

Shifting from Deficit to Generative Practices:  
Addressing Impoverished and *All* Students

P. L. Thomas

Furman University

Education

3300 Poinsett Hwy

Greenville, SC 29361

864-294-3386

paul.thomas@furman.edu

## Abstract

The political language, the public discourse, and the mandates of federal and state legislation all speak about the “achievement gap” and the need for schools to “close that gap.” The language we use to describe the children who come from poverty and the practices we have identified to address the needs of children from poverty in schools are corrupted by deficit models of both language and practice. Education in U.S. public schools, and public schools in the South, particularly, have faced the negative impact of poverty on student success for over a century. This paper addresses some of the historical, political, and research-based realities we encounter in our schools. Those realities include identifying poverty as a problem, identifying students as contributing to an “achievement gap,” and codifying approaches to teaching children from poverty in standardized ways that seek to “close gaps” and “raise test scores.” As well, we fail to recognize the unique qualities all children bring to the classroom and to guarantee generative experiences for all students. Running through this discussion will be a consideration of the language we use and the deficit models we implement when addressing the markers of poverty brought into the schools but originating in the wider society. Finally, this paper will offer needed shifts for addressing all students, including children from poverty.

Shifting from Deficit to Generative Practices:  
Addressing Impoverished and *All* Students

“Writing About Literacy,” Leland, Harste, and Shockley (2007) offers an argument that fits *within* and struggles *against* the current national discourse about our public schools’ claimed inability to address the achievement gap within socioeconomic contexts: “Literacy with an attitude requires schools to provide children from working-class and low-income communities with the kind of generative education that is seen more often in schools attended by children of high-wage earners” (p. 134). Their assertion fits within the current climate created by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) that acknowledges a discrepancy between academic achievement by children from poverty and children from affluence—the “achievement gap.” Yet, that same assertion struggles against current practices because it claims that children from *all* socio-economic backgrounds deserve a “generative education”—not one approach for the impoverished (the deficit model) and another for the affluent (the generative model).

Here, the term “deficit” characterizes the language about and behaviors associated with the conditions of poverty and children from lives of poverty in the context of what those conditions and people lack, using an often unspoken norm of what people should have and be. The term “generative” encompasses language about and the behaviors associated with the conditions of poverty and children from lives of poverty in the context of describing those conditions and people by what exists in nuanced and value-free language that recognizes the complexities of those conditions and lives.

From the graduation rates in schools populated by impoverished children (Swanson, 2008) to the periodic announcements that test scores are not improving as

they should (and when scores do improve, we still see disparities in the achievement of children of color and children from poverty), the discourse about education is marked by *deficit labels* for the children not succeeding at levels mandated in legislation, by *alarmist rhetoric* characterizing the impact of low achievement in schools on our country and economy, and by *idealistic and paternalistic commitments* to “raising test scores” without acknowledging the poverty surrounding the schools in the lives of the children we claim to help. In order to reach the goals we set for our schools and for the children who enter those schools, we must rethink the language we use, the assumptions we have, and the practices we implement both in our schools and in the greater society around those schools. We must place those goals, that language, and our guiding principles within a historical and research-based context that can inform us as we move away from deficit models and toward the “generative” classrooms that all students deserve.

As the opening argument Leland, Harste, and Shockley (2007) establishes that we must embrace a broad recognition that *literacy*—the abilities necessary to read and write the world—is the key to success by all children regardless of socioeconomic status. Further, we must accept that *learning* is a natural human state that is encouraged and suppressed in a myriad of ways both inside and outside of classroom walls. The work of Bomer, Dworin, May and Semington (2008) argues that education has embraced a deficit model, imposing it on a wide range of issues related to poverty. Here, I will explore that connection and suggest that the assumptions of deficit thinking about poverty are creating much more harm than good.

## **“The Difficult Thirty Percent”—The Historical Reality of Poverty**

“I assume you all know that I really have no business attending this sort of conference,” began Ralph Ellison (2003), speaking to educators at Bank Street College of Education in September of 1963. Despite his perceptive opening, Ellison did continue his lecture, “to discuss. . .the difficult thirty percent” (p. 546). Although Ellison was not a professional educator, his life and perceptive speech provide for us a historical foundation for reconsidering our deficit assumptions and language related to children in poverty.

