The Presence of Deficit Thinking Among Social Studies Educators

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Abstract

This case study explores the presence of deficit thinking among social studies educators in the State of Florida. Included in this research is an analysis of semi-structured interview data that focused on pivotal experiences and participants' understandings of the connection between social class and academic achievement, mobility, and race and ethnicity. Despite divergent pivotal experiences with social class, findings suggest social studies teachers exhibit deficit thinking towards students living in poverty. From a social justice perspective, in order for social studies teachers to develop asset-based knowledge of students living in poverty, they must receive explicit training that challenges deficit thinking and stereotypes that lead to lowered expectations of students living in poverty.

Keywords: social studies teachers, deficit thinking, poverty, equity pedagogy, social justice

Introduction

Social inequity in public schools persists in the United States, despite decades of educational reforms and legislation aimed at closing the achievement gap. In the field of social studies education, race and socio-economic status continue to negatively impact students' national civics test scores as measured using NAEP exam scores (Bittman & Russell, 2016). Although the United States is a world leader in educational innovation (Tarman, 2016), social problems such as poverty and racism have hindered equitable academic achievement. Across disciplines in education, practitioners and scholars have called for structural changes in our society such as providing more equitable access to nutritious foods, housing, and safe neighborhoods (Berliner, 2009; Gorski, 2008). From an applied and pragmatic standpoint, social studies teachers can practice equity pedagogy (Gorski, 2014) and teach from a social justice perspective (Grant, 2012). At the core of these frameworks is the belief in high expectations for all students, even when taking into consideration that achievement is different for everyone

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(Ladson-Billings, 2006; Nieto & Bode, 2012). The purpose of this research was to investigate how social studies teachers develop an understanding of poverty and educational achievement, a key aspect of equity pedagogy and social justice theory, and whether or not social studies teachers express elements of deficit perspectives in their beliefs about students from lower social class backgrounds.

In the United States, 84% of all teachers are white (Feistritzer, 2011), and predominantly middle-class (Hodgkinson, 2002; Feistritzer, 2011; Mundy & Leko, 2015). However, the K-12 student population in the United States is increasingly poor, Hispanic, and Black (Feistritzer, 2011). Preservice teachers enrolled in teacher certification programs in Colleges of Education reflect this trend. Generally, Millennial preservice teachers come from middle-class, white backgrounds (Castro, 2010; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). In terms of certification pathways, white preservice teachers are more likely to obtain certification in traditional programs in Colleges of Education, whereas, Black and Hispanic teachers are more likely to obtain certification through alternative programs (Feistritzer, 2011). Regardless of how teacher certification is achieved, white, middle-class preservice teachers need to examine the roots of their assumptions about students who come from non-white, non-middle class backgrounds (Nieto & Bode, 2012).

Social studies teachers are uniquely poised to delve into social equity issues. Patterns of human social relationships are fundamental to the social studies curriculum. Several National Council for the Social Studies Themes necessitate the study of social structure and social problems: Time, Continuity, and Change; Individuals, Groups, and Institutions; Production, Distribution, and Consumption; and Civic Ideals and Practices (NCSS, 2010). The Civics Dimension and Sociology Standards of the C3 Framework implore students to critique the relationship between society and government, including democratic principles, human rights, and social problems such as poverty (NCSS, 2013). Furthermore, Dimension Four of the C3 Framework requires students to communicate conclusions and to take informed action. In a social studies classroom teachers should be prepared to guide students through an authentic analysis of social problems such as poverty and to take informed action as citizens to help people who are living in poverty. Teachers must also be able to select strategies and resources to prepare students to be effective citizens outside of the classroom walls (Mauch & Tarman, 2016). Teachers can only be prepared to undertake this task if they are well informed about the dynamics of poverty in United States' society.

Social studies teachers learn how to teach about poverty, social structure, and social problems in social studies methods courses and during professional development. Yet, there is scant research in social studies education on social problems such as poverty (Myers, 2008). Research by Mishra (2014) indicates that teachers' pedagogy is influenced by their biases and beliefs, and these tend to be deficit laden. However, research on how social studies teachers construct knowledge about poverty is lacking. Absent from the social studies education literature is an anthropological understanding of poverty that has been "effective in interrogating the structural inequities of educational policy and practice" that informs teachers' practices (González, 2010, p. S249).

Social studies teachers' interests in teaching civics, history, and social sciences should allow them time to develop a complex understanding of students from diverse backgrounds. Yet, we do not know how social studies teachers construct an awareness of how poverty impacts student achievement. The following research explored this topic. The research questions were:

> 1. How do teachers' formative experiences shape their understanding of social class and educational achievement?
> 2. Do social studies teachers express deficit perspectives about students from lower social class backgrounds?

