Critical Discourse and School Finance: Examining the Language of Inequity in Educational Policy

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Abstract

This article uses critical school finance and critical discourse analysis to examine how education policy language constructs systemic inequities. Focusing on Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the study shows how discourse reinforces deficit thinking, labeling marginalized students as "educationally deprived" instead of addressing structural issues of racial capitalism. The author contends that funding disparities, stemming from property tax reliance and historical "localism," are deliberate outcomes rather than accidents. The paper demonstrates how policy language obscures power relationships, justifying unequal resource distribution while failing to hold institutions accountable for educational gaps.

Keywords*: critical discourse, education policy, school funding, federal policy, K-12 policy, school finance*

Introduction

The language we use to describe schools, students, and educational policy is never neutral. Discourse both reflects and shapes social realities, constructing meanings that influence how we understand educational challenges and solutions (Hall, 1992; Foucault, 1972). In the realm of school finance, language plays a particularly powerful role in determining who receives resources, how those resources are distributed, and which students are deemed worthy of investment. As it relates to public school funding, critical school finance (CSF) has emerged as a framework that "activates the schools' technical arena and money against racial capitalism" (Backer and Cyna, 2024, p. 13) by examining the power relationships that shape, maintain, or mitigate differences between well-funded and under-resourced schools. This framework provides essential tools for understanding how educational funding systems perpetuate what Backer and Cyna describe as "ineluctable inequalities" (2024). In describing ineluctable inequality, Backer and Cyna (2024) ask the question whether the inequality is unavoidable? Yet, the discursive dimensions of school finance policy—the ways language constructs deficit narratives about students and communities—remain underexamined. As such, this article applies critical discourse analysis to school finance policy, with particular attention to federal Title I legislation as a case study. Title I represents the single largest federal investment in K-12 education, providing financial assistance to schools serving high percentages of students from low-income families (National Coalition on School Diversity, 2019). Despite its stated purpose of promoting educational equity, the language surrounding Title I both in legislation and implementation reveals problematic assumptions about the students it serves.

Theoretical Framework

Critical School Finance

Critical school finance is derived from critical theory and Critical Race Theory (CRT), which centers racism as a structuring feature of law and institutions rather than an accident or anomaly (Crenshaw et al., 1995). As an organizing framework, CSF "considers schools and financial resources through the lens of movements, labor, and the struggles of the diverse working class" (Backer, 2025). It is interdisciplinary, drawing on insights from various fields within the humanities and social sciences through mixed methods approaches (Backer, 2025).

Central to CRT are principles of rejecting ahistoricism and acknowledging the enduring nature of racism (Bell, 1975). This theoretical grounding is essential for understanding school finance because, as Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) demonstrated, persistent education disparities cannot be understood apart from their racial dimensions. CRT examines how citizenship and race interact (Ladson-Billings, 2010), making it particularly valuable for analyzing how funding systems allocate resources across racially segregated school districts.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Policy Analysis

Critical discourse analysis provides methodological tools for examining how language use reflects and shapes social order, "shaping individuals' interactions with society" (Jaworski & Coupland, 2014, p. 3). Discourse concerns "the production of knowledge through language" (Hall, 1992) and includes not only linguistic components but is embedded in material practices. As Foucault (1972) argued, discourses are: "collections of interrelated texts and practices that systematically form the object of which they speak."

Foucault's conceptualization of power as circulated through discourse is particularly relevant for analyzing educational policy. "Power cannot be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse" (Foucault, 1980, p. 93). This framework allows examination of how discourse shapes Title I policy and how discursive strategies either reinforce or challenge educational inequities.

Further, critical policy analysis "refers to a form of education policy studies where the focus is upon exposing inconsistencies between what policy says and what policy does, particularly in the terms of power relationships in society" (Diem et al., 2014). This approach examines how marginalized groups come to be marginalized through policy and how existing distributions of wealth and capital are maintained through policy mechanisms (Cahill, 2015). Critical policy analysis must locate power in policymaking processes and challenge conditions of inequity (Ball, 1994; Molla, 2021).

Deficit Thinking

Deficit thinking holds students from historically oppressed populations responsible for the challenges and inequalities that they face (Bruton & Robles-Piña, 2009; Haggis, 2006; McKay & Devlin, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Valencia, 1997, 2010; Weiner, 2003). This perspective serves as a tool that maintains hegemonic systems and fails to place accountability with oppressive

structures, policies, and practices within educational settings (Patton Davis & Museus, 2019). Understanding deficit thinking is crucial for analyzing how language in school finance policy constructs narratives about students and communities that justify unequal resource distribution.