More than forty years ago, we were wringing our hands over the disproportionate number of African-American students, children often living in poverty, not succeeding in our schools. Ellison (2003), celebrated author of *Invisible Man*, argued, “There is no such thing as a culturally deprived kid” (p. 547). Here, a man of letters recognized something that contrasts with our assumptions today: Too often we attempt to address the educational problems of children from poverty with workshops, programs, and classroom practices that maintain a *deficit view* of those children and their lives. “Let’s not play these kids cheap; let’s find out what they have,” Ellison countered. “What do they have that is a strength?” (p. 548). For Ellison, who left college and gained his full education as a writer by reading and writing, the purpose of education was clear: “Education is a matter of building bridges, it seems to me” (p. 548). And why build a bridge to something that is broken, something that is lacking?—we might imagine him asking those who see children from poverty as incomplete, passively waiting for schools and teachers to fill in those gaps. As educators, we must seek language that avoids the implication of fruitless enterprises.

Workshops, worksheets, and programs that deal with students in standardized and reductive ways have characterized our schools for decades. Ellison (2003), however, had a solution at mid-twentieth century: “Thus we must recognize that the children in question are not so much ‘culturally deprived’ as products of a different cultural complex” (p. 549). There exists for students in poverty a disjuncture, possibly even a chasm, between the norms of their homes and the norms of schooling. We must recognize that the “failure” we often associate with the achievement of impoverished students does accurately describe that disconnection, but not necessarily the student intellect.

This powerful writer, weary of numbers, knew that the failure of children of color and children from poverty in the schools was a marker for *social ills*, not a true reflection of the “potentiality” of those students. Yet, we have persisted in reducing children to statistics and seeing children for what they lack. Even in 1963, Ellison (2003) was exasperated by the deficit model: "I don't know what intelligence is. But this I do know, both from life and from literature: whenever you reduce human life to two plus two equals four, the human element within the human animal says, 'I don't give a damn'" (p. 555). Despite his language dating his message, despite his lack of expertise, and despite his conclusions drawn from casual observations, Ellison was right.

His words help us recognize that these problems that do require our action are *historical* problems of our society, not some recent decline in the effectiveness of schooling. These are not easy problems to solve, and they are social problems before they are educational problems. We cannot, however, ignore failure for any children—and we certainly cannot ignore failure when it affects any category of children

disproportionately—such as the “difficult thirty percent” Ellison considered over forty years ago.

We must move beyond seeing deficiencies when we confront poverty, we must stop asking schools to change *alone* what society ignores, and we must hold to the optimism found in the final words given by Ellison (2003): “If you can show me how I can cling to that which is real to me, while teaching me a way into the larger society, then I will not only drop my defenses and my hostility, but I will sing your praises and help you to make the desert bear fruit” (p. 555). Ellison speaks for those students who find our classrooms insignificant to their lives. We are charged as teachers with the responsibility to value the lives of our students as well as the lives to which our students may ultimately aspire if we can help them discover the relevance of our classrooms.

### **Schools as Social Mirrors—Facing Current Realities and Research**

If we were to judge hospitals and mortuaries as we judge schools, we’d constantly condemn hospitals for *making* people sick and condemn mortuaries for *killing* people simply because both institutions house the sick and the deceased. Instead, we are vigilant to insure that hospitals and mortuaries are conscientious in the care afforded the sick and the deceased—but we do not ask hospitals or mortuaries to take responsibility in causal ways for what they are handed.

