

## Challenging deficit default and educators' biases in urban schools

Lynette Parker

Charlene Reid

Tanya Ghans

### **Abstract**

This paper explores kindergarten and 1st grade teachers' beliefs about students in an urban elementary school. Teachers situated concerns about a new literacy program and benchmark goals within an ideology that pathologized poor students of color as being academically unprepared. Teachers' claims were corroborated by their grade-level administrator. However, an analysis of student performance data revealed educators' pathological beliefs to be unwarranted. Deficit beliefs about the capabilities of the poor students of color were associated with fear of failure, uncritical acceptance of poverty as brain trauma, and their ascription to negative views about poor and minority students.

### **Keywords**

Urban education; race; teacher beliefs; deficit thinking; equity

## Introduction

Much of the work about intervention in education addresses how students develop academically. This is in part because accountability measures are most concerned with student level outcomes. However, students' academic outcomes are related to a myriad of factors, many of which have a locus of control outside of the students themselves. Among the factors impacting students' academic successes are teacher quality and teacher beliefs (Cooper, 2003; Dudley-Marling, 2007; Ghans & Parker, 2015; Gorski, 2010; Klehm, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2002; Love & Kruger, 2005; Milner, 2006; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Valencia, 2010). While No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the 2015 reauthorization, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), attempted to address teacher quality by mandating "highly qualified teachers," teachers' beliefs are rarely addressed as part of larger education reform efforts. This is problematic because deficit beliefs held by teachers translate into actions or in some cases inaction when it comes to teaching students.

Deficit beliefs are part of a larger ideology surrounding poor people of color in the U.S. According to Gorski (2010), "deficit ideology defines every social problem in relation to those toward the bottom of the power hierarchy, trains our gaze in that direction, and as a result, manipulates the popular discourse in ways that protect and reify existing sociopolitical conditions" (Gorski, 2010, p.7). In recent years, there has been a return to deficit thinking (Dudley-Marling, 2007), most notably in relation to students in poverty. In this paper we argue that deficit beliefs that teachers hold in education, specifically about poor students of color, are often wrongheaded and embedded in false ideology of students' inferiority rather than the fact of their abilities.

Deficit thinking, at its core, is an endogenous theory—positing that the student who fails in school does so because of his/her internal deficits or deficiencies (Valencia, 2010, p. 7). We examine deficit thinking using quantitative methods to address previous themes that emerged from qualitative study related to early literacy interventions. We have divided this paper into two studies to address beliefs held by teachers and their grade-level administrator.

We use findings from the literacy intervention evaluation as part of the background to contextualize the ways in which teachers' beliefs were manifested. We then use quantitative methods to address research questions aimed at differentiating between administrator and teachers' deficit beliefs about student ability and students' true abilities.

The first study examines kindergarten<sup>1</sup> teacher beliefs' (and the grade-level administrator) that reemerged during the second year of the literacy intervention, and establishes those beliefs as a continuation of beliefs held in year one. In the second study, we examine 1<sup>st</sup> grade teachers' beliefs that students who entered their classes were lower than the students entering the previous year. In the section that follows, we lay out literature about deficit thinking

---

<sup>1</sup> During the 2013-14 school year kindergarten teachers expressed negative views about students' abilities.

within education discourse. We do so for the purpose of foregrounding the prevalence of deficit thinking within education. We then detail the background, methods, results and discussion of each respective study. Lastly, we provide a cumulative discussion, implications and conclusion to combat what we term *deficit default*.

## Literature Review

### *Teacher Beliefs about Student Characteristics*

Numerous scholars have studied the ways in which students' characteristics are implicated in teachers' beliefs and actions. In her study of U.S.-Mexican youth at Seguin High School, Valenzuela (1999) found that the students experienced a subtractive form of schooling that devalued their culture and language. The students had to actively resist the pathologizing subtractive practices in order to preserve themselves as a result.

In her study about teachers' attitudes toward students with disabilities, Klehm (2014) found that teachers' attitudes towards students' abilities led to student exclusion. General education teachers believed that students with disabilities could learn, but doubted their ability to ever reach levels of proficiency. She also found that teachers' feeling that they were underresourced or ill-equipped to work with students who have disabilities contributed to their practices of excluding students.

Rist (2000/1970) concluded that teachers' beliefs about the abilities of poor Black children in kindergarten, became a self-fulfilling prophesy and set the course for the academic trajectory of the students as low performers. The educability of poor students of color as a question for some teachers contributed to the teachers' expectations, their teaching, and even in where they positioned the students in the classrooms.

Jensen (2009) posits that poverty affects the students' academic achievement, their thinking, the behavior and their very souls. Jensen's (2009) definition of poverty is "a chronic and debilitating condition that results from multiple adverse synergistic risk factors and affects the mind, body, and soul" (p. 6). Jensen suggests that leaders can change the mind-sets of the teachers by putting up affirmations like "Miracles happen here every day!" (p.63). However, what Jensen offers here as a different mindset is not one that addresses the systematic ways in which teachers' beliefs in the inability of students of color can be disrupted. Rather, it encourages them to hope for the out-of-the ordinary miracle, rather than believe in students' humanity.

Payne (2005), similarly, suggests that considering the poverty situation and the lack of resources that comes along with poverty should temper the expectations and advice educators have for students and their families. According to Payne, "[r]esources of student and adults should be analyzed before dispensing advice or seeking solutions to the situation. What may seem to be very workable suggestions from a middle-class point of view may be virtually impossible given the resources available to those in poverty" (Payne, 2005, p. 39). However, this framing of poverty, and the assertion Payne makes about poor students of color enter school with no formal registers, and nearly incapable of performing as their more affluent peers has been

vehemently challenged for lack of methodological soundness and widespread generalizations (Bomer, Dworin, May & Semingson, 2008).

