

# **Deficit Discourse and the Education of Refugee-background Students: Issues and Alternatives**

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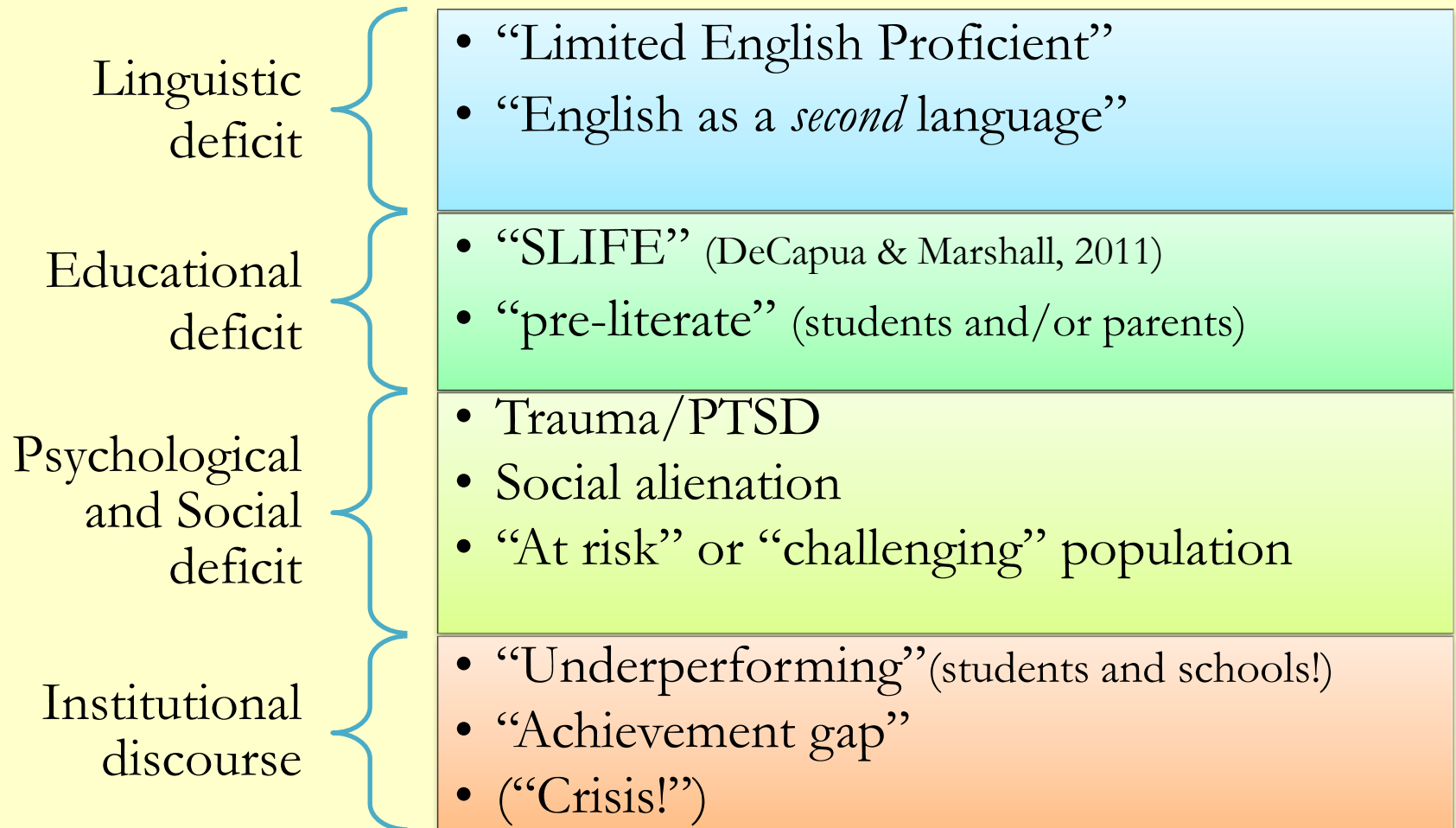
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# Linking Discourse and Practice

**Discourse** is “*a form of social practice*” employing language, as well as other tools for communication (Cameron & Panović, 2014)