This research was part of a larger ethnographic study of how social studies teachers' formative experiences inform relational aspects of pedagogy.

Deficit Perspectives

For decades, deficit perspectives have persisted in shaping Federal educational policy and national opinion. By definition, deficit perspectives explain academic failure in terms of cultural, linguistic, moral, intellectual, and social pathologies that exist in minority and lower income communities (Nieto & Bode, 2012; Gorski, 2008). Teachers communicate deficit perspectives when they define "students by their weaknesses rather than their strengths" (Gorski, 2008, p.34). As exemplified by Ruby Payne's (2005) *A Framework for Understanding Poverty,* the persistent belief in a *culture of poverty* is a prevalent example of deficit perspectives in teacher education. The concept of a *culture of poverty* first appeared in the anthropological literature with the publication of Oscar Lewis' (1961) *The Children of Sanchez*. Despite the ethnography's limitations, including lack of generalizability, limited sample size, and the fact that people living in poverty in our country come from diverse social backgrounds, the concept of a *culture of*

poverty has remained popular in public education (Greenbaum, 2015; Gorski, 2015). Perhaps this is because, as Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) laments, educators have misused the term culture as a panacea to explain everything from "school failure to problems with behavior management and discipline" (p. 104). Norma González (2010) clarifies:

> Culture had come to be viewed as a holistic configuration of traits and values that shaped members into viewing the world in a particular way, these assumed rules for behavior were seen by some as the root of the educational failure of minoritized groups. (S251)

Shortly after the publication of Lewis' book, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, laid the historical foundation for the prevalence of deficit perspectives in educational policy and public opinion (Moynihan, 1965). Moynihan's (1965) report found a "tangle of pathologies" in poor, Black communities (p.29). Deficit perspectives were also heaped upon Latin American families. Latin American culture, family structure, and male authoritarianism were perceived as causal factors for a lack of family support for educational achievement (González, 2010; Samora 1970). Based upon this belief in pathological family characteristics in poor and minority communities, the *educationally deprived* child became the focus of Federal education policy as a part of President Johnson's War on Poverty. One of the immediate goals of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was to meet "the special educational needs of the educationally deprived child" (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965, p. 25). The House Budget Committee's (2014) report *The War on Poverty: 50 Years Later*, sponsored by Paul Ryan R-Wisc, echoes Moynihan's contention that poverty and welfare dependency is reproduced by, "single-parent households raising children with neither the desire nor capacity to acquire skills to support themselves as adults" (Greenbaum, 2014, p.1).

Criticism of the Moynihan Report and the deficit perspectives it perpetuated stem from the report's overly negative focus on poor, Black, single-parent families. The report was criticized for blaming poverty on poor families and for ignoring structural, economic inequities in society that often overpower poor families' abilities to move out of poverty (Greenbaum, 2015; Gorski, 2014; Valentine, 1968). In her influential ethnography *All Our Kin,* Carol Stack (1974) argued that poverty was caused by a lack of access to scarce economic resources, not

cultural pathologies. Stack (1974) found that kinship networks within poor Black communities provided meaningful support and necessary resources. Contrary to stereotypes exacerbated by exaggerations in deficit-laden literature, Black male family members were not in abstentia; 69% of fathers assumed parental responsibilities and paternal family members were active in childrearing. Recent research by Jones and Mosher (2013) found no statistical difference when considering time spent with children between white, Latino, and Black Fathers. In some measures Black fathers spent more time with their children than white fathers (Jones & Mosher 2013).

Asset-based Perspectives

Funds of Knowledge. González, Amanti, and Moll's *Funds of Knowledge* program (2005) introduced an asset-based approach for preservice teachers to research families and students from lower class and minority backgrounds. The theoretical approach of the *Funds of Knowledge* program focused on education as a social process and acknowledged that, "students' learning is bound within larger contextual, historical, political, and ideological frameworks that affect students' lives" (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, p. ix). Many preservice teachers' have deficit–based beliefs about students living in poverty due to the widespread social persistence of deficit perspectives. Therefore, the program's goal was to shift preservice teachers' deficit perspectives of working class and poor communities to perspectives of communities with many strengths and resources, or funds of knowledge. During exit interviews, Messing (2005) found that preservice teachers exhibited changed attitudes about parents, had improved communication with parents, and felt less judgmental about their students. One participant in the *Funds of Knowledge* project reported she "had been unconsciously judging the students in her classroom, and that this judgment was based on a lack of understanding of the family's day-to-day reality" (Messing 2005, p. 190).

In the *Funds of Knowledge* program, participants were given time to reflect on their experiences after employing ethnographic research methods such as guided walking tours of local communities, questionnaires, interviews, field notes, life history narratives, and participant observation. The preservice teachers reported shifts in perspective after analyzing the data and reflecting on their experiences during the research process (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

Preservice teachers reported the experience "challenged them to learn new things about their students and students' families and therefore about their own roles as teachers and their practices" (Messing, 2005, p. 189).