### *Students' Families and Cultures*

Teachers in urban schools have been particularly impacted by discourses that pathologize the child and their parent. In their study of high school educators, Thompson, Warren and Carter (2004) found that educators blame parents and students for academic failure. They also found that several predictors were associated with educators who held these beliefs. Among the predictors were 1) those educators had higher degree attainment, 2) those educators admitted that they did not treat their students the way they would want their children's teachers to treat their children, and those educators did not rate their colleagues as 'outstanding educators (demonstrating an overall issue with teacher quality)' (Thompson, Warren, and Carter, 2014, p. 9-10). Additionally, scholars have found that teachers' beliefs about parents and families of color are known to have stigmatizing effects. Cooper (2003) found that the African American mothers in her study said teachers in the inner city schools are "quick to assume their students are deviant" (p. 111). Of the 14 mothers in her study, Cooper noted that 12 recognized their children had been stigmatized. "They said teachers' negative views often relate to the students' racial and class backgrounds, or the fact that they may come from families headed by single mothers or alternative caregivers" (p. 111) These reasons mirror those found by Rist (2000/1970) some thirty years prior demonstrating the deep embeddedness of biases and deficit beliefs in the schools.

Scholars have found that successful teachers who believe the students of color are smart and valuable generally endorse culturally relevant teaching. In their effort to measure teachers' "culturally relevant beliefs" in relation to student achievement, Love and Kruger (2005) found that among the important factors was "learning from students is as important as teaching them." This finding of what teachers reported to have believed is counter to what African American students experience.

Ladson-Billings (1994) explains that teachers who use culturally relevant practices with students of color are often successful. These practices include 'teacher-student relationships that are "fluid, humanely equitable [and] extends to interactions beyond the class," and that "teachers demonstrate connectedness with all students" (p. 55). Culturally relevant teachers recognize and value of students' cultures. Yet, culturally relevant teaching as a belief among educators as characteristic of successful teaching is found to be lacking. Garza and Garza (2010) critique the notions of "successful" teachers of Mexican, low SES students because "success" appears to be defined differently when associated to students of color. Although the white teachers in their study had been nominated because of the "success" on standardized tests, Garza and Garza found that the white teachers relied on subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999), were lacking in culturally relevant teaching practices, and were selfaggrandizing about their success with students placing the onus of success on teachers' ability rather than students' abilities.

*Teacher Beliefs Operationalized*

Pollack (2012) found that teacher beliefs inevitably make their way into “everyday teacher talk” thereby shaping the educational environment. In her study about the salience of deficit narratives in teacher talk about students’ abilities, and their family and cultural backgrounds, Pollack found that such beliefs that manifest in talk of low expectations for students may “diminish teachers’ sense of self-efficacy and professional responsibility, while justifying differential teaching practices, policies, and teacher behaviors – all of which are associated with inferior educational experiences and opportunities for students of color” (p. 888). Along the same lines, Pitzer (2015) argues that teachers who engage in “critical talk” have at their heart deficit beliefs and neoliberal logics. In Pitzer’s study, she found teachers who spoke negatively about students and schools navigated between beliefs about “these kids” and the neoliberal constraints that prevented them from doing their work.

Bomer, Dworin, May and Semingson contend, “[s]ince teachers do make decisions and plans on the basis of their beliefs or conceptualizations of their students, students’ daily lives are strongly affected by the influences on their teachers’ thinking” (p. 2524). Teacher biases and ideologies associated with culture, language, race, or poverty are part of a larger socialization process in the U.S. When teachers carry biases into the classroom, it may serve as an obstacle to effective teaching. Weiner (2006) argues that associating student and family deficits to achievement is “seductive” as it “locates responsibility outside of their classroom” (p. 45).

Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain (2005), found that teacher and schools play a larger part in students’ achievement even more than the Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966) asserted. In fact, Ford, Harris, Tyson, and Trotman (2001) found that teachers’ deficit thinking regarding African-American students’ intellectual ability and failure to recognize giftedness has led to an underrepresentation of African-American students in gifted and talented classes nationwide. It is such negative beliefs about students’ abilities that leads to what Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) call the Pygmalion effect, where students reproduce the expectations of their teachers.

### **Study Background**

In September of the 2014-15 school year, kindergarten and 1st grade teachers began the second year of a partnership with a neighboring school to increase literacy among students in kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade. The 2014-2015 year would be the second year of the partnership for the kindergarten teachers and the first year of the partnership for the 1st grade teachers because the partnership was designed to scale up. The teachers completed quarterly surveys or questionnaire in which they self-reported beliefs about collaboration, student achievement, and pedagogy. The grade level administrator was interviewed on four occasions. Kindergarten students at the school completed the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) at the beginning and at the end of the school year to determine baseline level. Both kindergarten and 1st grade students completed the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) in September as a baseline measure to determine growth throughout the school year. Teachers were given one survey in which they self-reported their thoughts about students’ levels.

The K-1 grade-level administrator is a white woman who had six years of experience. The school administrator, who shared during the first year that she used Jensen's (2009) work *Teaching with Poverty in Mind* as a tool to inform her work, was interviewed regarding her thought about students' levels and teachers' survey responses. Findings from an earlier report and paper (Ghans & Parker, 2015) demonstrate that the struggle with *deficit default* was most pronounced in the administrator. *Deficit default* is defined as the constant struggle with beliefs and stereotypes about students' ability that results in a default back to deficit beliefs about students. These beliefs are pathological and are associated with poverty, race, language; they emerge and reemerge when there is a fear that students' ill performance may be related to teachers' inability. We have also seen *deficit default* when teachers experience disappointment or frustration, and when students fail to perform at the expected level (Ghans & Parker, 2015).