Discourse(s) are “*ways of being in the world,*” including “*words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, social identities...*” that can be understood through linguistic analysis. (Gee, 2007)

# Deficit Discourse and the Education of Immigrant/Refugee Students





*The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”*

-Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

# Discourse and Power

*“Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by [power relations]. How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it **the definitive story** of that person.”*

-Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

# My goals as an educational linguist

## Identify and “unpack” deficit discourses in educational settings

- Focusing on student perspectives

## Examine impact of those discourses on students

- Potential “missed opportunities” in schools and community

## Highlight alternative discourses—i.e. other stories

- e.g.,  
“refugee-background students” (vs. “refugees”)  
Assets, such as *agency, resilience, aspiration, contribution*, etc.

## Work in local schools and community to promote change

# Research Questions

1. What do refugee-background students perceive as deficit discourse?

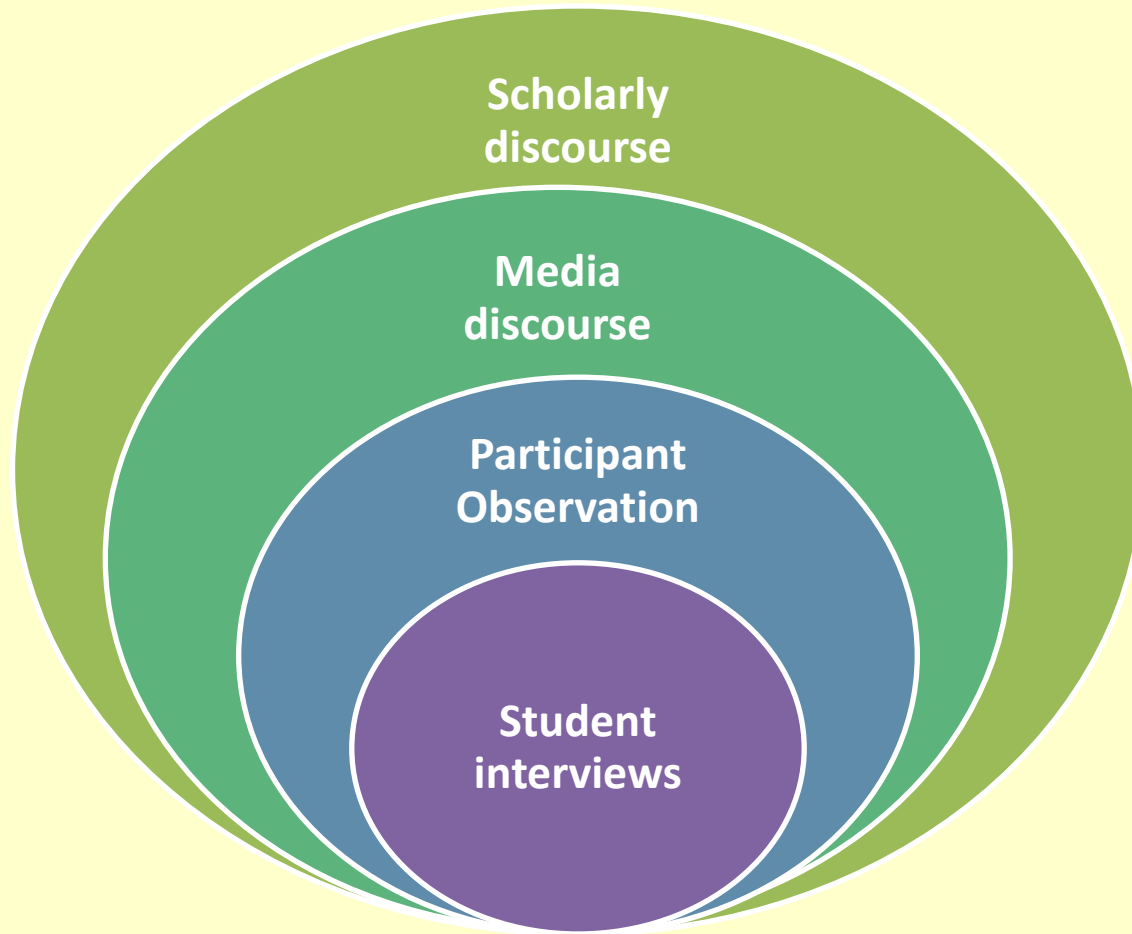
*What attributes or stories do they feel are overlooked by peers, teachers, and administrators?*

