“Words That You Said Got Bigger”: English Language Learners’ Lived Experiences of Deficit Discourse

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In recent decades, academic outcomes for English Language Learners (ELLs) have become a major focal point of research in English education. Much of the scholarly discourse on this topic reinforces a deficit orientation toward ELLs, constructing them as an educational “problem” rather than an asset (e.g., Crumpler, Handsfield, & Dean, 2011; Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006; Mitchell, 2013). This article examines how ELLs at one high school in New England perceived and resisted this deficit discourse by analyzing statements these students made during public protest and personal interviews. I employ Critical Race Theory (Kubota & Lin, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) as a framework for understanding how these students—all Black, former refugees from African countries—experienced the effects of deficit discourse in their lived experience at school and in the community. Focusing on four themes—Essentialization, Educational Deficit, Intellectual Inferiority, and Resistance—I show how students came to link deficit discourse with limited educational opportunity, and how particular schooling practices—such as language/literacy testing and academic tracking into low-level English classes—came to be seen by students as an outgrowth and reinforcement of deficit discourse. In the discussion of findings, I highlight alternative forms of representation (i.e., “counter-stories”) that were put forth by the students, and outline a number of implications of this study for teaching, research, and advocacy in English education.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, educational outcomes for English Language Learners (ELLs) have been the focus of a great deal of educational research and public debate. These students currently comprise more than 20% of the US K–12 student population, and this number is expected to continue to grow in coming decades (Kanno & Harklau, 2012). Research has found disparate outcomes for ELLs on a number of measures, including performance on state reading and math tests, participation in honors and college-preparatory classes, and enrollment in postsecondary education (Callahan, 2005; Kanno & Varghese, 2010). Conversations about the academic “achievement gap” for ELLs have been taken up not only in educational scholarship, but also in public media ven-
ues such as ABC News (Costantini, 2012) and Time Magazine (Webley, 2011). Many articles in Research in the Teaching of English have noted that discussions of academic outcomes for ELLs tend to be underwritten by deficit-oriented discourse (e.g., Crumpler et al., 2011; Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006). Differences in language, culture, race, and nation of origin are often conceived of as educational obstacles, rather than resources (Crumpler et al., 2011; Grainger & Jones, 2013). This ideology is reflected in educational practices that tend to reify White, monolingual, US-born students as the norm and present ELL students as the “other.” One example of this “othering” effect is the label Limited English Proficient, still used widely in government discourse, which simultaneously essentializes ELLs as linguistically deficient and disregards their proficiencies in languages other than English. This deficit ideology is perpetuated as well through educational policies that focus on “fixing” students’ linguistic limitations, rather than on building their linguistic repertoires (Menken & Kleyn, 2010). Gutiérrez and Orellana (2006) have claimed that the construction of ELLs as a “problem” is so pervasive that it is an expected genre feature for ELL-focused literacy research.

Deficit discourse is particularly common in educational literature focusing on ELLs at the secondary level (Harklau, 1999; Reeves, 2004). Not only are these students’ non-English linguistic resources ignored, but low English language proficiency is often seen as the sole cause of the “achievement gap.” As Mitchell (2013) explains, “there is no story about race” (p. 345) in most of this literature, despite the fact that most ELLs are students of color. Socioeconomic background is similarly underemphasized, even though a high proportion of ELLs qualify for free and reduced-price lunch programs (Kanno & Varghese, 2010). The typical narrative about academic success for adolescent ELLs is that “English is ALL that matters” (Mitchell, 2013, p. 354; see also Mitchell, 2012).

This overemphasis on language has a major impact on schooling practices, since full proficiency in English is assumed to be a prerequisite for accessing rigorous academic content. At many high schools, therefore, ELLs spend much of their day in separate academic tracks, where the primary focus is linguistic remediation and not the learning of grade-level content—an approach Valdés (2001) calls “linguistic isolation.” Because these students are denied access to a more comprehensive and challenging literacy curriculum, they tend to stagnate academically and linguistically (Callahan, 2005). Even “sheltered” courses, which are supposed to teach content and language simultaneously, tend to be lacking in rigor and can be socially stigmatizing (Callahan, 2005; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2003). As scholars such as Fritzen (2011) have noted, an isolationist approach to ELL instruction is prevalent not only because of misunderstandings about what these students need, but also because this approach “shelters” mainstream teachers from having to accommodate a more linguistically and culturally diverse student population.

Deficit discourse is closely tied to standardized testing, as test scores are assumed to be objective indicators of language and literacy skills, despite substantive research showing that they may not be the best measure of what ELLs know and
can do (Crawford, 2004; Menken, 2008). Standardized tests often employ a narrow construction of what it means to be literate, and overlook literacy resources that do not fit neatly within that construction (Campano, Ghiso, & Sánchez, 2013). Test score reports also tend to highlight deficits of the group and overlook the progress and potential of the individual. As a result, they present a monolithic understanding of achievement, which often translates to a one-size-fits-all approach to language and literacy development (Campano, Ghiso, & Sánchez, 2013; Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006; Reeves, 2004). Curricular decisions made solely on the basis of standardized test scores, therefore, tend to perpetuate deficit ideologies about ELLs.