Equity Pedagogy and Social Justice. Social studies teachers can teach from a social justice perspective regardless of their race or ethnicity. A social justice perspective is practiced when teachers have "high expectations for students, recognize the intellectual capacity of often marginalized students, provide curriculum content that is challenging and culturally responsive, and maintain ongoing reflective assessment of what they teach, how they teach, and why" (Grant, 2012, p. 915). By definition, social justice pedagogy demands a shift in attitude from deficit perspectives to a perspective of high expectations for all students.

Gorski and Swalwell (2015) argue that the fetishization of culture in education should be reformed with a focus on equity. Although culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching has emerged from a concern with equity (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995), all too often issues related to equity are subordinate to relevant and authentic cultural aspects of students' lives. Gorski and Swalwell (2015) contend that equity literacy is warranted in all content areas and should be interdisciplinary. However, the field of social studies, due to the scope of its curriculum, should serve as a natural starting point for the discussion of historical and present-day social issues such as racism, classism, and poverty.

Social studies teachers should be trained to be aware of student's funds of knowledge and to use this knowledge as a starting point for relevant and equitable pedagogies. The *Funds of Knowledge* approach is an example of equity pedagogy because it implores teachers to recognize skills, ideas, and abilities from the home environment and use them to inform effective methods and strategies to capitalize upon the diversity present in classroom settings (Chapa, Garcia, & Guerra, 2011). Since several NCSS Themes require an awareness of culture and identity, equity pedagogies that embody the basic principles of the *Funds of Knowledge* framework are an elegant fit in social studies classrooms.

Methods

This study examined five secondary social studies teacher's perceptions of students from different social class backgrounds to determine to what extent they expressed sentiments that are consistent with historical beliefs about children living in poverty in our country. The culture of poverty paradigm has been historically pervasive in public education, and with it, deficit-based

ideologies. To provide a balanced analysis of data gleaned from participants, the study sought to acknowledge evidence of asset-based ideologies among the data, including evidence of an awareness of student's funds of knowledge.

Sample

The sample was derived from a large metropolitan area in the State of Florida. The area the sample was collected from provided a wealth of diversity in regards to rural, urban, and suburban schools and student social class, race, and ethnicity. As of 2016, the metropolitan area has a population of 1,376,238 residents, with a 27% Hispanic population and a 17.7% African American population (U.S. Census, 2017). As of 2013, 24% of all children under the age of 18 years were living in poverty. There is an increase in the number of children living in poverty; in 2009, 22% of children under the age of 18 were living in poverty (Kids Count, 2017). A major benefit of conducting research on teachers in this metropolitan area was the ability of the population to support a maximum variation sample due to the dynamic demographic composition of the urbanized area. Furthermore, the demographic make-up of the metropolis and its surrounding areas are reflective of the State of Florida as a whole, thus increasing potential generalizability (U.S. Census, 2017).

Participants

Maximum variation sampling was used to purposefully sample five social studies teachers from the above population along areas of analytical interest. Themes that emerge "from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a phenomenon" (Patton, 2002, p.235). For this case study these areas included: gender, ethnicity or race, and school location. A diversified sample of female and male teachers, from suburban and urban school locations, and from different ethnic or racial backgrounds was assembled for this research. All teachers had been in the classroom for fewer than 10 years. The sample included: Monica, a Latina who taught at a Title I urban school; two white females, Lucy and Regina, who taught in non-Title I suburban schools; a Black male named Peter who taught at an affluent public urban school, and a white male named Jim who taught at an urban Title I school.

Data Collection and Analysis

The five social studies teachers were interviewed twice over three months to produce interview transcripts that were used to construct participants' narratives of experience with social

class. Following Dilley's (2000) protocol, the researcher developed semi-structured interview questions. The interview began with closed-ended questions to make the participants comfortable and to determine their sense of ease with the topic: Where did you grow up? What was your family's economic status? Who lived with you growing up? How often did you spend time with people from different social classes or social groups growing up? Then, the interview questions became more open-ended: Do you remember the first time you realized some people had more than others; can you tell me that story? During the second interview participants were asked: Can you tell me about when you first realized that social class was important? and When has social class been important in your life?

Participants were active in the validation and construction of their narratives through both the verification of transcripts, and the verification of accuracy of literary elements used in the narratives such as tone, point of view, mood, and voice (Coulter & Smith, 2009; Kramp, 2004). Interview transcripts were analyzed using two-column notes and Atlas-ti software to create codes. Data was then organized by meaningful criteria into groups for comparison purposes in order to identify patterns (LeComte, 2000).