2. What impact does this discourse have on their experiences in school?

*How might deficit discourse lead to policies and practices that limit opportunity for refugee-background (RB) students?*

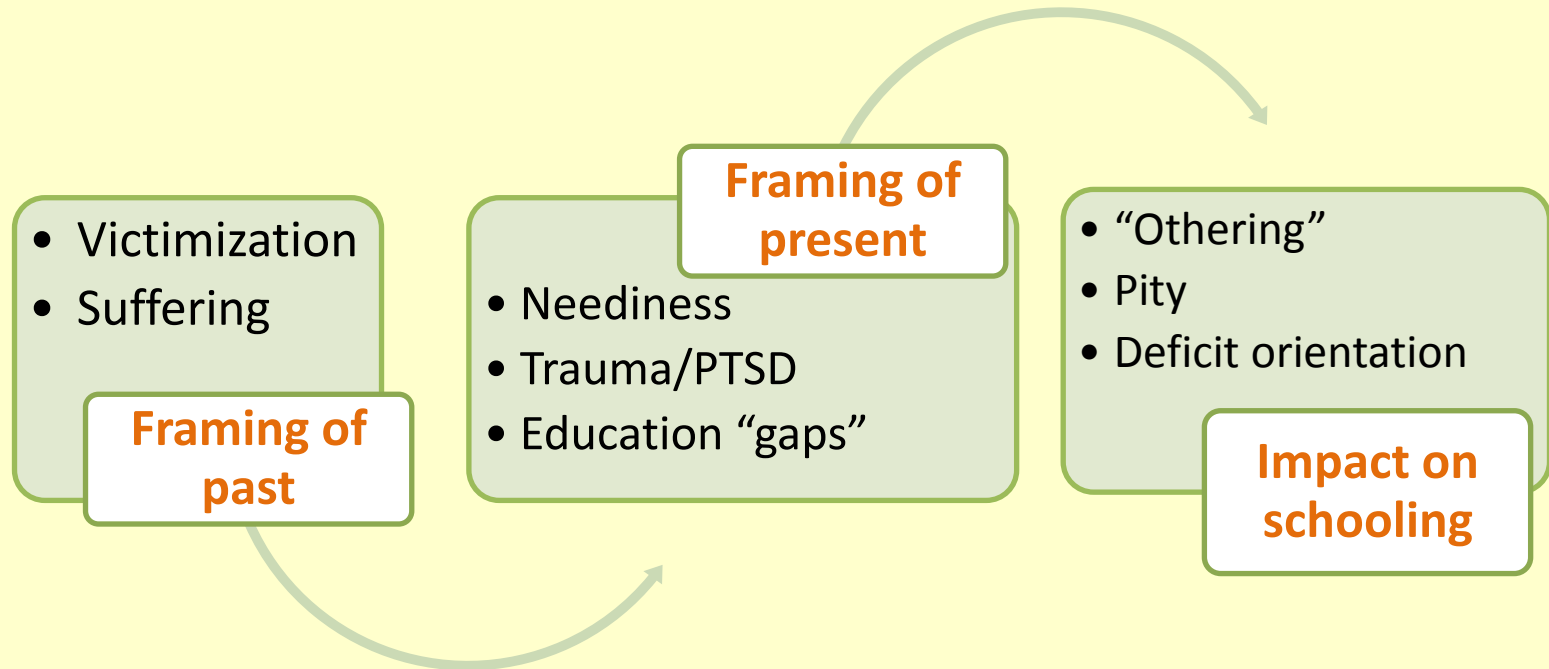
3. How can deficit discourse be **resisted** in classrooms, schools, and community?

# Data Sources





# The “single story” created by deficit discourse



e.g., Bigelow, 2010; Keddie, 2012; Kumsa, 2006; Roy & Roxas, 2011  
see Solórzano & Yosso (2002) for more on Critical Race Theory in education.

