deficit thinking, democracy in an age of neoliberalism, and the challenges involved in beginning the process of overcoming deficit thinking; I will be able to offer a fresh critical perspective on deficit thinking to educators. Because of this perspective, I hope to create a transformative space in schools that aims to create truly democratic educational possibilities.

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

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 and Scheurich, 2001, p.236).
Thus, such deficit practices ‘disarm’ marginalized students from the competitive workforce and keep them out of affluent social circles. Anyon (1980) also supports this view on deficit practices, she states it is because working class children receive a weak and narrow set of educational skills and acquire limited dispositions (i.e. no critical thinking skills, open-mindedness, creative capacity, compassion, etc.) that they end up reinstating the status quo.

When the standards of education are low and the potential of inner city students is not reached (Valencia, 1997), these students get constrained by the limited knowledge and employment skills that they briefly are exposed to at school (Anyon, 1980). Moreover, they often remain in the low socio-economic class that faces oppression, marginalization, poverty and several inequities (Anyon, 1980). As a result, the student is harmed, oppression remains (i.e. reproducing the status quo), and thus school becomes a negative experience for most minority students.

Therefore, in order to create true democratic education possibilities for minority students we must collectively become aware and responsible for the deep practical and philosophical problems that anchor deficit thinking practices. After reaching this level of critical awareness and taking moral responsibility for it, we need to use our individual and collective agency to diminish and ultimately eradicate deficit practices in schools.

**Theoretical Framework**

Ross and Gibson (2006) claim education is heavily invested in by politicians who hold strong neoliberal values (i.e. globalization, equality, consumerism)² that are

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² These values are discussed by Michael Apple (1979) in *Ideology and Curriculum*. A discussion on neoliberal values in schools will be elaborated on in chapter three.
exemplified in government policies and procedures. Some government policies that reflect neoliberal values in Canadian schools are: EQAO testing (i.e. standardized tests), character education, Pathways program (i.e. extra-curricular program to ensure student “success”), and a one-dimensional Ontario curriculum. The spirit of the American policy titled “No Child Left Behind” has been adopted into Canadian schools.

Governments have introduced curricular reforms, via legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act in the United States…which commodifies public education by reducing learning to bits of information and skill to be taught and tested and marketizing education through programs that promote privatization and user fees in place of free, public education (Ross and Gibson, 2006, p.4).

Moreover, from the neoliberal standpoint it is in the best interest of the economy to open up the educational services that ‘market’ to “profit educational management skills” (Ross and Gibson, 2006). As a result, neoliberal policies support the upper and middle class children as they would bring the most “profit” to the economy and cut down on the resources and finance allotted to public education for working class children (Ross and Gibson, 2006).

Efforts are made to reduce educational costs, often through economies of scale. Closing school libraries, reducing the number of special needs teachers, increasing class size, expanding online learning programs are examples. These actions intensify the work of teachers and isolate them from decision making and from one another (Ross and Gibson, 2006, p.4).

Such neoliberal practices as cutting back the funding for public schools are part of the reason why the status quo is perpetuated. Consequently, public education despite being “free” or “equal” education for all becomes inaccessible to many working class children (i.e. students who need one on one assistance, differentiated educational plans, or those who suffer from some kind of disability). Moreover, the quality of education that

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3 I will discuss these examples of neoliberal policies and practices in chapter three and four.
working class children receive is inferior, because the demands put on inexperienced or new teachers (e.g. delivering standardized tests, working with large class sizes, and dealing with fewer resources) are often too overwhelming and leave no space to help develop a more equitable teaching environment (Portelli, Shields, and Vibert, 2007). Thus, these children from working class families end up with limited possibilities for their future (lower graduation rates, limited job market opportunities, low-collar jobs and no mobility from their social class). “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” (Ayers and Ford, 1996, p.145).

On the other hand, these neoliberal practices support and ensure the “success” of students from middle/high class families by giving them the opportunity to attend private schools or programs that provide high quality education (Reid, 2005). Middle class students who are in the public education system are encouraged to think independently/critically, develop managerial/business skills, and are encouraged to pursue their education (Reid, 2005). The curriculum is designed and delivered to the benefit of the dominant middle class students and not the minority working class students, and this is reflected in standardized test scores.

An examination of school achievement along racial lines underscores clear racial divisions about who is benefiting from school and who is not…Latino students fare slightly better than African American students, but they have an unacceptable dropout rate that has remained near thirty percent over the past three decades and shows no sign of improving (Howard, 2003, p.196).

Some of the reasons why these test results are often low for marginalized students are: because the curricula do not reflect their culture, identity or history; their basic needs (i.e.
food, shelter, clothes) are not met; their upbringing at home is not positive or sometimes parents are not present because they are working two jobs to financially support their families, and often they are disengaged by the pedagogical approach educators use (Valenzuela, 1999). Thus, it is not surprising that minority students do not excel at public school. The majority of dominant middle class students are successful in public school as their Western culture, identity and history serves as the foundation of the curricula and their home circumstances are comfortable (Valenzeula, 1999). As a result, the majority of dominant middle class students have the opportunity to further pursue their education and then get hired into higher paying jobs and maintain, if not exceed, their economic class backgrounds.

I will respond to the above briefly described neoliberal context of education, through a critical-democratic perspective in this thesis. In order to articulate this critical-democratic perspective I will use Jean Anyon (1980), Pauline Lipman (1998), Joe Kincheloe (1999), Jesse Goodman (1992), Henry Giroux (2005), Kevin Graham (2001), and Alan Reid’s (2005) work in reference to systemic inequities.

As an educator I believe that critical democracy is best understood in two parts namely, a ‘critical lens’ and a ‘participatory democracy’ (Graham, 2001; Goodman, 1992) combined with an ethic of care (Noddings, 2005). From the viewpoint of an educator, having a critical lens refers to keeping an open-mind (Hare, 2005) toward critical inquiry (Bailin, 2005) which as a result would provide an opportunity for critical thinking to occur. “Thinking critically involves attempting to make a reasoned judgment about what it would be sensible or reasonable to believe or do in a given situation…” (Bailin, 2005). Moreover, according to Bailin (2005) critical thinking requires the
following ‘intellectual resources’: criteria for judgment, critical concepts or vocabulary, habits of mind, background knowledge and strategies or heuristics. The critical lens is developed once all of these intellectual resources are intact and the process of inquiry is conducted in an open-minded way.

As a result of using this critical lens on public education, one is able to unpack the hidden socio-economic and political agendas (Reid 2005, Lipman 1998, Anyon 1980) which bring to surface the systemic inequities that lie at the core of public education. Recognizing and identifying these systemic inequities is important work. However, it is pertinent to go beyond this identifying phase to become morally responsible for our role in sustaining these inequities. Skrla and Scheurich’s (2004) conception of administrators’ accountability is helpful in illustrating how and why we need to be morally responsible to society for our agency (i.e. the actions and decisions we as individuals freely choose to make). I will take their conception of accountability and agency and extend it to include everyone as an agent (students, teachers, staff, civilians etc.). I will argue once we can critically identify/recognize systemic inequities (tucked neatly under neoliberal policies and agendas) and realize in what capacities our agency sustains them, we stand a chance of transforming neoliberal schooling to truly democratic education possibilities.

Reid’s (2005) work supports my argument as it explains how neoliberalism has an agenda to globalize and marketize education allowing private corporations capitalize on education, while decreasing the quality of education for the low socio-economic background students. Lipman, as quoted by Ross and Gibson (2006), believes that the standardized tests, which have also been introduced by a neoliberal agenda, help increase the gap between the social classes and maintain the status quo. Anyon (1980) also claims
that the job market displays the socio-economic and political disadvantage that has been placed on students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds. Thus, the critical lens is essential and important in unveiling these hidden political, social and economic agendas of neoliberalism. Once these political agendas are brought to the conscious attention of people it is imperative that people are morally responsible for their actions and take hold of their agency to actively decide what to do in the collective interest of society, by being a part of a participatory democracy (Graham, 2001).

I believe, as an educator, that participatory democracy (Graham, 2001) as a response to neoliberalism requires the school community and the greater societal community to exercise their collective rights with an aim to create more inclusive and democratic practices that diminish systemic inequities.

The struggle for democratic education is a continuing project…The challenge is to shift the focus of education policy from the individual right of (some) individuals to choose between schools to the collective responsibility of society to develop the sorts of citizens who can play an informed, active, and committed role in a cosmopolitan moral [and participatory] democracy (Reid, 2005, p. 295).

If a collective struggle for democratic education is not exercised then, the concentration of a great deal of wealth and productive capacity will remain in the power of a few corporate entities, who often do not have a moral or democratic conscience that they choose to utilize (Graham, 2001). Thus, participatory democracy through the collective voice of the people is essential in order to decrease the moral and systemic inequities. From my point of view, I recognize that because participatory democracy often begins in the format of coalition building,\(^4\) and requires “emotional-labor” (Boler, 2003) it is essential to have an ethics of care (Noddings, 2005) in place. According to

\(^4\) I will take up the concept of coalition building in chapter four.
Graham (2001) “[p]articipatory democracy is precisely that form of democracy that seeks to maximize each person’s participation in shaping the world around him or her through deliberate, collective action” (Graham, 2001, p.160). With the support of an ethic of care within a coalition group (which utilizes participatory democracy) the emotional-labor is shared. Thus, participatory democracy is attainable and as a result, a genuine space for the voice of the whole community is created.5

I believe that when educators develop their critical lens and help their students and the greater society to exercise their collective rights through a participatory democracy that systemic inequities sustained by neoliberal agendas can be diminished and change can take place in the hopes of developing a truly democratic society.

Critical teachers, operating in this democratic and introspective confrontation with power, understand that self-directed education undertaken by self-organized community groups is the most powerful form of pedagogy” (Kincheloe, 1999, p.10).

Statement of the Problem

It is difficult to define deficit thinking because it blends in with “normal/common sense” thinking (Portelli, 2007). However, its existence is easily verifiable when examining the schooling experiences that working class children have in contrast to the schooling experiences that middle/upper class children receive. Deficit thinking implies that working class children lack the ability to reach preconceived norms that are rooted in neoliberal values (which in essence are middle/upper class values). For example, a working class child who does not identify with the Eurocentric definition of “respect” or

5 I recognize there are challenges for everyone’s voice to be equitably heard (i.e. minority people who do not have access to time or transportation etc.), however, if these challenges are overcome, it can be argued that there are genuine spaces available for critical dialogue. I will take this contention up further in chapter four.
is not familiar with the “American culture” lacks the ability to be “successful”. Thus, it is argued by Valenzuela (1999) that the impact of deficit thinking, practices, and attitudes infects and impacts the daily lives and futures of working class children. I will offer a revised conceptualization of deficit thinking in chapter three based on a vast literature review (offered in chapter two) on the different frameworks in which deficit thinking exists.

Deficit thinking exists and has invaded the schools’ environment for several years now (Valencia, 1997). It is so vivid and present in the classrooms of inner city schools that it has become “normalized” or “common sense” (Valenzuela, 1999).

School practices and assumptions emerging from the deficit paradigm often hide student and teacher abilities. These assumptions are especially powerful because they are unspoken. We overlook our taken-for-granted ideas and practices to an extraordinary degree. (Weiner, 2006, p.42)

The normalization of deficit thinking continues to plague the schools’ environment. Although some educators and students are not aware of deficit attitudes and actions that are in constant play inside the classroom and school, the effects of deficit thinking are intensifying and are deeply impacting students (Valencia, 1997). Alternatively, some educators are aware and choose to have a deficit thinking pedagogy for many different reasons (e.g. in the “well-intentioned” interest of the students, it is easier to teach with this ‘style’ etc.) (Valenzuela, 1999). As a result of educators not being aware of the negative ethical and practical implications of deficit thinking and deficit action inner city students are put at risk, the quality of public education decreases and the possibility of having truly democratic education diminishes. Thus, an unintentional and ignorant cycle is created by many educators, which in turn sustains deficit thinking in schools and
continues to negatively influence and harm the educational experiences of working class children.

The existing [educational] situation in which we find ourselves reinforces deficit thinking and militates against changes that would provide more opportunities for those suffering from educational oppression (Valencia, 1997, p.247).

It is vital that a critical awareness around deficit thinking and deficit practices be created and, furthermore, that everyone recognizes and embraces their moral responsibility to help transform these practices to enable the process of creating a space for true democratic education possibilities.

_Research Question_

My thesis focuses on two major aspects regarding deficit thinking: 1. What are the different frameworks that create and support deficit thinking and deficit practices, and are there any philosophical inconsistencies or overlap amongst them? Moreover, what is the conceptualization(s) of deficit thinking that arise from these different frameworks? 2. Why is deficit thinking toward inner city students philosophically problematic and inconsistent with creating true democratic education possibilities?

_Significance of the Study_

This thesis will present an overview of the different frameworks and conditions used to create, maintain, and sustain deficit thinking practices and then a conceptualization of deficit thinking which arises from it. The practical and philosophical effects and implications of deficit thinking will be examined. After which, from a critical-democratic perspective, I will present a conceptualization of deficit thinking. Finally, I will provide an argument for why this conceptualization of deficit thinking is ethically

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6 I will discuss my conception of true democratic education possibilities in chapter five.
problematic for creating true democratic education possibilities. As a result of this philosophical research, two significant contributions will be made: 1. the neoliberal values and beliefs of popular notions of “deficit thinking” will be exposed and 2. the philosophical and ethical inequities that deficit thinking creates will be revealed. Both of these contributions are important because once the ‘veil’ comes off deficit thinking and neoliberal values are exposed, a political statement can be made about the ethical implications neoliberal values have on working class children and society in general. Thus, a clear understanding about who is benefiting from the ethical implications of deficit thinking will become apparent and questions of moral responsibility and agency will respectively arise.

Overview of the chapters

This thesis is organized as a philosophical investigation about deficit thinking in public education. In chapter one, I gave a personal anecdote that provided insight into the background and context of my thesis work, followed by a brief overview of my theoretical framework rooted in critical-democracy, which then led to the statement of my thesis problem and research question, and a brief identification of the significance of this work.

Chapter two will be divided into two sections. In section one, I will examine how deficit thinking is defined/conceived with respect to its practical effects (e.g. What makes an action, a way of thinking, a way of constructing expectations towards students deficit in nature?) and what conditions perpetuate deficit thinking practices. I will base this literature review on, but not limit it to, Valencia’s (1997) six characteristics of deficit thinking, Valenzuela’s (1999) concept of ‘subtractive schooling’, García and Guerra’s
(2004) views on teacher’s deficit perspectives on ‘cultural upbringing’, Ford and Grantham’s (2003) form of deficit thinking as emerging from negative cultural stereotypes, Weiner’s (2005) form of deficit thinking that hides the abilities of teachers and students, Thomson and Comber’s (2003) notion of deficit thinking as labeling, Cuban’s (2004) concept of deficit thinking as linked to economy, Gaab’s (2004) notion of deficit thinking as embedded in gender, race, and economic issues, Pollard’s (1996) form of deficit thinking based on gender and race equity concerns, Shields’ (2005) perspective on deficit thinking emerging from socio-cultural grouping of students, Visser and Cole’s (1996) form of deficit thinking as conceived by analysis of emotional behaviour, and Ford, Tyson’s et. al. (2002) form of deficit thinking as a barrier which does not provide space for retaining culturally diverse students in gifted programs. In section two, I will describe the above-mentioned scholars’ responses to the different frameworks and conditions of deficit thinking. The underlying ethical implications (i.e. assumptions and beliefs) of these deficit thinking conditions will be unpacked and addressed in chapter three.

In chapter three, I will philosophically re-examine and explore, the ethical implications of the different frameworks required for sustaining deficit thinking practices in schools. I will argue that there are three main academic frameworks\(^7\) in which the current literature on different conditions of deficit thinking can be categorized into: pseudo-scientific, sociological/cultural, and socio-economic. The pseudo-scientific framework premises deficit thinking in “behavioural” problems that can “diagnosed” and

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\(^7\) The nature of these three academic frameworks is to help understand and illuminate how various individuals and groups perceive marginalized groups through a deficit mentality.
then “pathologized” (Sheilds, 2005). It misuses scientific authority (scientific method and reasoning) to make false claims that are deficit in nature about working class students (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008). Alternatively, the sociological/cultural framework which argues that deficit thinking has its roots in sociological/cultural differences. In other words, the treatment shown by some educators who have a deficit approach towards working class students is presumptuous and often disrespectful because of the student’s cultural and social background identities. Finally, the third framework for deficit thinking is the socio-economic framework, which demonstrates the connection between social class, economic status, and deficit thinking. After establishing these three frameworks, I will examine the broader conceptualization of deficit thinking that emerges from all of the conditions that create deficit thinking practices. I will argue that the broader conception of deficit thinking is based on a sharp contrast to “norms” founded in Euro-centric values and culture (these are clearly different from most minority identities’ values and cultures). Moreover, this sharp contrast is responsible for creating and sustaining the “deficit” (or the lacking) approach toward working class children. I believe that deficit thinking lies in deeply troubling societal inequities (e.g. racial/cultural/socio-economic discrimination) toward minority students, in particular Latino and Black African Americans (Howard, 2003). After establishing a conceptualization of deficit thinking, I will critically explain what is ethically and philosophically problematic about this broader conception of deficit thinking with respect to creating true democratic education possibilities in chapter four.

In chapter four, I will critically address the anti-democratic nature of current schooling that helps to perpetuate, maintain, and sustain deficit thinking practices. I will
argue that this anti-democratic nature of schooling is harmful toward working class children and the education system in general. Furthermore, I will contend that in order to diminish and eventually eliminate deficit practices in schools we must embrace our individual and collective moral responsibility and make small transformations in our own way. We must be accountable for our actions and attitudes toward schooling if we truly desire to start creating democratic education possibilities for future generations. I will argue that we must be agents of change who are able to blend together the following elements necessary for democratic education: critical inquiry, participatory democracy, moral responsibility, and an ethics of care. I will briefly explain and highlight each of these necessary elements in chapter five.

Chapter five will be divided into three sections. In section one, I will address how true critical inquiry (from a critical-democratic perspective) provides a beginning towards the process of transformation in the public education system. I will advocate for educators to move beyond being critically aware of the negative implications of deficit thinking to a critical self-reflective position that helps them recognize their own contributions to deficit thinking. As a result of this critical self reflection, I will articulate my new critical perspective on deficit thinking in section two and why it is essential to go beyond critical thinking.

I will present and briefly explain the four components (i.e. critical inquiry, participatory democracy, moral responsibility/agency, an ethic of care) that I believe are the essential elements for beginning the transformative process in education. I hope that this perspective will interrupt the current oppressive educational framework to make space for what I believe to be the beginnings of creating true democratic education.
possibilities. Garvey’s work supports my vision of active agency, as he takes an activist position and claims:

Chance has never yet satisfied hope of a suffering people. Action, self-reliance, the vision of self and the future have been the only means by which the oppressed have seen and realized the light of their own freedom. Up, up, you mighty race! You can accomplish what you will (Garvey, 1996, p.210).

Finally, in section three, I will briefly highlight the potential struggles that often create challenges toward my vision of democratic education possibilities.
Chapter Two

Literature Review on Deficit Thinking

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of three different frameworks that create, sustain, and often ‘justify’ deficit thinking. The three frameworks are namely: pseudo-scientific, sociological/cultural, and socio-economic. Often, however, researchers who argue from the standpoint of one of these frameworks extend and overlap into the other frameworks. Nevertheless, I will examine the meaning of each framework, and the conditions that lead to such frameworks, and offer examples that critique or support the respective framework. Finally, I will describe the effects that each of these frameworks may have on the students and their overall schooling experience.

Pseudo-Scientific Framework

The pseudo-scientific framework for deficit thinking emerges from using scientific methodology and authority in unethical ways that often (re)produce unreliable “factual” evidence (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008). ‘Convergent thinking’ often lies at the heart of pseudo-scientism, this often allows researchers to remain consistent with prevailing theories (i.e. Bell Curve theory and No Child Left Behind legislation (i.e. NCLB) ). These theories are based on unquestioned assumptions about political agendas (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008). “The Bush administration NCLB legislation considers scientific research the best available means to improve education, supporting only studies that, “employ systematic, empirical methods that draw on observations and experiments” (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, p.87, 2008). Often these

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8 Term used in Hyslop-Margison, 2008, p.37.
theories claim that results from scientifically conducted tests and surveys accurately provide statistical “facts” that are true about minority communities (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008). However, despite the scientific methodology used in these surveys/tests to analyze and compile the facts about minority communities, the research itself is pseudo in nature (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008). Critics of pseudo-science researchers argue that these “facts” are not reflective of the minority communities because they are created, processed and analyzed with a political agenda that sustains neoliberal values (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008). Thus, the questions that need to be asked about this “scientific research” are: what criteria are used to create these surveys/tests? who is responsible for creating and delivering these surveys/tests? who does this research benefit? and finally, how are these “facts” used to reinforce deficit assumptions about minority communities? Moreover, the contexts in which these surveys/tests are given are often not taken into consideration (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008). For example, if a child is hungry because they had no food at home to eat, and stayed awake all night because their mother’s boyfriend was fighting with their mother and then took the test would the child’s performance be reflective of their intellectual capacities or emotional turmoil?

Consequently, with respect to education, unquestioned assumptions rooted in pseudo-scientific methodology frequently lead to errors in the dominant discourse about teaching minority communities and the level of learning that is possible in them (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008). These errors often create, reinforce, and sustain deficit thinking assumptions about inner-city children which then become incorporated as given truths into deficit teaching practices (Valencia, 1997). Pseudo-science offers a “causal
explanation of why humans act in certain ways” (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, p.40, 2008). Such an explanation, “inevitably involves normative and contextual components that cannot be ignored when accurately explaining individual or group behaviours. Under these conditions, claims of objectivity, reliability, and validity in human science are highly problematic” (Hyslop-Margison, 2008, p.40). In other words, “scientific” causal explanations are problematic because they create norms that are developed from a study done on a set group of people, but then are generalized to encompass everyone from that community (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008). Without being culturally sensitive these norms set the standards to which everyone is compared and contrasted (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008). To elaborate on this point, Hyslop-Margison and Naseem quote Durkheim’s structural argument that, “the study of society must eschew reductionism (i.e., the study of individuals) and instead consider social phenomena as the appropriate unit of analysis” (as cited in Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008, p.41). In other words, a collective approach must be utilized when doing research on any particular group. To support his idea, Durkheim explains his structural argument in terms of a school classroom;

A school classroom, for example, although composed of individual members, cannot be explained or understood in terms of its individual constitutive elements; rather, a school or classroom is a structural “whole” accounted for by the social and historical forces from which it emerges, and that shape its operation and agenda (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008, p.42).

Thus, Hyslop-Margison and Naseem (2008) imply that Durkheim’s structural argument provides an insight on how deficit thinking is sustained in school classrooms. However, to understand the way in which deficit thinking is created from pseudo-
scientific conditions, it is important to understand Levy-Bruhl’s argument articulated by Hyslop-Margison and Naseem:

[According to Levy-Bruhl (1925), in studying mental processes and categories sociological and anthropological studies must chronologically precede (in terms of methodological importance) psychological studies because it is impossible to examine the mind prior to understanding it first and foremost as a cultural product (Cazeneuve, 1972) (as cited in Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008, p.43).]

Levy-Bruhl’s argument emphasizes the importance of examining the sociological and anthropological context before any kind of scientific study can take place (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008). Levy-Bruhl’s reasoning for this methodological approach is to avoid the complications in Durkeim’s structural argument (i.e. insensitivity of cultural contexts as norms are created).