Despite growing awareness of the existence of deficit discourse, very few researchers have examined how students perceive and respond to that discourse. Some ethnographic studies at US high schools have explored how ELL students’ sense of belonging at school is connected to their understanding of how they are perceived by teachers, administrators, and peers (e.g., Harklau, 2000; Menken & Kley, 2010; Valdés, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). Research in postsecondary settings has also engaged this theme, showing how deficit-oriented labels and policies threaten academic and social integration for incoming ELL students (Harklau, 1999; Oropeza, Varghese, & Kanno, 2010; Shapiro, 2012). Most educational literature on the ELL “achievement gap” ignores these dynamics, however. Echoing Gutiérrez and Orellana (2006), Mitchell (2013) has suggested that educators and researchers “may participate in the perpetuation of structural inequities by researching and teaching from uncritical standpoints in which deficit perspectives are passed on” (p. 341). A critical approach requires that researchers offer nuanced perspectives on academic success and institutional integration, including students’ own interpretations of their schooling experiences. Engaging student perspectives on the topic of deficit discourse allows us to explore “the discursive production of difference” and find “tools to produce difference differently”—endeavors which are “vital to language and literacy research,” according to Crumpler et al. (2011, p. 82).

This article implements such an approach, drawing on comments made by one group of ELLs who engaged in public protest to voice their concerns about media representation, academic tracking, and institutional marginalization. My analysis employs Critical Race Theory (CRT) to explore how students experience deficit discourse at school and in the local community, and to highlight counter-narratives they put forth as a form of resistance to that discourse. This study has a number of implications for scholar-practitioners in English education, as both ELL and (mainstream) English Language Arts specialists have an important role to play in resisting deficit discourse in their classrooms, as well as within their schools and communities.

**Background**

In April 2012, in Laketown, a midsize refugee resettlement community in New England, a group of approximately two dozen high school students walked out of their morning classes and spent most of the day protesting in front of the school building. All of the students were former refugees from African countries. They held
signs with messages such as “End Racism,” “Unite and fight racism,” and “Racial profiling kills.” At the end of the school day, the students met in the library with two newspaper reporters and the school principal to discuss their concerns. One topic that emerged multiple times during both the protest and reporter meeting was an article that had been published a month earlier in the local newspaper. The article included the following passage, which was the focus of many students’ comments: “Annual standardized test scores . . . show a yawning achievement gap between high-income and low-income students in the district. English language learners, many of whom are African refugees, have even lower scores.” The report went on to list test scores for 11th graders, citing 3% proficiency for ELLs in reading and 6% in math. These figures were compared with those for students receiving free or reduced-price lunch (47% in reading; 16% in math), as well as with those for students not receiving free or reduced-price lunch (88% in reading; 46% in math).

This article had been posted on a bulletin board at the high school, alongside other school-related news. Students said the posting of the article had led to an exacerbation of interracial tensions at school in the weeks leading up to the protest. One student said the article had resulted in “more racist jokes in our school and our community.” Another said that it gave other students “another reason why they should come up to us saying some rude things.” Several students requested a retraction of the article: “Tell the community that this whole story’s not true,” one student urged reporters. The two journalists seemed sympathetic to students’ concerns, but took pains to emphasize that test scores are an objective measure of student performance and help to show, as one put it, that some groups of students are “not getting a fair shake.” Yet students continued to insist that the newspaper article had done more harm than good. Throughout the meeting, they circled back to the article multiple times, describing it as unfair, offensive, and hurtful.

The emotional intensity of these responses caught my attention, as a researcher who studies the transition process from high school to college for ELLs. I wanted to investigate why this particular paragraph—what I call the “test score passage”—incited such negative reactions from students, culminating in public protest—particularly given that discussions of low test-score performance of particular groups are prevalent in public discourse nationwide. A close examination of students’ comments about the passage, in juxtaposition with their descriptions of their lived experience at school, led me to conclude that the test score passage served as a springboard for a broader conversation about representation, discrimination, and educational opportunity. In critiquing the reporting of low test scores, the students were responding to a larger discourse of deficit that was prevalent in discussions about ELLs at school and in local media—particularly in regard to Black, former refugee students from African countries.

**Theoretical Overview: Critical Race Theory, Deficit Discourse, and Educational Equity**

To examine how students perceive, respond to, and resist deficit discourse, it is important to employ an analytical framework that foregrounds representations
of difference. Critical Race Theory offers tools for understanding the relationship between representation and inequality in regard to race, while at the same time considering how race intersects with other factors, such as social class and citizenship. Scholarship in CRT often highlights discursive strategies that “mark” people of color, or that render them invisible in representations of society. These strategies reinforce the narrative that Whiteness is the desired norm, and that divergence from that norm is a form of deficit. Ultimately, research using CRT aims to create the space for new stories about race and difference, rooted in the lived experience of people of color and aimed at promoting a pluralist vision of society (Kubota & Lin, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Educational researchers have used CRT to help explain disparate outcomes for particular racial groups. Differences in academic achievement tend to be attributed to perceived deficiencies in the student, rather than in the system. As a result, most discussions of closing the “achievement gap” are underwritten by an expectation of assimilation by non-White groups, rather than of mutual understanding and accommodation (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2006). Many students of color therefore experience schooling as a culturally and linguistically subtractive process, rather than an additive one (Menken & Kleyn, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999). Efforts to address racial inequities in school can contribute to the marginalization of students of color if they treat difference itself as a problem rather than a resource.