## Student Protest in “Laketown” April 2012



“Annual standardized test scores . . . show a yawning achievement gap between high-income and low-income students...**English language learners, many of whom are African refugees, have even lower scores”**

-March 2012 article in local newspaper

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gpj0sMwR7tl>

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2S\\_KJnIRV34](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2S_KJnIRV34)



## Resistance to (long-term) placement in ESL/ELL classes

- “If you put kids from the same country in the same class, what are you hoping for them to gain?”  
(student protester)
- “You don’t need to separate us. We are all equal!”  
(student protester)
- “I talked about a lot of teachers that I don’t want to be in ESL class, but they always tell me that ‘Your English is not ready to go to a high level.’”  
(student interviewee)

# Desire for academic rigor

- “I can’t even read [my earlier essays]. How did I get an A?” (student interviewee)
- “I got frustrated sometimes... maybe I should get pushed a little harder.” (student interviewee)
- “[Teachers] don’t want to push them....but you have to push them.” (parent interviewee)
- “The SAT test-- I was like ‘What is that?’ I never learned it from them. Nobody taught me.” (student interviewee)

## Awareness of deficit discourse:

Most of us interpret [the article] 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.

(Student protester)

## Incomplete (deficit) narratives

## Effect on school policy/practice



Safety and protection is what refugee-background (RB) students most need

RB students are too traumatized to receive negative feedback

RB students have little or no prior schooling experience

Students are “lucky” simply to be here! They’ve come a long way!

“Sheltered” ELL classes that serve as “comfort zone”

Grade inflation (grades given for “effort” or “growth” rather than achievement)

Placement into remedial level for all subjects

Social promotion  
Success= graduation  
(rather than college/career preparation)

Bigelow, 2010; Callahan, 2012; Fritzen, 2010; Keddie, 2012; Mitchell, 2012; McBrien, 2005; Pinson & Arnot, 2010; Roy & Roxas, Shapiro, 2014

# Toward Asset Discourse

❖ “Do you guys accept us—that we’re different, that we’re here, and we’re actually trying to succeed? . . . 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!”

❖ “Give me one minute, and I’ll impress you. Just one minute!”

-Student protesters

## DEFICIT DISCOURSE

What do you lack?  
(deficit/need)

Where have you been?

Victimization/Trauma

Survival

Pity/Sympathy

Being helped

## ASSET DISCOURSE

What do you bring?  
(resources/potential)

Where are you going?

Agency/Resilience

Success/Thriving

Pride/Aspiration

Helping others



# Coding for Asset

ASSET CATEGORY	SEGMENT FROM INTERVIEW WITH “NAJIB”
<b>Agency</b>	“I started my own business in the refugee camp at the age of eleven or twelve. I have always been extremely independent.”
<b>Success/Thriving (family support)</b>	“[My mom] doesn’t care if there’s nothing to eat at home—she wanted me to go to school. . . .I shouldn’t be at this level without her support.”
<b>Focus on future (Where are you going?)</b>	“The problem is that when you don’t know anything about college, and nobody talks to you, you’re, like, blind.”
<b>Critical Awareness</b>	“I just feel like. . . <b>maybe they want to have more janitors in here, you know?</b> ”
<b>Resilience</b>	“That struggle is something I put myself into,” he says. “I made myself harder, and that made me really smart.”
<b>Service/leadership</b>	“You got to give somebody the credit. . . .When you see a person. . . .do something good, make sure that you award him. . . .He’s gonna be a role model, and that will encourage a lot of kids.

# Tapping into family/community assets

“I’m gonna just say, **this is about making family**. . . . If you bring all kids together and you’re telling them . . . all positive stuff. . . . “We want you to have a family, a future, and we’ll be working hard on you”. . . . We just got to bring more **love** to the community, in order for these kids to change.” (Najib, interview)

# My next steps

## In my research

- Continue developing conceptual framework of asset discourse
  - include family/community capital
- Document changes (and barriers to change) in school and community
- Connect with other educational researchers working in refugee resettlement communities (e.g., current book project)

## In schools/community

- Help schools develop asset-oriented policies
  - Assessment, Advising, Curriculum that is culturally relevant (and rigorous!)
- Support community-driven efforts
  - E.g., Heritage language programs, Mentoring initiative etc.



# (Re)Humanizing Discourse

*“Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity.”*



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# Thank you!!

For these slides and other resources, go to

<http://sites.middlebury.edu/shapiro>

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