Levy-Bruhl stresses the importance of taking the aforementioned methodological approach and applying it to educational research studies, because the consequences of not applying it are detrimental (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008). For example, when looking at identifying universal constructs of concepts such as intelligence it is essential that Levy-Bruhl’s approach be applied. According to Levy-Bruhl, “[r]esearchers, for example, cannot objectively define or test “intelligence” because any definition of the normative concept emerges from what is deemed consistent with a specific social context” (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008, p.43). As a result of the misuse of IQ testing,

[For numerous years in the USA, it was assumed that African-Americans were intellectually inferior to Americans of Caucasian origin [due to intelligence tests], it was an assumption often encouraged for political or ideological reasons. It is, of course, far more difficult morally to shackle another human in slavery if that person is considered socially and intellectually equal (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008, p.43).]
Hyslop-Margison and Naseem (2008) argue that it is because such assumptions, as stated in the above quote, are communicated by one-sided standardized tests (e.g. IQ tests) that the scientific methodology is pseudo in nature. The misunderstandings that are created by these misconceptioned assumptions are harmful to those they pertain to (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008). Thus, “[t]o examine the African-American students’ (or any marginalized group’s) intellectual abilities it is necessary to acknowledge this group often constitutes a different cultural order than the urban, middle-class North Americans or Western Europeans of Caucasian origin” (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008, p.45).

It in light of these insights Hyslop-Margison and Naseem (2008) insists that when doing educational research,

…the data must inform our conclusions rather than allowing the lens we apply to our observations to determine the research outcomes. The problem in education and the social sciences more generally is that research in the absence of some presuppositional framework or theoretical commitment is exceptionally rare and probably not even possible given the individual biases and perspectives brought to bear on any research enterprise (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008, p.47).

Moreover, Hyslop-Margison and Naseem claim it is because researchers tend to look for conformational studies that reinforce their “observational lens” instead of “looking for anomalies that might undermine their theoretical commitments” which call the validity of their theory into question (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008, p.48). Unfortunately, “[i]n educational theories, however, such anomalies are often simply disregarded and the researchers offer some non-empirical ad hoc explanation to explain away the problem” (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008, p.49). As a result of disregarding these anomalies in the theory or the way it is conceived, the findings become skewed. Hyslop-Margison and Naseem stress that “a meaningful scientific theory is not illustrated by confirmation or empirical verification, but rather by prohibition that forbids certain things to happen
contrary to the theory’s postulates” (Kuhn as cited in Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008, p.54).

With this background information from Hyslop-Margison and Naseem (2008) on how scientific research in education has often been misused, misunderstood or misconceived, it is important to recognize that, “[a]s teachers and learners, we are both agents and objects who influence and are influenced by the context and outcomes of our social, economic, and cultural circumstances” (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2008, p.58). Keeping the above analysis and critique of “scientific research” in mind, let us turn our attention toward the researchers who have conducted or critiqued pseudo-scientific studies on deficit thinking.

Many researchers have critiqued this form of skepticism as being unreliable and, as a result, question its validity when it is used to ‘justify’ deficit thinking. Some of the researchers who have analyzed and critiqued deficit thinking conditioned by the pseudo-science lens are: Valencia (1997), Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi (2005), Trent, Artiles, and Englert (1998), Weber and Bennett (1999), Visser and Cole (1996), Morrison et. al. (2006), Jones and Chronis-Tuscano (2008), Jordan and Hanich (2000), and Rogevich and Perin (2008). Each of these researchers’ works examine the ‘scientific’ methodologies, reasoning and arguments used to ground deficit thinking.

**Deficit Thinking Created by a Pseudo-Scientific Framework**

Valencia’s (1997) main argument about the origins of deficit thinking is rooted in evolutionary theory that is supported by pseudo-scientific reasoning. Valencia (1997) begins by declaring that the origin of the term deficit thinking is not traceable to one source. However, according to Pearl (1960), it appears that the phrase was invented “by a
small cadre of scholars (e.g. Black 1966, Edwards 1967, Hess and Shipman 1965) in the early 1960s who launched an assault on the orthodoxy [which] asserted [that] the poor and … people of colour caused their own social, economic and educational problems” (as cited in Valencia, 1997, p.x). In the later 1960s the phrase ‘deficit thinking’ became interchangeable with other socially constructed terms. For example, “socialization of apathy and underachievement” (Hess, 1970); “culturally disadvantaged child” (Black, 1966); “cultural deprivation” (Edwards. 1967); and “accumulated environmental deficits” (Hess and Shipman, 1965) were all terms used to describe deficit thinking (as cited in Valencia, 1997, p.x). For Valencia (1997) all of these terms mentioned above were formulated to rationalize why racial minority students fail. However, what Valencia draws attention to is the question: Why were racial minorities targeted by deficit thinking? He claims that educators who engage in deficit thinking posit that students who fail in school do so because of alleged cognitive, motivational deficiencies or familial deficits that are biologically innate in them (Valencia, 1997).

“Deficit thinking is tantamount to the process of ‘blaming the victim’. It is a model [based] on imputation, not documentation” (Valencia, 1997, p.xi). According to Valencia (1997) there are six aspects that describe the act of deficit thinking namely; “1) a process of blaming the victim; 2) a form of oppression; 3) pseudoscientific in its pursuit of knowledge; 4) a dynamic model, changing according to the temporal period in which it finds itself; 5) a model of educability; that is, it contains suggestions or actual prescriptions for educational practice; 6) a model so controversial that dissent, and in some cases, heterodoxic discourse is inevitable” (Valencia, 1997, p. xii). To gain further
understanding of what deficit thinking is, let us briefly examine each of the six components listed above.

_The Six Components of Deficit Thinking_

Valencia uses Ryan’s (1971) phrase ‘blaming the victim’ to explain the beginning oppressive cycle of deficit thinking (as cited in Valencia, 1997). Ryan (1971) recognized in his research that there was a great deal of repetitiveness in programs that were founded on deficit thinking (as cited in Valencia, 1997). Ryan (1971) makes a very key observation on the ideological base of deficit thinking in education:

> In education, we have programs of ‘compensatory education’ to build up the skills and attitudes of the ghetto child, rather than structural changes in the schools…

As we might expect, the logical outcome of analyzing social problems in terms of the deficiencies of the victim is the development of programs aimed at correcting those deficiencies. The formula for action becomes extraordinary simple: _change the victim_ (as cited in Valencia, 1997, p.3).

Ryan’s (1971) observation illustrates how people in positions of power often recognize social problems, then do a comparative study that emphasizes differences between the disadvantaged and the advantaged, and, as a result, connect the differences to the cause of social problems (Valencia, 1997). Furthermore, people in positions of power get the government to intervene and ‘correct’ the differences (Valencia, 1997). Unfortunately, the above process occurs at such a smooth speed that it seems rational and goes unquestioned and the victims suffer (Valencia, 1997). This relationship between the victims and the victim-blamers then becomes a cycle of oppression, which is the second component of deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997).

This cycle of oppression ensures that victims and the victim-blamer groups remain separate, thus allowing for deficit thinking to be seen as a rational conclusion (Valencia, 1997). Some of the results that arose out of the oppressive cycle in action were
demonstrated by the educational history of compulsory laws in schools, school segregation, and high-stakes testing (Valencia, 1997). The effects of the oppressive cycle help to perpetuate the pseudoscientific nature of deficit thinking, which is the third component of Valencia’s conception.

Valencia (1997) claims that the pseudoscientific nature of deficit thinking is built upon assumptions of accuracy (e.g. high stake testing) and generalizations that do not logically follow from one to another (e.g. victim-blamer group accusing oppressed as the cause of social problems). This pseudo-scientific methodology assumes that marginalized people are incapable or limited in their intellectual capacity (Valencia, 1997). Moreover, the pseudo-scientific condition is based on the values of the dominant class, which then act as the norm to which all marginalized people are compared and are required to aspire to (Valencia, 1997). It is because deficit thinking goes through similar motions such as the “scientific method” that it gains acceptance (as the “scientific method” is regarded as an authoritative and privileged discourse) (Valencia, 1997). However, during different temporal periods, the nature of the scientific argument for deficit thinking changes (Valencia, 1997).

Deficit thinking is influenced by the time period in which it occurs and as a result it moulds itself correspondingly (Valencia, 1997). In other words, the way in which deficit thinking is ‘transmitted,’ changes according to the temporal period. For example, in the 1920s when racial differences in intelligence were being studied, deficit thinking was seen to be transmitted through hereditary genes. Thus, deficit thinking has become adaptable and mutable to its temporal environment, which consequently affects how it is diagnosed (Valencia, 1997).
Valencia (1997) claims the diagnosis process to be the fifth component of the deficit thinking. Deficit thinking aims to “describe, explain, predict and prescribe” its victim’s behaviour (Valencia, 1997, p.7). The diagnosis that follows can be understood as the result of a cycle that begins with educators describing the deficits, deficiencies, limitations, and shortcomings in students (from low socio-economic backgrounds); then, educators explain these deficits by placing the origins of them in genetic characteristics; and finally these explanations are used to predict the perpetuation and accumulation of these very deficits, and as a result they prescribe educational interventions designed to remedy the deficits (Valencia, 1997).

However, the most important part of the diagnosis is the modification which is prescriptive, as it determines what kind of intervention is required to deal with the “deficits” (Valencia, 1997). The results of some of the interventions used to deal with deficit thinking include school segregation, lowered expectations, and unchallenging pedagogical methods (Valencia, 1997).

The sixth component of Valencia’s (1997) form of deficit thinking is informed by heterodoxical views. Heterodoxical views are those that challenge the dominant class’s (i.e. upper-middle European class) norms or “orthodoxical” ideas on what standards should be upheld by society (Valencia, 1997). Valencia’s work in itself exposes a heterodoxical view of deficit thinking that encourages the public to re-evaluate, and re-analyze the conditions of deficit thinking. Thus, examples of miraculous achievements (e.g. an African child excelling in intelligence tests) in schools help solidify the presence of deficit thinking and sustain it because they are upheld and scrutinized against the pseudo-scientific findings of deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997).
Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi (2005) share a similar critique of the “scientific perspective” in relation to deficit thinking. Their main argument claims that deficit thinking is seen as a disease based on a medical model that is rooted in pseudo-science, and is used to pathologize minority students (Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi 2005).

Pathologizing is a process where perceived structural-functional, cultural, or epistemological deviation from an assumed normal state is ascribed to another group as a product of power relationships, whereby the less powerful group is deemed to be abnormal in some ways. Pathologizing is a mode of colonization used to govern, regulate, manage, marginalize, or minoritize, primarily through hegemonic discourses. (Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi, 2005, p. x).

In other words, the process of pathologizing the lived experiences of minority people/students often has deep roots in colonial and imperial history (Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi 2005). Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi (2005) quote Bhabha to explain the implications of such historical colonial roots:

…savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants (the bearer of food); he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child; he is mystical, primitive, simple-minded and yet the most worldly and accomplished liar, and manipulator of social forces (as cited in Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi, 2005, p. 2).

Historical colonial discourse uses pseudo-scientific authority to convey an argument of inferiority (with respect to power) amongst marginalized people (Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi 2005). Moreover, Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi (2005) use Valencia’s definition of deficit thinking to explain the deficit assumptions in the dominant “scientific perspective”:

…deficit thinking is a product of long-term power imbalances that need to be examined by educators in terms of their own cultural assumptions and a consideration of how they themselves might be participants in the systematic marginalization of students in schools and classrooms (Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi, 2005, p. 6).
Consequently, the deficit assumptions that educators make often focus on students and their homes as the main cause of the students’ failure at school instead of internally examining their own cultural assumptions which may be rooted in the pseudo-scientific studies (Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi 2005). For example, often a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyper Disorder (i.e. ADHD) is made before any further inquiries are made about the cultural assumptions with which the educator has been raised (Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi 2005).

For a diagnosis of ADHD, symptoms have to cause social or academic impairment for the child in more than one setting, typically at home and school. The cross-situational impairment reported by parents and teachers included negative interactions with parental figures and increased familial stress in the home setting and decreased academic achievement and poor peer relationships in the school setting (Jones and Chronis-Tuscano, 2008, p.918).

Some educators fail to reflect on their personal biases, cultural assumptions and internalized “norms” and as a result incorrectly diagnose the student and their family for being responsible for their inability to reach standardized norms. Some examples of these deficit assumptions targeted towards minority students are: “limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn and immoral behaviour” (Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi, 2005, p. 16). These deficit assumptions are echoed in the writings of Trent, Artiles, and Englert (1998) that focus on special education programs in schools.

Trent, Artiles, and Englert (1998) argue that deficit thinking assumptions constitute the foundations of most special education programs:

…special education has relied too heavily on deficit thinking and must now enhance existing practices with alternative approaches that consider the socio-cultural contexts in which children with disabilities learn (Trent, Artiles, and Englert, 1998, p.277).
Moreover, they claim “…the evolution of deficit thinking in special education stem[s] from beliefs that, although some individuals functioned in ways considered “subnormal” they were still humans and deserved to be educated” (Trent, Artiles, and Englert, 1998, p.279). The authors contend that special education educators who hold such a deficit mentality do so ironically on the moral grounds that deficient children need to be saved (Trent, Artiles, and Englert, 1998).

By the early 1800s, according to Trent, Artiles, and Englert (1998), children who were labeled mentally ill (e.g. behaviourally or emotionally disordered) were deemed to be responsible and blamed for their illnesses (Trent, Artiles, and Englert, 1998).

However, by the 1900s researchers such as Alfred Strauss, William Cruickshank, and Heinz Werner provided studies which claimed that children were labeled mentally ill because of mental and familial deficits which resided in them (Trent, Artiles, and Englert, 1998).

As a result of this theory and research emerging on “curing the student”, deficit thinking towards minority students occurred more readily and was seen to be acceptable on scientific grounds. This conclusion echoes Valencia’s sixth component of heterodoxical views reinforcing deficit thinking. Another example that was based on pseudo-scientific assumptions which permitted a misuse of scientific authority is the research on Attention Deficit Hyper Disorder (ADHD). ADHD was often used as a spring-board for many educators when they identified minority students as ‘special needs’ children as a result of their own cultural biases which were based on pseudo-scientific findings (Trent, Artiles, and Englert, 1998).

Persons with ADHD demonstrate difficulties in executive functioning, selective attention, sustained attention and orienting attention, all of which can depress
academic achievement…executive functioning deficits, affecting the allocation of attention to planning and organizing behaviour, are the core problem (Rogevich and Perin, 2008, 136).

Thus, the misuse of scientific authority as noted in the above quotation occurred frequently amongst deficit thinking educators, as a way of deferring any further responsibility to examine deeper systemic inequities from which the students were suffering (Trent, Artiles, and Englert, 1998). Many different pseudo-scientific theories were co-opted by deficit thinking educators to explain away the “behavioural conflicts” that minority students demonstrated (Trent, Artiles, and Englert, 1998). For example,

[a] deficit in selective attention is a difficulty in effectively ignoring irrelevant and distracting information when performing a perceptual act of relevant information…The term orienting attention deficits refers to difficulty in benefiting from a cue that automatically attracts attention to a specified location or failure in disengaging and reorienting attention to a different location (Rogevich and Perin, 2008, 136).

Thus, it was information that was produced by pseudo-scientific research that misused the privileged voice of science to create the conditions necessary to sustain and justify deficit thinking.

Another theory that Trent, Artiles, and Englert use to support their argument on deficit thinking is the “social control” theory:

…certain socio-cultural and socio-political forces blurred visions of meeting the needs of these [special needs] children in an effective, equitable, and democratic manner. These forces included economics, systemic constraints, and negative beliefs about the educability and worth of people with disabilities that emerged shortly after the Civil War” (Trent, Artiles & Englert, 1998, p.280).

In other words, Trent, Artiles & Englert (1998) question the motivations behind social, political, and economical forces which blurred the requirements of meeting “special needs children” with children who became targets of deficit thinking. They claim that the social, political, and economical motives are difficult to uncover as they are often veiled
by pseudoscientific theories (Trent, Artiles & Englert, 1998). According to Kauffman (as cited in Trent, Artiles & Englert, 1998, p.279) “a possible cause for this [educational] disability included masturbation and other such superstitions as ‘idleness and ennui,’ ‘pecuniary embarrassment,’ ‘sedentary and studious habits,’ ‘inhaling tobacco fumes,’ ‘gold fever,’ [and] ‘indulgence of tempers’”. Moreover, Kauffman’s “rationalization focused on deficits within the individual and to the predominant societal belief that individuals who were retarded were not educable” (as cited in Trent, Artiles & Englert, 1998, p. 281). As a result of pseudo-scientific based deficit thinking theories such as Kauffman’s, marginalized students were often mislabeled, “diagnosed”, and victimized (Trent, Artiles & Englert, 1998). To gain a further insight on the pseudo-scientific justifications used to mislabel marginalized students in or entering into special needs programs, let us examine the important work of Weber and Bennett (1999) on labeling.

Weber and Bennett (1999) claim “[l]abels stigmatize by emphasizing weakness and dysfunction (e.g. behavioural)” (p.25). Labels are used to classify students, which become the beginning steps to ‘pathologizing’ students in special education programs.

Once a person’s exceptional need is classified, he or she tends to be seen in terms of the label, rather than as a human being with a special need. Thus individuals with the label ‘learning disabled’ for example, may innocently and unwittingly provoke lowered expectations in those who teach them (Weber and Bennett, 1999, p.25).

Weber and Bennett (1999) state that the lower expectations created for special needs illustrate a deficit attitude taken by educators. This deficit attitude is often a reaction to the fact that “disabled students” go against dominant norms (Weber and Bennett, 1999). Moreover, they claim that there are four criteria that educators often use to help identify special needs students namely: 1) deviation from expected cultural or social norms of
behaviour, 2) compulsive and impulsive behaviour that negatively impacts learning, 3) low academic achievement or a result of inappropriate behaviour, 4) poor interpersonal relationships and low self-esteem (Weber and Bennett, 1999, p.72). According to Weber and Bennett, the above-mentioned criteria are rooted in pseudo-scientific deficit thinking assumptions about the behaviours of marginalized students who are targeted, classified, and labeled as ‘special needs students’.

**Effects of the Pseudo-Scientific Condition**

Unfortunately, the effects of these pseudo-scientific theories that support deficit thinking towards marginalized children are deeply felt and often remain with the marginalized child for the duration of their life. Valencia (1997) 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 behaviour, 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, 1997, p. 7).

Thus, discriminatory attitudes, actions and dispositions are held against “minority students” (Valencia, 1997). Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi (2005) agree that the “scientific” labeling process makes students, who have been labeled or who fit the label, to believe it as a statement of truth. They argue that a structural/positivist form of science is seen as an authoritative voice to truth and consequently, the pathologizing process that happens to minority students is accepted as a norm and goes unchallenged (Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi, 2005). Trent, Artiles and Englert (1998) also claim the pseudo-
scientific labeling process is misleading (even if it is not intentional), because it creates and sustains discriminatory beliefs about children with special needs.

We reiterate the fact that many educators who focused on the etiology of learning problems from a deficit perspective did so with the hope of developing interventions to ameliorate or minimize these problems...However,...many children labeled with a mild disability...causality is not readily apparent but is still linked, sometimes inappropriately, to deficits that reside within children, their families, and their communities (Trent, Artiles and Englert, 2008, p.297).

Marginalized students who suffer because of being mislabeled or misclassified feel displaced, alienated, disengaged and frustrated with the school system (Portelli, Shields, and Vibert, 2007). As an educator, I have heard many students’ frustrations with being ‘labeled.’ I can recall one instance in particular, about a grade two student, who for two years was in my health and physical education class. This boy was often in trouble because of his “bad behaviour and emotional outbursts”. He was seen on the bench outside the principal’s office on a daily basis. Then, one day, he told me in confidence that his homeroom teacher told him that he had a mental (i.e. psychological) problem that was serious and needs to take a few tests with the school psychologist. After letting me know, he burst into tears and said: “I do not want people to think I am mental and now, I am stuck because my crazy teacher thinks I have a “mental” problem”. With sadness in his eyes and voice, he uttered: “I will for sure not have any friends to play with and my mom will yell at me and then cry herself.” I saw the weight of the world on the shoulders of this seven year old. I consoled him and then promised to support him if he decided to speak with his homeroom teacher about how he felt. Unfortunately, the young boy said he would never do that because his teacher hated him and according to his friends she always said, “it was such a quiet day when “this young boy” was not here.” I felt my heart sink and I told him to come take a walk down the hall with me to get his mind off of
all of this. He looked relieved, as I told the principal that I had a “prep” period and I would be happy to talk with the boy. This short-term solution helped build a trusting relationship but, unfortunately, I knew I could not shield him from the psychological testing. The principal, homeroom teacher, and the child’s mom had already consented to it. According to my teacher mentor, as a beginning teacher, if I challenged that authority I would definitely be reprimanded and should not pursue this matter. The pseudo-scientific deficit thinking approach is still alive in current schooling practices, and the suffering of these children is not heard.

**Deficit Thinking Created by a Sociological-Cultural Framework**

The sociological/cultural framework is one that creates, sustains and often “justifies” deficit thinking. Valenzuela (1999), Garza and Crawford (2005), Cooper (2006), and Smith (1999) argue that deficit thinking also has its roots in sociological/cultural differences. Moreover, they contend that the treatment shown by some educators towards inner city students is presumptuous and often disrespectful. This presumptuous treatment is most visible in the interactions between the teacher and the students (Valenzuela, 1999). Differing curricular, pedagogical, and student evaluation practices emphasize different cognitive and behavioural skills in each social setting. Such practices contribute to the development of social identity in “behavioural”, “inner city”, “immigrant”, and “special needs” children with respect to physical and symbolic capital, to authority, and to the process of work which in turn make up their social class identity (Anyon, 1980).

To address the negative effects of labeling Valenzuela advocates a “caring theory which addresses the need for pedagogy to follow from and flow through relationships
cultivated between teacher and student” (Valenzuela, 1999, p.21). A teacher’s attitudinal predisposition is essential to demonstrating their care for students (Valenzuela, 1999). Valenzuela (1999) expands on Cummins’ (1984, 1986) and Gibson’s (1993) concept of “subtractive assimilation” which aims to assimilate all students to the dominant culture. Cummins (1984, 1986) and Gibson (1993) argue that “subtractive assimilation” happens when a student’s identity and culture is torn apart by the schooling process (e.g. the students’ native language and cultural identity are not encouraged/reinforced).

Valenzuela (1999) coins the term “subtractive schooling” to include other ways in which schools diminish essential resources from youth (e.g. school based-relationships, curriculum, pedagogy, standardized testing and so forth). It is through subtractive schooling that Valenzuela (1999) explains the necessity of care in school-based relationships.

Valenzuela (1999) contends that the most important component of schooling is school-based relationships (e.g. student-student, student-teacher) because it provides students with “social capital”. Cooper (2006) explains “social capital” as,

… the set of unspoken assumptions [cultural and economic] and the actions that typify successful people in the mainstream. These might include things as complicated as knowing the ins and outs of applying to colleges and universities, from standardized tests to the standard application, to things as simple as knowing that when your child reaches kindergarten he or she is expected to have some basic preparation for learning to read English (Cooper, 2006, p.2)

With social capital students are able to gain valued resources or opportunities (e.g., high grades, access to gifted programs, graduating from their program) without which there would be a negative impact on their economic and political integration into society (Valenzuela, 1999). Thus, it is important to recognize the value of social capital as an
absence or lack of it could prevent “minority students” from succeeding in school and life (Valenzuela, 1999).