After each round of interviews, a panel of three social studies education graduate students verified coding of the interview transcripts to provide feedback on emergent themes, and to provide insight from divergent perspectives from within the field of social studies education. Panel member's divergent perspectives stemmed from their diverse backgrounds in terms of race, age, gender, and areas of academic focus within the social studies. The panel was composed of one Latina female, one white female, and one white male. One of the panel members was gay. Two of the panel members were over 50 years old and one member was 40 years old. Academically, all participants were engaged in human rights scholarship but their interests diverged in the social studies domains of civics, history, or global education. The panel provided a multifaceted examination and scrutiny of the data coding system. With the panels' social backgrounds and academic subjectivities, a thorough analysis of data provided rich commentary on how social dynamics such as race, gender, and socio-economic status interacted with participants' experiences. This provided instrument fidelity by allowing the researcher to modify the second interview questions in order to maximize their utility (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

Limitations

This case study is limited by its small sample size and by the scope of its geographical location. Although multisite design was utilized, insuring the five teachers represented a wide variety of racial backgrounds, teaching sites, and other areas of phenomenological interest (Merriam, 1998), generalizability to a widespread population is limited. A larger sample size encompassing a greater geographical area would include a greater corpus of pivotal experiences. However, the findings from this study provide a sturdy snapshot of the perceptions that social studies teachers may have about their students who are living in poverty.

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Findings

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Participants' pivotal experiences yielded two themes, migration and deficit thinking. First, participants' pivotal experiences will be introduced to describe their unique and seminal experiences with social class. Then, the researcher will discuss the secondary theme of migration and how it represents a commonality in participants' diverse experiences. Finally, the theme of deficit thinking will be discussed to illustrate how participants utilize similar language about people living in poverty, regardless of the divergences in participants' formative experiences.

Pivotal Experiences

The participants' pivotal experiences served as a starting point for their cognition of equity and social class. Pivotal experiences are moments in peoples' lives that have the capacity to unlock critical consciousness (Hallman & Burdick, 2011). Freire (2000) defined the term *critical consciousness* as a form of sociopolitical awareness that educates individuals about the nature of historical and social inequity. Participants recounted pivotal experiences in response to the question "When did you realize some people had more than others?" The participants Regina, Peter, and Jim grew up middle class; Monica and Lucy came from working class backgrounds. Participants' pivotal experiences were distinct in terms of the age they realized social class mattered, and the circumstances surrounding their pivotal experiences. Despite participants' vast differences in pivotal experiences, themes emerged from the pivotal experiences that have profound implications for social studies education. The most significant inter-participant theme was the presence of deficit thinking, regardless of whether or not the participants believed they grew up working class or middle class.

Regina. Regina's pivotal experience occurred when her family moved from metropolitan New York to rural Florida at the end of third grade. Her middle class family moved from a

predominantly white suburb in New York City to a rural county in Florida. Regina's family rented a house upon arrival in Florida and began exploring the area to find a home to buy. Regina noticed trailer parks for the first time while house hunting with her family. For Regina, rural poverty provided the backdrop for her pivotal experience.

Regina went through a period of culture shock adjusting to her new learning environment. It was this traumatizing experience that shaped Regina's conceptualization of social class differences. At first, Regina resisted attending the new school in rural Florida. It was different from her suburban school in Queens and she was intimidated:

> There were times when I would fake sick because I didn't want to go to school or I would just cry because I didn't want to go to school because it was so different...'here comes this little girl with this extremely New York accent,' you know, and I get thrown into a class where...students, they were coming from very, like, farm – maybe not all farms – but it was spread out and rural and it was just very different from me.

After a few months Regina began to make friends at school. Regina noticed that many of her classmates lived in trailer parks, while other friends lived in homes or in even more affluent housing developments. Regina noticed a geographic division of social difference in her school:

> Social class-wise, there was just a difference…because there were people in these rural areas and they were not really high, middle, or upper class rural areas. You know, I'm not talking like plantation-style homes here; we're talking, like, trailers. Just lower class rural, if that makes sense.

Although Regina attended a diverse school, she noticed students tended to interact with people in their own social class. Students living in poverty kept to themselves, as did the middle and upper class students. As Regina grew older, the social distance between these groups became wider and was prominent by the time she entered high school.

Regina's move to Florida and her subsequent adjustment to the environment was the pivotal experience in her life where she began to realize some people had more than others. The abrupt change in socio-cultural landscape from suburban New York to rural Florida provided an experience that delineated differences in social class. Regina's period of culture shock was traumatizing for her, yet through overcoming her fear of a diverse new school setting she developed an understanding of social class and rural poverty.