One of the key features of educational research from a CRT perspective is a focus on identifying and complicating “master narratives” that are told about students of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For the current analysis, narratives about former refugees from African countries are a primary focus. As Keddie (2012) has pointed out, the label refugee tends to evoke connotations of neediness and dependency, and often overlooks “the diversity and complexity of [students’] historical and cultural backgrounds” (p. 1297; see also Kumsa, 2006). Factors such as ethnicity, language background, and gender might be central to students’ understandings of themselves, but are absent from dominant societal narratives about “refugees” (Bigelow, 2010). Master narratives about what it means to be “African” and “Black” also shape many former refugee students’ lived experience in school and society (Bigelow, 2010; Ibrahim, 1999). CRT research aims not only to question these narratives, but also to “tell a counter-story . . . in an effort to transform oppressive structures and practices” (Mitchell, 2013, p. 348). Although CRT is not the only framework that can be used to engage in this work, it is particularly relevant to the case of Laketown, where many students associated deficit discourse with explicit forms of racial discrimination.

**Method and Research Context**

Grounding this study in CRT led me to ask two central questions: (1) What does deficit discourse look and feel like to ELL students who are Black, former refugees at Laketown High School? (2) How do students negotiate and resist this discourse? The design for this project draws on work by Bigelow (2010), who studied educational outcomes for Somali youth in Minnesota, looking at how deficit discourse
was used to justify structural barriers to educational opportunity. Bigelow (2010) has argued that advocacy can be a focal point of the research design process: “By crafting research questions that are relevant to the intended beneficiaries of the work,” she explains, we are “better able to undertake research that will matter along the way and in the end” (p. 22). Like Bigelow, my aim in this project is not just to further scholarly understanding, but also to offer insights that can contribute to improved educational outcomes for students in Laketown and other communities.

I drew on three data sources for this analysis. The first was media footage of the student protest and a video recording of the afternoon meeting between students and reporters, which lasted just over one hour. I located these recordings at local media websites. The second data set was composed of individual interviews I conducted with nine students—all Black ELLs from African countries—who attended Laketown High School and were matriculated in college or planning to enter college the following year. Participants were recruited via staff members at schools and community organizations. The interviews focused on the topic of college preparation and access, and included questions about students’ academic and social experiences in high school. Interviews were semistructured, lasting approximately one hour. Each interview was audio-recorded, with written consent from the participant, and later transcribed. The third set of data consisted of newspaper articles and other publicly available documents, as well as my participant observation at a number of district meetings and other community conversations. This latter set was used primarily to triangulate findings in the first two data sets.

I implemented an inductive approach to data analysis, drawing findings from detailed readings of raw data rather than employing a predetermined set of hypotheses (Thomas, 2006). This approach allowed me to foreground students’ lived experience, as expressed in their own words, and to develop a “theory about the underlying structure” of those experiences (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). After multiple readings of the data with extensive note-taking, I chose to use the video footage of the protest and reporter meeting as the starting point for grounded coding. One reason for this choice was that students initiated most of the turn-taking and topic switches in these conversations, in contrast with interviews or other data. Therefore, these two public speech events seemed to better represent students’ most salient concerns. Moreover, I had noticed that media reports on these events differed in significant ways from what I observed in raw footage. For example, several newspaper articles focused nearly exclusively on the issue of racist bullying among students, despite the fact that this was only one of a number of concerns raised by student protesters. I therefore felt an ethical imperative to ensure that students’ own stories—rather than the media’s interpretations of those stories—were at the forefront of my analysis (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

I also decided early on that “deficit” would be a central analytical theme, as my initial readings of the data had revealed that students were using the test score passage as a discursive anchor for discussing what they saw as deficit-oriented representation and treatment at school and in the community. I therefore approached the coding process with the question, What forms of representation and treatment
do students perceive as deficit-oriented? This process produced a number of codes, including labels, test scores, tracking, segregation, perceptions of being smart/stupid, talking/not talking about race, the future, and pushing back. After coding the data from the video-recordings, I applied these codes to the interview data, which helped to confirm the validity of the codes. I also reviewed relevant literature on many of these themes to gain a deeper understanding of what to look for in applying each code. Eventually, I consolidated the findings into four overarching categories. The first three—Essentialization, Educational Deficit, and Intellectual Inferiority—represent “master narratives” that were identified by students, while the fourth—Resistance—focuses on “counter-stories” (see Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, for more on this analytical framework). In the final phase of analysis, I drew on newspaper articles, participant observation notes, and other documents to triangulate the findings—in particular to see whether the master narratives identified by students could be observed elsewhere in public discourse.

**Researcher Positionality**

Because I am drawing on CRT in this analysis and am foregrounding issues of power as they relate to representation, it is important to acknowledge my own positionality as a researcher. As a White, middle-class woman, I recognize that it is an exercise of my own privilege, and a political act, to represent these students. For this reason, I have paid careful attention to the labels I employ. I avoid use of the term “African refugees,” a label that some students identified as problematic. I do occasionally use the term “refugee,” as it is a central discursive construct for this analysis, but I add the qualifier “former,” in order to highlight the fact that the label “refugee” does not fully capture who students are in the present. I use the label “English Language Learner” throughout the article, as it is still prevalent in educational research, but I acknowledge that this label can itself be seen as a contributor to deficit discourse as it implies that native English speakers (i.e., non-ELLS) are somehow not learners of English (Crumpler et al., 2011).