In his qualitative study of teacher and student interaction in American schools, Valenzuela (1999) distinguishes between caring and uncaring student-teacher relationships. His research findings demonstrate that teachers often believe that “minority students” (in particular “immigrant students”) do not care about school. At the same time, minority students feel that teachers do not care about them and so refuse to care about school (Valenzuela, 1999). Cooper (as cited in Valenzuela, 2006) also supports Valenzuela’s claim that teachers often have a deficit mentality towards immigrant students and argues that students are cognizant of teachers’ deficit approaches toward them. As a result, students become less motivated to learn and display “disengaged and disruptive” behaviours (Cooper 2006, Valenzuela, 1999).

Teachers in Valenzuela’s study claim that immigrant students ‘prove’ they do not care about school because of the way they dress, walk, talk, and the disrespectful tone they have toward each other and staff. According to teachers, such student behaviour and attitudes are directly related to their ability to learn (Valenzuela, 1999). As a result of these educators’ prejudicial surface level observations of students, a deficit thinking approach begins and creates a barrier between the teacher and the student.

In his study, Valenzuela found another barrier to developing a caring relationship between the teacher and the students: teachers tend to draw out the differences in culture and language between themselves and their students (Valenzuela, 1999), and often give cultural superiority to their own identities over their students. Valenzuela (1999) noted that minority students are given the choice to leave the classroom or stay put, and endure
the often irrelevant one-dimensional curriculum-based lessons. This latter point reminds me of a recent conversation I overheard in the hallway between two “experienced” teachers who were talking about a grade eight student who they believed to be “useless and hopeless”, and thus “not worth the effort”.

This student in particular has a difficult time focusing in classes and, as a result, she often chooses to “strike up a conversation with whoever is down with it”. Unfortunately, it is exactly these conversations that she has in class that get her labeled as a “bad influence” towards the other students. According to one of these teachers, “she needs to be thrown out into the hall once a period as she interrupts other students’ learning opportunities, and plus it is not like she is going to get far in her education with her attitude.” Moreover, the other teacher participating in this conversation said: “well that is no surprise, just look at the family culture she comes from, her mom never made it to high school, she was too busy having unwanted children.” Then the bell rang and I went to teach my next class in a state of disbelief because, in my view, this student demonstrated, in my class, that she was very talented. She always chose to apply herself well on health assignments. I later asked the student why she is frequently sent out of class. She responded that: “those teachers I have during period four and five are rude to me and the subject matter they teach is boring.” I came to the realization that students can detect deficit mentality in teachers and recognize when teachers do not want them in class. Hence, students reassert their own self-esteem by claiming the classes are “wack anyway, just like the teacher!” Dei and Karumanchery also arrive at the same conclusion:

[p]ast research (Gutmann, 187; Lieberman, 1986) suggests that not only will a child’s experience of schooling influence his or her development of child’s self-esteem and sense of personal identity, but that the environment of schooling will
also develop or impede his or her feelings about issues of social commitment and responsibility (Dei and Karumanchery, 2001, p.211).

In other words, they argue that the deficit approach neither serves the self-esteem of students nor does it motivate them to care about social concerns in their society (e.g. human right violations). A sense of disengagement and indifference develops when educators’ teaching instructions are laden with deficit assumptions about students’ socio-cultural identities.

Valenzuela concludes that, “[w]hen teaching effectiveness gets reduced to methodological considerations and when no explicit culture of caring is in place, teachers lose the capacity to respond to their students as whole human beings and schools become uncaring places” (Valenzuela, 1999, p.74). Therefore, instead of dealing with the enormity of blanket judgments about ethnicity and underachievement or “deficit” cultures, teachers and administrators often resort to face-saving explanations about these school-based problems (Valenzuela, 1999). Valenzuela claims that:

[s]chools like Seguin not only fail to validate their students’ culture, they also subtract resources from them, first by impeding the development of authentic caring; and secondly, by obliging students to participate in a non-neutral, power-draining type of aesthetic caring. 

Smith (as cited in Valenzuela, 1999) also arrives at a similar conclusion:

Subtractive schooling…is the institutionalized process of organizing the school’s curriculum and tracking system so as to take away the linguistic, cultural, ethnic and political/historical identities and resources of those students whose language, culture, ethnicity and history are different from the dominant culture. [It] also necessarily involves a clash between students and teachers, counselors and administrators over the definition of ‘caring’…” (Smith, 1999, p.244).

Another aspect of the socio-cultural framework relates to issues of ethnicity and race. Garza and Crawford (2005) use the phrase “colourblind racism” to explain why
minority people are seen through a deficit lens in society. Colourblind racism is “the abstract extension of egalitarian values to racial minorities and the notion that racial minorities are culturally rather than biologically deficient” (Garza and Crawford, 2005, p. 601). In the realm of education “colourblind racism” is supported by a perception that minority students and their parents are “dysfunctional due to their different cultural orientations” (Garza and Crawford, 2005, p. 601). Garza and Crawford (2005) claim that because cultural deficiency is associated with minorities and is often veiled with the liberal value of “equality for all” it makes deficit thinking difficult to detect. In other words, “liberal arguments, such as ‘equality for all’…are used to mask the assimilative practices employed to subtract difference or remedy the deficiencies that are thought to be endemic to the minority” (Garza and Crawford, 2005, p. 601). Moreover, Garza and Crawford (2005) state that a hegemonic multiculturalism has been created as “the result of dissonance between a school’s desire to promote an inclusive and welcoming learning environment for their culturally and linguistically diverse students and [maintain a] persuasive, assimilation agenda that underlies instructional practices and programs designed to educate them” (Garza and Crawford, 2005, p. 601). Thus, this “all-inclusive” approach “ultimately privileges the dominant group’s conceptualization of what diversity is and how diverse identities should be positioned and expressed…” (Garza and Crawford, 2005, p. 602).

**Effects of the Sociological/Cultural Form of Deficit Thinking**

Valenzuela (1999) states that the major effect of deficit thinking, which targets the sociological/cultural backgrounds of immigrant/minority children, is a sense of alienation. He claims that instead of seeing immigrant/minority 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). In other words, these minority children are labeled as disrespectful, disengaged, unappreciative, and rebellious because they do not adhere to the dominant neoliberal norms that construct school culture (Valenzuela, 1999). Garza and Crawford (2005) also suggest that a binary contrast is drawn between dominant norms and minority lived experiences, which are seen as abnormal due to deficit thinking. “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” (Garza and Crawford, 2005, p.602). Furthermore, as a result of this contrast drawn between minority students and school culture a “…clash between students and school over the definition of caring and education [is created and] inevitably leads to disaffection and alienation on both sides” (Smith as cited in Valenzuela, 1999, p.246).

**Deficit thinking: A Socio-Economical Perspective**

The socio-economic framework demonstrates the connection between social class, economic status, and deficit thinking. This section is based on Anyon (1980), Gaab (1993) and Cuban’s (2004) work. Anyon (1980) defines social class as an outcome of three relationships namely: (i) the way a person relates to the process of producing goods, services, and culture in society; (ii) how one relates to the aspects of the production process through one’s own work; and (iii) the relations one has to the system of ownership towards other people and themselves at work in society. However, the question left unanswered is: How are children’s social class identities formed and judged
during their schooling process (Anyon, 1980)? In order to answer this question it is important for us to examine how students are taught and under what conditions they are taught.

The teaching style that is used when teaching working class students is explicitly instructional and often involves rote behaviour (Anyon, 1980). Instructional and rote teaching is rooted in the deficit assumption that working class children are incapable of learning any applied knowledge skills or critical skills (Anyon, 1980). Moreover, many teachers in working-class schools “attempt to control classroom time and space by making decisions without consulting the children and without explaining the basis for their decisions” (Anyon, 1980, p. 76). As a result of this teaching approach, knowledge skills that are required for powerful social positions (e.g. lawyers, doctors, managers) are withheld from the working class (Apple, 1979). Thus, working class students are never given the opportunity to excel at attaining positions of social power (Apple, 1979).

Working class students are only trained in practical skills which restrict them to trade positions (Apple, 1979). To put it more bluntly, “[s]chools in complex industrial societies like our own make available different types of educational experience and curriculum knowledge to students in different social classes” in order to maintain the status quo (Anyon, 1980, p.67). The classroom practices in “inner city” schools (i.e. schools highly populated by low socio-economic status “minority students”) are rooted in deficit thinking attitudes and pedagogies which reinforce the status quo (Apple, 1979).

Books (2004) also supports Apple’s conclusion, she claims,

[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

In other words, Books (2004) states that the deficit teaching approach in schools helps reinforce economic inequities amongst the working class. Gaab (1993) explains that working class children were treated with a deficit approach because they were incapable of “success” due to their low economic status. “The early seeds of deficit thinking were being sown with the common belief that poor children were less innocent” and thus had a natural disposition towards “inherent misbehaviour” (Gaab, 1993, p.178). Moreover, Gaab claims working class students are targeted by “…social policies and the ideology of the social economists [that] are driven by the belief that the poor and uneducated are responsible for all the social pathology that exists in society” (Gaab, 1993, p.179). In response to these deficit-based social policies and ideologies aimed at working class students, neoliberalism advises to “fix” the students by creating programs (e.g. behavioural classes, special education classes, home school programs) (Gaab, 1993).

Proponents [in positions of power] believed that by turning these [poor] children into useful, productive citizens [through social programs] they could eliminate the social ills of society. Unfortunately, these social programs were initiated with much indifference for the lives of the poor…(Gaab, 1993, p.179).

Due to the low level of ‘success’ that resulted from these social programs; “a pervasive belief that the poor were beyond redemption” was established (Gaab, 1993, p.179). Such a belief has reinforced and justified deficit thinking attitudes and practices toward working class students (Gaab, 1993, p.179). Often pervasive and dominant deficit attitudes in respect to poor children have helped to justify the unequal distribution of

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9 “Success” is a neoliberal value that encourages mainstream education, which is based on one dimensional curriculum that is rooted in Euro-centric middle class values and then generalized to everyone despite any cultural differences.
money toward the education of the poor (Apple, 1979). A current example of a program that has been created on socio-economical deficit assumptions is Ontario’s Regent Park, “Pathways to Education” program. It is a program that is designed particularly to address “the most economically disadvantaged regions in Canada. While extremely rich in diversity, it is a community that faces many race, language and cultural barriers” (cited in http://pathwaystoeducation.ca/comm-regent.html). Despite its well-intentioned objectives to:

- increase both retention in high school and academic success of students from the Regent Park area, to give increased opportunities and encouragement for young people to pursue post-secondary education, to develop their careers, and be part of the knowledge-based economy…(http://pathwaystoeducation.ca/comm-regent.html)

the delivery of the program is rooted in deficit thinking. The program runs solely on volunteers, who are often high school students tutoring elementary students. According to one of my grade seven students who goes to the Pathways program, “tutoring is provided to help teach students how to meet the school’s standards and excel on EQAO tests.” The program reinforces dominant schooling practices (i.e. standardized testing) and Euro-centric values (i.e. “competitiveness”) which are not reflective of the students in the community. The irrelevancy of these standardized tests was best articulated by one of my students who commented: “why should I have to learn about restaurant menus and going out when there is not enough money to buy bread in my house? For what… to get a grade to prove to a government (who does not even know my life) that I am smart”? The student was annoyed and frustrated with such irrelevant standardized testing and does not understand why she has to learn/ get tutored for such tests. Pathways to Education is a program that falls into the “good” neoliberal trap; trying to help low socio-economic
minority children to “succeed” but yet it perpetuates oppressive conditions for them. Cuban’s (2004) work also supports my critique of programs such as Pathways to Education, but in a broader context of economic concerns. He examines the economic damage that is bought about because of the deficit belief about poor children being incapable of learning (Cuban, 2004).

Cuban quotes Akers (a chairman of IBM, 1991) who claims, “[e]ducation…is a major economic issue…if our students can’t compete today, how will our companies compete tomorrow?” (as cited in Cuban, 2004, p.237). Cuban (2004) highlights the important role education plays in creating a stable, healthy and prosperous economy.

Throughout the 20th century business-inspired reform coalitions, driven by a deep belief that strong public schools, produce a strong economy, have changed school goals, governance, management, organization, and curriculum. In doing so, the traditional and primary collective goal of public school building literate citizens able to engage in democratic practices has been replaced by the goal of social efficiency, that is, preparing students for a competitive labor market anchored in a swiftly changing economy” (Cuban, 2004, p.237).

In other words, Cuban (2004) claims that currently in our neoliberal society, it is more important to prepare students for a competitive society by focusing on labor skills, instead of developing critically minded citizens. Such a claim implies that labor skills, which are often communicated with a deficit attitude toward students’ ability and agency, are essential in developing a high economic status. “According to national and international [standardized] tests results, American students have insufficient knowledge and skills and…this is why the economy suffers” (Cuban, 2004, p.237). Moreover, Cuban argues that because research supports the view; “…public school critics link test scores to worker productivity and the national economy…there is a tie between workers’ supposed skill deficits and America’s global competitiveness,” hence we must ensure our students
“succeed” on these tests (Cuban, 2004, p.238). As a result of these findings, Cuban asserts that standardized test scores are good predictors of economic status;

“…standardized test scores [are compared] to hourly wages by taking gains in the scores and computing corresponding increases in dollars earned” (Cuban, 2004, p.238). Cuban’s work seems to suggest that a deficit pedagogical approach (using standardized tests and teaching ‘efficiency’ skills) instead of critical skills is in the best interest of our society’s economy. Thus, students who have low socio-economic backgrounds are ironically expected to “succeed” on these standardized tests, which have been designed to fail them in life (personally and in the job market).

**Effects of the Socio-Economic Form of Deficit Thinking**

Gaab (1993) claims that because, “…deficit thinking continues to exist in our schools, [it is] communicating to [minority] children that they are somehow less deserving” of school funding and well equipped schools (Gaab, 1993, p.183). Moreover, Gaab states that because socio-economic research reveals that,

…many working class and poor schools are teaching children in rote, repetitive ways that exclude discussion and higher level thinking in order to provide students the skills believed to be needed in the blue-collar workforce (Anyon as cited in Gaab, 1993, p. 183)

In light of this research, deficit thinking assumptions toward the capabilities of working class children become reinforced and encouraged. Moreover, Cuban’s (2004) research also seems to blame the low socio-economic background of students for being the cause of a declining neoliberal economy, and thus “justify” deficit assumptions about these students.
Conclusion

This chapter explored and described three different frameworks of deficit thinking namely; pseudo-scientific, sociological/cultural, and socio-economical. Each framework was defined and explained according to research that was in support or critical of it. In addition, the conditions of each framework were also presented through narrative examples, which demonstrated the effects that these deficit frameworks have on inner city students.

Based on the literature review presented in chapter two, I will discuss the implications of each of the deficit frameworks in chapter three. I will argue that the ethical implications are consistent and in some cases overlap across the three different frameworks of deficit thinking. Then, from this critical analysis, I will articulate the conceptualization of deficit thinking. Finally, I will argue that the conceptualization of deficit thinking creates conditions that favour anti-democratic schooling.
Chapter Three

Ethical Implications of Deficit Thinking and Anti-democratic Education

Introduction

In chapter two I provided an overview of the literature on deficit thinking by organizing it into three main academic frameworks: pseudo-scientific, sociological/cultural, and socio-economic. The nature of these three academic frameworks was to help understand and illuminate how various individuals and groups often have deficit-based assumptions about marginalized groups. Each of these frameworks were explained with respect to the practical effects they had on “inner city students’” schooling experiences. It is important to keep the findings of chapter two in mind while reading chapter three as they are interconnected. In this chapter, I will critically discuss the overlapping ethical implications that arise from the three frameworks of deficit thinking as presented in chapter two. The ethical implications will be critically discussed and analyzed with respect to the practical daily problems and the perpetuating cycle of oppression that they create for “inner city students.” In order to understand the importance and the influence of these ethical implications of deficit thinking in the context of society (beyond schools), I will give a brief account of a current media report on the status of education. By presenting this media report, I will provide an overall picture of media influence on deficit thinking. Then, from this broader critical context, I will examine four particular ethical implications of deficit thinking in schooling: labeling, drilling/rote learning, standardized testing, and student disengagement. I will provide narratives in support of the four major ethical implications of deficit thinking. Each of the narratives emerge from my teaching experiences in inner
city schools. Lastly, I will offer the overarching conceptualization of deficit thinking that is derived from the aforementioned four ethical implications.

**Current Educational Affairs and Deficit Thinking**

On April 7, 2009 the local *Toronto Metro* newspaper published an article titled, “Website Gives Parents a Chance to Check out Schools.” The article announced that the Toronto Ministry of Education launched a new website, “The School Information Finder” [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/sift](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/sift). The site is a portal to providing information about any particular school in the Toronto District School Board (i.e. TDSB). The information that is disclosed to the public audience details community demographics (e.g. ethnic background, socio-economic background) and each of the schools’ scores and progress rates on standardized tests (e.g. Education Quality Accountability Office testing also known as EQAO). The proclaimed purpose of sharing this information with the parents of students prior to registering their child in school is to help them make an ‘informed’ choice for their child(ren)’s educational future. The ministry claims that, “[t]his tool was developed to give parents a reliable source of information about Ontario’s publicly funded schools. Information about student achievement, the student population and the school itself provides a richer profile of each school and helps provide overall context ([http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/sift/faq.html](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/sift/faq.html), 2009).” Moreover, this website also allows for parental involvement in the school community. However, the questions that the article raises for me are: Is there a sublimated message beneath this “proclaimed purpose”? In other words, is there a political message that is being sent out indirectly, which is disguised in a good liberal manner? In whose benefit is this political message? What
implications does this have on the general public and the quality of schooling? Who is the media reflective of and supported by?

The member of the Canadian Press who wrote the article questioned the website and problematized the implications of such a website and how this website will affect communities on a practical level. “It allows parents to say, ‘I don’t want my child going to a school, where income levels are below the norm or where there’s a certain racial/ethnic makeup to an area” (Runciman as cited in Toronto Metro, April 7, 2009; p.3). Moreover, I think the ethical implications of such a website are alarming as the information disseminated from it permits society to reinforce or resurface deep deficit assumptions about certain community demographics (i.e. ethnicity and socio-economic status in relation to standardized tests). From this critical perspective of reproducing the status quo through deficit assumptions, I claim that current schooling, as portrayed by the media, is “anti-democratic schooling.” I define anti-democratic schooling as schooling that is based upon deficit thinking frameworks (e.g. pseudo-scientific, sociological/cultural, and socio-economic). As a result, I believe that these deficit frameworks are often located in the schooling context and hence, can be partly attributed to the media and how it communicates with the public.

The [i]nequalities in public schooling reflect a larger social segregation along the lines of race, ethnicity, and class. Hochschild and Scovornick speak of ‘nested inequalities’ that shape student’s experiences in school. The first ‘nest’ is statewide; school funding varies significantly among states. The second is district wide; funding varies within as well across states. The third ‘nest’ is school wide; even within districts, significant disparities can be found…Finally, schools do not

\[10\] The media is politically controlled by a select group of people, who are from the high socio-economic classes; and thus push for their own political agenda through media productions. Ironically, everything that is communicated through media is normalized as “common knowledge” or “public knowledge.” (Books, 2004).
necessarily provide the same experience for all their students” (Books, 2004, p. 105).

These ‘nested inequalities’ often make us turn ‘a blind eye’ towards deficit-based inequities and contribute to biased ‘public knowledge’ which is created and communicated through media (Books, 2004). Moreover, “[these] nested inequalities’ mean poor children are far more likely than others to have inexperienced or uncertified teachers, teachers without a background in the subject matter, or teachers with relatively low academic skills” (Books, 2004, p. 106). Therefore, a perpetuating cycle in schools of creating, communicating and sustaining deficit assumptions about students is supported by the media.

Beyond the media’s reincarnation of deficit assumptions, which are based on ‘real facts’ of test scores and ethnic background correlations, there is the reality of poverty statistics. Schooling experiences provided under high levels of poverty are often full of inequities that negatively influence and impact the lives of poor children. “Schools themselves bend and break under the weight of poverty. In most urban schools [i.e. city schools that are populated by poor minority students], academic outcomes correlate powerfully with the percentage of low-income students the school serves” (Books, 2004, p. 108). In light of this, the scores on the standardized tests can be questioned for their accuracy with respect to providing each child an equal opportunity to succeed at these tests. As test scores decline or stay at the low end of the spectrum in urban schools the poverty level in those communities increases or remains consistent (Portelli, Shields, and Vibert, 2007). Such test patterns are consistent with poverty statistics for urban areas. “Recent claims are that twenty percent of American children are living in poverty, while in Canada the numbers have been cited as high as twenty-five percent for urban centres
and nineteen point nine percent nationally” (as cited in Portelli, Shields, & Vibert, 2007, p.2). The question that lingers from these statistics is: Why is there such a high level of poverty amongst certain minority communities? In other words, what is the cause of this deeply embedded poverty and who is responsible for it? Unfortunately, the answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this thesis as they are grounded in the politics of government. However, the effects that poverty has on the schooling experience of urban school children (i.e. inner city students) directly links back to deficit thinking and assumptions made in classrooms.

Too often, schools and classrooms offer poor children not a space in which to encounter new ideas and explore their creative potential in an atmosphere of support and affirmation, but rather ‘landscapes of condemnation’. Schools and classrooms become places where too many poor children learn that they do not matter much (Books, 2004, p. 113).

To gain a deeper insight into the ethical implications of deficit thinking in urban schooling experiences let us examine four effects of deficit thinking namely; labeling, drill/rote learning, standardized testing, and student disengagement.

**Labeling**

As a result of neoliberal influences, several educators believe that labeling students is necessary to effectively organize, assist and ensure that the needs of each student are met (Portelli, Vibert, and Shields, 2007). Ironically, labels (e.g. “behavioural”) are most commonly presented to ethnic minorities and stifle their confidence levels (Portelli, Vibert, and Shields, 2007). These labels act as new identities for “inner city students” (Portelli, Vibert, and Shields, 2007). The questions that remain about the neoliberal labeling practices are: How do labels get established? Who decides on the labels? Why does labeling occur?
Labeling is a complex process of differentiation, identification, and separation, both of objects (such as commodities for purchase) and of people…Within modern capitalist societies, practices of labeling operate within complex historically-defined relations of power, systems of representation, and sites of identity formation; sites where those in power have the privilege to frame the identity of those unable to name their own world collectively— for Freire, this means the oppressed” (Hudak and Kihn, 2001, p.15).

In other words, the oppressed with respect to “inner city schools,” would be the inner city students. These students have been stamped, labeled and shipped out into the greater society as ‘inner city students’ because of the complex relations of power and systems of representation that circulate in our neo-liberal society. As a result, even the literature used to explain the deficit thinking based schooling experiences in poor communities has been classified differently from the mainstream schooling experience. In particular, schools that primarily serve poor children are known to be “urban or inner city schools” and the students that attend these schools have been classified as “inner city students or at-risk students.”