Historical Context: School Finance and Racial Inequality

To understand contemporary discourse around school finance, one must examine the historical foundations of educational funding in the United States. Publicly funded schools first emerged in the 1780s, and during the early days of public education, local schools depended on parents' tuition payments, charitable contributions, property taxes, fuel contributions, and state support (Kober & Rentner, 2020). The reliance on property taxes for school funding has exacerbated disparities, as communities with lower property values often have less funding for their schools, perpetuating cycles of educational inequity (Baker & Corcoran, 2012).

The struggle for funding before and after the Civil War centered on beliefs regarding the role of publicly-funded schools. U.S. schools regularly excluded or offered inferior education to students of color (Turner et al., 2016). After the Civil War, Southern states enacted Jim Crow laws that diminished or eliminated educational opportunities for Black students while claiming to treat them equally—a practice that continued until the Supreme Court struck down race-based school segregation (Turner et al., 2016). According to economist Robert Margo, during the separate-but-equal era, "(Black-to-white) per pupil expenditures in southern public schools followed a U-Shaped pattern over time: an initial period of relative similarity in the late nineteenth century, followed by a pronounced shift toward inequality around the turn of the century that persisted for forty years" (Green, Baker, & Oluwole, 2021) – meaning that the history of underinvestment had long-term effects on the racial wealth gap that has persisted well into the 21st century (Margo, (1990).. This historical reality demonstrates that educational funding inequities are neither accidental nor inevitable but stem from deliberate policy decisions rooted in racism (Baker, 2018). Black (2023) argues that localism and inequity in independent school districts contradict the original intent of public education systems. He contends that White Southerners undermined state funding and leadership of education systems and achieved school segregation by championing local control and funding. The inequity that exists across school districts is not part of the original intent of public education; rather, local control led to decisions that produced benefits for some while creating inequalities for others (Black, 2023).

The Language of Title I: A Critical Discourse Analysis

The Evolution of Title I

Title I was implemented in 1965 as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and President Johnson's War on Poverty. The original intent was to provide financial assistance to local educational agencies serving areas with concentrations of children from low-income families to expand and improve their educational programs and contribute to meeting the needs of "educationally deprived children" (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, 79 Stat 27, 27). Since its original enactment, Title I has changed dramatically. While it began as a funding source to support high-poverty schools, it has become a force for driving accountability in high-poverty schools and often low-performing schools. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act introduced significant changes, including the concept of 100 percent proficiency as

the academic achievement target and test-based accountability (Baily, Reiss, & Winston, 2010). In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) granted states greater responsibility for developing and implementing accountability systems while maintaining the focus on students "at risk of academic failure because of the inequitable conditions of poverty" (ASCD, 2015; Chenoweth, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2016; McGuinn, 2016).

Deficit Language in Policy Documents

An analysis of Title I legislation, congressional testimony, and policy guidance reveals pervasive use of deficit-based language. Students are consistently described as "disadvantaged," "poor," "under-achieving," "low-achieving," and "educationally deprived." Schools are characterized as "low income," "disadvantaged," "under-resourced," and "underperforming," (Muhammad, 2020). For example, a February 10, 2006 Congressional Research Service report entitled "Education for the Disadvantaged: Overview of ESEA Title I-A Amendments Under the No Child Left Behind Act" defined Title I-A grants as "Grants used to provide supplementary educational and related services to low-achieving and other pupils attending schools with relatively high concentrations of pupils from low-income families" (Riddle, 2006).

Congressional testimony from the 96th Congress stated: "First of all, it is important to remind ourselves that Title I programs are almost always directed toward the improvement of reading or mathematics skills of the education disadvantaged students" (96th Congress, First Session, 1979). A 2023 letter to the House Committee on Education and the Workforce noted that "an estimated $18.4 billion was appropriated for Title I to provide financial assistance to districts and schools with high numbers or percentages of children from low-income families."