My professional experience also shapes my interpretation of the data. Having taught both ELL and (mainstream) English Language Arts at the secondary level, I have witnessed firsthand some of the trends described here. In my current work in higher education, I see the longer-term impact of deficit-oriented discourse and practice, both in the low representation of ELLs in college classrooms to begin with and in the ways that postsecondary institutions continue to treat ELLs as a problem rather than a resource (Kanno & Harklau, 2012; Shapiro, 2012). I have also been involved in conversations for several years now about educational reform in Laketown schools and have realized that the question, “What is equitable and appropriate for our ELL students?” is not an easy one to answer. Hence, I am not a neutral or passive observer. My collection of experiences undoubtedly colors my interpretation of the data, but it also enhances my ability to understand what students are saying and why it matters so much to the work of English educators and researchers.
Community and School Demographics

The city of Laketown has approximately 40,000 residents and is located in northern New England. Laketown has been a refugee resettlement community since the 1980s, but the number of families with children has increased significantly since the mid-1990s. The composition of the incoming refugee population has changed a great deal over time: In the 1980s and 1990s, most newcomers originated from countries in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia, whereas the past decade has seen more arrivals from countries in Central and Eastern Africa, as well as from Burma (Myanmar), Iraq, and Nepal/Bhutan.

Laketown School District has just over 3,500 students, 51% of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Although ELLs still make up only a small portion (2%) of students statewide, they are a much larger portion (18%) of Laketown’s student body, and 91% of Laketown’s ELLs qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Laketown High School is the district’s only high school and has approximately 1,100 students, 15% of whom are ELLs. The racial demographics of the high school population mirror those of the entire district: White (73%); Black/African American (14%); Asian (10%); Latino (2%); Multiracial (1%). Approximately 35% of the ELL population is Asian and approximately 50% is Black. The African countries most highly represented by Black ELLs include Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Burundi, and Sudan. Because much of this analysis deals with conceptions of racial difference, it is useful to note that 90% of Laketown community residents identify as White, compared with 70% of the students in Laketown School District. Hence, discussions of academic performance of racial minority groups are prevalent in the community, including in local media, as many Laketown residents look to the schools as the demographic and social blueprint for the community.

Findings

“They Think All Africans Are the Same”: Discourses of Essentialization

During both the protest and the meeting with reporters, essentialization was a prevalent topic. Many students expressed concerns about the frequent grouping of multiple populations of students under the umbrella label “African.” Moreover, they felt that this constructed group of “Africans” was portrayed negatively, while other groups within the school body were portrayed in a positive light or ignored completely. Students saw the word “African” as problematic, because it essentializes students based on a very loose geographic association (the continent of Africa) and an implied racial identification (Black). As such, it gives a false sense of homogenization among students from a variety of national, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds. As one student said in the reporter meeting: “To categorize ‘Africans’ in general is a big, big issue.”

One of the reasons students were angry about the test score passage was that it characterized “African” students as having low test scores, but avoided mention of other groups of ELLs. Reporters and school officials claimed that they had made
this editorial decision because “Africans” were the largest population of ELLs. Of course, as some students observed, if “African” students had been categorized by country or language background, as is done with other groups, these generalizations would have been impossible: “I understand what you’re saying, that the largest amount of refugees come from Africa,” said one student in the reporter meeting, “but at the same time . . . that’s a really awful thing . . . to pretty much profile just one group of people, when there’s so many different groups.” This student also pointed out that if other groups of ELLs were similarly lumped together—such as students from Asian countries (Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Vietnam, etc.)—that group would be similar in size to the “African” group, and might merit more attention. As one interview participant explained:

They made it clear in the newspaper like Africans was the reason [for LHS’s] scores. The kids that are from Africa did get mad, cause there’s like Nepalese, there’s like Vietnamese, like Asians and all that, and they only picked on the Africans. That like pissed everyone off.

The spotlighting of “African” ELLs in the test score passage was a concrete example of the sort of markedness many students experienced on a daily basis. Several interview participants said that their peers often made vast generalizations about “Africans” as a group: “They think all Africans are the same,” one said. “Like when we’re in class watching a movie, they see some Africans from different tribes, and they’re naked, and they say like, ‘You still like that when you were in Africa?’ I’m like, ‘We’re not all the same.’” Two other interview participants said they had been asked whether African people “sleep in trees.” These comments carry echoes of exoticization, as well as cultural inferiority; not only are all “Africans” presumed to have had a similar life experience, but that experience is also thought of as distinctly “other.” These trends index what Adichie (2009) calls the “single story” of Africa as a continent (sometimes mistakenly thought of as a single country) of war, poverty, and disease. This deficit discourse is then extended to students from African countries, who are presumed to be deficient in social and cultural capital (Bigelow, 2010; Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006).

Not all students were critical of the label “African.” Many used it when referring to themselves and their families. At the same time, some uses of the word were considered blatantly offensive. “It depends how you use it,” said one interview participant. He went on to give an example of when he found the term problematic: “Yeah, like, ‘That African kid—he’s not doing good.’” Another student told reporters, “When they say ‘the N-word,’ or ‘That Black kid—look at him—look at the African!’ It just makes me stand out—makes me feel different.” These examples offer insights into how students experience deficit discourse: Being identified as “African” in itself may not be problematic, but when assumptions of deficit are made about “Africans” as a group, and those assumptions are projected onto individual students, the label “African” becomes a form of deficit discourse. Moreover, as the second comment indicates, the word “African” is used explicitly as a racist slur in some instances. In individual interviews and in the meeting with reporters, students shared additional examples of this pejorative usage, as will be discussed later on.
“But . . . We Went to School!”: Narratives of Educational Deficit

It is impossible to discuss the label “African” without considering the construction “African refugee.” Two of the most prevalent assumptions made about former refugee students from African countries are that they received little or no schooling prior to coming to the United States and that they lack literacy in any language (Bigelow, 2010). In the article containing the test score passage, for example, a teacher from Laketown High School was cited as saying that many “African refugees . . . had little or no access to education before they arrived and enter [the high school] sometimes as much as six grades or more behind.” This disparity, the teacher explained, was in large part why those students were not reaching high levels of academic achievement. While it is true that many Laketown students’ schooling prior to coming to the United States was limited and/or interrupted, most incoming ELLs had at least a few years of prior schooling, albeit often in languages other than English, such as French, Swahili, Arabic, or Somali.