Peter. Peter's pivotal experience involves the significance of opportunity. Peter's father was a middle school teacher and his mother was an administrative assistant. For Peter, his middle-class upbringing meant that he "never really needed anything." Although Peter attended church with people from different social classes, it wasn't until high school that he became more aware of differences in people based on their material possessions and access to opportunities. Peter's background provided him with opportunities that led to a successful teaching career, unlike many of his friends from lower class backgrounds. For example, Peter's best friend lived with mother and had less income:

> My best friend didn't have as much as me in terms of an income in his family. He just lived with his mom, and even thought he was kinda spoiled, they still didn't have as much as us, and I thought it was because I had two parents that worked and he only had his mom. Um, like the amount of TVs in our home. The fact that we had more than one car, things like that made me realize that not everyone had the same things, the same social status.

Peter lived with both his parents, his family had more money, and they had more time and resources available to take vacations. Peter was exposed to the world outside of his hometown on vacations whereas his best friend was not. When Peter enrolled in college away from home it expanded the world around him even more. As Peter grew older, opportunities opened up for him due to his family's social class. Peter felt sad that many of his friends did not have the same opportunities.

> I felt bad for some of my friends because they never really got out of the community. Even now as adults they don't get out of the community. It kinda makes me sad.

Peter noticed how social class difference created a divergence of opportunities by the time he reached high school. His friends from lower class backgrounds did not have as many vacations as he did, nor did they have the opportunity to attend college. Rather, Peter's friends were "left behind" in the town he grew up while he was presented with opportunities to go away to a four-year university.

Jim. Jim's pivotal experience with social class was latent, when he began his first year teaching at a Title I high school. Jim is aware his childhood was sheltered. He grew up in an affluent, predominantly white community that did not provide many experiences with social class differences. When Jim's family moved from New York to Florida he began to notice some

social class differences among his peers. For example, in school several of Jim's classmates were on free and reduced lunch. Jim noticed few differences in material wealth, although some students had nicer sneakers, clothes, or backpacks. However, Jim's pivotal experience with social class did not occur until after he graduate from university with a degree in secondary social studies education.

The bulk of Jim's learning experiences with social class have stemmed from interactions with the students he teaches. Jim explains:

> Growing up upper-middle class there's lots of things you don't have to deal with. You don't think 'where am I getting my next meal' and that's a big thing. If I needed something I can use a credit card and buy it. If I don't have the money myself I can get it from my parents. Right now I'm at a Title I school so I'm definitely getting the other experience now as a young adult.

Most of the students at Jim's school are living in poverty although there are more affluent students in the school's magnet program. In the quote below, Jim makes a clear deficit-based presumption; students who attend school on free or reduced lunch are there for meals but not for an education.

> We have the low, low, low – like homeless living in shelters – kids coming from very low-income neighborhoods, then we have more middle class neighborhoods, then we have upper class kids from the [Magnet] program. So we have the full range...people who are just there for meals – breakfast and lunch – and the kids who are actually there because they want to be in school.

Jim's latent pivotal experience underscores the need for social studies teacher education programs to explicitly challenge deficit thinking, to teach about poverty from a social justice perspective, and to provide preservice teachers with exposure to students who are living in poverty. Jim felt unprepared to teach at a Title I school and expressed difficulty relating to his lower class students.

Monica. Monica moved to the United States from a large urban area in South America before elementary school. Her parents immigrated to Florida in search of a better life. In the United States her father worked in restaurants and her mother became an administrative assistant. In South America, her family had been considered affluent, but by U.S. standards they were working class. Monica's family was close-knit and supportive. As Monica grew up and attended

school her parent's support was fundamental to her academic success, which led to college and a career as a high school social studies teacher.

For Monica, adjusting to life in the United States after moving from South America provided her with a painful lesson in social inequality. One of these early experiences was in Girl Scouts. After a day at the amusement park, a mother drove Monica and a few other Girl Scouts home. The mother and other girls came from more affluent backgrounds. Monica was the only working class Latina in the group. The other girls lived in homes in a more suburban part of town while Monica lived in an apartment complex "literally on the other side of the tracks." When Monica was dropped off at her apartment complex, the girls in the back seat snickered "Oh my God! You live here?" This was the first time Monica realized that her family did not have what other families had. This experience was a rude awakening for Monica:

> [I felt] horrible. I felt literally like a second-class citizen. Um, I felt bad, I felt embarrassed...like a stab to my heart or my conscious in a way, you know, and I never realized because I thought I had more because my parents always told me, you know, "we are here for a reason, we had more, you don't understand what we actually went through."

Monica was embarrassed and felt inferior to these girls. Her parents had told her they were doing well, especially compared to their life in South America. However, compared to the other Girl Scouts, Monica was a poor South American girl from the wrong side of the tracks.