The administrator grappled with concerns that kindergarteners may not perform as well as the partner school - though the partnership that was designed for the literacy intervention was framed as one cohort of students rather than a competition between schools. In was early in the 2013-2014 school year that the administrator first articulated her view:

Overall most students need [intervention] work. They will need a lower target than the partner school" [Administrator statement - PD observation September 24, 2013].

Another example of the deficit beliefs is articulated in a response to a question about improving student performance in the upcoming year (2014-2015):

We need more reading expertise. We need to provide it. That the work we have done with the [partner school] has been helpful but I think we need to make it deep... We've done a lot of work with [the organization that focuses on poverty] trying to learn the brain trauma and poverty. We are trying to tap into how the brain learns reading. [Administrator interview- June 2014]

Though there was recognition for this administrator that the teachers needed more expertise and skill teaching reading, she still defaulted to the effects of poverty - a prevalent thesis in Jensen's work.

An additional manifestation of beliefs and concerns about students unfolded when teachers were asked whether or not their students entering during the 2014-2015 year had the same skill set or capabilities. Evidence from a self-report survey item "The students came into kindergarten at a different level than last year [2013-2014]." The 4-point Likert scale consisted of strongly disagree (1) disagree (2) agree (3) strongly agree (4).

Table 1

*Kindergarten Teachers Beliefs About Students and Colleagues*

Survey Item	<i>N</i>	Mean	Standard Deviation
The students came into kindergarten at a different level than last year	14	3.29	0.70
My grade-level colleagues seem committed to meeting our benchmark goal	12	3.33	0.62

The responses to this item demonstrate that the majority of educators believe that students were at a different (lower) level than the previous year's students. The mean score indicates that teachers on the whole agreed or strongly agreed to the statement. They also seemed to believe that their colleagues were committed to the work. This opens up the possibility that the students rather than the teachers may be at fault should benchmarks not be reached. Additionally, teachers' responses to an 8-item questionnaire during the first quarter of the 2014-2015 school-year. Six teachers responded. Their responses fell into two categories which demonstrated teachers' beliefs of students' preparedness was negative in comparison to the previous. For example, responses to the item - How academically prepared do you feel your students are this year? returned responses such as,

- I feel as a whole, they are a little lower than the group from last year (Survey #3)
- Some students feel very sleepy in the morning and they do not know the letter names and sound. (Survey #3)
- I think they are not prepared as they are so low. (Survey #5)

The kindergarten teachers and the administrator had established negative views of students in the 2013-2014 school year as demonstrated by surveys and interviews. But whether their beliefs were warranted then or upon embarking on the 2014-2015 school year is the topic of this study. Because of the prevalence of deficit as an ideological position of many of the teachers in the public school, our guiding *research question* is - *In what ways observed teachers' and administrators' deficit beliefs about students be disrupted by data analyses?*

To answer this question, we look at student data from 2013-2014 school year compared to the 2014-2015 school year. In study 1, we use an independent samples *t-test* to gauge the difference between the two cohorts on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (a continuous normreferenced test that reports grade-level equivalency). In study 2, we test the teachers' and administrator's belief that the 1st grade students entering the 2014-2015 were the same (or lower) than the previous cohort of first graders, we used a chi-squared test of independence. The 1st grade cohort, unlike the kindergarteners, only take the Iowa Test of Basic Skills at the conclusion of the school year. Therefore, we used students' September Development Reading Assessments (DRA). The DRA is an assessment that gauges students reading skill and places students within certain categories aligned with Beginning-Middle-End performance expectations.

### Exploring the Beliefs of Kindergarten Teachers

#### *Sample*

The kindergarten cohort 2013-2014 ( $N=100$ ) and the kindergarten cohort 2014-2015 ( $N=114$ ) are 99% of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch indicating low SES (socioeconomic status).

#### *Study Site*

The elementary school located in a large urban area on the east coast. It has seven kindergarten classes; one of which is an ICT (integrated co-teaching) class, and one is a bilingual class. There are eight teachers and four push-in educators who work in classrooms during the literacy block. The teachers on average have 17 years teaching experience.

#### *Data Analysis*

To address teachers' assertions that kindergarten students entering from 2014-2015 school year were "lower" and "less" prepared (as demonstrated by teachers' comments in the PD sessions and their responses on survey items), we used an independent samples *t-test*. We tested the null hypothesis that the mean scores of students are equal, against the alternative hypotheses that the means are not equal to zero:

$$H_0: \mu_1 = \mu_2$$

$$H_a: \mu_1 \neq \mu_2$$

Where,

$\mu_1$  = mean kindergarten 2013-2014 cohort scores on September ITBS

$\mu_2$  = mean kindergarten 2014-2015 cohort scores on September ITBS  $\alpha$

= .05

The Iowa Test of Basic Skills is a norm referenced standardized test that demonstrates students' skill or ability in comparison to similar age and grade groups. To examine the

September baseline, grade equivalency data were coded as continuous data with P.0 (prekindergarten zero months) being coded as .0; K.0 (Kindergarten zero months) coded as 1.0. The recoding of pre-kindergarten and kindergarten allowed for us to account for the scores of students who entered kindergarten with pre-kindergarten level scores on the ITBS. The numbers to the right of the decimal accounts for months of growth. For example, 1.1 = kindergarten, first month.

### Results

The kindergarten cohort from the 2014-2015 group was believed by teachers to be lower in ability and academic level upon entering school than the 2013 -2014 cohort. The teachers and administrator had defaulted to this belief. To test the hypothesis that there was no statistically significant difference between the two cohorts, 2013-2014 ( $N=100$ ) and 2014-2015 ( $N=114$ ), an independent samples *t-test* was performed.