Throughout ESSA, language is used to describe the Title I program including: "low-income families," "poverty," "poverty-data," "low-achieving," "under-performing," "students of color," "underprivileged," "under-resourced," and "disadvantaged." From a critical policy perspective (Diem et al., 2014), this language supports a narrative that students attending Title I schools are incapable of achieving or, at the very least, that students enrolled in Title I schools are operating from a deficit.

The Construction of Deficit Narratives

Title I schools are described in research and policy documents as institutions serving "large proportions of students suffering from low achievement, described generally as being unprepared to advance in grade levels" (Hung, 2011; Kirby, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2001). This language constructs students as deficient rather than as capable individuals whose potential is constrained by systemic inequities in resource distribution.

The stereotypes of attending a Title I school have fostered deficit thinking among educators (Muhammad, 2020). Much of what enters consciousness and shapes stereotypes comes from the culture around us and experiences with people from different cultural groups (Nolan, 2017; Paul, 1998). The literature indicates that deficit thinking perpetuates beliefs that students' environments are responsible for their failures, though most research refers to environments within students' communities and families rather than environments perpetuated within dominant power systems such as schools (Patton Davis & Museus, 2019). Teachers may assume a student's behavior or academic progress based on their cultural, academic, racial, or economic background. In many

cases, most have knowledge of commonly held negative stereotypes associated with different social or ethnic groups, but knowing does not necessarily signal agreement with those stereotypes (Nolan, 2017). However, the pervasive use of deficit language in policy documents and professional discourse normalizes these assumptions and makes them appear natural and inevitable rather than socially constructed.

Discourse, Teacher Perceptions, and Educational Inequity

The Commuter Profession

Studies show that education is a commuter profession (Moll & Arnot-Hopffer, 2005; Weiner, 2003). Most administrators and teachers—about 80%—are middle-class white women who do not live in low-SES communities. Teachers' life experiences and perceptions often don't align with those of their students, causing a disconnect. Because of the nature of this profession being a commuter profession, there is a disconnect between perceptions of students and the backgrounds of those teaching and leading Title I schools. Between daily tasks such as lesson planning, instructional time, and assessments, teachers feel that opportunities to further understand their students, parents, and the school community are minimal (Moll & Arnot-Hopffer, 2005). According to Ng (2003), Sleeter (1993) "observed that White teachers often deny racial issues and differences all together," which shows a reliance on ethnicity theory or the view that society is a meritocracy (p. 383). Moreover, studies also show that by not creating opportunities to know students, teachers often form and believe misconceptions about students from culturally, academically, racially, and economically (CARE) diverse backgrounds (Bryant et al., 2015; Buck & Deutsch, 2014; Jones, 2016). Disproportionate numbers of white teachers in K-12 education may result in minority students being stereotyped as being culturally deficient due to White teachers' potential implicit biases as racially dominant group members.

The Role of Teacher Preparation

Since teacher education programs often do a poor job conveying the knowledge and understanding necessary to teach multicultural and diverse populations, teachers are being sent into classrooms underprepared to teach a significant percentage of their students (Wasonga, 2005). Media plays a role in passing the message that impoverished schools are usually in dangerous or perceived-to-be-dangerous neighborhoods. Schools serving students with characteristics of low-income, high-poverty, urban, rural, mostly-minority, and English Language Learning classrooms face greater challenges finding and retaining qualified teachers than white, affluent schools, further widening opportunity gaps between students of varying race and socioeconomic statuses (Aragon, 2016). This creates a cycle where schools serving the students with greatest needs – which refers to students who face the most significant barriers to academic success - have the least experienced educators, reinforcing the very inequities that Title I funding is meant to address.

The idealistic colorblind outlook associated with meritocracy diminishes students of color's lived experiences in educational systems that tend to favor white and affluent students. Teachers who perpetuate this rhetorical fallacy of meritocracy and colorblind ideology render students of color experiencing forms of discrimination as invalidated and powerless (Sleeter, 1993).

Contemporary Funding Inequities and Their Discursive Justification

Current Distribution Patterns

A 2022 EdTrust report found that across the country, districts with the most students of color receive, on average, substantially less (16%) state and local revenue than districts with the fewest students of color, equating to approximately $13.5 million for a 5,000-student district. The report also found that districts with the most English learners receive 14% less state and local revenue compared with districts with the fewest English learners, leaving districts with higher needs for resources—including bilingual educators and instructional materials—with $2,200 less per student than districts with lower needs (EdTrust, 2022).