Often, Laketown community members and school officials contrasted “Africans” with other refugee groups, who were presumed to have more educational assets. For example, a 2004 article in the local newspaper said that “many of the [Somali] Bantu students are illiterate in their own language and unfamiliar with the concept of school.” A school official was quoted as saying, “They aren’t typical refugees. They come really with no written language.” Such assumptions of educational deficit can have a major impact on how schools treat students: if one group is presumed to be “unfamiliar with the concept of school” (a dubious claim in itself), those students will have fewer opportunities to display their cultural capital because they are not presumed to have any to begin with. Lack of formal schooling is also misinterpreted at times as lack of appreciation for education. As a result, the parents of students with limited or interrupted formal education are sometimes thought of as placing a lower priority on schooling than their American counterparts, despite the fact that the desire for high-quality education is one of the primary reasons most refugee families cite for wanting to relocate to the United States in the first place (Bigelow, 2010; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Hence, the narrative of educational deficit is doubly hurtful as it not only makes inaccurate assumptions about students’ schooling histories, but also denies their identities as active seekers of educational opportunity. One Laketown student referenced this identity in the reporter meeting: After describing how peers sometimes told her to “Go back to your country,” she said, “It’s very wrong for them to tell us to go back to our country. I mean, we would love to go back to our country, but we came here for education!”

Standardized testing is an important aspect of this deficit discourse around formal schooling. One of the reasons many student protesters were critical of test scores was that those scores were the primary mechanism used for placement into high school courses. Students felt that standardized tests did not measure their actual abilities, and therefore put them on an academic track that was below their capabilities. One Laketown student addressed this concern in a letter he read aloud during the protest:
We’re bigger than test scores! ... Test scores has nothing to do with who we are and who we’re becoming as young men and women. ... Imagine you coming to our countries and taking a test in a language that you can’t even read, and asking yourself, “Should I read from left to right or from right to left?”

By addressing the public directly and through a written letter, this student not only displayed his own literacy resources, but also encouraged his listeners, whom he imagined to be US-educated community members, to “imagine” the experience of being tested in another language and the frustration of being unable to demonstrate their academic abilities.

It is not that students in the protest thought they had reached their full potential in terms of English language and literacy—quite the opposite. Many were angry that they had been placed into ELL-only English classes for multiple years in a row, because they wanted to progress more quickly in their English language development and thought they would be more likely to do so in mainstream English classes. As one student framed it in a question directed at the Laketown principal, “If you put kids from the same country in the same class, what are you hoping for them to gain?”

Students’ sense that mainstream English courses provided greater educational opportunity than ELL-only classes was bolstered by the fact that many experienced the latter as “too easy.” Although students often reported feeling comfortable in ELL English classes, few described feeling intellectually challenged. One interview participant said that after rereading writing assignments he had completed in his first few years of ELL classes, he could not comprehend how he had gotten such high grades: “I can’t even read it. ... How did they even understand? How did I get an A?” While not all students had the same perception of ELL classes, most subscribed to the belief that being placed in mainstream English classes was a marker of achievement and greatly improved their likelihood of being prepared for college. One student framed being “exited” from ESL as part of a process of intellectual identity construction: “I came from being this ESL person in middle school, to [being] this Honors person in high school,” he said. Yet many students never experienced this shift: They remained in ELL (and/or remedial) English classes for much of their high school careers, largely because their standardized test scores had not improved. In essence, their “limited” English proficiency, as measured by standardized tests, kept them in low-level classes, but the nonrigorous nature of those classes kept them from getting the higher scores needed to access a more rigorous English curriculum.

English proficiency was a major factor in placement decisions for other subject areas as well, such as Mathematics. One student raised this issue at the meeting with reporters: “Students of color are, like, they’re in Algebra I and below that. ... You have seniors that are taking ELL math. That’s not right. ... Math is a universal language. Everybody knows math.” Although this student’s assumption that “everybody knows math” might be inaccurate, the belief that ELL students’ prior knowledge was devalued within the current system was widespread. During his time
at a refugee camp, one interview participant had used arithmetic daily for his small business, making soccer balls out of plastic bags and selling them to other families. Upon entering Laketown High School, this student was placed in a low-level math class where he said he was “like, acing it all the time.” He was eventually moved to a more advanced class but felt that the initial placement had been detrimental to his confidence and his preparation for college. Two other interview participants said they had been advised to take less challenging math courses in eighth and ninth grade, without being told that this decision would greatly reduce their chances of being in college preparatory math classes by senior year.

These experiences illustrate the relationship between deficit discourse and educational opportunity. Students who are presumed to be educationally deficient are not predicted to reach high levels of achievement, and therefore may not be encouraged to challenge themselves academically. Parents of ELLs in Laketown often expressed concerns about low expectations, both at public gatherings and in private conversation. One interview participant—a community college student who was also a wife and mother of two—said that when she had visited her children’s elementary school looking to schedule a parent-teacher conference, staff were hesitant to interact with her. While other parents were greeted promptly and given a form to fill out, this parent said she was ignored for 20 minutes. The experience led her to conclude, “They have to think that every African woman didn’t go to school—they don’t know how to write, to read, they don’t know anything. But we do! . . . We went to school!” She said that to assume lack of schooling was a form of “discrimination.” This mother felt that deficit discourse was informing the way her children were taught as well: “I know our kids can do it. [But] they don’t want to push them,” she said. Earlier in the interview, she gave as an example the fact that no one asked her son for his homework folder when he forgot to turn it in: “It’s like they expect [him] to fail,” she said.