The *t-test* revealed no statistically significant difference between 2013-2014 cohort ( $M=1.29$ ,  $SD =$ ) and the 2014-2015 cohort ( $M=1.31$ ,  $SD=$ ) performances on the September Iowa Test of Basic Skills. The null hypothesis,  $H_0: \mu_1 = \mu_2$ , was accepted  $t(212)=-0.578$ ,  $p=0.564$

Recall from the transformation of ITBS scores that 1.1=first month of kindergarten. This means that both cohorts of students completed the September ITBS for their respective years and demonstrated grade level equivalency of 3<sup>rd</sup> month of kindergarten within the first three weeks of entering school.

### Discussion – Fears of Failure and Dominant Beliefs

Kindergarten teachers demonstrated their positioning, and thinking about students' capabilities in relation to student data. Deficit viewpoints were revealed to be part of the school culture. Within the first month of the 2013 -2014 school year teachers had administered the ITBS and the DRA. When asked about how the students performed on the baseline DRA assessment, one teacher commented, "You can just fling these in the air and put them where ever you want." It was this comment that further established a belief that there was a free-for-all and that she didn't see any students as possessing any particular quality that could be related to academic promise. In the first month of the 2014-2015 school year, similar negative assessments had been made about the new cohort, leading teacher to collectively decry that the students in the new cohort were "lower" and "less prepared."

To make sense of this interpretation by teachers compared to the statistical analysis, we used a "zooming in" approach (Warren-Little, 2012). Zooming in allows "a deeper understanding of the practices and perspectives in play in specific moments (events, activities) as teachers and others assign various meaning to data, make inferences from data, create explanations for observed patterns, and imagine useful responses to the patterns they detect" (Warren-Little, 2012).

Teachers here, however, examined student work with an understanding that they were entering another year worth of specific benchmark expectations. The administrator had shared concerns about teachers' abilities to teach reading. The three weeks before students completed the assessment were reserved for establishing structures and procedures in the class. Teachers had made claims about students' abilities prior to any meaningful academic work taking place. They made assumptions that the students were lower than the previous cohort when they in fact were not. Either the teachers are unable to properly assess students, or their negative views about poor students of color serve as biases that cloud judgments. Both of these are problematic.

Rist (2000/1970) found that teachers’ beliefs of students from lower social classes were reified in the seating charts, amount of communication, leadership opportunities, and level of control. In Rist’s study, the expectation by the kindergarten teacher that the poor children would perform lower was shared by the teachers as the students matriculated through second grade. Ultimately, Rist sadly concludes, “[i]nitial expectations of the kindergarten teacher two years earlier as to the ability of the child resulted in placement in a reading group, whether high or low from which there appeared to be no escape. The child’s journey at one reading level and in one social grouping appeared to be preordained from the eighth day of kindergarten” (p. 287).

Whether or not the kindergarten teachers had shared data about the 2013-2014 cohort as they matriculated to 1st grade is unclear. What is clear is that within the first survey and professional development session, the 1st grade teachers articulated similar deficit views.

**Exploring the Beliefs of 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Teachers**

The second study addresses a similar finding of teachers’ deficit beliefs. Since the 2013-2014 kindergarten cohort ultimately outperformed their previous cohort, the expectation was that the 1st grade teachers would inherit students who were better prepared and on a higher level academically. The 2013-2014 kindergarten cohort completed its school year with 64% of students reading at Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) level 8<sup>2</sup>, whereas the previous 2012-2013 cohort completed the year with only 11% of students reading at a DRA level 8 or higher. Therefore, the majority of students would enter 1<sup>st</sup> grade in the 2014-2015 school year with higher grades than the prior year. However, 1st grade teachers and the grade-level administrator held beliefs that students entering were lower and less prepared to engage in literacy work.

There were 12 teachers and coaches who made up the 1<sup>st</sup> grade team. Ten of the 12 (83%) held master’s degrees. The teachers had an average of 13.4 years of teaching experience with a range from five months to 27 years. The teachers had an average of 6.3 years teaching 1<sup>st</sup> grade.

*Background Data*

During the first quarter questionnaire administered in October 2014, 1st grade teachers and staff were asked to respond to items related to their backgrounds as educators and their beliefs about their students. What are some concerns that you have about the literacy work you are being asked to do this year? The teachers’ responses fell into four themes as denoted in Table 2 below.

Table 2

*Teachers Descriptions of Concerns Embarking on the Literacy Intervention*

Theme	Description	Example (Number of similar responses)
Beneficial	Does not see the literacy work as posing any issues	As an AIS teacher I feel the literacy work I will be using to instruct students will be beneficial in helping them make progress in reading. (1 response)

<sup>2</sup> DRA level for completing Kindergarten is level four, but a higher expectation was created as educators disagreed with rigor of work at a DRA level four.

Overwhelming/Teacher Ability	The teacher is overwhelmed by the scope of the work involved in instructing during a 90-minute literacy block.	My concern about the literacy work that I'm being asked to do this year is a bit overwhelming because it's something new but with anything that's new it will take some time to see progress. I think the students are being asked to do so much in a short time span it seems kind of rushed. Are they really getting it or are they getting it for that moment and then it's gone/forgotten? Time will tell (5 responses)
Concernfor/about students	Teachers are concerned about students' ability to reach goals or keep up with the work	I don't know if we can move the students with the high registers and the limited amount to make up the deficits. (5 responses)
New Program	The teachers are concerned about using a new program.	Being new to AIS and having spent 7 years focusing on math – I am concerned with getting to know the curriculum and programs being used effectively. I have not visited the [partner school] (3 responses)

\* Some teacher responses encompassed two themes and thus were counted twice.