Another incident that made Monica feel inferior was on the school bus the first day of sixth grade. The bus crossed the train tracks from her neighborhood to a more affluent and white housing development in her community. Two white students on the bus decided to pick on her and sneered, "What the hell are you doing here, you spic? You don't belong here!" Monica felt like an outcast, like she didn't belong. Monica was vulnerable as a new student and therefore an easy target for these students' racial slurs. Her feelings of insecurity resurfaced and she once again felt inferior, just like that day in Girl Scouts.

These two experiences in Monica's early life brought feelings of inferiority to the forefront of her conceptions of social class. When the girls in Monica's Girl Scout group made hurtful comments about where she lived she felt ashamed and inferior. The students on the middle school bus who made racist remarks made these negative emotions resurface. For

Monica, these experiences built connections between ethnicity, social class, and inequality in our society. These negative experiences made her feel embarrassed and inferior because of her background as a relatively poor South American immigrant. Monica attributes her parents' support to her ability to overcome these hurtful experiences from her childhood.

Lucy. Lucy grew up in a working class family. Her father was physically and mentally abusive, and an alcoholic. He had an elementary level education and worked in construction. Lucy's mother graduated high school and cleaned houses for wealthy families in the area. Lucy knew her family wasn't as wealthy as others, but her family's income was sufficient to provide for their basic needs and small luxuries, such as vacations. However, her father's volatile behavior meant that she never knew when she would return home from school to discover her mother had been battered.

When Lucy was eight or nine years old she began to realize some people had more than others. When on break from school, Lucy would accompany her mother to cleaning jobs. She remembered visiting homes her mom cleaned and immediately noticed these families were wealthier. The families her mother worked for had larger homes and more material possessions than her family. Lucy felt jealous; despite the fact the families were nice to her and sometimes let her swim in their pools. Lucy realized at this point that "people lived in different ways based on what their parents did for a living". Lucy knew the children in these families had different choices in their future and that this was related to their income:

> I remember being jealous of the families my mother worked for. There were teenagers that were a little bit older than me. They had a pool, a caged in pool in their backyards. They had beautiful homes, and I knew they had a different future than I did.

As Lucy grew older, she fell in love with horses and wanted to be a horse veterinarian. Lucy found employment a horse stable. This turned into a modest paying job for the next three years. The young girls who kept their horses at the stable were from upper class families. Lucy's job was to train and take care of the horses other girls owned. Many of these upper class girls only took the time to see their horse when they had riding lessons or when they had a show. Lucy spent long hours at the stable making sure their horses were healthy and well cared-for. Lucy noticed horses were more of a hobby or an after school activity for the upper-class girls. Horses

were Lucy's passion, but she did not have the financial means to obtain her own horse. Feelings of jealously surfaced again during this time in her life. Making five dollars an hour taking care of other people's horses seemed unfair:

> I worked for a horse trainer for about four years and I'm working for about five dollars an hour slogging, you know, saddles around, wrestling horses and doing all the hard work while a lot of rich kids, had, one young lady had three horses and only saw her horses the two days before the show, during the show and then we wouldn't see her again for weeks, so there was at the time a lot of jealousy.

Reflecting back on this experience, Lucy understands her life was different than the girls who owned the horses. Riding horses was probably one of the many different activities the girl's parents had them involved in. Lucy understood that horses might not have been a passion for these girls. However, horse riding was an activity they were expected to do because of their social class.

Lucy's childhood experiences watching her mother clean homes and her job taking care of horses taught her powerful lessons about social class. The more privileged families she interacted with had more money than her family and they also had more opportunities in life. Lucy's feelings of jealousy that stemmed from these experiences were an affective element of her early life that influenced her understanding of social class dynamics.

Participants' pivotal experiences shaped their understanding of social class and educational achievement by establishing the early development of a frame of reference. Regina, Peter, Jim, Monica, and Lucy referred to their pivotal experiences during their interviews and harkened back to these experiences to explain their insights about poverty and social class. The deficit perspectives participants expressed began to take shape during these pivotal experiences and were not challenged at any point during their teacher education to the extent that created a shift in their beliefs.

Themes

Despite the fact that participants' experiences were unique, there were two striking similarities in their narratives that emerged into themes. The primary theme that emerged from participants' narratives was deficit thinking; migration was a secondary theme of interest. All

participants utilized deficit language when speaking about people living in poverty. Most of the participants migrated in their youth and their migration was an essential part of their pivotal experiences. These two themes imputed social meaning into participants' experiences with social class.