When one school coincidentally serves an area of high poverty, we do blame that school for low test scores—while celebrating schools in affluent districts for their high test scores. *The reality is that schools in poor neighborhoods with low test scores may be providing better teaching and learning than the high achieving schools in affluent areas.* Nonetheless, one aspect of a needed shift away from deficit practices toward generative practices is recognizing *social realities* and the *research* that should inform

our practices—research that clarifies that the source of low student achievement among the impoverished actually lies in the disconnect between the norms of some students’ lives and the norms of schooling (specifically the norms of standardized testing in schools). Some fair generalizations about poverty and education can be drawn from several key reports that offer the nuanced and complex realities we face:

- *The primary causes for low student achievement comprise a complex matrix of conditions within the homes and lives of children; increasingly, research suggests that schools as they are currently conducted are ill equipped to reverse the influence of poverty reflected in academic achievement.* Barton and Coley (2007) explain in a study from ETS (Educational Testing Service), “Together, these four factors account for about two-thirds of the large differences among states in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) eighth-grade reading scores,” referring to “single-parent families, parents reading to young children every day, hours spent watching television, and the frequency of school absences” (pp. 5, 4). A series of extensive research reports on poverty and education in the UK paint an even more vivid picture of the impact of social realities on student achievement along with the probability that schools are unlikely to erase the impact poverty has on student achievement (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2007): “Just 14 percent of variation in individuals' performance is accounted for by school quality. Most variation is explained by other factors, underlining the need to look at the range of children's experiences, inside and outside school, when seeking to raise achievement.”
- *U.S. educational achievement, when compared internationally, reflects the disparity of affluence within our society more profoundly than many other*

*countries throughout the world; in other words, rankings of U.S. educational achievement is a greater commentary on our society than on our schools.*

Cavanagh (2007) explains concerning the 2006 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) report: “Not only did many industrialized countries outperform the United States in science on a recent international exam, but American students’ academic achievement was also more likely to be affected by their wealth or poverty and family background than was their peers’ in higher-scoring nations” (p. 1). The PISA findings replicate similar conclusions from United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (Adamson, et al, 2002): “In all OECD countries, educational achievement remains strongly related to the occupations, education and economic status of the student’s parents, though the strength of that relationship varies from country to country” (p. 2). The UNICEF report also identifies that U.S. schools reflect the realities of U.S. society; if a child is born poor, that child is likely not to move beyond that fact of birth through the school system: “A child at school in Finland, Canada or Korea has a higher chance of being educated to a reasonable standard, and a lower chance of falling a long way behind the average, than a child born in Hungary, Denmark, Greece, the United States or Germany” (p. 2).

• *Popular perceptions that one type of school is more effective than another type of school, specifically private versus public, are ill founded; private schools appear to trump public schools only because they tend to house more affluent students.* Two recent studies (Braun, Jenkins, Grigg, & Tirre, 2006; Wenglinsky, 2007) have addressed the perception that private schools are superior to public schools. Both studies suggest that most differences found between private and

public schools are primarily accounted for in the lives of the students, not the quality of the schools. Wenglinsky (2007) summarizes: “Students attending independent private high schools, most types of parochial high schools, and public high schools of choice performed no better on achievement tests in math, reading, science, and history than their counterparts in traditional public high schools” (p. 2). When researchers compare apples to apples—as opposed to ignoring the disparity of populations housed in private and public schools—they find no real differences in the quality of schooling between private and public schools.

• *Historically and currently, children living in poverty, disproportionately children of color, are in classrooms with the least experienced and least qualified teachers.* “We do not believe that the inequalities that exist today are the result of intentional actions to hurt children,” Peske and Haycock (2006) explain, but, “The simple truth is that public education cannot fulfill its mission if students growing up in poverty, students of color and low-performing students continue to be disproportionately taught by inexperienced, under-qualified teachers” (p. 15). If there exists a gap between the daily lives of children living in poverty and their peers living in relative affluence, then providing classroom experiences that exacerbate those disparities by assigning new and unqualified (or underqualified) teachers to the low achieving students and by rewarding veteran and highly qualified teachers with the high achieving and advanced students further create the so-called “gaps” that we wish to close.