In an interview, the administrator was asked -What are your biggest concerns going into the new school year?

The first [grade] are starting so low. Yep, yep uh, concerned about some of the teachers and their basic knowledge around reading instruction and differentiation, uh that uh – the transition to ½ block for [reading] instruction. [The intervention program] may not be enough to address the lack for all the students [Administrator interview, October 2014]

Recall from the previous study that the administrator articulated similar beliefs about teachers' ability to teach reading, but then stated that they would be looking at brain trauma. In this case, the administrator corroborates the belief that the 1st graders are starting low, and then suggests that the [intervention program] may be the issue with addressing student deficiencies instead of the teachers' deficiency in reading instruction.

The 1<sup>st</sup> grade teachers ( $N=12$ ) were asked to respond to two separate questions to determine their beliefs about the 2014-2015 cohort of students.

- 1) How do you think your students' academic readiness this year (2014-2015) compares to the students you have had in the past?
- 2) Please describe the readiness of your student to read and write on 1<sup>st</sup> grade level. These responses from the questionnaire demonstrate teachers' beliefs about students as of October, 2014 is reflected in how they spoke of the students. Table 2 below identifies teachers concerns upon entering the new school year.

Table 3  
*Teachers' Classification of 1st Graders' Academic Readiness*

Classification	Description of readiness compared to previous years
Not Ready/Lower	This year my assignment has changed, so as an AIS (Academic Intervention Service) teacher it is similar I am reading with students below grade level [survey #1]  The students are less ready this year as compared to last [survey #10]
No Change/The Same	I have more students this year than last year and it seems my class is lower [survey #12] No change [survey #3]  They are about the same [survey #5]
N/A or Too early to tell	N/A [survey #4]  Blank [survey #8]  Too early to gauge [survey #11]
Mixed (students lacking in some area)	They have a stronger word knowledge (reading word bank); but their writing skills are considerable <i>[sic]</i> weaker [survey #6] I do not have my own class but I feel that more students are coming into school with more skills and more stamina for working
Higher	Last year ½ of my class were reading below a first grade level. 1/3 of my class were recent arrivals to the U.S. or had limited schooling. This year most of the students attended kindergarten at [our school], and only 4 students do not recognized initial sounds. Almost half are on reading level in Spanish. Yet most of them are lacking reading comprehension [survey #9] My student's academic readiness this year has shown an increase from the previous years. The majority of my students DRA level are higher and their knowledge of sight words are advanced. [survey #2]  I do not have my own class but I feel that more students are coming into class with more skills and more stamina for working [survey #7]

In an effort to triangulate the data from teacher's self-report, and substantiate deficit thinking as part of the larger culture, we interviewed the K-1 administrator and asked – How do you explain some of the 1<sup>st</sup> grade teachers' feelings that students aren't prepared for the work?

It's a challenge on K and first. We are also losing the [high performing] students too. [Administrator interview, October 2014]

The response is complicit. The administrator who has purportedly examined the student level data, agreed that the students were lower. To explore these claims made by teachers within the first month of the intervention, we formulated the following research question: Study 2 Research Question - Are students from the 2014-2015 1<sup>st</sup> grade cohort entering at a lower academic level than the 2013-2014 cohort?

*Sample*

The samples sizes were uneven 2013-2014 1st grade cohort ( $N=141$ ), 2014-2015 first grade cohort ( $N=144$ ). There was an approximate turnover of 30 students. The students who entered the school for the first grade had similar racial and SES status as the school maintained its overall 99% SES classification.

*Data*

As with the previous 2013-2014 cohort, the students had experienced three weeks of education with their new first grade teachers. The students completed the Development Reading Assessment during the end of September. The DRA provides categorical results (Pearson 2011) with an expectation that students entering will be at Below A or A.

**Results**

Using Pearson's Chi-squared test of independence, we sought to examine teachers' and the grade level administrator's claims that the students were lower or the same. We found the relationship between the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school year performance on the DRA was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(2, N=285) = 25.06$ ,  $p < .05$ . The hypothesis rejected at  $\alpha = .05$  level. The first grade students from the 2014-2015 cohort were not the same as the students from the previous year's cohort (2013-2014), and actually performed higher than expected. The contingency table below demonstrates the differences between the observed DRA levels and expected DRA levels – shown in parentheses.

Table 4

*DRA Contingency Table*

Year	Below DRA 8 (EV)	At DRA 8 (EV)	Above DRA (EV)	Total
2013-2014	123 (105)	7 (10)	11 (26)	141
2014-2015	89 (107)	14 (11)	41 (26)	144
Total	212	21	52	285

There were 18 fewer students Below DRA level 8 than expected in 2014-2015. Percentagewise, the 2013-2014 cohort of first grades show 87% Below DRA whereas the 2014-2015 had 61%. The expectation of students from the 2014-2015 cohort who should score at DRA 8, was 11, however the observed value was exceeded by three. Lastly, fifteen students performed higher than expected in the Above DRA 8 category in comparison to the previous 2013-2014 cohort. The difference between the expected and observed show the 2014-2015 cohort actually better prepared on average than the 2013-2014 cohort.

The rationale for teachers' and grade-level administrator's classification of students as the same or lower than the previous cohort is part of a larger issue of socialization and indoctrinated beliefs in inferiority will be taken up in the next section.