Participant's pivotal experiences were tinged with negative sentiments. Psychological research indicates humans have a tendency towards negativity bias. In other words, humans tend to remember, ruminate, and learn more from negative experiences than positive experiences (Vaish et al., 2008; Baumeister et al., 2001). Regina felt culture shock when she moved from New York State to rural Florida. As a young child she remembered not fitting into her new setting and consequently not wanting to attend school. Monica was deeply hurt when she was bullied due to her immigrant experience, and Lucy was jealous of people who were more affluent than her. Peter also felt badly about his friends who were left behind while he had greater opportunities in life due to his social class. Jim's early life was sheltered. His pivotal experience had negative elements, although, he lacked an early awareness of social inequity and thus had fewer experiences and less time to reflect upon social injustices. Negative pivotal experiences have the capacity to allow individuals to recognize marginality, develop knowledge of inequity, and empower individuals to work towards greater social justice (Caesar, 2014). Of the five participants, Regina, Monica, and Peter's early life experiences had informed them in this manner. However, Jim and Lucy did not follow this pattern; their pivotal experiences yielded different reactions to social inequity in our society.

Migration

The secondary theme of migration served as a main backdrop for three participants' pivotal experiences. Four of the five participants moved when they were young. Regina moved from New York City to Florida and discovered rural poverty. Peter moved away to a four-year university after graduating from high school. This move made Peter aware that he had more opportunities than his friends who were living in poverty. Monica moved as a child from South America to the United States. When Monica arrived in the United States she became aware that her family was poor by United States standards. Jim moved from New York State to Florida when he was in middle school. In New York State, Jim attended a demographically homogenous

suburban school. In Florida, the student population in the schools Jim attended were much more diverse in terms of race and socio-economic status.

Only Lucy had not migrated either to or from Florida at any point in her life. Of the four participants who migrated during their youth, these movements contributed to participants' construction of an understanding of social class. Even Lucy's lack of migration integrates well with this theme. Just as Peter noted, people living in poverty lack opportunities and are less likely to have migrated long distances from their place of birth (Winship, 2015; Cohn & Morin, 2008). So, although Lucy did not migrate from her hometown during her youth, her lack of geographical mobility served as a hallmark of her lower social class status and lack of opportunities in her early life.

Deficit Perspectives

Despite the fact that participants' pivotal experiences were unique, the major theme gleaned from data was that the presence of participants' deficit thinking towards students living in poverty was consistent and pervasive. Participants also stated factual information about people living in poverty, such as people living in poverty work longer hours and lack access to resources such as food, shelter, and education. Yet, participants' deficit perspectives were embodied in their overt focus on what people living in poverty "lack" and the negative consequences of living in poverty. These findings have real world consequences for the field of social studies education because deficit perspectives about students living in poverty can lead to lowered expectations for student achievement (Gardner & Toope, 2011; Nieto & Bode, 2012) or reinforce negative stereotypes about students living in poverty (Gorski, 2008).

Participants' understanding of students living in poverty was limited to the basic understanding that poor students do not have equitable access to financial and educational resources. Participants did not mention students' strengths, funds of knowledge, or types of local knowledge that exist in lower class communities (Gardner & Toope, 2011; Greenbaum, 2015; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Stack, 1974). The participants focused on perceived deficits of lower class students and they believed these deficits lead to fewer opportunities for educational achievement. In addition to deficit language, narratives were analyzed to determine if participants expressed beliefs consistent with Gorski's (2008) prevalent myths about people

living in poverty. Specifically, that poor people were lazy, did not care about education, were linguistically deficient, and abused drugs and alcohol.

Participants' descriptions of social class and poverty utilized deficit words such as "lack" or they mentioned that people from lower social classes "do not have" resources or opportunities relative to more affluent social classes. As suggested by Regina:

> There's a high probability that the kids that come from there, they don't really get what the other students need/get from other socio-economic backgrounds if that makes sense. So I think it's tough for people to get out of those situations.

Teachers were especially concerned with lower class students' lack of access to education and limited time with their parents. Regina provided an example of this sentiment: "I think if parents are working a lot due to their socio-economic status and…trying to get by, there's not going to be as much parent involvement with the child." Peter agreed, "sometimes in lower socio-economic households it seems like maybe some of the families don't spend as much time with the children".

Participants perceived lower class students were more likely to come from single-parent homes and therefore had more obstacles to tackle in life. Monica expressed, "most of these kids are coming from single parent homes, they have mothers who work two or three jobs. They don't have the time to sit down and help these students with homework, or revise their work."

Participants acknowledged that lower class parents tend to work long hours and that work interfered with their ability to provide educational support at home. However, participants expressed contradictory sentiments related to myths about people living in poverty, such as laziness or a poor work ethic (Gorski, 2008). Peter noted, "either they don't have a job or they have to educate themselves, but then…maybe they just don't educate themselves or don't want a job." Lucy blamed the welfare program in our country. She believed our welfare system discouraged people living in poverty to work:

> in places where everybody gets the same thing…why should I improve myself?...and the United States government has a very big part in that. Welfare: How much is enough help? It's difficult to draw the line. After a year you have to get a job or I'm cutting you off. If that woman has three kids, why should we make her kids pay because of her, whatever you want to call it – laziness, stupidity, or just lack of finding a job.