The use of this term [student at-risk] is in reference to all the students whom schools have historically not served well, including students who do not belong to dominant social identity categories and students who, for whatever reasons, learn differently (Portelli, Shields, and Vibert, 2007, p.2)

Thus, a further line of distinction and classification rooted in deficit thinking is created; leaving the inner city child alienated from the ‘regular or average’ child. The effects of labeling on the student can be traumatic and often long-standing. Such effects of labeling were clearly communicated to me, by a former graduating elementary student. She explained that because she was labeled as a ‘behavioral’ student throughout most of her senior year that her chances to get into a good academic high school “were next to non-existent”. When I inquired why she felt that way, she responded, “Oh come on, no real high school wants a ‘problem’ child like me, so what is the use in even applying; I will
just end up looking like a fool.” I could hear the frustration in her voice and then asked her very cautiously why she thought she was a ‘problem child’? She shyly responded, “Well, I always get kicked out of classes because teachers don’t like my questions or ‘clever’ answers and say that I talk too much; plus on whatever file they have in the office it says I am a behavioural child with an attitude problem.” I was taken aback by her response and became silent for a moment, then she said: “Come on, you know the school, once you are told that you are a behavioural/problem child that sticks with you for good, I just hope I can bear this through high school.” After she finished saying this, there was an awkward silence and then lunch was over and classes resumed. Until now, almost a year later, I still can remember the frustration that the student expressed. As a result of discussing this labeling experience with my student, it had become obvious that she had internalized her labeled identity to the point where she was emotionally distressed by it. Also, our discussion helped me to recognize the long and short term effects labeling has on students. What I am left wondering about is: Why is there such a strong need to label every student, especially when there can be such negative effects on their schooling experiences?

It has been argued that there is a need to label and categorize people and things in order to have a sense of control and organization in society (Hudak and Kihn, 2001). While this may be partially true, the type of labeling (i.e. behavioural students in contrast to normal students, or boys in contrast to girls) and who endures the effects of it while others benefit from it, must be taken into consideration and re-examined.

Our labels and our ways of labeling emerge from the controlling mood [that is sustained by a neoliberal hyper reality]. The ways in which we name the young, the meanings we invest in labels for kids, both express the predominant
It is the children, who are labeled often incorrectly, that suffer the deepest points of hopelessness, because a big part of their identity in the public lens has already been constructed by their schooling experience (Hudak and Kihn, 2001). “To label others according to stereotype is to deny one’s own humanity, one’s own historical place within the world” (Hudak and Kihn, 2001, p.63). In other words, when a person’s humanity is denied their social identity is no longer in their control. As a result, the labeled person lives to fit (or is always controlled by) the preconceived labeled identity that is stamped upon them through social and cultural stereotypes/deficit assumptions (Smith as cited in Portelli, Shields, and Vibert, 2007). Many special education researchers (e.g. Ford and Grantham 2003, Hudak and Kihn, 2001, Trent et al., 1998) support the argument that incorrect labeling of students is often rooted in deficit assumptions that are socially and culturally constructed towards particular students. This argument makes me wonder about my former graduate student’s experience: why was she labeled a “problem” child when she did wonderfully in my class? One theory that has attempted to indirectly answer why such labeling (e.g. problem child) and special programs (e.g. special education, behavioural class) are created is the Child Saving Theory\textsuperscript{11} (Trent et. al., 1998).

The Child Saving Theory researchers argue that “special education for individuals with mental retardation emerged from a need for differentiated curricula for an increasingly diverse school-aged population composed of children” who have

\textsuperscript{11} Both the “Child Saving Theory” and the “Social Control Theory” have been explained in depth in chapter two, please refer back to it.
impairments and are immigrants from central and eastern Europe (Trent et al., 1998, p.278). Special education programs were designed with lower expectations and were conducted outside of the “regular” classrooms for primarily immigrant and impaired children (Trent et al., 1998). The implied deficit assumption is, children who are immigrants and/or impaired are not able to learn like “average” students, and need to be saved from themselves and removed from the classroom, by labeling them as “special education students” (Trent et al., 1998). Whereas, the Social Control Theory researchers advocate that “separate programs for the mildly retarded in public schools were created to separate immigrants, African American children, Native American children, and poor children from middle class and wealthy White children” (Trent et al., 1998, p.278). With respect to the Social Control Theory researchers’ argument the deficit assumptions in it are rooted in socio-economic stereotypes, which also have resulted in mislabeling and displacing “inner city students.”

Both of these theories are guided by an “overreliance on a [deficit] model that attributes learning and behavior problems to deficits that reside within children” (Trent et al., 1998, p.278). Moreover, it is because the deficit model has been used often in classrooms that we currently trace back and recognize the problems created in the special education etiology of behavior disorders (Trent et al., 1998). Trent et al. (1998) concur that the roots of deficit thinking in special education programs arises from a belief that some students function in a ‘subnormal’ way but are still human beings and deserve a chance to be educated (Trent et al., 1998). Trent et al. (1998) were supported by Menchaca who “asserted that beliefs emanating from deficit thinking contributed to beliefs about race and intelligence and eventually…pushed for separate, special education
programs in public schools” (Menchaca as cited in Trent et al., 1998, p.281). It was when the concept of learning disabilities was introduced that educators were able to systematically separate children within special education programs by race (Trent et al., 1998). Thus, “[t]his overreliance on a deficit perspective coupled with cultural socio-political, and economic forces characterized early special education efforts” (Trent et al., 1998, p.283). Early special education programs were used to segregate children by their race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Trent et al., 1998). This deficit-based segregation is also apparent in gifted programs (a part of special education programs).

“[Deficit] thinking effectively hinders educators from recognizing the gifts and talents of students who are different from the dominant culture” (Ford and Harmon, 2001, p. 141). Because of this deficit thinking approach, minority students, who often attend inner city schools, are excluded from gifted programs. The argument with regard to deficit thinking acting as a barrier for educators to recognize the gifts of minority students, is supported by the “…low referral rates of diverse students for gifted education services and the heavy reliance (sometimes exclusive reliance) on [standardized] tests that inadequately capture the strengths and cultural orientations of diverse students” (Ford and Harmon, 2001, p. 141). The heavy reliance on test scores and the general knowledge that results from these scores, reinforces deficit assumptions about “inner city students”:

...educators’ perspectives about students who struggle in school historically have been deficit focused. Eligibility categories for qualification for special education services are based on documentation of deficits in cognitive, physical, sensory, language, and/or emotional domains. Students who are seen by school psychologists for assessment or intervention are typically those who experience a challenge that prevents them from being able to profit from typical classroom experiences (Morrison et al., 2006, p.20)
In light of this perpetual deficit producing cycle created by the various tests mentioned above (often which are requested by teachers) it can be said, “inner city students” will continue to be underrepresented in gifted education (Ford and Grantham, 2003). When teacher referral is the only way or the first step for a minority student to be admitted into a gifted program and teachers are using smoke-screen practices (i.e. attendance patterns) to claim the student should not be permitted into the gifted program, “inner city students” will remain underrepresented (Ford and Grantham, 2003). It is assumed that attendance patterns are indicative of students not wanting to come to school, instead of realizing the possibilities of financial or home crisis situations, or the possibility that the school curriculum and school in general are disengaging for the students (Ford and Grantham, 2003; Portelli, Shields, and Vibert, 2007). Furthermore, “[t]eachers often use the behaviours of white students12 as the norm to compare diverse students to, and deviations from this perceived norm are unlikely to result in referrals to gifted education” and as a result, “inner city students” are excluded from these programs (Ford and Grantham, 2003, p.221). The mislabeling of students in combination with the deficit-based stereotypes of “inner city students” often can lead to a self-internalization, which also contributes to the underrepresentation of them in gifted programs (Ford and Grantham, 2003).

Due to ‘stereotype threat’ (i.e. when black students are overwhelmed with anxiety during test-taking situations) gifted African American students may underachieve deliberately, refuse to be assessed for gifted education services, and refuse placement if they meet criteria (Ford and Grantham, 2003, p.223).

12 The “behaviour of a white student” refers to the middle class Christian-Anglo attitudes/values that are revered (i.e. polite, have a drive for success, and the individual is more important than the value of collective community).
Thus, often “…teacher referrals [or deficit attitudes] serve as an effective gatekeeper, hindering minority students from beginning the process of screening and assessment” (Ford and Grantham, 2003, p.221). The question that remains is “…who labels whom and for what larger, political purpose?” (Hudak and Kihn, 2001, p.15).

Reflecting upon the labeling process it can be observed that “[l]abeling is about politics, power, and representation. This raises the questions of: “Who has the power to define whom, when [does this happen] and how” (Hudak and Kihn, 2001, p.22). It is in light of these questions that it becomes understandable as to how and why “…a child’s label could become an indictment of the family and its poverty, over which many immigrants have little control, especially within a system that was set against them” (Hudak and Kihn, 2001, p.15). However, the question of why “inner city students” are most often labeled as “behavioural or require individual educational plans with lower expectations” has not yet been directly answered. Apple contends that “children are labeled through the hidden curriculum [which echoes a neo-liberal economic agenda], through processes of sifting, sorting, and selecting to meet the demands of the larger economic order” (as cited in Hudak and Kihn, 2001, p.15). This contention made by Apple has received a great deal of support from other critical educators (e.g. Hudak and Kihn 2001, Ford and Grantham 2003, Portelli, Shields, and Vibert, 2007). I will not discuss this contention at length here but I will take this up in chapter four. Thus, with respect to all that has been discussed in regards to the ethical implications of labeling and its impact on “inner city students” identities, it can be concluded that if “[w]e value young people [then] we [will] refuse to label them, and refuse to accept them as merely
markets or stereotypes produced by the mass media or policy ‘experts’ with hidden agendas.” (Hudak and Kihn, 2001, p.69).

Freire (1998) builds on Hudak and Kihn (2001) arguments against labeling by providing an overarching moral argument against such deficit-based practices. Freire’s moral arguments are rooted in his epistemological and ontological frameworks. He advocates that knowledge comes from human subjects transforming the world through human practice (Roberts, 1998). Moreover, Freire states knowledge is always being created and is part of an ongoing process of discovery (in conjunction with critical thinking) which he terms “praxis” (Roberts, 1998). This critical thinking based knowledge making process is not the case with labeling. Labels are unethically created as they utilize standardized and definitive explanations (often based on pseudo-science practices or socially based on dominant values “according to the norm”) that identify the abilities or inabilities of children without engaging in praxis. “Freire speaks of knowing as a praxis, implying both a reflective and an active component. Knowing demands a curious, attentive, restless attitude toward, and interaction with, social reality” (Roberts, 1998, p. 98). In other words, labeling does not ethically engage in a critical and reflective dialogue with people, it dictates and assumes authority over them. Therefore, labeling is inconsistent with what Freire’s ethically grounded epistemological framework, which requires critical thinking and ongoing open dialogue about it. Building on this theme of knowing as an ongoing process, Freire presents an ontological argument that also claims that human beings are always unfinished beings (Roberts, 1998).

The human ideal that Freire urges us to recognize is, one that is constantly striving for “humanization” (Roberts, 1998). Humanization can only be practiced when
“human beings pursue their vocation of becoming more fully human when they engage in authentic praxis, through dialogue with others, in a critically conscious way” (Roberts, 1998, p. 99). This humanization process is ethical because it acknowledges “the educational significance of differences across class, race, and gender lines, …[and there] an implicit assertion in [Freire’s] work that there is something about being human which transcends these differences” (Weiler, 1991; Freire and Macedo, 1993, as cited in Roberts, 1998, p. 103). Again, labeling does not transcend differences between human beings; rather it amplifies and highlights those differences by processing generic labels on people. Labeling practices do not recognize the importance and value of humanization and contributes to unethically behaviour.

Moreover, Freire believes in order to live fully each human being must embrace this process of humanization because it is the only way to transform the current neoliberal world (i.e. one full of individual differences and the market-based ideologies) into a democratic world. Therefore, labeling, a deficit-based practice which finds its roots in neoliberal ideology contradicts the process of humanization. Freire claims that along side with our humanization process and ongoing journey of praxis, it is important for us to understand and strive collectively for a “universal human ethic“\(^\text{13}\).

According to Freire’s work (1998), the continuous pursuit of the universal human ethic should be everyone’s moral responsibility toward each other and the society they

\(^{13}\)“Universal human ethic” is a term coined by Freire (1998). However, it is never explicitly explained or defined in detail throughout his work. It is only conceived of implicitly and indirectly through his epistemological and ontological frameworks. I agree with both of these frameworks and the concept of “unfinishedness;” however, I am still unsettled to claim that there are no short term visions/goals which can be achieved. I believe that there are end goals which constantly change as time goes on but, nevertheless they are a crucial part of our pursuit of humanization/praxis.
strive to live in. According to Robert’s interpretation of Freire, “[w]e ought (collectively and dialogically) to consider what kind of world – what social structures, processes, relationships, and so on – would be necessary to enable (all) people in a given social setting to pursue their humanization” (Roberts, 1998, p. 104). It is with this moral understanding, Roberts (1998) claims that Freire encourages each person to rightfully “speak up and act” after critically reflecting on how and why neoliberal policies/practices/structures impede humanization. Labeling policies and practices leave no room for arguing or speaking against the “identifying” signifiers/labels or even room to critically examine the criteria used to produce such labels. Moreover, the unethical practical effects (such as identity assimilation, disrespect for school and teachers, failing grades, internalized “bad” behaviour etc.) of labeling are imposed on people. It is because of such instances, that Freire (1998) urges us to apply and utilize the universal human ethic. He claims that, the universal human ethic is an ethic that is not afraid to condemn the kind of [neoliberal] ideological discourse which supports an ethics of the market (Freire, 1998). Moreover, Freire states,

[the ethic of which I speak is that which feels itself betrayed and neglected by the hypocritical perversion of an elitist purity, an ethic affronted by racial, sexual, and class discrimination. For the sake of this ethic, which is inseparable from educative practice, we should struggle, whether our work is with children, youth, or adults (Freire, 1998, p.24).

From this statement it is understood that Freire thought educative practice (i.e. critical reflection, dialogue, and action) has a predominant role in helping pursue the universal human ethic. In closing, Freire emphasizes that when he refers to the universal human ethic, he is speaking of “something absolutely indispensable for human living and human social intercourse…In truth, [he] speak[s] of a universal human ethic in the same way
[he] speak[s] of humanity’s ontological vocation, which calls us out and beyond ourselves” (Freire, 1998, p.25).

Thus, Freire’s epistemological, ontological, and moral frameworks are all interwoven as they support one another. Roberts (1998) explains that Freire’s ontological and historical vocation of all human being is humanization; and that such an ideal can only be pursued through critical, dialogical praxis. As a result, the universal human ethic is called upon as the moral ideal which is necessary for our ever-changing world and our own “unfinishedness.” All three frameworks held by Freire exemplify ethical and critical thought and after closely examining each of them it can be concluded that deficit-based practices, such as labeling are unethical and thus problematic. Let us turn our attention to another deficit-based practice, drilling/rote learning.

**Drilling/Rote Learning**

Rote learning (i.e. using worksheets for learning exercises or repeating out loud text) is a common practice that occurs in most urban schools (Gaab, 1993). Many teachers at urban schools are often inexperienced and/or “burnt out” by ‘behavioural’ students. As a result of being “burnt out,” most inexperienced teachers resort to using worksheets as “busy work” in hopes of keeping students at their desks working independently without making any noise (Gaab, 1993). In most cases, at least in my teaching experience, I have noticed that rote learning has the opposite effect from what most teachers expect when using such worksheet exercises. For example, I can recall when I was a student teacher in a grade seven classroom; I observed one of my associate teacher’s teaching style and lesson. She had decided to give out “busy” worksheets to the students and upon receiving them after five minutes the students became very loud. At
first, I thought it was the students who were rowdy and loud because they did not know how to behave (this was my own deficit assumption). My associate teacher would often say to me: “these students have no real future lined up for them, and so teaching them was a waste of time.” She was their English and Science teacher and she firmly believed that because the students came from broken homes (i.e. being raised by “unfit parent(s)” and living in poverty) they had a very slim opportunity to graduate and pursue high school. I was shocked and frustrated by her words. However, I remained silent because I knew she was my superior at that given time. Over the course of my internship with this class, I learned more about the students and gained their trust. As a result, I was able to ask them how they felt about school, the work that they were assigned, and their futures. One of the boys who was the leader of the ‘in-crowd’ said to me, “the teachers at this school treat us like we are dumb and they don’t even want to be here, so why should we respect them?” I calmly responded, “well, if you give the teachers the respect they are asking for, maybe they will recognize your abilities and create more challenging and exciting lessons.” The student responded sharply, “why the hell should we always have to prove ourselves to these disrespectful teachers”? Once I heard this level of rightful frustration and anger in the young boy’s voice, I just nodded and said, “I understand.” Reflecting back on my associate teacher’s pedagogical style and attitude toward the students, I recognized how deeply embedded it was in deficit thinking. Her deficit assumptions about these childrens’ broken homes (i.e. in reference to their low socio-economic identity) and their correlation to students successfully entering high school was skewed. Such a correlation seemed to help her justify poor teaching strategies (i.e. rote learning), to which the students responded by being ‘rowdy and loud.’ Unfortunately, I
have heard other teachers speak in the staff room about how rote learning is an essential skill for these “inner city students,” as most of them will work in factories, following rote procedures and instructions. “Research has revealed that many working class and poor schools are teaching children in rote, repetitive ways that exclude discussion and higher level thinking in order to provide students the skills believed to be needed in the blue-collar workforce” (Gaab, 1993, p.183). Despite, the well-intentioned goal of assisting “inner city students” with their future “blue collar” job careers, I do not feel it is fair for these teachers to excuse themselves from preparing and delivering challenging lessons. Moreover, “intentions” are not good enough, especially when they are rooted in unethical assumptions about inner city students and their capabilities. Such a claim in regards to their future job opportunities entails a big unethical leap: because they are inner city children they are not intelligent enough and consequently, would be “lucky” to work in “blue collar” jobs. Quite frankly, in my opinion, the deficit mindset of the teacher is what partly prevents and sets up a barrier for the inner city child to strive and attain “white collar” jobs rather than the “inherent/intrinsic” capabilities of the child. It is very unfortunate that teachers unethically misuse their authority (by using pseudo-science based findings) to pre-assume and pre-determine the potential and capabilities of their students. Moreover, these unethical and presumptuous assumptions made by teachers about the capabilities of minority students often reinforce deficit claims about race and intelligence.

Racial differences in intelligence, it was contended, are most validly explained by racial differences in innate, genetically determined abilities. What emerged from these findings, regarding schooling, were curricular recommendations that the ‘intellectually inferior’ and the social order would best be served by providing these students concrete, low-level, segregated instruction commensurate with their
alleged diminished intellectual abilities (Menchaca as cited in Trent et al., 1998, p.281).

Until teachers recognize the ethical damage poor pedagogical approaches have on “inner city students”’ identities, the students will continue (and have a right) to be resistant and act out of deep frustration. Freire’s (1998) moral framework helps explain why poor pedagogical approaches such as drill/rote learning are unethical since they are abusive and harmful to the child.

Of course, the teacher can abuse students without physically hitting them. For example, by a variety of strategies that are prejudicial to the student in the course of the learning process, such as the teacher’s resistance to the worldview that the student brings to the classroom, a view obviously conditioned by his or her class and culture and revealed in his or her language, and which, thereby, becomes an obstacle to his/her learning possibilities (Freire, 1998, p.109).

In other words, by providing “busy” worksheets that do not challenge the students in any way, but rather suppress students’ personal (using their cultural identity and knowledge) and critical input. Teachers are acting unethically because of their deficit thinking based principles which assume that inner city students cannot be critically challenged, the opportunity to engage in critical reflection and critical dialogue are not given. As a result, inner city students often are forced to complete and memorize irrelevant subject material and their personal learning growth is stunted. It is in light of these ethical concerns that Freire states,

\[\text{[i]f we carry on with neoliberal practices [such as drill learning] we adopt an immobilizing ideology of fatalism…From the standpoint of such an ideology, only one road is open as far as educative practice is concerned: adapt the student to what is inevitable, to what cannot be changed. In this view, what is essential is technical training, so that the student can adapt and, therefore, survive (Freire, 1998, p.27).}\]

As a result of such a fatalistic perspective on the future of minority students, Freire cautions that we are failing to meet our ethical duties as educators, as the learning
opportunities and the right to learn and grow are being denied when deficit-based pedagogy is practiced. Moreover, it is unethical to not allow students to critically think, reflect and build their own perspectives on differences that exist among teachers and students. Freire (1998) claims that in order for the process of humanization to occur, students must question different styles of comprehension, interpretation, and appreciation of problems and questions that arise in daily learning situations in the classroom (Freire, 1998, p.24). Thus, because drill/rote learning does not leave space for humanization to occur and also it creates barriers for student growth and learning, it is unethical.

However, since student voices are not heard as equivalent to teachers’ voices the educational experience always has a top-down delivery process, regardless of the negative outcomes. An example of a current educational practice that happens irrespective of the students’ wishes is the provincial wide standardized testing, which reinforces deficit assumptions about “inner city students.” This issue of standardized testing will be taken up in the following section.

**Standardized Testing**

Standardized testing has almost never benefited the “inner city student” because it does not evaluate them on knowledge that is relevant or reflective of their life (Portelli, Shields, and Vibert, 2007). Yet, ironically, these tests are used as indicators of intelligence, and proponents of testing claim that tests help gage future schooling opportunities for “inner city students.” As a result, it is assumed that that the questions on these tests (which are mostly irrelevant to the lives of minority students) “verify” and “assert” “knowledge” that then becomes indicative of a student’s “intelligence.” “Instead of being viewed as subjectively created and integrated, knowledge is conceived as
something existing outside of the human mind that can be understood only by being tested within a controlled setting” (Goodman, 1992, p.23). The irony in this claim (in regards to how knowledge can only be conceived under controlled settings) is that no testing environment is one hundred percent controlled, at least not from the perspective of the “inner city student.” Home life influences the ability of many “inner city students” to perform well on these tests (Portelli, Shields, and Vibert, 2007). For example, there are many daily factors that may affect the “inner city student’s” ability to perform well on these tests (e.g. being hungry before taking the test, dealing with a traumatic family feud, working to feed the family, raising their siblings and having no time to study). Hence, the outcomes of standardized test scores are not a good measuring tool of what these students know and what they are able to know.

Decades of research document the link between poverty and educational achievement. The link exists not because poor children cannot learn as well as others and not because ‘some families’ or communities do not care about education. Rather, it exists largely because poor children are not given anywhere near the same educational opportunities as others, because public policy for decades has allowed poverty to grow and become so geographically concentrated it now overwhelms entire communities, including the schools, and thus poverty takes such a fearsome toll on young bodies and minds (Books, 2004, p.102).

The contextual factor of poverty must be taken into consideration when examining students and analyzing test scores. “Scores for children in the wealthiest families were sixty percent higher than scores for children in the poorest families—[this is] evidence of the multiple inequalities that disadvantaged children have ‘right from the starting gate’.

14 Local research from Statistics Canada and the Canadian Council on Social Development using the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (1994-1995) states, “the probability of experiencing poor functional health [i.e. cognition, vision, hearing, speech, mobility, dexterity, emotion, pain, and discomfort] declines from roughly 13% to 8% as family income rises from $10,000 to close to $30,000.” For more information please see appendix one.
Of the factors considered [(race/ethnicity, family educational expectations, access to quality child care, home reading, computer use, and television habits)].” The researchers concluded that socioeconomic status is the most heavily influential factor on cognitive test scores” (Books, 2004, p.102).

The ethical problem results from biased standardized tests (biases because they do not allow or consider different cultural perspectives) when evaluating a student’s “intelligence.” In particular, the ethical concern is that the student’s identity is being denied a place in the classroom, curriculum, pedagogy and evaluative processes. As a result of such denial and no acceptance, the student does not participate in “humanization” (Freire, 1998). Instead, the student is left disempowered, disengaged, displaced, and left with no voice in relation to deficit-based practices, such as standardized tests. Nevertheless, inner city students are faulted for performing lowly on these standardized tests, and moreover claims have been made that their performance on these tests are linked to explaining why the American economy is not doing as well as it could. “According to national and international test results, American students have insufficient knowledge and skills, and this mediocre group [acts as a barrier for] U.S. economic performance…” (Cuban, 2004, p.237).