### **Discussion – Resistance to Data and an Underlying Issue**

The teachers and the grade-level administrator entered the school year with concerns. The teachers articulated concerns that work they were asked to do as part of the literacy intervention was overwhelming for them, and also that students were not academically ready. One teacher's statement, "I don't know if we can move the students with the high registers and the limited amount to make up the deficits" was shared in some way by four colleagues. However, the students were not the same, nor were they lower than the previous cohort as some teachers claimed. This cohort of students performing higher than their previous cohort, with larger percentages of students perform at or above the DRA level 8. The question of why teachers perceive these students as being lower, and why the administrator leading kindergarten and 1st grade levels would corroborate the deficit statements may be viewed through theories of class and race.

Rist (2000/1970) found that teachers in his study of kindergarten and 1st grade students based their assessments on characteristics (poverty information, parent/home life) or appearance (cleanliness) that were not related to academic ability.

One could assert that the 1<sup>st</sup> grade teachers may be associating the ending (June DRA) levels when they thought about comparatively about the students entering in September. However, teachers were asked questions about the process of teaching their previous cohort, the time frame, additionally the administrator had done a comparison of the cohorts. Lasky (2008) asserts that conversations about data show that "during early stages of learning from data, participants tended to focus on procedures or processes rather than the meaning of the actual data (p. 99 cited by Little, 2012). However, considering the years of experience of the teachers and the administrators, it is highly unlikely that this is the case. Rather, this is an active dismissal of the ability of poor students of color. It is what Mills (2007) calls "white ignorance." In painting a picture, Mills challenges,

*Imagine an ignorance that resists. Imagine ignorance that fights back. Imagine an ignorance militant, aggressive, not to be intimidated, an ignorance that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly—not at all confined to the illiterate and uneducated and propagated at the highest levels of the land, indeed presenting itself unblushingly as knowledge (Mills, 2007, p. 13 – Italics in original text).*

When teachers hold deficit views about the family backgrounds and abilities of students of color, and they are resistant to the truth of data, they embark on passive teaching methods, and what Ladson-Billings (2002) calls "permission to fail."

### **Culminating Discussion**

#### *Teacher Beliefs*

The kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade students entering school during the 2014-2015 school year were poor, yet well capable. Most entered according to the expectation of Developmental Reading

Assessment guideline. The kindergarten students scored at an equivalency of K.3 (kindergarten 3rd month). This dispels some beliefs that poor children of color enter with no formal register. The 1st graders entered to school year performing better than expected in all categories (i.e. there were fewer students entering below level and more students entering at or above DRA 8). This fact notwithstanding, we have found that in our society such poor students in urban schools are being characterized as tremendously traumatized, lacking cognitive ability, and being at risk of failure (Payne, 2005; Jensen, 2009).

Teachers who work in urban schools are inundated with practices and techniques to deal with poor children assuming that the children experience the most severe form of poverty that would lead to brain trauma. In a classic case of blaming the victim (Ryan, 1971) teachers and their grade-level administrators turned to poverty and poverty-related scholarship to determine expectations.

Though economists and educators have effectively pointed out the paradoxes of American poverty, the racist ideology underlying its construction and its ability to hinder progress of people of color (Batchelder, 1964; Conley, 1999; Shapiro, 2004; Bomer, Dworin, May & Semingson; 2008; Gorski, 2013; Coates, 2014), many educators have come to characterize poverty as a trait that impedes learning. In the school in this study, the administrator admitted to relying on poverty-based texts to ground her practices, and teachers reflected a similar belief.

The beliefs about students were constant and seemingly immutable. The administrator admitted on multiple occasions that the teachers at the school were ill-equipped to teach reading, but instead she dismissed teacher inadequacy by suggesting that it is brain trauma associated with poverty that must be focused upon. Teachers similarly situated obstacles to learning to factors outside of the classroom, corroborating what Weiner (2006) found. The teachers' beliefs about students were problematic, but even more problematic was the administrator's interpretation. While teachers looked mainly at the data for their respective classes, the administrator was able to examine the data across all classes across both years. She therefore had opportunity for a more nuanced evaluation of the data. Yet failed to see students as they really are.

### **Limitations**

We would be remiss not to note the racial dynamic in the study. The grade-level administrator for both kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade is a white woman. Seven of the 12 educators on 1<sup>st</sup> grade were white women Six were lead teachers. Studies have shown that whites in urban school tend to have lower expectations of students (Douglas et al., 2008; Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016; Milner 2006; Milner & Laughter, 2015). Though we are by no means suggesting that there are no white teachers working in urban schools who care about and have high expectations of students. It is a limitation to this study because there is not enough diversity of staff make up to determine if this is a racialized practice of beliefs that is transcends the dominant group of white educators in this school.

While studies have found that white teachers in particular hold deficit views of poor children of color, Vaught and Castagno (2008) found that instead of admitting holding racist beliefs about students that could impact their learning, teachers held on to beliefs about structural racism in schools. Scholars that interrogate the “whiteness” of education and schooling spaces offer insight of how successful white teachers eschew deficit beliefs in urban schools (Howard,

1999). Boucher (2016) found that successful white teachers build solidarity with African-American students. Though the assertion that poverty of a White male teacher can be an entry point or relational characteristic, wrongly assume poverty can equate to issues of race. The fact that poor students have historically underperformed makes students' failure to learn material palatable and acceptable for teachers. It allows them to blame these young victims of poverty for being unlearned (Weiner, 2006; Dudley-Marling and Lucas, 2009). Blaming the victim, according to Ryan (1971) is an ideological process, which includes a belief system, a systematic distortion of reality that maybe unintentional but self-serving to the class that practices and reproduces the distortion in the system. The distortion in the education system belie the impact deficit beliefs have on teachers by reframing issues of educations as is issues of race and poverty.