The participants perceived lower class families as being inherently unstable, having more problems, or being prone to domestic and/or substance abuse. Lucy generalized her experience

growing up in a working class home with a father who abused alcohol and was physically abusive:

> You gotta feel like they give up after a while. Coming home to a parent who is there but not there; who's physically there but has some other challenges because the lack of money. You just know there's more alcoholism in lower social class [families].

Although participants acknowledged social hindrances to upward social mobility, none of the participants mentioned positive features found in many poor communities, such as close-knit extended families, strong social networks, and productive activities based on local forms of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Greenbaum, 2015; Stack, 1974). This signified a gap in participants' education about the realities of poverty. It is true that families living in poverty work longer hours and lack access to scarce and valued resources in our society. However, participants' perspectives were one-sided; participants lack knowledge about assets that exist in lower income families and communities. A more balanced perspective would mitigate deficits with assets, thus challenging stereotypical thinking about children and families from impoverished backgrounds.

A Call for Social Studies Equity Pedagogy

This study demonstrates the need for asset-based pedagogy in programs of social studies teacher education. First, social studies methods courses must challenge deficit thinking among preservice social studies teachers. We can then apply a social justice and equity-focused model within the NCSS themes and C3 Standards. Gorski and Swalwell (2015) note that the C3 Framework is especially well suited to questions of equity related to poverty. They advise that inquiry based social justice questions should be used in order to teach from an equity literary stance. This would include questions such as: What causes social inequality? What challenges to equity exist in our society? What individual and collective responsibilities do we have to address poverty in our society? Inquiry-based pedagogy should also be at the core of a social studies curriculum that effectively prepares preservice teachers to teach social studies in our diverse society and among a student population that has increasingly experienced poverty.

Further Research

This study investigated the presence of deficit perspectives among secondary social studies teachers in the State of Florida. An examination of classroom practices was beyond the

scope of this study. Further research could explore how teacher's perceptions of students' social class backgrounds are embodied in classroom practices. In this study, teachers discussed how they perceived their students, but it did not include participant observation in their classroom settings. Moving forward, data from classroom settings would contribute to this research in terms of describing how teacher's perceptions are practiced in the classroom.

This study did not explicitly address teacher preparation programs, although research indicates that preservice social studies teachers lack a clear understanding of social justice as it related to democratic education (Tannebaum, 2015). In fact, only Regina mentioned her teacher preparation program during the interviews. Another line of research related to this topic could elicit teacher's experiences in their preparation programs and how that experience shaped their understanding of students from different social class backgrounds. Since the findings of this study point to the necessity of a social studies based equity pedagogy, a study on the role teacher preparatory programs have in shaping teachers attitudes and beliefs about students living in poverty is a warranted next step.

Conclusion

Although the participants' pivotal experiences were qualitatively different, most participants migrated at some point in their lives and their migration in some way shaped their understanding of social class in the United States. Regardless, all participants in this study exemplified pervasive forms of deficit thinking that are prevalent in education in the United States. As González, Moll & Amanti (2005) found in their *Funds of Knowledge* research, participants in this study, like most teachers, appear to have deeply entrenched deficit perspectives about students living in poverty.

Teachers often choose the profession for altruistic reasons, such as the desire to engage in moral work and to make a positive difference in students' lives (Osguthorp & Sanger, 2013, p. 183; Watt & Richardson, 2010). However, if social studies teachers exhibit deficit thinking towards lower class students, they are more likely to believe negative stereotypes and have lowered expectations for students. Social studies teachers, including the participants in this study, will continue to fail to recognize the *funds of knowledge*, among other assets that exist in lower class families and communities. However, Colleges of Education can use preservice teachers and teachers' pivotal experiences as a springboard for the development of a critical

awareness of their students' lives from a social justice perspective (White, McCormack, & Marsh, 2011).

Social justice pedagogy requires a shift away from deficit thinking about students to a more realistic and more positive way to view students' realities. Therefore, social studies teacher education programs must explicitly train teachers to recognize and value local knowledge, funds of knowledge, and how to challenge deficit thinking that is manifest and latent in pedagogy and curriculum. Tempering social studies teachers' deficit perspectives with asset-based perspectives will enrich the field of social studies education by providing teachers with a more balanced understanding of the complexities of poverty in the United States for the purpose of teaching a more accurate account of social class in North America and facilitating a more socially just approach for teaching students who are living in poverty.

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