Cuban (2004) explains why some theorists may find value in standardized tests. He believes that advocates of testing think that the tests help narrow and target which community is responsible for the economic decline in the U.S. capitalistic society. Moreover, Cuban explains, advocates for standardized testing further their argument by claiming that “…student deficits occur because local school boards and practitioners are hostile to competition, and have been unaccountable for student outcomes, and have little
managerial expertise, and have relaxed academic standards. They [inner city students] lack both the will and a grasp of the larger economic situation to solve these problems” (Cuban, 2004, p.237). Therefore, Cuban (2004) states that proponents of standardized testing often claim that such testing helps gage the future economy of the country and also provides an opportunity for parental involvement and school pride. Cuban (2004) found that advocates of testing are claiming that “[m]ore authority over schools must therefore be shifted to state and federal agencies, to develop uniform academic standards, [thus we] require more tests, and [need to] hold local schools accountable while promoting parental choice and school competition” (Cuban, 2004, p.237). To counter these arguments of advocates for standardized testing (highlighted by Cuban’s research), let us turn to research done by Ford and Grantham’s (2003).

Ford and Grantham (2003) provide another perspective on standardized testing by questioning, what the tests actually measure in contrast to what they claim to be measuring (e.g. parental involvement, literacy and numeracy abilities).

Ford and Grantham (2003) concur that,

…as school districts face increasing racial diversity, educators resort to increased reliance on standardized testing—biased tests…[because] the tests measured familiarity with American culture and English proficiency, not intelligence. This almost guarantees low test scores for immigrants (and culturally diverse groups) who are unfamiliar with U.S. customs, traditions, values, norms, and language (Ford and Grantham, 2003, p.218).

It has been consistent since the beginning of standardized tests, that low test scores always reside with immigrant students. The questions that arise from this fact are: who benefits from this pattern? And who is accountable for the creation of these tests?

As public schools were faced with educating increased numbers of immigrant children and former slaves, the introduction of intelligence test in the United States provided further justification for segregation based on race and ethnicity.
Furthermore, these tests afforded school systems the opportunity to legitimize their efforts to identify children for special education (Trent et al., 1998, p.281). These tests, then, provide an alibi for segregating minority students from ‘mainstream normal students’ (Ford and Grantham, 2003). Moreover, the results from these tests influence and determine the current and future possibilities of schooling for “inner city students” (Ford and Grantham, 2003). Research shows that intelligence tests (i.e. standardized tests) are effective at identifying middle-class White students as gifted but can ignore those students who (a) perform poorly on paper-and-pencil tasks conducted in artificial or lab-like settings; (b) do not perform well on culturally loaded tests; (c) have learning and/or cognitive styles that are different from White students; (d) have test anxiety; or (e) have low achievement motivation (Ford and Grantham, 2003, p.220).

However, regardless of these factors that have not been taken into consideration when examining the results of inner city students in the United States, “[m]ore than ninety percent of school districts use test scores for placement decisions. This nearly exclusive reliance on test scores keeps the demographics of gifted programs resolutely White and middle class” (Ford and Grantham, 2003, p.219) and discards the students who do poorly on the tests from gifted program opportunities.

Often, when the poor test results are questioned, deficit based explanations are given in response (Ford and Grantham, 2003).

Educators can choose from at least three explanations for the poor test performance of diverse students: (a) the fault rests within the test (e.g. its too long); (b) the fault rests with the educational environment at home and school (e.g. poor instruction and lack of access to high quality education); or (c) the fault rests with (or within) the student (e.g. he/she is cognitively inferior, genetically inferior, or culturally deprived) (Ford and Grantham, 2003, p.220).

These explanations remind me of an experience I had as a teacher at an OFIP (Ontario Focused Intervention Program) meeting. An education ministry representative had come
to our school to discuss strategies to get our students to “celebrate the coming of EQAO testing” (i.e. standardized testing). It was in my first year of teaching that I was a part of OFIP, and I had asked the representative “why our students should be celebrating a test that does not measure their intelligence but, rather helps reinforce neoliberal deficit-based assumptions about them?” In response to this question, the representative asked me, “how many years have you taught and what have you taught?” I answered accordingly, “this is my first year teaching health and physical education for all the grade divisions”. Before I could say another word the representative chuckled and said, “Let the years of experience come to you, and then you will understand.” With that said, the representative declared a break during which I heard the representative say, “new teachers have no clue just how these tests actually provide these inner city students’ schooling opportunities, seeing as their homes do not provide any guidance we are their last hope.” I was embarrassed by the tone of indigence this representative used while indirectly referencing me in conversation with another “experienced” teacher. Reflecting on this situation, I believe that the representative from the ministry had a different political agenda that was rooted in deficit assumptions about the capabilities of inner city students. The idea of “celebrating the test” with students felt like it was a “happy mask” placed on a hidden political agenda, much like the “Bell Curve” theory.

The Bell Curve theory was portrayed as the opportunity for boosting every student’s grade on a test, by making the highest score equivalent to one hundred percent with respect to daily classroom practices (Ford and Harmon, 2001). However, the Bell curve theory was created with the purpose of using intelligence quotas (IQ) to predict many factors including financial income, job performance, unwed pregnancy, crime, and
parents' socioeconomic status or education level (Wikipedia, 2009). Consequently, the
theory as described in

*The Bell Curve* (book) revived the deficit orientation. Among other grievous
errors (e.g., equating IQ with actual intelligence, viewing intelligence as static and
almost totally inherited, misinterpreting correlation as causation, etc.), the authors
over-interpreted and misinterpreted results of studies on the intelligence of
African American children. They ultimately drew the fatal conclusion that
African Americans are intellectually and culturally inferior to other cultural and
ethnic groups” (Ford and Harmon, 2001, p. 142).

It is in light of the conclusions that claim “race and class differences are largely caused
by genetic factors and are therefore essentially immutable…” (Gould, 1994, p.11) that
inner city students were ranked “less of a capable human” than other students from the
dominant European background. Freire’s (1998) moral argument, in particular, the
universal human ethic states that we need to collectively transcend individual differences
and recognize each person as a human subject first and foremost. Clearly the information
retrieved from the bell curve study (which highlights race and class as being identifying
markers of intelligence) is not compatible with the universal human ethic. Education
theorist, Stephen Jay Gould (1994) critically explains what the Bell Curve theory entails
and offers some criticisms of it.

Gould (1994) articulated the main points of the *The Bell Curve* theory as:

1. Intelligence exists and is accurately measurable across racial, language, and
national boundaries, 2. Intelligence is one, if not the most, important correlative
factor in economic, social, and overall success in the United States, and is
becoming more important, 3. Intelligence is largely (forty to eighty percent)
genetically heritable, 4. No one has so far been able to manipulate IQ long term to
any significant degree through changes in environmental factors - except for child
adoption - and in light of their failure such approaches are becoming less
promising 5. The USA has been in denial regarding these facts, and in light of
these findings a better public understanding of the nature of intelligence and its
social correlates is necessary to guide future policy decisions in America (as cited
After establishing these main points about the Bell Curve theory, Gould (1994) claimed that two of the main arguments that form the basis of the Bell Curve study are flawed. First in order for the theory to be accurate, the following premise must be accurate: “intelligence, in [Herstein and Murray’s] formulation, must be depictable as a single number, capable of ranking people in linear order, genetically based, and effectively immutable” (Gould, 1994, p.12). Gould (1994) argues that most of the above mentioned premises in the Bell Curve study (that is pseudo-scientific in nature because it is was an experiment with uncontrolled variables whose findings were generalized) are not true. He contends that intelligence statistics vary depending on the external and internal factors (i.e. time, content of test-relevancy, who were the participants etc.) and are not consistent and thus cannot be generalized. Secondly, Gould (1994) argues that next big fallacy in the Bell Curve study lies in its conclusion; “innate cognitive stratification…claims that racial differences in IQ are mostly determined by genetic cause – small differences for Asian superiority over Caucasian, but large for Caucasians over people of African descent” (Gould, 1994, p. 13). Again, Gould (1994) claims that the way in which the study was conducted was pseudo-scientific in nature (the generalization of experimental results on a small population of selective individuals). Moreover, he claims that the study was done with intentional political agendas in mind because at the time the general public was “obsessed with the meanings and consequences of ethnicity” (Gould, 1994, p. 14).

The way the results were presented and why they were presented was unethical.

Hernstein and Murray know and acknowledge the critique of extending the substantial heritability of within-group IQ to explain differences between groups, so they must construct an admitted circumstantial case for attributing most of the black-white mean difference to irrevocable genetics – while properly stressing that the average difference doesn’t help in judging any particular person, because so many individual blacks score above the white mean in IQ (Gould, 1994, p.14).
However, despite acknowledging the above critique their study’s conclusions released damaging information based on the average differences (Gould, 1994). Unfortunately, the unethical process used to do the “sample study” and then to publish the “average differences” created deficit-based assumptions about minority people. Freire (1998) would argue that such practices were unethical, as they highlight the “intelligence/race” differences between people and create dangerous friction between them. Moreover, Freire (1998) would state that Hernstein and Murray’s study (1994) reduces people to be assigned to a “value” (as the IQ apparently helps identity the types of professions, and their salary’s contribution to the economy) in correlation to a market-based ethic and not a universal human ethic. However, despite Gould’s well articulated criticisms of the Bell Curve theory, many authority figures (i.e. psychologists, teachers, professors) still correlate the results from tests with what the theory proscribes. Although using the Bell Curve theory reinforces unethical deficit assumptions about minority communities, often the greatest difficulties lie in the practical consequences that these deficit assumptions create for minority communities (Cuban, 2004).

Cuban (2004) claims that “[t]he problems begin…when public school critics link test scores to worker productivity and the national economy” (Cuban, 2004, p.237). It is once these links are established that economists begin to compute hourly wages in correlation to test scores, thus providing ‘invaluable’ information to big corporate companies (Cuban, 2004).

Using standardized achievement tests, for example assumes that these instruments measure the analytic, creative and practical skills and positive attitudes valued by employers. Gauging the results against hourly wages assumes that pay is set by equals, by employer and worker negotiating in fully competitive markets…conclusions are put forward as unadorned facts (Cuban, 2004, p.238).
The ‘invaluable factual’ information on pay rates and working skills are all deficit-based as they inaccurately depict the potential and productivity of “inner city students” (Cuban, 2004). “As a result, a broad coalition of civic, business, labor, and education leaders pressed district, state, and federal policymakers introduced vocational curricula so that U.S. students would be better prepared for the industrial workplace” (Cuban, 2004, p.238). Moreover, as a majority of inner city schools were introduced to a vocational curriculum they simultaneously enacted “tracking and ability grouping” classes (Books, 2004). Unfortunately, in these vocational and low-level tracking classes, expectations of students were very low, rote teaching became a regular practice and the most inexperienced teachers were given these classes to teach (Books, 2004). These unethical consequences that inner city students suffered (e.g. not having the opportunity to critically think, reflect, act/ grow, not be a part of “humanization” (Freire, 1998) ) because of standardized testing are often overlooked. Many teachers believe that once these students graduate from vocational classes, “at least they can get minimum paying jobs to live off of.” In other words, for students to be denied their right to good critical education (because of deficit assumptions rooted in class and race discrimination), clearly contradicts the principle of the universal human ethic. Although, teachers’ intentions about inner city students, working minimum paying jobs can be perceived as well intentioned thinking on behalf of the inner city students it is again a deficit-based argument. The important issue is “not whether schools should prepare students for productive labor. They should. The issue is that the single-minded pursuit of preparing [selective] students for college and high-paying jobs has narrowed the far broader and historic mission of civic engagement [and critical education]” (Cuban, 2004, p.239).
Unfortunately, because of this single-minded business pursuit that is founded on deficit assumptions about the potential and identity of inner city students, many students drop-out of school and often, the rest remain disengaged throughout their schooling experience (Portelli, Sheilds, and Vibert, 2007).

**Student Disengagement**

Educators who (knowingly or unknowingly) apply deficit thinking to their teaching practices, negatively impact the social, emotional, and psychological development of students (Ford and Grantham, 2003). As a result of this impact often “inner city students” lack self-esteem and lose hope in the educational system (Ford and Grantham, 2003, p.223). Some of my inner city students have claimed that the educational system is a “joke” because it is “boring, dry, and is designed to make us not get the big jobs or the big money, so who cares about the whole thing anyways.”

Willis’s (1977) work provides a critical insight on how the labor market is tightly related to an economic agenda. He explains that labor can be separated into two main divisions namely, work that requires high mental input (i.e. intelligence acquired from schooling) and then manual labor. His work contends that working class people often continue to get manual labor jobs. However, the question that remains is: How working class children remain predominantly in manual labor jobs?

With the current practices of drilling/rote learning that reinforce technical/passive skills, I contend that inner city students are being “trained” into getting prepared for manual “blue-collar” jobs. Moreover, student engagement (i.e. using critically engaging pedagogy) is not seen to be a priority amongst educators who are teaching inner city children, because they claim that these students “will be working in the manual labor
force anyway.” Such deficit assumptions on the part of educators are highly unethical as they pre-assume what the inabilities of inner city students are and do not provide the opportunity for critical thinking and learning to occur. Moreover, the inner city student is harmed by such deficit assumptions because they often end up internalizing these assumptions, as the truth.

Some minority students internalize the deficit-thinking orientations many teachers hold and become self-destructive towards their schooling opportunities by fulfilling the deficit assumptions (Ford and Grantham, 2003). “These students may also succumb to negative pressures to avoid achievement, particularly from their peers; and they come to associate or equate academic achievement with ‘acting White’ ” (Ford and Grantham, 2003, p.223). In other words, “inner city” students question their own abilities and embrace their differences presented to them by society (i.e. they embody the public identity created for them), and then sabotage their own achievement because of deficit practices and assumptions they encounter in their schooling experience (Ford and Grantham, 2003). For example, if a minority student is successful in getting admission into a gifted program (consisting of mostly “white” students) often because of the deficit assumptions that have been instilled in them about their abilities (i.e. “…poor children are still more likely than their more affluent peers to fall into the lower levels of literacy performance”) they resist, withdraw or rebel against participating in the gifted programs (Comber and Kamler, 2004, p.294, Ford and Harmon, 2001). Deficit assumptions are one of the reasons why, “[u]nderachievement is learned [as] [c]hildren are not born underachieving” (Ford and Harmon, 2001, p. 144). Consequently then, underachievement often “…results in inaccurate perceptions of marginalized students that may prevent
teachers from developing effective lessons that might better meet the needs of diverse students” (Milner and Smithey, 2003, p.297). Thus, the cycle of deficit pedagogy can lead to underachievement which reinforces the stereotypes about the capabilities of minority students that end up solidifying the deficit assumptions about them. Weiner (2006), who supports this analysis of deficit thinking, claims that one of the effects of deficit-based pedagogy is that it can obscure student strengths.

According to Weiner (2006), the deficit paradigm has two forms: 1) it blames the student and their family for the deficits is the cause of poor achievement; 2) it blames the teacher (i.e. personal biases, pedagogical strategies) for sustaining deficit thinking in schools and as accountable for poor achievement on tests. Weiner (2006) focuses on the second form of the deficit paradigm because there is not a lot of research that has been done on it. Weiner claims, “an impersonal, bureaucratic school culture undercuts many of the teaching attitudes and behaviours that draw on student strengths” (Weiner, 2006, p.42). As a result of educators not focusing on student strengths, students’ self-esteem levels decrease and often lead to disengaged behaviours at school (Weiner, 2006). Moreover, it is because of a bureaucratic culture of schooling that educators “…foster [a] pervasive assumption that when students misbehave or achieve poorly, they must be “fixed” because the problem [originates] in the students or their families, not in the social ecology of the school, grade, or classroom” (Weiner, 2006, p.42). She argues that because educators often place the accountability of low test results on the students’ inability to perform according to the neoliberal standards of “success” the deficit paradigm underlying the low results is often overlooked (Weiner, 2006). “School practices and assumptions emerging from the deficit paradigm often hide
student and teacher abilities. These assumptions are especially powerful because they are unspoken” (Weiner, 2006, p.42). Thus, what is not spoken about (i.e. deficit assumptions) is understood as the truth.

Howard (2003) extends Weiner’s (2006) argument by quoting Nieto in support of recognizing the impact of teacher deficit thinking paradigms on students. Nieto claims “the way students are thought about, treated by society, and consequently by the schools they attend (and the educators who teach them) is fundamental in creating academic success or failure” (as cited in Howard, 2003, p.199). With this in mind, Weiner (2006) explains why deficit pedagogical approaches obscure personal motivation to learn and create a state of disengagement.

One of the most common examples that exemplify the effect of deficit pedagogy is when “[educators] assume that a “hyperactive” (who is really disengaged) first grader requires medication and placement in special education (Weiner, 2006). I remember a time when I was talking to another colleague at work about how classes were going and showed him my class lists, he just laughed at who was in my grade one/two class. When I asked why he was laughing; he replied: “Oh come on, that is wired, the boys especially those five (pointing to my attendance list) will drive you nuts because they are just wired.” When I asked him what exactly did he mean by wire he said “you know super hyper the kids that need Ritalin, there are definitely several of them in your class!” I replied; “Don’t you need a prescription for Ritalin and anyway did you teach these students before?” He said, ‘ya, but if you ask me they all need Ritalin, otherwise that class needs special education teachers”. I said, “well, I guess it will be a wait and see, after all it is only the first week of school!” Reflecting back on my colleague’s comments,
I believe that he was well intentioned (however, critically, intentions make no
difference!) about advising me but nevertheless, the problem is that he had some deficit
assumptions ingrained in him about certain students. His assumption about the “hyper”
behavior of the boys was not justified. I believe the students could have been disengaged
in previous classes and as a result displayed “hyper” behavior, contrary to my colleague’s
rationale. As I have gotten to know those “hyper” boys this year, I have noticed that they
have been engaged in physical activity and remained focused in class. Hence, I believe
the people most affected by my colleague’s deficit pedagogical approach are his students,
because their disengagement was misread and not heard by him. As a result, the cycle of
deficit assumptions leads to deficit practices towards students, which then formulates
student disengagement and resets the cycle again continuously.

García and Guerra (2004) help explain the effects of a perpetuating deficit cycle
to be “…hinder[ing] [the educator’s] ability to appreciate the resources or the funds of
knowledge in every family and to view teaching and learning as an interactive process”
(García and Guerra, 2004, p.159). They conclude that educators who have a deficit
pedagogical approach toward minority students, tend to make assumptions on students’
life experiences or behaviours as being: burdensome, underprivileged, disrespectful and
disorderly instead of focusing on their learning characteristics or needs. Thus, the student
is told (or hears from other teachers/students) of their “behavioural problems” and often
ends up fulfilling that “hyper-active” identity created for them, or becomes completely
disengaged; either way, the student suffers in their schooling experience and beyond.

Ford and Grantham (2003) also claim, “[d]eficit thinking exists when educators
hold negative, stereotypic, counterproductive views about culturally diverse students and
lower their expectations of these students accordingly” (Ford and Grantham, 2003, p.217). Moreover, they state that it is difficult to isolate single instances of historical events that embody deficit thinking because deficit thinking is embodied deeply and implicated in policies, practices, and beliefs.

Perceptions—negative and positive—about racial backgrounds influence the development of definitions, policies, and practices…deficit thinking contributed to past (and current) beliefs about culture, race, and intelligence (Gould as cited in Ford and Grantham, 2003, p.218).

As a result of “[s]uch early assumptions and practices, …the prevailing belief that people and their ethnic backgrounds could be ranked for “mental worth” became normative (Ford and Grantham, 2003). Most deficit assumptions about why students are disengaged at school can be attributed to tests about American culture (e.g. standardized EQAO tests). Often students believe because they are not successful on these tests, they are not able to succeed at school and therefore display attitudes of disengagement. Ford and Grantham (2003) contend it is the deficit thinking pedagogical approach of teachers which privileges white behaviour/success as the norm to which minority students are compared and evaluated.

Teachers often use the behaviours of White students as the norm to compare diverse students, and deviations from this perceived norm are unlikely to result in referrals to gifted programs… (Ford and Grantham, 2003, p.221).

Teachers are given the power of providing opportunities to students (whether they are White or not) to enter into gifted/special needs programs – their views impact students’ confidence and attitudes towards school. Thus, when a teacher takes a deficit approach toward minority students they stifle all possibilities of learning opportunities for them, and often leave “inner city students” feeling vulnerable, lost and disconnected (Ford and Grantham, 2003).
Ford and Harmon (2001) agree that deficit thinking limits the possibility of learning opportunities for minority students, but also further state that it hinders the educator’s ability to recognize “difference” as a positive opportunity. Often “difference” in learning styles is misinterpreted as disengaged behavior (Ford and Harmon, 2001).

Milner and Smithey (2003) define deficit thinking as “…a way of thinking about persons from cultures, races, or social backgrounds other than one’s own as being not as intellectually astute or socially adept as you” (Milner and Smithey, 2003, p.297). García and Guerra (2004) further support the claim that “difference is equated to deficit” according to educators who have a deficit approach towards minority students.

[Educators] believe that the students and the families are at fault because, from their perspective, “these children” enter school without the necessary prerequisite knowledge and skills and the so-called uncaring parents neither value nor support their child’s education (García and Guerra, 2004, p.151).

Educators, who implement deficit pedagogy toward minority students, create schooling practices that are modeled on a deficit approach which constantly creates conditions that are favorable for disengaged behaviour. Why is such disengaged behaviour unethical? Let us turn to Dei’s (1997) work to get a critical insight on why creating such disengaged conditions is unethical.

Dei’s (1997) work on student disengagement and “dropping out” offers a series of narratives that provide student insight on why student disengagement occurs. From his study, the most predominant reasons why students felt disengaged in school were: the curriculum was irrelevant to their lives; school policies and procedures were delivered in

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15 Dei’s (1997) work argues that the long term practical effect of student disengagement in class is directly connected to dropping out of school. He claims this holds true for most minority students, in particular African-American students (on which his study is based upon).
unethical ways; and there was no support system designed to help them cope with this ongoing disengagement (which often led to “dropping out”) (Dei, 1997). Let us examine each of these reasons more closely, in order to understand their unethical underpinnings.

According to Dei (1997) the current school curriculum is based on middle class values and Euro-centric views. In particular, the literature content of English, History and Geography illustrate the one-sided perspective on the world (Dei, 1997). Dei’s (1997) study provides the narratives of many Black students who were not able to engage with school curriculum because they did not see themselves reflected in it.

The school was seen as unable to engage students and, in turn, students were seen as unable to make relevant connections between their education and their everyday lives. The student narratives revealed that racial issues and a Eurocentric curriculum play a large role in discouraging Black students from pursuing their education (Dei, 1997, p. 69).

As a result of being disengaged by school, many minority students have been discouraged to continue or fulfill their educational pursuits. This discouragement and disengagement impedes their right to have access to a critical and engaging education. Moreover, when these rights are denied, deficit-based assumptions become self-filled (e.g. Black students are underachievers; Black students are incapable of succeeding at school and will drop out eventually etc.) (Dei, 1997). Thus, having a non-inclusive, Euro-centric curriculum that is not engaging for minority students is unethical.