Deficit thinking about students of color allow teachers two forms of escape: 1) they are not held accountable for students' failures 2) they are not forced to ber reflective about their practices or their contributions to the achievement gap. As Weiner (2016) noted, locating the problem outside of the classroom, or focusing on the problem of the larger political and structural issues (Kumashiro, 2012) teachers do not have to show much in the way of student achievement. Teachers who may have a fear of failing can insulate themselves by establishing that children as young as 5 and 6 are so academically behind they cannot be expected to meet high expectations. This problem is compounded when school administrators, who are charged with leading, hold the same deficit beliefs rather than disrupting them.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

In this study, we used data to challenge earlier findings that teachers and administrators ignored or misinterpreted data in order to maintain deficit beliefs about students. The administrator purports to use data driven decision making and included the data percentages in tables and discusses "the numbers." However, the numbers do not disrupt fears of failures, a culture of blaming the families, and thinking about students though deficit lenses. Teachers and school administrators demonstrated their epistemological beliefs in several ways. They spoke openly in the meetings; in the classroom environments their behavior and their interactions with the students, as well as their reasons for disciplining students were undergirded by their belief systems. In many ways these beliefs had the potential to disrupt the interventions, and to minimize the effort teachers put into the work with students.

This article may at times imply that we are blaming the teachers for their belief system. This is not the goal. Kumashiro (2012), argues that discourse that blames teachers wrongly obscures the larger structural issues in education. He points to inequality in resources and teacher preparation as well as high stakes testing, markets, and privatization of education. While structural inequities exist, we are arguing that some teachers in urban schools add to them by virtue of deficit beliefs. That is the point we are making here by describing how a culture of deficit beliefs takes form if not carefully monitored.

Several themes emerged throughout the year of classroom observations, interviews, and professional development that had to constantly be refuted. This points also to an issue with professional development. Judith Warren-Little (2006) has argued that professional developments are often misaligned with teacher needs and as a result fail to address recurrent problems in practices of teaching and learning. While it is believed that effective professional development can shape teacher instructional capacity (Cohen & Ball, 1999), and that at the heart

of professional developments, a consideration of teachers, content, and students must be taken into foregrounded (Warren-Little, 2012), but we have found through this work that not enough attention is given to teachers' thinking about students as part of their professional development. Because we know that teachers' epistemologies are constructed alongside their racial and class identities (Brownlee, Schraw, & Berthelsen, 2011; Demers, 2016), we argue future education interventions involving teachers must take into account teachers' beliefs.

The most poignant finding in this work was the ways many teachers remain unconvinced of the students' intellectual growth and their ability. Using both student and teacher-level data analyses to address both racialized and classed biases that exist, we were able to make how *deficit default* operates. Specifically, deficit default is seen when, in spite of student successes, teachers default back to ingrained deficit beliefs about poor students of color. In this case, kindergarten and 1st grade students who have done little more than being born to poor parents have been cast in a light that prevents educators from seeing their success, thereby relegating them to low-expectations. If the trajectory of these students in any way mirror what Rist found in 1970, these students are doomed for failure. This, however, need not be the case.

Scholars in the positive psychology field (Duckworth, 2009; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Duckworth & Seligman, 2005) contend that students must shift mindsets in order to achieve in schools. We argue that teachers and administrators must make a similar shift. Teachers like many in this study have what Dweck (2008) termed *fixed* rather than *growth mindsets* in relation to poor students of color and achievement in classrooms. This can and must change.

Since teachers are the purveyors of the content, we contend that their beliefs and personal epistemologies should be of greater concern when we think about interventions aimed at improving the achievement of students of color and poor students. Otherwise we will see little progress. It has become clear that deficit default is too deeply embedded in the work of intervention, and we argue that the move toward data driven decision making will never be effective if the *true* data about students' abilities is overridden by teachers' and administrators' deficit views about their students.

## References

- Batchelder, A. (1964). Poverty: The Special Case of the Negro. In B.A Weisbrod (Ed.), *The economics of poverty: An American paradox* (pp. 100-104). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bomer, R., Dworin, J., May, L., & Semingson, P. (2008). Miseducating teachers about the poor: A critical analysis of Ruby Payne's claims about poverty. *The Teachers College Record*, *110*(12), 2497-2531.
- Boucher, M. L. (2016). More than an ally: A successful white teacher who builds solidarity with his African American students. *Urban Education*, *51*(1), 82-107.
- Brownlee, J. M., Schraw, G., & Berthelsen, D. C. (2011). Personal epistemology and teacher education: An emerging field of research. In *Personal epistemology and teacher education* (pp. 3-24). Routledge.
- Carter, P.L.(2013). Student and school cultures and the opportunity gap: Paying attention to academic engagement and achievement. In P.L. Carter & K.G. Welner (Eds.), *Closing the opportunity gap: What America must do to give every child an even chance* (143155). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Coates, T. N. (2014, May 12). The case for reparations . *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archives/2014/05/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>
- Coleman, J. S., Campbell, E., Hobson, C., McPartland, J., Mood, A., Weinfeld, F., & York, R. (1966). The Coleman Report. *Equality of Educational Opportunity*.
- Conley, D. (1999). *Being black, living in the red: Race, wealth, and social policy in America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Cooper, C. W. (2003). The detrimental impact of teacher bias: Lessons learned from the standpoint of African American mothers. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, *30*(2), 101-116.
- Demers, K. E. (2016). Helping White Preservice Teachers Understand: The Impact of Racial Ideologies in the Classroom. *Multicultural Education*, *24*(1), 2.
- Douglas, B., Lewis, C. W., Douglas, A., Scott, M. E., & Garrison-Wade, D. (2008). The impact of White teachers on the academic achievement of Black students: An exploratory qualitative analysis. *The Journal of Educational Foundations*, *22*(1/2), 47.