High-poverty districts receive, on average, 5% less (about $800 per student) state and local revenue than low-poverty districts (dThe Education Trust, 2022). In 37 states, districts with high concentrations of low-income students received little additional funding compared to more affluent districts (EdTrust, 2022). This disparity illustrates a long-standing issue of underfunding rooted in historical inequalities. For example, during the post-antebellum period, Black students mainly attended schools that were significantly under-resourced compared to white schools (Halcoussi et al., 2009). Halcoussi et al. contended that race undeniably has an important influence on public school funding mechanisms, in which funds have historically been diverted from Black schools to white schools. Wealthy white landowners controlled their burden to fund public education in two ways: either reducing funding allocations or diverting funds from Black-only to white-only schools (Halcoussi et al., 2009).

The Poverty-Achievement Narrative

Americans understand their public school system as the government's primary program for combating inequality (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2004). Essentially, most schools labeled as underperforming are located in overtly disadvantaged areas, whether in rural, coastal, or urban settings (Harris & Jones, 2022). Research consistently shows that socioeconomic status—typically measured by parental education and income—is a powerful predictor of academic success and dropout behavior (Rumberger, 1995). For example, Tschinkel (1999) analyzed combined writing, reading, and math test scores of students across seven school districts in Florida while accounting for numerous student- and school-related factors. In all districts, 60-80 percent of differences in school performance were associated with a single factor: the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. This finding is frequently cited to suggest that poverty, rather than school quality or funding, determines educational outcomes.

However, this interpretation obscures the reality that poverty and inadequate school funding are interrelated structural problems rather than independent variables. The dominant discourse attributes poor academic performance to students' poverty status rather than to the systemic underfunding of schools serving low-income communities. This discursive move shifts responsibility from policymakers and funding systems to students and their families.

Much of the historical beliefs around students of poverty stems from the 1966 Coleman Report, which infamously concluded that variation in academic performance was strongly linked to children's family environments but hardly at all to per pupil expenditures or other measurable school characteristics (Coleman et al., 1966). Many social science scholars resisted this position and articulated the ways in which schools reinforce or even promote inequality (Bourdieu, 1997;

Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Cookson & Persell, 1985; Kozol, 1992). Despite rejection of the Coleman Report by many scholars, these beliefs are maintained by many in educational policy and practice.

Evidence That Money Matters

Contrary to the deficit narrative, research demonstrates that adequate funding makes a significant difference in educational outcomes. Studies indicate that schools with a high percentage of low-income students require two to three times more money than other schools to address the challenges faced by these students (Baker, 2018; Duncombe & Yinger, 2004). LaFortune et al. (2016) used NAEP data to construct a state-by-year panel of relative achievement in low-income school districts covering 1990 to 2011. The study demonstrated that the test score gap narrowed in states that implemented reforms but was stable in states that did not. Furthermore, the research documented sharp increases in state revenue, with larger increases in low-income districts and smaller but positive increases in high-income districts. Changes occurred quickly after reform events, persisted for many years, and were not offset by reductions in local revenue (LaFortune et al., 2016). This evidence directly contradicts deficit narratives that attribute poor educational outcomes to student characteristics rather than inadequate resources. Yet the dominant discourse in policy documents and public debate continues to emphasize student deficits rather than funding adequacy.

Critical School Finance: Four Tenets Applied to Discourse

Backer (2025) proposes four tenets of critical school finance: demystification, counter-interpellation, organization or mobilization, and transformation. These tenets provide a framework for analyzing and challenging the discursive practices that perpetuate educational funding inequities.

Demystification

As Backer (2025, p. 3) states, "Restating widely discussed school finance realities in clear and distinct ways is one way to surface and reframe." To address educational inequities, we must take responsibility for perceiving education as a public good and surface school finance conversations in all communities with clarity about what is at stake as underperforming schools, as identified by ESEA, tend to predominantly serve Black and low-income students as well as those lacking proficiency in reading or math (U.S. Government Accountability Office or GAO, 2024). The GAO reported that around 2.5 million students attend a K-12 public school that their state has identified for comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) under Title I. CSI schools are among the lowest-performing schools in the nation and have higher student-teacher ratios than other schools (GAO, 2024).