Another argument given in Dei’s (1997) study, for why there is such a high level of disengagement amongst Black students examines how school policies and the reinforcement of them are enacted towards Black students. In particular, in the Dei’s (1997) student narratives there is discussion around the policy of being late and suspended.
…teachers and administrators take up school policies in ways which appear counterproductive to keeping students in schools [or engaged]. The practice of being sent to the office for being late and then being kept for anywhere from ten to thirty minutes with other latecomers…students suggested that this practice only exacerbates the situation by forcing students to miss a greater amount of class time than if they had been allowed to stay in class. Similarly, the practice of suspension for skipping class…helped them ‘out the door’ (Dei, 1997, p. 68).

In other words, students are frustrated by always being pulled out of class, and then not knowing how to re-enter class because they have missed so much information/instruction. As a result they disengage themselves from schoolwork altogether (Dei, 1997).

Unfortunately, it is because administrators and teachers reinforce these late/suspension policies in ways that are harmful to the minority student (i.e. because they miss the opportunity to learn critically and exercise their right to democratic education) that their actions are unethical. Thus, the disengagement which results because of the implementation of aforementioned policies creates unethical implications for the future possibilities of minority students’ education.

Lastly, Dei (1997) articulates that minority student disengagement also happens because school systems are lacking a support network that understands the students’ needs and concerns. Some of these concerns include: problems at home because of cultural differences, lack of parental guidance/support, balancing employment and school (because lack of income at home) etc. Unfortunately, when there is no where to get advice on these concerns, minority students develop low self-esteem and often take on a fatalistic attitude (Dei, 1997).

Lack of encouragement by teachers and family serve to compromise personal and cultural self-esteem. The result, a diminished sense of confidence in one’s ability, can therefore lead to a sense of fatalism in which, as these narratives show, students begin to internalize negative self-concepts and feel that the demands of schooling are beyond their capabilities (Dei, 1997, p. 67).
Without having such support networks that can understand the concerns of minority students, these students are left isolated and not helped (Dei, 1997). As a result, a sense of resentment towards the school can be developed, causing a strong dislike and disengagement for school (Dei, 1997). Moreover, this disengagement can then have serious ethical implications on the future direction and current education possibilities. If minority students “drop out” of school because they are disengaged (due to a lack of support networks), then they will not be able to enact Freire’s (1998) universal human ethic.

**Conclusion**

The four implications critically discussed above, labeling, drill/rote learning, standardized testing, and student disengagement; all victimize and target “inner city students.” In particular, the deficit thinking assumptions made about inner city students are rooted in systemic inequities (i.e. socio-economic differences, racial/ethnic differences) that are invasive in schools and society. These differences are representative of the binaries that are constructed in alliance with neoliberal thinking and values. Unfortunately, neoliberal thought and values set the “standards” or “norms” against which everyone is measured. Thus, the public schooling system which is modeled on neoliberal thinking and values also recreates a space in which deficit thinking and assumptions are reinforced, communicated and continue to exist.

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 on the basis of misinformation and
It is in light of this conceptualization of deficit thinking and its ethical implications that neoliberal thought and values (which are at the root of public schooling) must be questioned, analyzed and reassessed through critical inquiry.

This chapter explored and described four implications of deficit thinking, which have serious ethical consequences: labeling, drill/rote learning, standardized testing, and student disengagement. Each implication was explained, analyzed, and critically reflected upon. Moreover, each implication was supported by current narratives from an “inner city” school.

Based on the implications of deficit thinking presented in chapter three, I will discuss the philosophical problems that arise from the current neoliberal state of “anti-democratic” schooling. I will explore the roots of anti-democratic education and how it impacts schooling practices. I will argue that anti-democratic schooling is harmful, and further critically discuss who benefits from it. After which, I will present briefly, what practical and philosophical stance needs to be taken to create favorable conditions for democratic education possibilities.
Chapter Four

Neoliberal Nature of Anti-Democratic Education

Introduction

In chapter two, I presented an overview of the literature on deficit thinking, and I organized it into three academic frameworks: pseudo-scientific, sociological/cultural, and socio-economic. Moreover, I explained the practical effects these frameworks had on “inner city students.” Next, in chapter three I expanded on the practical effects of deficit thinking by critically discussing the ethical implications of deficit thinking. In this chapter, I will develop an argument that connects deficit thinking to anti-democratic schooling.

I will begin chapter four by briefly highlighting the political and historical background that has given rise to neoliberal values in schooling. In particular, I will address how colonialism continues to influence schooling practices and policies on a macro-system level (i.e. school and political system). After which, I will discuss the impact the macro-system has on the micro-level daily school practices and how these reinforce and create a sustainable environment for deficit thinking based schooling practices (i.e. anti-democratic schooling)\(^1\). Then, I will critically discuss anti-democratic schooling and the explanations that have been given in defense of this schooling.

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\(^1\)Deficit assumptions about inner city children and their capabilities are interwoven into classroom pedagogy and school culture. As a result the classroom pedagogy and school culture become also rooted in deficit thinking, and create serious ethical problems (previously discussed in chapter three) for the learning opportunities for inner city students. Thus, because of the deep ethical concerns created by deficit practices in schools, I argue that current schooling is anti-democratic (and, by implication, not ethically sound).
Finally, I will present one of the main arguments for why anti-democratic schooling is problematic.

**Political and Historical Context of Education**

Compulsory schooling has always been a part of the political planning agenda for North America (Portelli, Shields and Vibert, 2007). Schooling is perceived from an economic framework that is rooted in neoliberal/capitalistic thought and values (Anyon, 1980). The government measures a ‘school’s success’ by how well the pre-determined curriculum is delivered, the results of standardized tests, and how well students can adapt/assimilate/embrace ‘school culture’. As a result of this current neoliberal framework, schooling\(^\text{17}\) has become a narrowly defined term, which limits the possibility of democratic education (Portelli, Vibert and Shields, 2007). Consequently, the importance and value of schooling is not given the attention and acknowledgement it requires, despite it being responsible for shaping future citizens.

One of the most important institutions within an industrialized society such as ours is school. All citizens spend a considerable amount of their childhood inside school buildings. Schools teach children about society through subjects such as social studies, science, and literature. However, the form and structure of schools also teach children about societal values and arrangements. Given this situation, elementary schools play an important role in supporting and promoting individualism in the United States (Goodman, 1992, p.22).

I believe that democratic education needs to provide the explanations and openly air the ‘dirty politics’ behind schooling. Democratic education extends beyond the neoliberal conception of schooling. Moreover, I contend that democratic education allows students and educators to critically examine the deeply rooted ethical problems that underpin deficit thinking practices in schools and the greater social inequities in our neoliberal

\(^{17}\) Schooling is seen as what occurs in an institution (i.e. school), which is monitored and directed by neoliberal agendas.
After embodying Freire’s notion of praxis, through critical pedagogy, I believe that democratic education offers guidance and the necessary “tools” required to begin understanding and dealing with these bigger ethical problems. Burbules and Berk (1999) interpretation of Freire’s notion of critical pedagogy clearly explains what role praxis takes in helping formulate true democratic education possibilities:

The task of critical pedagogy is to bring members of an oppressed group to a critical consciousness of their situation as a beginning point of their liberatory praxis. Change in consciousness [(i.e. thought)] and concrete action [(i.e. practice)] are linked for Freire; the greatest single barrier against the prospect of liberation is an ingrained, fatalistic belief in the inevitability and necessity of an unjust status quo (Burbules and Berk, 1999, p.51).

Thus, I believe that it is only with democratic education that students and educators will be able to understand the serious damaging unethical nature of neoliberal schooling practices.

Proponents of democratic education are cognizant of neoliberal value/thought laden school practices (e.g. drilling, standardized testing, labeling, student disengagement). Consequently, they contend that critical pedagogy must provide students with the necessary tools required to transform inequitable, undemocratic, or oppressive institutions and social relations (Burbules and Berk, 1999). Moreover, they examine the neoliberal framework by questioning the criteria used to create the school curriculum, the criteria used to create/assess/evaluate standardized tests, the assimilation process of school culture (which is reflective of the dominant Euro-centric middle/upper class).

Furthermore, democratic education guides and assists with teaching students about “real life” politics that are relevant and are based on their own life experiences\(^\text{18}\). The

\(^{18}\) Portelli and Vibert’s (2003) conception of a “curriculum of life” articulates a central component to what I conceive to be democratic education.
“curriculum of life” is a present day example of how to make the current anti-democratic (full of deficit schooling practices) schooling curriculum into a democratic one (Portelli and Vibert, 2003). The “curriculum of life” addresses the ethical concerns that arise from deficit-based schooling practices (in particular disengagement in school) (Portelli and Vibert, 2003). They contend that if the students’ lived experiences and identities are taken in consideration and lead/guide the learning experiences they have at school, the schooling experience will be one that engages them and gives them the opportunity to exercise “praxis” (Portelli and Vibert, 2003; Freire, 1998). Such an engaging and ethically sound curriculum then acts as a beginning opportunity to implement democratic education possibilities in schools (Portelli and Vibert, 2003). However, beyond this, I think democratic education needs to embrace Noddings’ (2005) conception of “ethics of care” and provide a space for making educators and the education system accountable to its students. Noddings (2005) argues that it is essential that we are physically, emotionally, and mentally aware of our students’ needs. Moreover, she states that we need to do our best in fulfilling their needs, especially those that interrupt or influence their learning/growing opportunities during their schooling experience (Noddings, 2005). Her argument is aligned with Dei’s (1997) ethical concerns about student disengagement and “dropping out.” She believes that it is the ethical responsibility of teachers to hear and understand students, because a failure to do this may result in creating learning barriers for the student (i.e. student disengagement). By providing this emotional, physical, and mental space and relationship with the student, she argues a trusting relationship is built and a network of support would be established (Noddings, 2005).
believe having a network of support is essential for students because without it learning may not even begin (as highlighted by Dei’s work discussed in chapter three). Currently, poor children’s experience in school too often mirrors their experience in the broader society...Children in poor communities too often end up in schools without adequate heating, cooling, or sanitation, and their teachers on the whole are less qualified than those in middle-and upper-class communities (Books, 2004, p.101).

Therefore, it is essential that we critically look into creating possibilities for democratic education if what we aim for is a truly democratic society. To understand the need of democratic education possibilities, it is important for us to analyze the current state of anti-democratic schooling, which can be attributed to colonialism.

**Colonialism and Macro-level Effects**

Steven Biko’s early work urges us to ask: “Why is it necessary for us as colonized peoples to think and reflect collectively about a problem not of our creation i.e., the problem of colonialism?” (as cited in Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.1). In response Dei and Kempf state that, “[i]n order to understand the knowledge and resistance of the past as it relates to contemporary politics of resistance, one has to know and learn about the past” (Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.1). They believe that colonialization still exists in current schooling practices and school structures (Dei and Kempf, 2006).

Colonialism is not dead. Indeed, colonialism and re-colonizing projects today manifest themselves in variegated ways (e.g. the different ways knowledges get produced) and receive validation within schools, the particular experiences of students that get counted as [in]valid and the identities that receive recognition and response from school authorities (Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.2).

Unfortunately, colonialism maintains a hierarchical gap between the “white folks” and the “coloured” because it privileges the former group over the latter (Dei and Kempf,
The “coloured” are seen to be inferior and thus less deserving of various life opportunities (e.g. in the employment sector, housing, education etc.) (Dei and Kempf, 2006). Colonialism sustains “a politics of domination which informs and constructs dominant images of both the colonizer and the colonized” (Memmi as cited in Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.3). The media, the neoliberal values, and the school culture all reflect “dominant images” according to colonial ideals (e.g. what makes an individual “successful”, “happy”, “fulfilled” etc.) which often go undetected (Dei and Kempf, 2006). In addition, due to colonialism most of the processes, policies, practices and structures on which schooling is founded on are pervasively white and middle class (Dei and Kempf, 2006). For example, “notions like school readiness, early and emergent literacies, meritocracy, background knowledge, and previous experience are all based in unexamined assumptions that universalize white middle class habitus” (Portelli, Shields, and Vibert, 2007, p. 38).

A great part of the problem confronting Euro-American/Canadian education is the incessant scripting of Western civilization, the fabrication of whiteness and the racial boundary policing that come with these practices. The dominance of Western civilization and the accompanying racial supremacy is anchored in a fabrication of whiteness (Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.7).

Another example, which depicts the “fabrication of whiteness,” is the notion of a “common sense” language used in Western schools. The language of what “normal,” “success,” “respect,” and many other terms mean ultimately shape and contribute to school culture. School culture surrounds all students including the minority students who are often not familiar with the “common sense” language (Dei and Kempf, 2006).

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19 The effects of colonialism can be taken up from many different perspectives such as race, sex, class and so forth. For the purposes of this section and the length of the thesis in mind, I will only be focusing on the race perspective.
Unfortunately, the minority students are expected to internalize and assimilate to the “normal” standards of expected behaviour and standard achievement charts. These students are judged and evaluated according to school culture that privileges Western/Euro-centric values and views (Dei and Kempf, 2006). As a result, many minority students suffer as a result of “battling out” their home cultural values and viewpoints in contrast to the school’s cultural values and viewpoints (Dei and Kempf, 2006). Thus, Dei and Kempf (2006) argue that language (an essential daily component to school culture) influences minority students’ identities and learning possibilities.

Moreover, Dei and Kempf contend that, “language is also very central when it comes to notions of exclusion, Othering, stigmatization and the resistance politics that are called for when challenging such practices” (Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.16). Consequently, when minority students challenge school culture (views or values) they become constrained by school culture “language” and/or policies. When there is no room for other cultural views or values to exist and furthermore, there is no language to explain them, the battle is heavily armoured on one side and leaves the other extremely vulnerable.

Language is the unsaid discourse. In other words, language is not only what is overtly said but what is also left unsaid...For example, the way in which colonial languages, through globalism and transnational practices, as well as through linguistic racism, and the symbolic capital of language serve to discriminate and disadvantage the colonized (Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.16).

Language that is used on a daily basis in schools can lead to the alienation of minority students and leave them with a daunting uphill battle (Dei and Kempf, 2006). In addition, students who are racially privileged (i.e. come from high economic backgrounds but have an ethnicity that is considered a minority) choose not to engage in such uphill battles (Dei
and Kempf, 2006). As a result of the current school culture created by “…often racially
dominant subjects [who] produce knowledge, construct identities, and garner credentials
on the backs of the racial Other [i.e. minority students]…[t]he knowledge produced in the
classroom, then, largely benefits Whites at the expense, and by the expending, of Non-
whites…” (hooks as cited in Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.57). As a result of this school
culture students with minority backgrounds

…have cultured within [them] a racism and a comfort with White supremacy. The
racism is a quiet one, understood best not through my words or actions – for I
have long spoken anti-racism – but through the instincts and reactions that I have
come to interrogate and have attempted to change…” (Dei and Kempf, 2006,
p.129).

**Colonialism and Micro-level Effects**

In light of the macro-level effects of colonialism that define what we know as
“schooling,” “school culture,” “common language” and so forth, it is no surprise that
these effects also deeply influence the classroom practices, and thus the students directly
on a micro-level. Colonialism has an insatiable greed, it imposes itself upon the present
and the future of a dominated country, and extends itself by “emptying their [minority
peoples’] brains of past histories” (Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.132). Moreover, colonialism
functions at such a smooth level that it “uses a kind of perverted logic, which turns to the
past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it” (Fanon as cited in Dei
and Kempf, 2006, p.132). As a result, it makes the identity of minority people (their
culture, history and values) disappear, become suppressed, and often distorted; this is
evident in the social studies curriculum mandated by Ontario.

If one looks at the pre-determined curriculum documents given by the Ontario
ministry of education then it can be seen how,
… difference is ignored, suppressed or not taken up in classrooms and curricula. It is not only under the tutelage of invading colonizing regimes that people find themselves excluded from the format and content of their education… but immigrants and racialized minorities are similarly excluded from/by dominant pedagogical practices” (Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.130).

All minority students have internalized the deficit assumptions that underlie many school practices (which do provide them with critical thinking skills, dispositions, and opportunities) without questioning their validity. For example, many racialized minorities do not question why they are not able to see their cultural backgrounds and identities reflected in the curriculum. Moreover, many minority students have been taught to believe that as part of the colonized group they have been elevated above their “jungle status in proportion to [their] adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards” (Fanon as cited in Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.133). Sadly, the “uni-focal history of dominant/colonial education serves to amputate marginalized people from their past and consequently from their present” because it does not inform them of their past (an integral part of the their identity) and neither does it place any value on providing an opportunity for this to occur (Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.132). In the social studies curriculum documents, only selective parts of Canadian history are shared and their descriptions are carefully described with “politically correct” terms, and those parts that are unfavourable in nature to Canadian politics are not mentioned. As for history that lies outside the participation of Canadian politics such as world affairs in under-developed countries (e.g. genocides); these are not shared.

In Ontario, the educational curriculum is developed by the provincial government and is standardized across the province’s thousands of public and private schools.

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I have explained why racialized minorities are excluded by dominant pedagogical practices, in particular the content of the current Euro-centric curriculum in chapter three. Please refer to pages 88-92.
Teaching resources are traditionally developed around the government curriculum. The government’s role in the education process is thus paramount (Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.136).

An example of distorted history curriculum is, “[i]n the case of popular representations of Aboriginal Peoples and perspectives in dominant Canadian history, not only are the people and perspectives largely absent, but so too is the story of the attempted genocide of the People of Turtle Island and their history” (Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.131). As a result, it is troubling to know that knowledge conveyed to students in public schools is politically controlled and as a result, students generally know only a fraction of what truly happened in history. Dei and Kempf state, “[t]hose who teach history do not simply convey knowledge, but go much further and construct it through conscious and unconscious inclusion of historical perspectives, contributions and events” (Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.131).

The case study…Survey of Ontario Classroom History Resources from 1860 to the Present, looks at textbooks and Ontario Ministry of Education guidelines…These resources contain a litany of glaring omissions, outright expressions of hatred and anthropological condescension that combine to privilege whiteness and European epistemology at the expense of Aboriginal perspectives and material processes (Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.136).

As a result of this partial sharing of knowledge, a critical mind is not developed but rather, a one-sided mind founded on European epistemology of historical events is produced.

Another example that shows how colonialism has found its way into policy that actively disrupts the lives and possibilities of minority children is standardized testing.

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21 By a European way of knowing (usually associated with rationality), I believe the author is highlighting how the Western culture in Canadian schools has adopted white, middle-class, European ethics and as a result, how history textbooks favor European perspectives in historical events.
Colonialism provides and ensures the privileges of white middle/upper class children by implementing mandatory in-school standardized testing that evaluates how well minority children know American/European culture (Portelli, Shields, and Vibert, 2007). Minority students are disadvantaged by these standardized tests because the content that they are being tested on is highly irrelevant to their lives and the circumstances under which they take the test may not be equitable (i.e. they may have a home life crisis, may be hungry because they did not have money to have dinner etc.) (Portelli, Shields, and Vibert, 2007). However, often these factors of home life circumstances are not considered important by ministry officials and consequently they are understood (if they are aware of them that is) as irrelevant, because the ministry is too concerned with test scores. Unfortunately, “[w]hen the results of standard assessments are allowed to override the located and informed assessment judgments of teachers who work daily with these students, the potential of these disadvantaged students is denied” (Portelli et. al., 2007, p. 42), again reinstating the privilege to middle/upper class “white” children.

Currently, all standardized test results are available to the public and are easy to access. “The [standardized] test results and the publicity of these inventories add to an already low morale, reinforcing negative reputations for the [inner city] schools, and sending messages that the schools’ work did not count in the end in any case” (Portelli, Shields, and Vibert, 2007, p. 44). Sending out such messages has implications not only on what the students are capable of but as well on what kind of educators become attracted to work at the school. Thus,

reputations for danger and chaos constructed around these [inner city] schools allowed people to ignore the good things that were happening in them and discouraged some strong teachers from coming to them. In this way, the negative
mystique became a self-fulfilling prophecy for such communities and schools, contributing to a culture of hopelessness” (Portelli et al., 2007, p. 46).

However, after all the discussion about the macro and micro-level effects that colonialism has on schooling the question that deserves an explicit attention is: Are schooling practices that benefit one group of students over another, democratic or anti-democratic in nature?

**Critically Questioning Anti-Democratic Schools**

When critically questioning schooling practices and policies it is always necessary to find the underlying political agenda, as education is inseparable from politics (Freire, 1998; Apple, 1979). A critical lens “raises questions about the social and political implications of often unexamined daily practices and language. When left unexamined and intact, many of these practices conceal or reify societal inequities in education” (Portelli, Shields, and Vibert, 2007, p.5). Many critical scholars’ research findings have argued that current elementary schooling structure is founded on a hierarchical and individual-based network.

As many analysts have documented (e.g. Apple, Callahan, Giroux and Penna, Haubrich), elementary schools are structured in such a way as to promote a division of labor within a hierarchical system. Principals manage the physical plant and staff; teachers teach the curriculum content; psychologists test children; special education teachers teach children with special needs; social workers deal with the children’s emotional or family problems as they are related to pupil performance in the schools; and students ‘consume’ school knowledge as they work on their assignments. In addition, teachers work in segregated classrooms and rarely have opportunities to actively communicate or participate in educational decisions with their colleagues (Goodman, 1992, p.24).

Thus, to critically examine who benefits from colonial-based school pedagogy, practices and policies; we must ask, why is it politically beneficially to have a huge gap in the
“achievement rate” between the middle/upper class students and the working class students?

The goal of school policymakers seems to centre on the belief that “society owes these [inner city] families just enough to survive but never enough to succeed” (Gaab, 1993, p.181). Unfortunately, the current situation of public schools that serve the inner city population reflects and supports the aforementioned statement. For example, the current public policy for creating and providing early childhood programs have “…been based on an ideology of what the investment of such a program would yield our society. Poor children, it seems, are deserving of public money only if investment in their early lives has demonstrable economic payoffs” (Gaab, 1993, p.182). Gaab’s position on public money and schooling investments, seems to remain true for current inner city schools. With this in mind, it can be argued that the political agenda for benefiting middle/upper class students in public schools is economically based. There seems to be a belief that middle/upper class children are worth the government’s money because in the future they will be leading the country’s economy toward a growing trend. In addition, from the critical perspective of an inner city educator, I would like to draw attention to the anti-democratic nature of this explanation.

This belief that the government is better off investing in the futures of middle/upper class children rather than working class children because they will be more economically beneficial to the country is full of deficit-based assumptions. To begin with,

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22 The inner city school I work at was under-funded for several years, until it promised to deliver EQAO results. If the school promised this then they would be given “special grant” money. During the two years of steady improvement our school continued getting funding. This year, however, our scores decreased. I believe as a result the “special grant” money was discontinued.
it assumes that working class children all have the same level of capacity, and moreover, that their capacity to be “successful” is low. Secondly, it assumes that if working class children did get into high paying professional jobs they would not benefit the economy. Lastly, it declares working class students are intrinsically inferior to middle/upper class students. With these points in mind, it seems as if the political agenda which claims to be based on the “economic outlook for the country” is actually a veil for perpetuating deficit thinking assumptions. Thus, “…deficit thinking continues to exist in our schools, communicating to children that they are somehow less deserving. The fact that the government continues to deny that school achievement and school funding are linked is a clear form of deficit thinking” (Gaab, 2004, p.182).

Alternatively, it can be argued that if the explanation for why colonialism benefits middle/upper class children “…acknowledge[es] that the quality of the education received is directly linked to the amount of money spent [this] would force the issue of redistributing public school money” (Gaab, 2004, p.183). If this contention was made before the government, how would the government respond? I believe that a convoluted response which evades the contention would be given. Books (2004) supports/shares this belief. She states that people in positions of power often claim that:

[w]hen needs far outstrip resources, as they do in the poorest communities, which are also the most segregated communities, schools easily become overwhelmed…Aside from the social isolation, concentrated poverty harms children in ways that make them more costly to educate than others. Even if per-pupil funding across school districts was equal, resources still would fall short in districts with many poor students, especially if the students also have special needs or are learning English or if districts must pay higher wages to attract teachers, as is often the case (Books, 2004, p. 103).