It is important to note that much of what these individuals experienced as discriminatory may have been the result of well-intentioned efforts on the part of school staff: A high school student might have been put into a lower-level class, or given an inflated grade on an assignment, in order to boost confidence and prevent academic failure. A mother might not have been greeted immediately because school staff were trying to locate an interpreter. Her son might not have been asked for his homework folder because teachers did not want to embarrass him in front of his classmates. However, these experiences were interpreted as discriminatory because participants suspected that someone who was not “African” would have been treated differently. Many ELL students and their families therefore concluded that the existing system had a “limiting” effect on their educational opportunities (Bigelow, 2010; Callahan, 2005).

“People Think We’re Stupid”: Narratives of Intellectual Inferiority

Closely tied with narratives of educational deficit are assumptions of intellectual inferiority. Many of the Black ELL students at Laketown were convinced that their peers, and some of their teachers, did not see them as “smart.” One of the protesters’ primary concerns about the test score passage, in fact, was that it had been
interpreted as “proof” of lack of intelligence. One student referenced this concern when explaining to reporters why the article had gone “way deep”:

Most of us interpret it as you guys calling us stupid. Like, four-year-olds. Call us dirty Africans. . . . Because they already call us stupid, and we don’t do anything about it, because we know we’re smart. . . . But her publishing that article just, like, makes people . . . say, “Oh wow, their stupidity is even published in the newspapers!” . . . And now everywhere we go, people give us dirty looks. Even elementary-schoolers call us “dirty Africans,” “booty-scratchers”—like, What the heck? Where did that even come from? I don’t understand it. And I will never understand what Americans or White people have against Africans.

These comments help to tease out the relationship between deficit discourse and racial discrimination. The newspaper article was a visible symptom of a deeply rooted problem. Racist taunting of the kind described above was mentioned by several interview participants as well. Many students had heard slurs such as “dirty African,” “stinky African,” or “dumb African” from classmates or community members. Questions about how to curb these incidents had been the focus of school board meetings and other public discussions for a number of years. The district had convened a task force in 2011 to look more closely at issues of diversity and equity, and had introduced some initiatives designed to respond more aggressively to reports of racist bullying and to promote cultural competency among school staff.

Yet in the eyes of students, the decision to post the article was a betrayal of sorts—an indication of a blind spot among school staff about the ways that Black ELLs from African countries were represented and treated. One student addressed the principal directly about this concern in the reporter meeting: “You know what people are saying [about us] is wrong. But why post an article to make things worse? Why?” When reporters tried again to downplay the test score passage, another student responded, “But . . . Words that you said got bigger!” She then asked, “If there was a fight, what would you do differently?” Indeed, several students said they had been close to engaging in physical altercations because of the article.12

The sense that the school did not understand the deeper implications of its actions was echoed in many students’ descriptions of their lived experience in school. A particularly illustrative example was shared by an interview participant who had graduated several years prior but still recalled being asked to attend a special meeting for ELLs on the topic of personal hygiene. “We have to have a meeting, so [we] can take a shower and stuff,” he explained sarcastically. He was extremely offended that all of the ELL students (mostly “Africans”) were expected to attend the meeting, while non-ELLs (“Americans”) were not:

I told them I’m not going. You can kick me out of school, but I know I’m not the one who’s smelling. . . . I’m not going to your meeting. . . . That’s one thing that made a lot of ESL kids get discouraged and drop out of high school. . . . I felt emotional just by hearing about the meeting. That just is not making sense.
In the weeks following the meeting, he said, many ELLs experienced increased ridicule from their peers, particularly as they were coming and going from their “sheltered” ELL classes: “People see you and they start holding their nose. They’re saying, ‘Oh my god! They’re smelly!’” He repeated multiple times his assertion that this incident had led many students to drop out of school. He found it ironic and unjust that “teachers are having a conference with you and they’re not talking about your education—they’re talking about your cleanness.”

This story offers a vivid depiction of how deficit discourse around students’ physical bodies intersects with other discourses about their intellect and educational potential. Here, the bodies of one group of students (ELLs, mostly Black) were “marked” as potentially unclean, while those of other groups (non-ELLs, mostly White) were not. The incident not only provoked racist bullying, but also reinforced a master narrative that ELLs were less intellectually capable than their peers. For if ELLs were truly seen as “smart,” many rationalized, then teachers would be having conversations with them about educational goals and opportunities rather than about “cleanness.”

This incident also carries traces of master narratives about physical, intellectual, and cultural superiority of Whites, which are an undeniable part of the history of race relations in the United States. Research has shown that such narratives continue to shape the educational lives of many students of color: students who are aware of negative stereotypes about the academic performance of their racial/ethnic group may be at higher risk of conforming to those stereotypes—a phenomenon known as “stereotype threat” (Steele, 1997). This phenomenon helps explain why many Laketown students responded so strongly to the test score passage: whereas media and school staff thought that posting the article publicly demonstrated their commitment to addressing educational disparities, students saw the article as contributing to those disparities by perpetuating the stereotype that they were unintelligent and lazy. One student framed this perceptual mismatch particularly well, asking reporters, “So the article was more about getting the issue out there, than to tell Africans to get off their asses and do better on the NECAP?14 Can you clarify to everyone here that that’s not what it was?”