Demystification requires reframing the narrative surrounding these schools. The narrative must not be viewed through a deficit mindset about students. Rather, demystification would address the beliefs of policymakers and educators surrounding communities served by underperforming schools. Research points to how labels influence perceptions. Title I schools are described as "low income" and "disadvantaged" schools (Kirby et al., 2005). These labels influence the perceptions of students and faculty.

To change the funding allocation perspective, a narrative shift is needed to effectively impact staffing, teaching, and funding decisions in these schools. Instead of describing schools and students in deficit terms, discourse should focus on systemic underfunding, historical disinvestment, and the resources required to provide equitable educational opportunities.

Counter-Interpellation

Researchers argue that the quintessential nature of inequality is distinct within the foundation of one of the country's oldest civic institutions—public education (Bell, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fitzgerald, 2009; Kozol, 2012). In the current system of local funding, affluent and predominantly white school districts can allocate more funds compared to their counterparts in economically challenged districts, primarily through property tax revenue (EdBuild, 2019).

Backer (2025) states that counter-interpellation not only names and condenses the balance of forces but also takes it on such that it changes the balance. Regardless of public commitment to eradicate racial discrimination, systems and institutions across the U.S. currently facilitate discrimination (Fitzgerald, 2009). Fitzgerald described structural racism as cultural values in a society so deeply ingrained in daily life that they're simply seen as the way things are (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023). School finance is one such system. With heavy reliance on local tax revenue, it is essential to understand that each state has a constitution that not only establishes a structure for public schools but also charges their respective state legislatures with the duty to provide funding (Fitzgerald, 2021). A critical school finance approach would explicitly specify particular dollar figures and key decision points for school finance related to school improvement.

Counter-interpellation requires challenging the dominant narrative that current funding arrangements are natural or inevitable. It means articulating alternative visions of how schools could be funded and demanding that policymakers justify why some students receive substantially fewer resources than others based solely on the wealth of their communities.

Organization and Mobilization

Backer's third tenet centers on the work of organizing and mobilizing constituencies to enact policies that will best serve them. When applying critical school finance to school improvement and accountability, communities should mobilize to change their funding systems at both local and state levels. Mobilization involves parents, teachers, and organizations dedicated to changing the ways schools are funded and pushing for change. This also implies organizational mobilization around policies that promote investments in marginalized communities. Stronger policies may provide increased financial resources for schools identified for school improvement. For instance, financial incentives could motivate faculty and administrators to assume roles in schools undergoing transformation. Underfunded schools have fewer experienced teachers, extracurricular activities, larger class sizes, and older facilities, all of which can negatively impact student learning outcomes (Turner et al., 2016).

Discourse plays a crucial role in mobilization. The language used to describe funding inequities can either galvanize communities to demand change or naturalize inequities as inevitable. Deficit language demobilizes by suggesting that the problem lies with students and families rather than with systems and policies. Counter-narratives that emphasize systemic injustice and the

proven benefits of adequate funding can mobilize communities to demand equitable resource distribution.

Transformation

School systems and public funding decision-makers must implement transparent processes to enhance knowledge about fund utilization for school development, fostering inclusive practices. This process must promote advocacy for additional funding within impacted communities and encourage community-engagement methods in understanding the fund utilization process.

Schools are complex, adaptable systems comprised of interrelated, nonlinear human relationships (Mason, 2008; McQuillan, 2008). In a complex school system, agents (e.g., students, teachers, parents, and volunteers) continually co-learn and self-organize to provide feedback to each other (Fidan & Balci, 2017). Transformation requires changing not only funding formulas but also the discourse that shapes how we understand educational equity. Taxes should be levied, and local funding changed by creating alternative policies that include bonus pay for high-quality teachers and principals willing to teach in high-poverty and low-performing schools. A new funding structure may allow for new processes of individual and organizational learning that led to emergent changes driving sustainable improvements (Hubers, 2020).

Kaplan and Owings (2022) proposed critical resource theory as an extension of critical theory. Critical resource theory uses qualitative and quantitative data to analyze public funding and explains societal phenomena in which individuals in authoritative positions influence the acquisition and distribution of essential resources in ways that shape systems, institutions, policies, and practices to benefit those in positions of power and disadvantage those without it. A transformative system diminishes the authority of control by participating in decision-making, thereby reallocating ownership.