The research addressing both the influence of poverty on student achievement and any school’s ability to overcome that influence is consistent, but not very encouraging. It

appears that we as a society need to shift our blame for failure away from schools and focus instead on alleviating the social dynamics that directly and profoundly contribute to low student achievement. This is politically difficult and challenging, but such a shift must happen first—before schools have any hope of helping students. However, as the report from UNICEF (Adamson, et al, 2002) suggests, some countries see greater impact within their schools on the ill effects of poverty than the U.S. It isn't completely clear if that is the result of those countries having profoundly different governments that address the social ills or if the schooling itself can account for the difference. Nonetheless, such research does give us hope that we can impact our students positively in our schools, but much has to change.

### **Shifting away from Deficit Assumptions to Generative Practices**

One of the greatest dangers of making the shift away from deficit assumptions and toward generative practices in our schools is the unintentional perception that some may conclude that educators are throwing up their hands and blaming society for low student achievement. Identifying the social impact of poverty on students is potentially perpetuating deficit assumptions also, as noted by Bomer, Dworin, May and Semingson (2008):

There are two basic varieties of deficit thinking. One is genetic, where poor performance of students from low-income households is held to be transmitted through biology. The other perspective, and the one that Payne advocates, is the culture of poverty view, where the self-sustaining cultural models of the poor are thought to be carriers of deficits like school failure and intergenerational poverty. In this variety of deficit thinking, the family and home environmental contexts are singled out as the transmitters of pathology (Valencia, 1997).

While I do believe we must recognize the overwhelming social *source* of low student achievement among the impoverished, I also believe that we have moral obligations as educators to do the best we can within the circumstances that are beyond our control, but to avoid succumbing to simplistic views of blame and of the inevitability of failure when children come from poverty.

Again, let's consider an analogy. People who live in poverty have been shown to consume less healthy diets than people in relative affluence, to conduct less healthy lifestyles (tobacco use, alcohol abuse, sedentary lives), and to visit doctors less often (Mozez, 2008; Singh & Singh, 2008; Ungar, 2005). If a person living in poverty comes to a doctor's office with health conditions so far advanced that the doctor is unlikely to cure the patient, that doctor does not announce that poverty has caused the sickness, absolving the doctor from treating the patient. The doctor does all that is medically possible—often with little regard for the costs. I am convinced that medical doctors are held accountable in significantly different ways than teachers since that doctor is not blamed for the state of the patient when that patient enters the office. We never look at the data from a doctor's office and proclaim, "All of your less affluent patients are quite ill; you are a failure as a doctor."

Now, to continue the analogy, if that same doctor treated those less affluent patients with techniques and medicine from 100 years ago—while treating the affluent patients with the most up-to-date techniques and medicines—we would be more likely to criticize the doctor's expertise (although there is evidence that a less dramatic form of this practice does occur). This is where our schools do deserve criticism. As the data reveal, low achieving students who are disproportionately children of color and from impoverished backgrounds do receive the most traditional and narrow forms of

instruction and assessment—year after year—while the accelerated students receive more progressive instruction and assessment, often sitting in classes with fewer students and more experienced, well-qualified teachers.

We as educators should call for our society to address the social failures that lead to poverty in the lives of children. We must also make significant shifts in the schooling of *all* children, including children living in poverty. The chart below (based on the research and commentary referenced in this article) identifies the failures of deficit assumptions and practices when compared to generative goals and practices that our students deserve:

<b>Shift Away</b>	<b>Shift To</b>
<i>Deficit Assumptions and Practices</i>	<i>Generative Goals and Practices</i>
“Banking” assumptions of teaching and learning (Freire, 1993) in which school is a setting for identifying student deficits and for teachers to deposit what students lack.	Critical constructivistic groundings for teaching and learning (Kincheloe, 2005) in which school is a setting for establishing prior knowledge in each student upon which students and teachers can build learning.
Mechanistic assumptions that new learning and learning by “weak” students must be analytic (from part to whole) and highly sequential.	Brain-based recognition that learners are diverse; therefore, classroom practices should acknowledge a range of learning styles (Rochford & Mangino, 2006).
Test-prep and worksheet approaches to “basics skills” for students who are tracked low; gifted practices and expectations for students tracked high.	De-tracked systems that honor the chaotic and recursive nature of learning for all students (Burris & Garrity, 2008).
Establishing goals such as “raising test scores” and “closing the achievement gap” when those goals are based almost exclusively on standardized, selected-response test scores.	Establishing authentic goals for student performances paralleling performances existing in the world outside of school.
Driving teaching and learning by accountability mandates.	Basing teaching and learning on teacher expertise, the knowledge base of each field, and the needs/interests of students.
Maintaining traditional school courses and departments that isolate knowledge along with requiring behaviors and performances by students that are unlike	Creating interdisciplinary courses and departments that honor the holistic nature of knowledge and performance as well as requiring student behavior and