“I Will Impress You!”: Strategies for Resistance

Throughout the protest, the reporter meeting, and individual interviews, students offered a number of suggestions for how deficit discourse might be counteracted. First, they said that local media should give more contextual information to accompany test-score reports, including discussion of the challenges ELLs face in adjusting to US schools, the difficulty of taking tests in a foreign language, and the rapid progress many of them do make as they become more fluent in English. Some pointed to their involvement in the protest as an obvious indicator of their abilities and commitment: “When we came,” said one student, “we did not even know one single word [of English]. But now look at us! We’re talking to a journalist . . . and it’s making our voices be heard.”

Students also encouraged the newspaper to place more focus on individual narratives, and to talk more about students’ educational futures—not just their
pasts. As one student put it, “How can you get to know me when you already view me as an idiot, pretty much, because of some stats?” Students exhorted reporters and school officials to learn more about their personal motivations and goals, and to start from the assumption that they valued education and had high expectations for themselves. “Do you guys accept us—that we’re different, that we’re here, and we’re actually trying to succeed?” one student asked. “You guys brought us to America, because our country wasn’t . . . giving us the chance to have success in life. We came here to have success in life!” Near the end of the meeting, another student offered a challenge to reporters: “Spend one minute with me. I will impress you. Just one minute!” Indeed, many of the students I have met through my research have articulated ambitious goals for themselves; a majority of the interview participants, for example, planned to pursue careers in helping professions, such as medicine, social work, or education. Students also pointed out that their proficiency in other languages was often under-recognized as an asset. One student asked a reporter directly: “I just want to know how many languages you speak. Do you speak other languages?” When the journalist responded briefly in French, students were visibly pleased and somewhat surprised. Most of their teachers spoke only English, and appreciation for linguistic diversity was largely absent from the school and media discourse about ELLs.

While the students in the reporter meeting did not discuss specific teachers (positively or negatively), many interview participants mentioned individuals who had shown a willingness to resist deficit discourse in their classrooms. Such teachers were usually characterized as both caring and demanding (Valenzuela, 1999). One student said of his American Literature teacher, “She pushed me hard . . . At the end of the year, I earned an A in her class, but I also learned something from that class. It was hard, but it pushed my brain.” Another student described how her ELL English teacher had talked constantly of her academic future: “The teacher was always reminding us . . . ‘You need this in college. These are the kind of things they’re gonna ask you.’” This student was proud to report that her ELL class was actually harder than the mainstream English class she took in her senior year.

Students also said that the high school curriculum needed to encourage more explicit discussion of race. One student admitted frankly in the reporter meeting, “I really think that White people are smarter than me. That’s what I think, and that’s what I’ve been taught.” She went on to describe how an antiracist curriculum might counteract this narrative:

Our teachers are not teaching other kids, you know, of different other colors in mind . . . I mean, I hear about, like, gay and lesbian things. They teach us that. . . . They improve on those. . . . But what about racism? What about us? I want people to know who I really am. . . . I want them to accept me, ’cause I’m different, too. . . . We’re trying to understand your ways. Why can’t you understand our way?

Some of the interview participants claimed that their Social Studies classes contributed to a deficit discourse about other countries by presenting a valorized narrative of the United States. “It’s all the great things America does,” said one
student of his American History class. “They don’t tell you some bad things. . . . And then when they look at other countries, they’d be like, ‘This is what they’re doing wrong.’” Some students suggested that they themselves could play a role in developing a more globally oriented curriculum. “Rather than [simply] teaching all these international kids,” said one interview participant, “let’s actually try to learn from them.” These comments seem particularly relevant in light of Lake-town School District’s mission, which includes the goal of preparing students to “contribute as global citizens in the 21st century.”

Discussion

This analysis reveals a great deal about how students experience deficit discourse. First, it shows that students care deeply about how they are represented at school and in the community. They wish to be portrayed as intelligent and resourceful, and may be critical of group labels and reports that do not reflect their individual abilities and achievements. However, the desire for individual representation may be at odds with much of the discourse around educational opportunity, which focuses on outcomes for particular groups as measured via standardized tests. In other words, the discourse of educational equity may feel discriminatory to the very students who stand to benefit. This study also offers insights into ways that students’ academic and social worlds intersect to reinforce deficit-oriented messages. A student who feels unchallenged in the classroom and who faces racist bullying in the hallways may come to see these experiences as mutually reinforcing forms of discrimination. Finally, this study shows that students have much to say about how to resist deficit discourse. Many are eager to serve as change-makers at school and in the community.

These findings carry a number of implications for English educators. First, schools’ intentions may not match students’ perceptions, and these perceptual mismatches can be highly damaging to ELLs’ sense of belonging. Teachers and administrators must, therefore, be in communication with ELLs and their families about the rationale behind their decision-making. They must be able to answer the question: How are our policies for testing, labeling, course placement, and curricular planning designed to help students reach high levels of academic achievement? Second, it is crucial to recognize that the mainstream English classroom is seen by many ELLs as a site of power—a place that offers linguistic, social, and cultural capital. Being placed in ELL-only English classes may be interpreted, therefore, as a withholding of that capital. This insight again suggests the importance of clear communication with students and families, and also highlights an imperative for ongoing collaboration between ELL and (mainstream) English teachers. Such a collaboration could help create greater alignment between ELL and English Language Arts curricula, increase the numbers of ELLs in Honors and Advanced Placement English classes, and perhaps lead to more opportunities for ELL and non-ELL students to draw on their collective “funds of knowledge” across the curriculum (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; see also Crumpler et al., 2011). Although sustained dialogue between ELL and ELA specialists may be happening at some
high schools, it is often prevented by what Matsuda (1999) calls “disciplinary division of labor,” by which the two groups remain institutionally and professionally segregated. Expertise in both areas is necessary, however, to create an English curriculum that is inclusive, equitable, and effective for all students.