Moreover, it is because the cost of creating equitable and democratic education possibilities would be too high that the current schooling environment of inequity and
deficit practices remains. Books (2004) quotes Haberman, a long-time observer of urban education, who argues that “many people stress schools no longer function as schools at all, but rather essentially as custodial institutions…the president of the Los Angeles teacher’s union claims ‘We have kids without teachers, teachers without classrooms, and a district without a clue. The system is broken. Students and teachers are a forgotten priority in the poor city schools’ ” (Books, 2004, p. 104). Again, this explanation offered by the teacher’s union, reiterates an evasive response to dealing with the problems that result from colonialism (i.e. deficit thinking practices).

However, the problem lies beyond people in positions of authority evading the contentions of inequities in schools because of political agendas that are not publicly known (and are not supposed to be publicly known). The heart of the problem lies in how this political agenda is “swept under the rug.” This agenda displaces what it should be accountable for onto minority students through deficit practices. It is astonishing how many layers of evasive explanations (which sometimes need to be sought out) are offered about why systemic inequities are present in educational practices. These explanations are offered without any accountability for why they exist and continue to mask themselves as “deficit practices” in the classroom. Valencia (as cited in Portelli, Shields, and Vibert, 2007) also supports the idea that the “accountability” piece is missing in all explanations that have been provided by political authorities. He states : “…[inner city] schools are [often] organized to prevent learning, sustain inequalities in the political economy of education, and [yet] the oppressive macro-politics and practices in education are all held exculpatory in understanding school failure (Valencia as cited in Portelli, Shields, and Vibert, 2007, p.9). Furthermore, I question what are the reasons as to why
the accountability component of decisions clearly made by the government (i.e. funding for certain schools, school culture, school curriculum and so on) are also missing. I venture to claim that it is evident that the reason why government authorities do not claim accountability for the current anti-democratic state of schooling is that they are afraid of being called on their inequitable treatment toward minorities. That is why they choose to hide behind the neoliberal veil (which supports deficit thinking practices). Moreover, it is because the neoliberal veil is broad and deeply rooted in our everyday school life routines that it becomes very difficult to identify it. “Perhaps the reason that we have been reluctant to mention it until now is that this facet of democratic schooling is difficult to clearly identify even when it is observed and difficult to describe in a manner that one can vicariously understand” (Goodman, 1992, p.177). However, since we have now critically explored and briefly thought about the roots of colonialism and their role in creating anti-democratic schools, let us examine the main problem with anti-democratic schooling.

The Main Problem with Anti-democratic Schooling

Anti-democratic education is founded on colonialism, which in turn supports the current political values of neoliberalism (Dei and Kempf, 2006). Neoliberalism upholds many concepts that root themselves in an individual-driven perspective; for example the notion of “success” and “equality” both focus on the individual’s abilities/needs (Dei and Kempf, 2006). This individual-driven perspective becomes problematic when it highlights differences to the extent of discriminating against certain minority groups’ cultural values because they do not align with the European kind of achievement, competition and so forth.
...education promotes the supremacy of individual opinion over the struggle to establish a set of values to promote the common good. Through an emphasis on competition, individual achievement, utilitarian skills, the atomization of knowledge, separation of labor, and official moral society’s schooling, individualism has become an underlying foundation for our society’s schooling (Goodman, 1992, p.24).

Moreover, by placing the individual before the group a sense of alienation and weakness is created and sustained (Dei and Kempf, 2006). One of the main pedagogical practices that reinforces this individualism is the popularly growing trend toward creating Individualized Education Plans23 (i.e. I.E.P.s) for students. “Almost without exception, elementary schools assume that learning is an individual experience [e.g. Individual Education Plans]” (Goodman, 1992, p.23). In elementary school, students “spend the vast majority of their school day working at individual desks in single rows, answering questions and problems in separate workbooks or worksheets, individually taking tests, and asking questions related to their individual concerns in order to finish prescribed school work” (Goodman, 1992, p.23). It is in light of these individualized practices that often each minority student finds it difficult to recognize that the alienation and deficit practices that they are subjected to are shared and felt by other minority students. As a result, challenging authority figures (e.g. teachers, vice-principals, principals and other staff) quickly becomes a very daunting task for minority students. Thus, in most elementary schools the opportunity for minority students to have a collective voice is not supported, encouraged, or presented. This makes me question/wonder if the political authorities truly did have the best interests of all students at heart. Why is a

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23 A kind of neoliberal value of individualism (based on European rationality) is shown in I.E.P.s through the effects they have on labeling the differences of each student. My focus is on the ethical implications that result from individual labeling on an I.E.P.
collective/community voice about the needs and interests of minority students not supported by current school practices?

In response to the aforementioned question, the Ontario Ministry of Education webpage (2009) indirectly claims, individual education plans have been established to help benefit the child by meeting their individual needs and thus giving I.E.P.s a positive connotation.

An IEP identifies the student's specific learning expectations and outlines how the school will address these expectations through appropriate accommodations, program modifications and/or alternative programs as well as specific instructional and assessment strategies. The learning program provided for the student is modified on the basis of the results obtained through continuous assessment and evaluation. (http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/individu.html).

It is through such well crafted and professional word choice that I.E.Ps. are presented in the light of assisting and benefiting the individual child in the classroom setting.

However, the details about how a child is assessed is left out of this I.E.P. policy. The questions that remain unchallenged are: Who designs the tests? Who is responsible for identifying the child? Who is accountable for the I.E.P’s creation and implementation? And is there another alternative reason to why the I.E.P. policy was created? My last question stems from the fact that the majority of students on I.E.P.s that I have taught have always been minority students. Consequently, these minority students are labeled, stamped and there after “shipped” into society with the negative connotations often attached with being “identified,” which prevents their ability to be “successful” in post-secondary education and the future employment sector. I often wonder why the majority

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24 For more information please visit http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/individu.html
of students on I.E.P.s are minority students. Could there be another motive/political
agenda behind this pattern?

I recognize that a quick neoliberal response to my reflective question would be in
the words of the ministry representative (who truly believes that the current schooling
system is democratic and is making leaps in the direction of helping minority children):
“Well, it is only when the needs of each of the children are met, then they will have an
“equal” opportunity at “succeeding” at school and life. Without these I.E.P.s they can just
forget it, they aren’t going to pass…”. From his words it can be extrapolated that the
I.E.P. policy is in favour of each minority student’s “success”; the problem is whose
connotation of “success” are we working with, and how are minority students supposed
to attain it, when the school culture is radically different from their home culture\(^{25}\)?

Goodman’s (1992) work further supports my position. He argues:

\[\ldots\text{individualized instruction has little to do with developing the individuality of}
\text{students, that is, with responding to each child’s unique learning style,}
\text{recognizing and giving voice to the personal knowledge base that each student}
\text{brings to school, and consciously promoting each child’s originality, creativity,}
\text{thoughtfulness, and efficacy…rather individualized education refers to}
\text{instructional design that separates each child’s learning from that of his or her}
\text{classmates and focuses on his or her particular achievement in standardized}
\text{curriculum content (Goodman, 1992, p.23).}\]

Moreover, it is this focus on “achievement in standardized curriculum” that the I.E.P.
supports, reinforces and emphasizes as the “marker of success.” As a result of this focus,
the I.E.P. lists “instruction [that] is individualized in the sense that if a child shows a
weakness in a particular skill [disposition and action] there are specialized drills and tests

\(^{25}\) The major difference between school and home culture is that mainstream public
schools have a middle class Eurocentric value based culture, whereas, home culture is
based on each family’s ethnic and cultural background. The majority of inner city
students do not have a European background and/or come from a middle class home.
that focus the student’s learning tasks upon his or her ‘deficiency’ until it can be
‘mastered’” (Goodman, 1992, p.23). Thus, the I.E.P. draws attention to the “areas of
deficiency” with respect to a Euro-centric standardized curriculum and, furthermore, it
puts the accountability of this deficiency on the student without recognizing the role that
the school culture/curriculum play.

Another argument against excessive individualism is that it encourages a
competitive environment instead of a cooperative collective learning environment.

…isolated learning supports a competitive learning environment. There are few
activities which necessitate cooperative learning in most elementary classrooms.
The contributions or ideas of one’s classmates are rarely seen as important to
one’s own learning. Rarely do students develop the feeling that they are exploring
subject matter ‘together,’ as a class or group. Because tracking in such subjects as
reading and math (which dominate the school day), each child is painfully aware
of his or her individual ‘standing’ in the class…They are taught that the only thing
that is important in school is their own achievement (Goodman, 1992, p.23).

In light of the above facts that Goodman provides, I contend that a competitive learning
environment is not beneficial to the child. I believe that the child’s ability to gain social
skills, which are necessary and essential in life, are neglected by this
individualistic/competitive approach. I recognize that competitiveness is also a
disposition that is required to work in the current employment environment. However, I
believe a balance between collective team skills/dispositions/actions and positive
“leadership” skills/dispositions/actions would give one the ability to “succeed” in the
competitive job market and also retain the ability to be a humanitarian26. Moreover, I
believe it is important to recognize that not all cultures (i.e. East Indian, Japanese,
Chinese et. al.) value “individual” over the “community” and as a result we must be

26 A “humanitarian” for me means someone who is able to display compassion,
sympathy, empathy and understanding toward others with respect to the greater good that
benefits everyone and not only themselves.
culturally sensitive to the personal values our students bring into the classroom as well (Valenzuela, 1999).

My final concern with individualism being deeply embedded in the school curriculum, stems from my personal stance as a young feminist. Goodman articulates my concern clearly in the following passage:

Individualism is also reflected in the form and content of the elementary curriculum found in most schools. Subjects such as history typically present a view of life as something in which only a few individuals (usually white men) actually participate. In most elementary schools, knowledge is broken down into ‘skills’ that are taught outside of an intellectual context…As a result, elementary education takes on a narrow, utilitarian orientation (Goodman, 1992, p.23).

It is with the above quotation in mind, and many personal examples of gendered/cultured skills/dispositions/actions (i.e. my gym teacher who denied me the opportunity to tryout for the basketball team) that I believe individualism does not support or encourage the development of a critical mind in the student or the educator. To be precise, I think changing the text/scholars (i.e. minority authors from all over the world) used to educate students about history/geography/English is a beginning step of setting the stage for critical thinking to occur. Once the knowledge base is expanded, the next step would be to have critical dialogue about the different perspectives on a given historical event (e.g. One Room Schools for Aboriginal People) and have students share and explore critical questions about the documents and the event itself. However, if the knowledge base is not expanded with other minority scholars’ work then educators are not ethically providing learning opportunities that exercise truly democratic critical thinking. Again, it can be argued that the curriculum and pedagogical strategies have changed and are more
culturally sensitive and diverse. However, then why is it that currently in high school English course outlines the literacy texts used are written predominantly by white European men (e.g. William Shakespeare, George Orwell, William M. Golding etc.)? Thus, I believe in the words of Sue Books that it is time that “…society must own up to what its social and educational policies and practices are doing to far too many poor children. Observations of the abuse that poor children and youth experience in their schools and classrooms fill the literature” (Books, 2004, p. 109).

**Conclusion**

This chapter presented a brief account of the historical and political background of colonialism with respect to current schooling practices. In particular, the macro and micro-level effects of colonialism were highlighted to demonstrate the anti-democratic nature that colonialism had and still has on schooling practices. A connection was drawn between the effects colonialism and the perpetuation of deficit teaching practices, leading to the conclusion of current schooling being “anti-democratic” in nature. Furthermore, I made arguments against the individualistic nature of anti-democratic schooling from a critical democratic perspective.

With the understanding of colonialism and its effects on current anti-democratic schooling in mind, in chapter five I will present the philosophical and practical stances which need to be taken in order to begin to build the foundations for creating democratic

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27 Recently the Toronto District School Board has made an effort to have a ‘multicultural’ perspective present in the curriculum, however because it is such a surface-level notion of celebrating heroes and holidays from different cultures, it has not diversified the curriculum. Moreover, the Board has enforced I.E.P.s. to help reach every student but the ethical implications of the labeling that happens with I.E.P.s. counters democratic schooling practices.

28 Please see Appendix two for an example.
education possibilities. I will argue that in order to diminish and eventually eliminate deficit practices in schools we must embrace our individual and collective agency and make small transformations in our own way. We must be accountable for our actions and attitudes toward schooling. I will argue that we must be agents of change who are able to blend together the following elements necessary for true democratic education: an ethic of care, critical inquiry, participatory democracy and moral responsibility.
Chapter Five

Moving Beyond and Reaching Out: Future Implications

Introduction

Thus far, in chapter two, I have given an overview of literature on deficit thinking, which was organized into three academic frameworks: pseudo-scientific, sociological/cultural, and socio-economic. I explained the practical effects these frameworks had on “inner city students.” Next, in chapter three I expanded on the practical effects of deficit thinking by critically discussing the ethical implications of deficit thinking. In chapter four, I developed an argument that connects deficit thinking to colonialism, which I further contended is at the core of anti-democratic schooling. Then, I explored the main problem with anti-democratic schooling namely, individualism and how it recycles elements of deficit thinking practices which sustain systemic inequities.

In chapter five I will discuss how to move through and beyond deficit practices (i.e. problems created by anti-democratic schooling). Moreover, in this chapter, I will present the philosophical and practical stances, upon which it is necessary to embark if the aim is to create truly democratic education possibilities. This chapter will have three main sections which discuss the philosophical stance, the practical stance and the struggles that both these stances may encounter. I will begin by re-visiting and explaining the critical lens we must ethically use while educating and interacting with others. Moreover, I will argue that the critical lens is the philosophical stance that is necessary in order to identify and acknowledge the problems with deficit thinking practices/anti-democratic schooling experiences.
Then, in section two, I will argue that all individuals, actively or inactively, contribute to the perpetuation of anti-democratic schooling (including, systemic inequities in our society). As a result of these contributions, we all must be morally responsible for our actions and behaviours. I believe that in order to be accountable, we must use our agency with others in a participatory democracy. I will recommend that in practice, it is important for each individual in a participatory democracy to be actively involved to help create democratic education possibilities. I will emphasize that this active engagement must simultaneously occur with an ethic of care in mind and heart. Then, finally in section three, I will briefly discuss what struggles a critical democratic stance will encounter, and how as a result we must collectively work toward overcoming them.

**Philosophical Stance: Critical Thinking Re-visited and Participatory Democracy**

“The world we have created is a product of our thinking. We cannot [begin to] change things until we change our thinking” – Einstein

I believe that thinking critically about the world is necessary if we want to gain a deeper understanding about why and how our society is organized/works the way it does and how we can change it.29 “Critical thinking is centrally involved in learning basic academic skills, in becoming a citizen in a democratic society, in becoming a responsible and competent worker, and in making wise life choices” (Bailin, 2005, p. 54). I agree with Bailin (2005) insofar as critical thinking does require learning certain academic skills (analyzing, reasoning, problematizing and so forth). However, I believe these skills

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29 Critically thinking is a crucial step towards beginning the process of striving for critical democratic education, however it is not sufficient in itself. I believe critical thinking must be followed by critical actions and ongoing critical inquiry, in order to fully pursue this notion of critical democratic education.
are one minor component of critical thinking. I contend with Burbules and Beck’s conception of critical thinking going beyond a set of “reason-based skills” into dispositions and further action.

...teaching content and skills is of minor importance if learners do not also develop the dispositions or inclinations to look at the world through a critical lens. By this, critical thinking means that the critical person has not only the capacity (the skills) to seek reason, truth, and evidence, but also that he or she has the drive (disposition) to seek them (Burbules and Berk, 1999, p.48).

Moreover, critical thinking always occurs “in response to a particular task or problematic situation…it is contextual…and in order to deal with a critical challenge a thinker must bring to bear a complex array of understandings or ‘intellectual resources’”(Bailin, 2005, p.55). Although again I agree with Bailin’s point of critical thinking as being required for particular problems, I believe that different kinds of critical thinking such as, women’s thinking based in feeling and thought and different cultural reasoning would be helpful to provide insight on deficit practices. In other words, it is important to recognize that rationality and logic are at the root of most accounts of critical thinking and are considered masculine in our culture and do not give a ‘voice’ to marginalized people (Martin, 1992). Furthermore, I contend it is dangerous to claim that reason-based analysis is the universal way of critical thinking because it can be too narrow and harmful to those audiences that do not share the same view, as it potentially perpetuates a status quo mentality. However, let us further examine Bailin’s conception of critical thinking for it provides a starting point to understand “critical thinking.”

According to Bailin (2005) critical thinking requires the following ‘intellectual resources’: criteria for judgment, critical concepts or vocabulary, habits of mind,
background knowledge and strategies or heuristics. In the following paragraphs, I will briefly describe each of these five elements required for critical thinking.

Criteria for judgment include: “criteria of argumentation and logic, criteria for practical deliberation, and criteria governing inquiry and justification in particular areas of study” (Bailin, 2005, p. 55). For example, accuracy, originality, clarity, fairness and so forth can be used as criteria for judgment (Bailin, 2005). Moreover, to be able to apply these criteria for judgment it is important to recognize the critical concepts involved (Bailin, 2005).

The second element for critical thinking is critical concepts or vocabulary (Bailin, 2005). By critical concepts Bailin (2005) refers to determining the “cause and effect; premise and conclusion; inference and assumption; necessary and sufficient condition; bias; point of view” (p.55). However, to acknowledge these critical concepts it is essential to have the right habits of mind.

Bailin (2005) states that habits of mind are what allow us to begin the critical inquiry/thinking process. She says that the mind needs to exert the following habits: “open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, independent-mindedness, and inquiring and critical attitude, a respect for high quality products and performances, and an intellectual work ethic” (Bailin, 2005, p.55). To promote these habits it is necessary for the mind to have background knowledge on whatever topic is being discussed.

Having background knowledge and strategies (elements four and five of critical inquiry) are important because it allows an individual to think through problems more deeply and critically (Bailin, 2005). For example, one can make a list of the pros and cons, use models, simplify a problem, and talk through a problem with another person if
there is an ample amount of background knowledge/strategies known on the topic (which is being critically thought about) (Bailin, 2005).

In retrospect, according to Bailin, it is only when all five components of ‘intellectual resources’: criteria for judgment, critical concepts or vocabulary, habits of mind, background knowledge and strategies or heuristics, that critical inquiry/thinking is actively pursued. Although, I agree that these components are necessary for critical thinking to occur, they are insufficient in meeting the conditions and needs of critical thinking embodied in Freire’s concept of critical pedagogy (explained in chapter three). I believe critical thinking must go beyond the analysis, reason-based rigor, otherwise it may unknowing “silence” potential participants in the critical thinking/dialogue process.

…part of the method of critical thinking involves fostering dialogue, in which thinking from the perspective of others is also relevant to the assessments of truth claims; a too-hasty imposition of one’s own standards of evidence might result not only in a premature rejection of credible alternative points of view, but might also have the effect of silencing the voices of those who (in the present context) need to be encouraged as much as possible to speak for themselves (Burbules and Berk, 1999, p.50).

A good analogy for critical thinking would be a critical lens that acts as an active filter for our thoughts. I believe that the critical lens (which supports different ways of critical thinking) allows us to recognize the spectrum of needs and concerns that people have. Recognizing differences in people’s needs (due to their individual context/situation) as genuine differences and not deficits is essential. Moreover, understanding the origins of some of these differences that are rooted in inequities is pertinent. Thus, the critical filter becomes a way to expose the deeply seated, troubling inequities in our society and allows us to question how and why they are perpetuated.
I believe this filter works best with Burbules and Berk’s (1999) conception of democratic critical thinking.

It is once this filter is on our thoughts that we can share our newly critically formulated thoughts with others and build a coalition. Through building a coalition we enter into a participatory democracy that will give us the collective agency/accountability to unpack the hidden socio-economic and political agendas (Reid 2005, Lipman 1998, Anyon 1980) that infect our society. As a result, we will be able to collectively begin making the transformations and changes we deem necessary to meet and address the needs of everyone in an equitable manner.

The term ‘democracy’ has been misused and abused by many politicians. “The meaning of the word ‘democratic’ has been widely corrupted in popular parlance to connote merely market-based societies that hold purportedly free elections” (Portelli, Shields, and Vibert, 2007, p. 56). However, the way I would like to use participatory democracy “refers to the open exchange of social and political ideas in public discourse, including the full inclusion and representation of voices and perspectives historically silenced and/or marginalized” (Portelli, Shields, and Vibert, 2007, p. 56). Graham’s (2001) notion of participatory democracy exemplifies the previous definition of participatory democracy offered by Portelli, Shields, and Vibert (2007). Moreover, Graham (2001) claims that “fostering difficult social dialogues is what participatory democracy means when a group of people have a common vision that benefits the society and work toward it, despite having different problem-solving approaches. I am aware that I have outlined what kind of critical thinking needs to occur and then have offered how I wish people to engage with these critical thoughts (i.e. participatory democracy which then can formulate a vision of critical democratic education). However, I know I have not discussed what critical actions need to be pursued to actualize such a vision. I recognize critical actions are a necessary component in creating democratic education possibilities (as critical dialogue is limited in its reach).
democracy is all about”. In particular, Graham states that after we collectively have critically thought about the systemic inequities in our society, a dialogue that is “[a] deeper, more intensive examination of the current ramifications of past injustices and the vivid suffering of present oppression is required if these societies are to respond adequately to their deep social wounds” (Graham, 2001, p. 158). Thus, it is in the “truth and reconciliation” dialogue process that participatory democracy ensures that everyone is involved and heard.

**A Vision of Democratic Education created by Critical Inquiry and Participatory Democracy**

I believe that we can collectively create a new vision of education, which is a truly democratic one, with the persistence of critical inquiry and active participatory democracy. Moreover, using these beginning steps of critical inquiry and active participatory democracy, I believe we will start the process of understanding and undoing the deep rooted current anti-democratic schooling practices. I agree with Portelli, Shields, and Vibert’s (2007) claim that, “[a] democratic education does not observe the usual polite silences on controversial or ‘sensitive’ matters; does not shy away from publicly naming and taking up injustices; welcomes disagreement and conflict as critical to a dialectic of justice” (p. 55). I believe this implies that democratic education is an ideal that will be constantly in the “making” through critical dialogue in which everyone (who chooses to be a part of the coalition) participates. “In this sense, democracy itself is never fully achieved; it is an on-going struggle, shaped by the access of all citizens to voice,
and the willingness to privilege, to speak out on behalf of a common good\(^{32}\). (Portelli, Shields, and Vibert, 2007, p. 56).

With respect to the classroom, teaching critical thinking “requires one to seek deeper levels of self-knowledge, and to acknowledge how one’s own worldview can shape students’ conceptions of self…we teach who we are” (Howard, 2003, p. 198). When we critically uncover our own assumptions that are often rooted in deficit thinking, then we can collectively work on how to diminish and eliminate such deficit thinking practices. I recognize that not all teachers or administrators are willing to “give up their privileges” by acknowledging their biases, and “going against the grain” (i.e. being morally responsible for them) requires a constant struggle that is demanding and difficult. However, I believe it is crucial that they are made aware and understand the serious ethical implications of deficit thinking, and are able to begin thinking about how they can be morally responsible and contribute to democratic schooling possibilities\(^{33}\). “Critical teacher reflection is essential to culturally relevant pedagogy because it can ultimately measure teachers’ levels of concern and care for their students” (Howard, 2003, p. 199).