- Duckworth, A.L. (2009). Backtalk: self-discipline is empowering. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 90(7), p. 536.
- Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). Grit: perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(6), 1087.
- Duckworth, A.L. & Seligman, M.P.E. (2005). Self-discipline outdoes I.Q. in predicting academic performance of adolescents. *Psychological Science*, 16(12), 939-944.
- Dudley-Marling, C. (2007). Return of the deficit. *Journal of Educational Controversy*, 2(1), 5.  
Retrieved from <http://cedar.wvu.edu/jec/vol2/iss1/5>
- Dudley-Marling, C., & Lucas, K. (2009). Pathologizing the language and culture of poor children. *Language Arts*, 86(5), 362-370.
- Dweck, C. S. (2008). Can personality be changed? The role of beliefs in personality and change. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 17(6), 391-394.
- Ford, D. Y., Harris III, J. J., Tyson, C. A., & Trotman, M. F. (2001). Beyond deficit thinking: Providing access for gifted African American students. *Roeper Review*, 24(2), 52-58.
- Garza, R. E., & Garza, Jr, E. (2010). Successful white female teachers of Mexican American students of low socioeconomic status. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 9(3), 189-206.
- Ghans, T. & Parker, L. (2015). “Tough” teachers in urban elementary schools: Applying Paul Tough to literacy intervention professional development. Paper session presented at the *American Educational Research Association Annual Conference*. Chicago, IL.
- Gorski, P. C. (2011). Unlearning deficit ideology and the scornful gaze: Thoughts on authenticating the class discourse in education. *Counterpoints*, 402, 152-173.
- Gorski, P.C. (2013). *Reaching and teaching students in poverty: Strategies for erasing the opportunity gap*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Howard, G. (1999). *We can't teach what we don't know: White teachers, multicultural schools*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Klehm, M. (2014). The effects of teacher beliefs on teaching practices and achievement of students with disabilities. *Teacher Education and Special Education: The Journal of the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children*, 37(3), 216-240.
- Kumashiro, K. K. (2012). *Bad teacher!: How blaming teachers distorts the bigger picture*. New York: NY, Teachers College Press.

- Jensen, E. (2009). *Teaching with poverty in mind: What being poor does to kids' brains and what schools can do about it*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American students*. San Francisco:CA Jossey-Bass Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2002). I ain't writtin' nuttin': Permission to fail and demands to succeed in urban classrooms. In L. Delpit & J.K. Dowdy (Eds.), *The skin we speak: Thoughts on language and culture in the classroom* (pp. 107-120). New York, NY: New Press.
- Love, A., & Kruger, A. C. (2005). Teacher beliefs and student achievement in urban schools serving African American students. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 99(2), 87-98.
- Mills, C. (2007). White ignorance. In S.Sullivan & N. Tuana (Eds.), *Race and epistemologies of ignorance* (pp. 11-38). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Milner, H.R. (2006). But good intentions are not enough: Theoretical and philosophical relevance in teaching students of color. In J. Landsman & C. Lewis (Eds.), *White teachers in diverse classrooms: A guide to building inclusive schools, promoting high expectations, and eliminating racism* (pp. 79-90). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Milner, H. R., & Laughter, J. C. (2015). But good intentions are not enough: Preparing teachers to center race and poverty. *The Urban Review*, 47(2), 341-363.
- Payne, R. K. (2005). *A framework for understanding poverty*. Highland, Tx: aha! Process.
- Pitzer, H. (2015). Urban Teachers Engaging in Critical Talk: Navigating Deficit Discourse and Neoliberal Logics. *Journal of Educational Controversy*,9(1), 8.
- Pollack, T. M. (2012). Unpacking everyday “teacher talk” about students and families of color: Implications for teacher and school leader development.*Urban Education*, 0042085912457789.
- Rist, R. C. (2000/1970). HER classic: Student social class and teacher expectations: The selffulfilling prophecy in ghetto education. *Harvard Educational Review*,70(3), 257-301
- Rivkin, S. G., Hanushek, E. A., & Kain, J. F. (2005). Teachers, schools, and academic achievement. *Econometrica*, 73(2), 417-458.
- Robertson-Kraft, C., & Duckworth, A. L. (2014). True grit: trait-level perseverance and passion for long-term goals predicts effectiveness and retention among novice teachers. *Teachers College Record*, 116(3), 1-27.

- Rosenthal, R., & Jacobson, L. (1968). Pygmalion in the classroom. *The Urban Review*, 3(1), 16-20.
- Ryan, W. (1971). *Blaming the victim*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books
- Shapiro, T. M. (2004). *The hidden cost of being African American: How wealth perpetuates inequality*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Thompson, G. L., Warren, S., & Carter, L. (2004). It's not my fault: Predicting high school teachers who blame parents and students for students' low achievement. *The High School Journal*, 87(3), 5-14.
- Valencia, R. R. (2010). *Dismantling contemporary deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive Schooling: US-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*. SUNY Series, The Social Context of Education.
- Vaught, S. E., & Castagno, A. E. (2008). "I don't think I'm a racist": Critical Race Theory, teacher attitudes, and structural racism. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 11(2), 95-113.
- Walker, K. L. H. (2010). Deficit thinking and the effective teacher. *Education and Urban Society*, 45(5), pp. 576-597
- Warren-Little, J. (2006) Professional development and professional community in the learnercentered school. *Washington: National Education Association*.
- Warren-Little, J. (2012). Understanding data use practice among teachers: The contribution of micro-process studies. *American Journal of Education*, 118(2), 143-166.