behaviors and practices in the world beyond school.	performances that are authentic.
Maintaining an assessment paradigm that focuses on final products by students and rewards student course credit based on averages.	Shifting to an assessment paradigm that requires and honors <i>process</i> ; an assessment paradigm that rewards course credit based on holistic assessments of portfolio artifacts that reflect authentic student growth and original representations of student knowledge.
Maintaining the traditional assigning of teachers by seniority whereby the most experienced teachers are rewarded with the “top” students and accelerated courses while new and less qualified teachers are assigned to the “low” classes.	Coordinating student needs with teacher expertise so that neither teachers nor students are stratified.
Maintaining current student/teacher ratios that allow low ratios in Advanced Placement courses while “general” and “basic” classes have the highest ratios; a system justified by publishing school-wide ratios that mask this disparity.	Establishing a maximum student/teacher ratio for any single class and committing resources to honor this essential condition for all students.
Maintaining “alarmist” rhetoric that condemns schools and teachers by labeling schools “failures” when those labels are highly correlated with the coincidence of poverty in those neighborhood schools serving high-poverty areas.	Recognizing the correlation between student achievement and poverty along with recognizing that so-called low scores are markers for social realities and not necessarily educational failure.

As a brief example, in a traditional setting, a teacher selects a single text for an entire class of students (generally a text that has been designated for all students in that course for many years). Students are required to read the text while the teacher leads discussions of that text, often focusing the lectures and discussions on the questions that teacher knows are included on the summative test students take after the text is covered. Much of the discussion focuses on close-ended questions that create a sense that there is a single meaning of the text verified by the authority of the teacher.

In a generative setting, students choose texts to read based on input by the teacher, possibly a guiding list of texts accompanied by brief “book talks” by that teacher and

maybe even some targeted recommendations by the teacher based on her knowledge of each student. As students read their chosen texts, the teacher provides a common text for students as a model of reading and responding to text; that model text is chosen because of its rich literacy and challenges the students. Students participate in Literature Circles or Book Clubs connected with their chosen texts to generate class discussions and presentations that reinforce the range of possible text interpretations within each text depending on the reader (Rosenblatt, 1995). During the unit focusing on the texts chosen by students, the teacher conducts several mini-lessons based on obligations to state standards, district curriculum guides, grade or department requirements, and student needs culled from work previously submitted by students. Students complete both formative and summative assessments that are holistic and authentic, but primarily based on texts *not discussed in class* to avoid students simply repeating what the teacher has stated in class.

Addressing poverty, thus, presents a paradox for educators. If we focus on blaming the family or maintaining a deficit view of children in poverty, we are failing those children in literal and figurative ways. If we ignore the impact of the family and the disparities between the lives of children in poverty and the norms of schooling and standardized assessment, we are also failing them. We must call for and create two dynamic shifts. One shift is to recognize that low academic achievement among the poor is a marker for greater social ills and may not reflect the quality of schools. The second shift involves language and assumptions—meaning we must not speak in terms of deficits and we must not continue deficit practices. The traditional beliefs and practices that create stratified schools are exacerbating the source of our students' struggles when they come from impoverished backgrounds.

The stance that best serves our students is this: *All* students deserve and need some differentiated instruction based on their demonstrated strengths and needs, and *all* students deserve daily generative experiences at school that honor their humanity and their potential. Today, we fail children in poverty by differentiating instruction with *deficit* practices and by denying them access to the most authentic and generative experiences offered in our schools. While we have little control in schools over the lives of our students outside of school, we can change our failures inside the walls of our schools—and we must.