Culturally relevant pedagogy is an approach to teaching that is sensitive and aware of different cultural values and ideas which may not necessarily coincide with the dominant

\(^{32}\) I am aware that not all citizens exercise their right to engage in critical dialogue, as many feminist scholars (e.g. hooks, Tannen, Gillian, Noddings) have argued that the way in which they deliver their thoughts is not respected by the “rational” minds of Western world. However, I still encourage all the citizens who feel unable to speak, to voice directly these impediments that do not allow them to comfortably participate in critical dialogue.

\(^{33}\) I believe these critical dialogues must be done with Noddings conception of an “ethics of care.” An ethic of care is one essential component for critical dialogue. In particular, I contend that active listening, mutual respect, openness to dialogue, and genuine compassion for the other are necessary components that must be enacted while pursuing such critical dialogues.
Euro-centric school culture. Such a pedagogy is pertinent if teachers choose to show concern for their students. By engaging in critical teacher reflection and then enacting culturally relevant pedagogy practices, educators will create a more inclusive class/school culture. As a result, when the students feel respected, included, and understood by their educators, they embrace a higher level of self-esteem and worth through which then the greater society views them. “[T]he way students are thought about and treated by society and consequently by the schools they attend and the educators who teach them is fundamental in creating academic success or failure” (Nieto as cited in Howard, 2003, p. 199). Moreover, it is essential to recognize that students are agents who are capable of understanding the world through observations but more importantly, are capable of doing actions that will transform our world (Martin, 1992).

Since as human beings, students are and continue to be experiencers, doers, agents, performers – in other words, participants in living – and since they are not born knowing how to do the things and perform the activities that constitute human life, it is wholly perverse to teach our young to be only competent watchers, perceivers, observers, and assessors (Martin, 1992, p. 175).

Thus, it is ethically mandatory that educators engage in critical teacher reflection in order to be morally responsible towards their students’ agency. It is only through such critical reflection and dialogue will they be able to begin to recognize their own biases that are often deeply seated in the effects of colonialism that perpetuate and sustain deficit practices.

Advocates and supporters of anti-colonialism understand “the socially constructed nature of racial (and indeed, all other social) categories, the messiness and futility involved with determining precise racial boundaries, and that racial identities are not monolithic” and as a result, are able to reflect and collectively work on their bias (Dei
and Kempf, 2006, p.48). The aim of anti-colonialism “… is to subvert dominant thinking that re-inscribes colonial and colonizing relations” (Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.3).

It [i.e. anti-colonialism] calls for a critical awareness of the social relations and power issues embedded in the ways of organizing the production, interrogation, validation and dissemination of knowledge in order to challenge social oppression and consequently subvert domination. It also calls for acknowledging accountability and power (Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.4).

In other words, once educators become more aware of the social and power politics involved in creating school culture then the challenge is to “help disabuse our minds of the lies and falsehoods about our peoples, our pasts and our histories” (Rodney as cited in Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.4). Moreover, for those who exercise privilege and are part of the dominant culture (i.e. White European middle/upper class) it is important that we critically address with them the ethical implications of their privileges and the serious damage that is caused by privileging one identity over another. Dei and Kempf urge us to share in their philosophy that a “…school system, and particularly the classroom, must provide the space for each learner to understand both her privileges and oppression, and to develop effective oppositional resistance to domination” (Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.6). I agree that only after creating such a space that collectively we will be able to pass such critical knowledge over to future generations of students. It is important that our students actively engage in processes (i.e. participatory democracy which embodies true critical thinking) that will help reconcile the suffering brought about by past injustices and

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34 I recognize that “traditional critical thinking” done in a liberal manner (i.e. focusing on reason-based logic, rationality which is rooted in a middle class Caucasian male perspective) can serve to reinforce “dominant ideologies” that are deficit/inequitable in nature. For example, to claim that “critical thinking” must be done in a procedural matter and co-exist with power imbalances would embody traditional critical thinking. However, I am arguing for democratic critical thinking which I believe is made up of Bailin’s (2005) conception of critical thinking and Martin’s (1992) conception of critical thinking.
address the current oppressive conditions in which some of our students live. In other words, if we desire to use critical thinking as a vehicle for transforming deficit-based practices and assumptions then we must as educators, think about how to teach critical thinking without separating thought and action (Martin, 1992). “We need to present anti-colonial discourse as a way to challenge Eurocentric culture as the tacit norm everyone references on which so many of us cast our gaze” (Kincheloe and Steinberg as cited in Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.4).

To challenge Eurocentric culture as being the “norm” El-haj encourages us to “…interrogate[e] the hidden values and norms buried in taken-for-granted educational practices and explore[e] how these most basic assumptions allow some students to accrue knowledge, skills, credentials, and power at the expense of others” (El-haj, 2006, p. 197). Moreover, El-haj acknowledges that conflict will be an “…inevitable part of the process of transforming education and building truly equitable school communities because those who benefit from the existing social order are unlikely to give up their power without a struggle” (El-haj, 2006, p. 198). However, it is with this in mind that I too believe it is essential for coalition building to occur amongst people, who think critically35 about education and have a vision for truly democratic education.

An education that benefits all students is one that is based on a “curriculum of life” (Portelli and Vibert, 2002) that brings the child’s life holistically into the classroom and uses it as a point of departure for teaching academic/life skills. “[I]t is never enough to focus on increasing access or opportunities without simultaneously asking how the existing arrangements of classrooms and …how schools preclude or promote the full

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35 Critical thinking as defined by Bailin (2005) and Burbules and Berk (1999) earlier in chapter three.
participation of all students” (El-haj, 2006, p. 200). It is important to ensure that all minority students are critically thought about when formulating an inclusive classroom, school culture, and structural/organization structure of a school (e.g. policies, pedagogy, curriculum etc.).

The organizational structure and policies, interpersonal dynamics, instructional practices, and curriculum content of elementary schooling must help move children towards values of social bonding, caring, responsibility, and justice as well as help them embrace antisexist, antiracist, and pro-global environmental attitudes. At the same time educators must avoid those practices which undermine students’ moral and intellectual autonomy (Goodman, 1992, p.163).

Thus, teachers’ practice and thinking must recognize and respect the intricacies of cultural and racial difference. Moreover, “teachers must construct pedagogical practices in ways that are culturally relevant, racially affirming, and socially meaningful for their students” (Howard, 2003, p. 197). We must work with all students collectively to create a school culture that is culturally sensitive and equitably meets the needs of each student.

**Practical Stance: Agency/Accountability and an Ethic of Care**

Through the process of critical thinking and participatory democracy, we can recognize and acknowledge that in current schooling experiences difference is “deficit-based.” However, we must go beyond the recognition, analysis and discussion phase of addressing the deep colonial roots of deficit thinking practices in schools. I am aware that the effects of colonialism are deeply seated and interconnected in all parts of our society (and not just education); nevertheless, it is a struggle that we must engage in, or else we would have already lost at the price of oppressed people.

Anti-colonial education often meets with open resistance, “such as the denial of difference that provides the context for power and domination in our society” (Dei and
Kempf, 2006, p.6). However, this open resistance has to be addressed in a manner that demonstrates a critical and deep knowledge of,

…the unequal relations of power in the production of knowledge, and the role of culture in current struggles over political decolonization and rights of sovereignty. It is important to acknowledge that in the long run if nothing is done to change the political and economic structures of domination, these [anti-colonial] struggles will fail (Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.14).

In light of the struggle that must be faced collectively, we must unite and develop a voice for those who have been silenced for so long and create a space for them regardless of the resistance we may encounter. According to Dei and Kempf (2006), it is when we collectively/individually decide to challenge the colonialized “norms” that we will be exercising agency and taking accountability for the critical knowledge we hold about the inequities we have faced as a nation.

Within colonial relations there lies the individual and collective agency to resist subordination and domination. Agency emerges from the power of knowing and knowledge, and it’s this that gives meaning to social and political action…Through the power and politics of resistance, the colonized are able to understand their social reality and work to change their condition (Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.15).

The perpetuation of deficit practices in the current anti-democratic schooling system sustains and renews itself each year through delivering a predetermined curriculum and unquestioned school culture to new generations of students. Therefore, it is pertinent that the “[p]roduction and reproduction of knowledge are ideally, collective pursuits, which recognize and work to dissolve power inequities – pedagogically and epistemologically. This work is thus not prescriptive, but interrogative” (Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.130).

Hence, Dei and Kempf urge educators to recognize the importance of critical thinking and discussion. As agents of change, we can collectively transform the current pre-
scripted history of our nation. “History is not mine to find or document: it is a conversation in which I may, at times, participate” (Dei and Kempf, 2006, p.130).

Goodman (1992) also supports the arguments made by Dei and Kempf (2006), as he believes that educators should not lose hope thinking about the resistance they are to face, but rather, they should be accountable for their social roles and use their agency to make transformations to schooling practices.

In spite of the conservative nature of our society, there are many educators who are not giving up, and who are determined to provide more meaningful and socially responsible schooling for our children. These individuals are resolved to collaborate, and through this collaboration, deepen the education of their students… (Goodman, 1992, p. 21).

Goodman (1992) claims that it is these educators that choose to deepen the education possibilities for their students who help critically inform and develop the consciousness of young citizens. Moreover, he argues that developing young critical citizens is the only way to build a critically democratic society, which will be able to change the current anti-democratic economical and social systems. All these social and economic system changes need to be rooted in “transforming the consciousness of … citizens, which can be successfully accomplished only through education as opposed to imposition” (Goodman, 1992, p.25). Thus, Goodman contends that “[i]n acknowledging the need to transform society through the modification of our public consciousness, it is essential that we see children’s education at the core of democratic activity prior to changes in other spheres of society” (Goodman, 1992, p.26).

Goodman (1992) articulates a similar argument to Dei and Kempf (2006) and Portelli, Shields, and Vibert (2007) with respect to aiming for a critical educational discourse in schools and society. Goodman claims that, “…the primary reason for the
importance of critical educational discourse in schools and society is that it has to a large extent challenged those who dominate the cultural, political, and economic sectors of our society to relinquish much of their privilege and power” (Goodman, 1992, p.164). He further suggests that in order for critical democracy to genuinely work in schools it needs to be consistent in the greater society as society works as a whole and not in individual parts. Furthermore, Goodman says, “…it is self-defeating to suggest that society must change before schools can change or before teachers or other educators can act. Each person needs to work for democracy in those areas of society that are most accessible, and for educators that is in schools” (Goodman, 1992, p.177).

Goodman’s (1992) conception of agency for educators expects them to be morally responsible to the diverse needs of their students by providing a safe and open-minded space that can be used for critical thinking. Moreover, he believes that as educators we are external agents who have the moral responsibility and ability to create safe and open spaces for critical discourse (Goodman, 1992). It is when educators use their agency that they are able to “…make powerful changes [that they] break through the pervasive influence of the deficit paradigm and recognize the untapped strengths of students and themselves” (Weiner, 2006, p.45). However, in order to “tap into” the strengths of students, an educator must build a relationship of mutual trust and respect with each of their students. To develop such a relationship between an educator and their respective students, Nel Nodding’s work on an “ethics of care” must be taken into consideration.

In order to develop an ethic of care, Noddings suggests that educators must become “responsive” to their students, by listening to their students and trying to address
their needs. This responsive behaviour needs to be embraced mutually by the student and the teacher otherwise it is counterproductive (Noddings, 2005). Being responsive then, is directly linked with relationship building between student and teacher, which is the foundation of Noddings’ ethics of care (Noddings, 2005).

An ethic of care according to Noddings (2005) is a relationship between the “carer” (i.e. educator) and the “cared for” (i.e. the student). It requires that both parties participating in the relationship show an understanding of how care is given and received by upholding an exchange of compassion, patience, and trust (Noddings, 2005). “The cared-for receives the caring and shows that it has been received. This recognition now becomes a part of what the carer receives in his or her engrossment, and the caring is completed” (Noddings, 2005, p.16). There needs to be a “motivational displacement” allowing for the carer’s energy to go from them toward the cared-for and their projects (Noddings, 2005). In other words, educators need to show compassion, patience, and trust toward their students and support their students’ personal and academic strengths. Noddings (2005) contends that the educator “…receive[s] what the other [i.e. student] conveys, and I want to respond in a way that furthers the other’s purpose or project…” (p.16). When this relational exchange (that is in the best interest of the student) is made, then a mutually respecting and trusting relationship can begin to take form. Moreover,

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36 By “needs” I am referring to those needs such as hunger and violence, which disrupt any opportunity to learn. I believe that emotionally an educator should be available to listen to their students, however there needs to be a boundary drawn. I recognize that the boundary drawing needs to be contextual to each situation and thus, it is important to have open communication between the teacher and student to ensure ethically sound advice is given.

37 I recognize that “in the best interest of the student” is a contentious statement, but I believe as critical educators we must trust ourselves through ongoing open dialogue with our students to carefully and inclusively make decisions together that uphold a genuine sense of morality for both parties involved.
Noddings (2005) encourages the exchange of motivational displacement to occur both ways between the carer and the cared-for because it allows the student to actively participate and initiate a trusting bond with the educator as well (Noddings, 2005). She argues that a sign of a mature relationship is one that allows both members to become carers and cared-fors as the opportunities arise in their relationship (Noddings, 2005).

Noddings argues that an ethics of care requires that the amount of attention (or “engrossment”) the carer displays towards the cared-for calls for an “emptying out the soul of it contents” (Noddings, 2005, p.17). In other words, Noddings (2005) is calling for the student and teacher relationship to have open dialogue about any matter (in a professional manner) about academic or personal life skill struggles. Having these open dialogues encourages communications and demonstrates a sense of caring for both the educator and the student (Noddings, 2005). Noddings claims that because each relationship, between the educator and the student, has different open dialogues and critical discussions, it is unique. This relationship is the beginning element of an ethics of care between the teacher and the student; however, Noddings argues that it needs to extend into teaching students how to care.

“[T]eachers not only have to create caring relations in which they are the carers, but they also have a responsibility to help their students develop the capacity to care” (Noddings, 2005, p.18). Unfortunately, it has been argued that creating these caring

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38 I agree with Noddings’ (2005) overall principle behind having an ethics of care for student-teacher relationships, that allows each party to actively engage in critical thought and dialogue. However, I disagree with Noddings’ (2005) argument that students should be able to reveal/share personal dialogue that is not directly related to their learning opportunities with their educators. I believe boundaries must be drawn (by both the student and the educator) for the personal safety and professional ethical conduct an educator needs to uphold with their student(s).
relationships and getting students to develop a sense of “care” has become increasingly
difficult with all the deficit thinking practices that are embedded in school culture
(Valenzuela, 1999). In response, Noddings claims that it is because of all the deficit
assumptions about students and their abilities an ethic of care is essential. She (2005)
claims that when teachers actively uphold an ethic of care, their deficit thinking
assumptions may diminish because they will always try to support the students’ learning
opportunities. She states in her concluding remarks: “[t]he structures of current schooling
practices work against care, and [ironically] at the same time, the need for care is perhaps
greater now than ever” (Noddings, 2005, p.20).

Struggles and Hopes for the Journey Ahead

It is true that my vision for truly democratic education requires a great deal of
risk, patience, dedication, persistence and initiative; however, it is what is necessary if we
want a better educational experience for our inner city students. I am well aware that
“[r]eputations for danger and chaos constructed around [inner city] schools [often] allow
people to ignore the good things that are happening in them and discourage some strong
teachers from coming to them” (Portelli, Shields, and Vibert, 2007, p. 46). As a result of
such reputations, which are based on deficit assumptions about the communities and
students that attend these inner city schools, the systemic inequities perpetuate
themselves. Unfortunately, when this cycle of perpetuation is not interrupted we (i.e.
educators) fail our students, and consequently lose ourselves and our students to a
“culture of hopelessness” which we must not allow to happen (Portelli, Shields, and
Vibert, 2007, p. 46).
However, because of our critical thinking abilities and responsibilities as active agents in a participatory democracy, we must “step up” to the challenge of diminishing this culture of hopelessness. We must collectively face political challenges in order to begin this process of transformation for true democratic education possibilities. I recognize that some of the challenges require speaking up against authoritative figures and governmental policies but if they are not challenged then, we are allowing them to exist. For example some of the challenges created by board and ministry policies in all provinces include:

inability to maintain new, energized teachers and to hire culturally and racially representative teachers; decreased professional development, and a focus on ‘best practices’ in the form of strategies and skill in-service at the expense of social justice and equity work…and constraints created by more narrow, province-wide definitions of curriculum and repositionings of assessment as standardized testing” (Portelli, Shields, and Vibert, 2007, p. 51).

Nevertheless, all of these challenges must be taken up by as many people as possible, because our strength against higher level authority lies in numbers. Moreover, it is by actively seeking ways in which we can address and combat these anti-democratic policies and procedures that we will begin to transform the current state of schooling. As educators, we must try to follow Freire’s (1998) conception of the role of a teacher:

…living my convictions; being open to the process of knowing and sensitive to the experience of teaching as an art; being pushed forward by the challenges that prevent me from bureaucratizing my practice; accepting my limitations, yet always conscious of the necessary effort to overcome them and aware that I cannot hide them because to do so would be a failure to respect both my students and myself as a teacher (Freire, 1998, p. 69).

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39 It goes beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss each of these challenges in detail. However, these challenges must be addressed if we aim to interrupt current oppressive schooling practices (i.e. deficit thinking practices in school culture).
Thus, as educators who believe in and aim for democratic education possibilities, I believe, we must not avoid/hide/or be irresponsible, for what is at stake is far too high to risk; namely the future direction of education for our daughters and sons. We must equip our sons and daughter with the critical thinking skills/dispositions and tools to act upon them to help diminish the deeply rooted deficit assumptions/practices in education today; otherwise we will have failed to do our moral duty to the world.

The best thinking in the world is of little avail if a person has not acquired the will, the ability, the skill, the sensitivity, and the courage to act on it. If the critical thinking they learn in school is to inform a *human* democracy, it will also have to include a large measure of learning to feel connected to others… (Martin, 1992, p. 178).

I concur with Martin’s (1992) notion of a humane democracy as that is essential to creating truly democratic education possibilities. Moreover, in the words of bell hooks (2003), “[l]earning …serves to educate students for the practice of freedom rather than the maintenance of existing structures of domination;” otherwise, we will remain prisoners in an oppressive society (hooks, p. 46).

Together we share a greater strength in minds, hearts and physical numbers, and that is the beginning light of hope for transforming our current anti-democratic schools into future democratic educational possibilities! For as Books (2004) reminds us:

> Our society, like all others, was made by human hands. Nothing is foreordained or carved in stone. It is now entirely possible to establish a system of public schooling that bears witness to our highest ideals, including, justice [i.e. participatory democracy], [critical minded educators], [always using our agency to create] equal and [equitable] opportunities, [an ethic of care], and giving a hand where it is needed for that reason alone: it is needed (p. 147).

**Conclusion**

In this final chapter, I have explained and explored the philosophical and practical stances required in order to redirect current anti-democratic schooling experiences to
future democratic education possibilities. I have argued that in order to make this transformation in education, we must begin within the school and change its deficit culture from the inside (as deficit mentality is unethical and colonial) and then collectively work our vision into a truly democratic society. I have argued that in order to make a truly democratic transformation within education, it is necessary that educators:

- have a clear understanding and working ability of how to think critically (as this would allow them to recognize the deep colonial and unethical roots of deficit thinking),
- recognize their moral responsibility and agency with respect to deficit practices in current schooling practices, actively participate in a participatory democracy (which has the aim of creating true democratic educational possibilities for all students), and finally, have the ability and the desire to apply an ethic of care toward all of their students.
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Taking student engagement seriously: Beyond deficit mentality, toward a curriculum of life. Keynote Address given by Professor John Portelli, at the Hamilton Wentworth Principals Association Conference, February 2009

Course Syllabus, English Department, ENG 4UO
Appendix One

A measure of poverty in Canada
A guide to the debate about poverty lines
Greg de Groot-Maggetti
March 2002, CITIZENS for PUBLIC JUSTICE

The impact of income on children’s health

The following chart, “Children with Lower Functional Health,” plots the relationship between average household income for a two-parent family with children and the functional health of children aged 4-11 years of age. The probability of experiencing poor functional health declines from roughly 13% to 8% as family income rises from $10,000 to close to $30,000. Between $30,000 and $70,000, the risk of poor functional health remains relatively constant. Beyond household income of $70,000, the risk of poor functional health declines further.

From a public policy perspective, there appear to be health gains to be had from increasing the number of families whose incomes are approximately $30,000. We can compare this figure to alternative measures of low income. The LICO in 1996 for a family of four living in a large city was $32,238 (using the 1992 base). The 1996 Statistics Canada Low Income Measure for a family of four is $25,304.

Taking into account research on the relationship between income and health together with information from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, we gain insight into the adequacy of alternative low income measures poverty.
Please Note:

Statistics Canada Low Income Cut-offs (or LICOs)
Low Income Measure (LIM)
ENGLISH DEPARTMENT
ENG 4U0 MARK ALLOCATION 2008/2009
Semester

Course Description
This course emphasizes the consolidation of the literacy, communication, critical and creative thinking skills necessary for success in academic and daily life. Students will analyse a range of challenging literary texts from various periods, countries, and cultures; interpret and evaluate informational and graphic texts; and create oral, written, and media texts in a variety of forms. An important focus will be on using academic language coherently and confidently, selecting the reading strategies best suited to particular texts and particular purposes for reading, and developing greater control in writing. The course is intended to prepare students for university, college, or the workplace.

Prerequisite: English, Grade 11, University Preparation

Mark allocation is based on the following weighting of the achievement chart categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge and Understanding</th>
<th>Thinking and Inquiry</th>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Application</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>25%</td>
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Assignment Weighting

**The Great Gatsby: Presentation & Rationale** 5% of Final Mark

Students will complete a project that demonstrates an understanding of the relationship between 1920s culture and the novel *The Great Gatsby*.

**Independent Study Unit** 25% of Final Mark

Over the course of the semester, students will complete an Independent Study Unit that demonstrates an understanding of complex texts from a selected time period, country and culture, with an emphasis on analysing and assessing ideas, themes, and concepts.

- Formal Report 5% of Final Mark
- Comparative Presentation 10% of Final Mark
- Analytical Essay 10% of Final Mark

**Hamlet: Creative Presentation** 5% of Final Mark

Students will demonstrate their level of understanding of the play, *Hamlet*, by conducting an inquiry into the relationship between Shakespeare’s themes, characters and writing style, and presenting their findings in a creative presentation.
Comparative Analytical Essay

10% of Final Mark

Students will write an in-class, analytical essay in which they develop and support an original thesis that compares two of the following: Hamlet, The Great Gatsby, Road to Mecca, (as assigned by the teacher).

Section Specific Evaluations

10% of Final Mark

Over the course of the semester, students will demonstrate their level of understanding of major course texts (eg. The Great Gatsby, Hamlet, and Road to Mecca) and their degree of mastery of course skills through various modes of assessment (personal writing, written tests, oral presentations, etc).

Essays: Argument and Persuasion

15% of Final Mark

Critiquing an Essay: 7.5% of Final Mark

Students will write one polished critique of a published essay that examines how the essay uses techniques of argument and persuasion to reach its intended audience.

Crafting an Essay: 7.5% of Final Mark

Students will write and polish one original essay on a topic of their choice that uses techniques of argument and persuasion to reach an identified audience for a particular purpose.

TOTAL TERM ASSIGNMENTS ........................................... 70% of Final Mark

FINAL EXAMINATION ..................................................... 30% of Final Mark