An alliance between ELL and ELA specialists might also help to address the structural barriers faced by ELLs at high schools like Laketown. Many ELL teachers feel that they lack the political capital needed to push for major reform of institutional policies and procedures—in part because they themselves often feel institutionally marginalized (Harper & de Jong, 2009). These teachers may be particularly hesitant to propose systemic changes that would ask their mainstream counterparts to share more of the burden of support and advocacy for ELL students. As English educators, we should ask ourselves: Are we ready to do more—and perhaps risk more—in order to expand educational opportunities for ELLs?

### Conclusion

In this article, I have presented a snapshot of student responses to deficit discourse, as expressed both publically and in private interviews. This analysis has some limitations, which suggest an agenda for further research. First, while this account draws on multiple data sources, a more complete depiction of deficit discourse in this community would require a longitudinal study using ethnographic methods. As Compton-Lilly (2011) points out, ethnographic research can help document “the historically constructed nature of discourses and the ways they operate across time” (p. 225). Second, while focusing on students’ perspectives has value in itself, the voices of other stakeholders—including teachers, administrators, and family members—are largely absent from this account. Those voices are needed in order to develop a more complete theory of how deficit discourse is perceived, perpetuated, and resisted in this community. Finally, this is just a single case and is therefore insufficient for generalization. Accounts of other communities, and ELLs from other backgrounds, are needed to contribute to a broader understanding of deficit discourse as an educational phenomenon. Educational research also needs more theoretical consideration of how to report on deficit discourse without reifying that discourse. Some scholars in higher education (e.g., Kanno & Harklau, 2012) have promoted the use of assets-oriented labels such as “linguistically diverse” or “linguistic minority,” as alternatives to “English Language Learner,” but these alternative labels may not be as easily recognizable to those who are not language/literacy specialists.

This study also highlights the need for more attention within English education to the relationship between schooling and society. As my analysis clearly shows, the worlds of school and community are permeable—perhaps even inseparable—for students. Increased focus on school-community connections offers exciting possibilities for future research (e.g., media analysis, ethnography, community case studies), as well as for the classroom: What if the students in Laketown had been encouraged by their English and/or ELL teachers to write letters to the newspaper and school board, expressing their concerns about deficit discourse? What if stu-
dents could help develop an interdisciplinary unit on African Studies, which would aim to broaden all students’ cultural competencies? What if students researched some of the issues of most concern to them—such as labeling, tracking, and racial segregation—and shared their findings with school and community members? These are the sorts of learning opportunities that will display and expand students’ multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), and may be the best way to convince students that we take them at their word when they tell us, “I will impress you!”

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NOTES
1. “Laketown” is a pseudonym I am using in part to protect the privacy of students and their families, who expressed concerns about backlash from the public protest.
2. These were a subset of a larger set of interviews with ELLs transitioning to Vermont colleges, some of whom had graduated from other high schools in New England.
3. This figure comes from US Census data.
4. This information was drawn from reports by the state’s Office of Refugee Resettlement.
5. District statistics in this paragraph come from a March 2013 report released by a district committee.
6. This list was compiled from district documents, as well as data from the Office of Refugee Resettlement.
7. This figure comes from US Census data.
8. The label “African” was indeed used regularly in local media reports about refugee/immigrant populations, including reports focused on education. However, it seemed to be applied inconsistently. In the television news coverage of the protest, for example, one reporter referred to the student protesters as “international students,” while another called them “African refugee students” but added that “many of them . . . consider themselves Americans.”
9. This claim is not fully accurate. Some of the dialects spoken by Somali Bantu do have written forms. It is true, however, that interrupted schooling is a common phenomenon for this particular group of ELLs.
10. This interview participant was not a graduate of Laketown High School.
11. In the time since this article was originally drafted, administrators in Laketown have expressed a commitment to addressing some of these concerns and have taken initial steps to improve the placement process, as well as the ELL curriculum. An outside review completed in spring 2013 confirmed, however, that many more substantive changes need to occur in order to “help ELLs meet high standards.”
12. The principal apologized sincerely for the school’s lack of sensitivity in choosing to post the piece, but pointed out that her staff had simply been following protocol: any newspaper report that focused on Laketown High School was displayed on the bulletin board. Most students seemed dissatisfied by this response.

13. Although this story was not repeated by any other interview participants (most of whom were several years younger), echoes of it were apparent in the frequent mention of epithets such as “dirty African” or “stinky African.” I have not yet interviewed school officials about this incident.

14. The NECAP (New England Common Assessment Program) is the standardized test taken by students in several New England states: Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

15. This interview participant was not a graduate of Laketown High School.

16. Since the initial writing of this article, I have had the opportunity to meet with some of Lake-town High School’s mainstream English and Social Studies teachers, and discovered that “diversity” and “social justice” are key themes in the ninth-grade curriculum. Sadly, since many ELLs are in ELL-only classes that year, they miss the opportunity to engage these topics with their peers.

REFERENCES


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