## References

- Adamson, P., Brown, G., Micklewright, J., Schnepf, S., Waldmann, R., & Wright, A. (2002, November). A league table of educational disadvantage in rich nations. *Innocenti Report Card* (4). United Nations Children's Fund Innocenti Research Centre. Florence, Italy. Retrieved December 27, 2007, from [www.unicef-icdc.org](http://www.unicef-icdc.org).
- Ayers, W. (2006, May/June). The hope and practice of teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 57(3), 269-277.
- Barton, P. E., & Coley, R. J. (2007, September). The family: America's smallest school. Educational Testing Service. Policy Information Center. Princeton, NJ. Retrieved December 27, 2007, from <http://www.ets.org/portal/site/ets/menuitem.1488512ecfd5b8849a77b13bc3921509/?vgnextoid=ddc571ae769b5110VgnVCM10000022f95190RCRD&vgnnextchannel=1fe7a5b55c8b5110VgnVCM10000022f95190RCRD&vgnnextnoice=1>.
- Bomer, R., Dworin, J. E., May, L., & Semington, P. (2008). Miseducating teachers about the poor: A critical analysis of Ruby Payne's claims about poverty. *Teachers College Record*, 110(11).
- Braun, H., Jenkins, F., Grigg, W., & Tirre, W. (2006, July). Comparing private schools and public schools using hierarchical linear modeling. National Center for Education Statistics. U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC. Retrieved December 27, 2007, from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2006461>.
- Burris, C. C., & Garrity, D. T. (2008). *Detracking for excellence and equity*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Cavanagh, S. (2007, December 7). Poverty's effect on U.S. scores greater than for other nations. *Education Week*, 27(15), 1, 13.

Ellison, R. (2003). What these children are like. In J. F. Callahan (Ed.), *The collected essays of Ralph Ellison*, pp. 546-555. New York: The Modern Library. Retrieved December 27, 2007, from <http://www.teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=575>.

Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation. (2007, September). Experiences of poverty and educational disadvantage. York, North Yorkshire, UK. Retrieved December 27, 2007, from <http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/2123.asp>.

Kincheloe, J. L. (2005). *Critical constructivism primer*. New York: Peter Lang.

Leland, C. H., Harste, J. C., & Shockley, C. J. (2007, November). Literacy education, equity, and attitude. *Language Arts*, 85(2), 134-143.

Mozez, A. (2008, February 21). Poverty drains nutrition from family diet. *Washington Post*. Retrieved September 8, 2008, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/21/AR2008022101091.html>.

Peske, H. G., & Haycock, K. (2006, June). Teaching inequality: How poor and minority students are shortchanged on teacher quality. The Education Trust, Inc. Washington DC.

Rochford, R. A., & Mangino, C. (2006). Are you teaching the way your students learn? *Radical Pedagogy*. Retrieved September 8, 2008, from [http://radicalpedagogy.icaap.org/content/issue8\\_1/rochford.html](http://radicalpedagogy.icaap.org/content/issue8_1/rochford.html).

Rosenblatt, L. (1995). *Literature as exploration*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: The Modern Language Association of America.

- Singh, A. R., & Singh, S. A. (2008). Diseases of poverty and lifestyle, well-being and human development. *Poverty and Human Development*, 6 (1), 187-225.
- Swanson, C. B. (2008, April 1). Cities in crisis: A special analytic report on high school graduation. Bethesda, MD: Editorial Projects in Education Research Center.
- Ungar, L. (2005, July 17). Bad habits, poverty undermine health. *Courier-Journal*. Retrieved September 8, 2008, from <http://www.courier-journal.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20050717/NEWS01/507170344>.
- Wenglinsky, H. (2007, October). Are private high schools better academically than public high schools? Center on Education Policy. Washington, DC. Retrieved December 27, 2007, from <http://www.cep-dc.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=document.showDocumentByID&nodeID=1&DocumentID=226>.