Discussion: Toward a Critical Discourse of Educational Equity

This analysis reveals fundamental contradictions between the stated intent of Title I policy and the language used to describe the students and schools it serves. While Title I aims to provide supplementary resources to expand educational opportunities for students from low-income families, the pervasive use of deficit language constructs these students as deficient, incapable, and responsible for their own academic struggles. This discursive construction has material consequences. When students are described as "disadvantaged," "low-achieving," and "at-risk," these labels influence teacher expectations, resource allocation decisions, and public support for increased investment (Baker, 2018). Research demonstrates that teacher expectations significantly influence student outcomes (Fox, 2016), and deficit narratives embedded in policy language shape those expectations. Moreover, deficit discourse obscures the structural causes of educational inequality. By focusing attention on student characteristics rather than funding adequacy, policy language naturalizes inequities and makes them appear to be individual problems rather than systemic injustices requiring political solutions. As Foucault (1980) argued, discourse circulates power by shaping what can be thought and said. When the dominant discourse attributes poor educational outcomes to student poverty rather than inadequate funding, it becomes difficult to mobilize political support for equitable resource distribution.

The persistence of deficit discourse despite decades of research demonstrating that funding matters (LaFortune et al., 2016; Baker, 2018; Jackson et al., 2016) reveals the power of language

to maintain existing systems of inequality. Challenging these discursive patterns is essential for achieving meaningful educational equity.

Recommendations For Policymakers

1. **Revise policy language**: Federal, state, and local education policies must eliminate deficit-based language describing students and schools. Instead of "disadvantaged," "low-achieving," or "at-risk," policies must use language that acknowledges systemic inequities, such as "systematically underfunded," "historically underinvested," or "deserving of equitable resources."
2. **Emphasize funding adequacy**: Policy discourse must shift from focusing on student deficits to emphasizing the level of funding required to provide equitable educational opportunities. Research-based cost studies must determine adequate funding levels for schools serving students with different needs (Duncombe & Yinger, 2004).
3. **Require transparent reporting**: States and districts must be required to report funding disparities between schools serving different student populations in clear, accessible language that makes inequities visible to communities.
4. **Mandate community engagement**: Policy must require meaningful community engagement in funding allocation decisions, ensuring that families and communities most affected by funding inequities have voice in resource distribution.

For Educators and Educational Leaders

1. **Examine language use**: Teachers, principals, and district administrators must critically examine the language they use to describe students, families, and communities. Professional development must address how deficit language shapes expectations and perpetuates inequities.
2. **Challenge deficit narratives**: Educational leaders must actively challenge deficit narratives in their schools and districts, reframing challenges as resource inadequacies rather than student deficiencies.
3. **Advocate for equitable funding**: Educators must use their professional expertise to advocate for funding formulas that provide adequate resources to all schools, particularly those serving students with greatest needs.
4. **Build relationships across difference**: Given that education is a "commuter profession" (Moll & Arnot-Hopffer, 2005), educators must intentionally build relationships with students, families, and communities to understand their strengths, assets, and needs rather than relying on stereotypes.

For Researchers

1. **Analyze policy discourse**: Educational researchers must continue examining how language in policy documents constructs narratives about students, families, and communities, revealing the power dynamics embedded in seemingly neutral technical language.

2. **Document funding inequities**: Researchers must continue documenting funding disparities and their consequences, making visible the connections between inadequate resources and educational outcomes.
3. **Amplify community voices**: Research must center the voices and perspectives of families and communities most affected by funding inequities, challenging deficit narratives with counter-narratives grounded in lived experience.
4. **Evaluate discourse change**: Research must examine whether and how changes in policy language influence resource allocation, teacher expectations, and educational outcomes.

For Communities and Advocates

1. **Demand language change**: Families and community advocates must demand that policymakers and educators eliminate deficit language from policy documents, school communications, and public discourse.
2. **Organize for funding equity**: Communities must organize to demand equitable funding formulas that provide adequate resources to all schools, using data on funding disparities to make the case for change.
3. **Share counter-narratives**: Communities must share their own narratives about student strengths, community assets, and educational aspirations, challenging deficit narratives with stories grounded in lived experience.
4. **Hold systems accountable**: Communities must hold school systems and policymakers accountable for equitable resource distribution through transparent reporting and community oversight.

Conclusion

Language matters. The words we use to describe students, schools, and educational challenges both reflect and shape material realities. This analysis demonstrates that deficit-based language permeates Title I policy and broader school finance discourse, constructing students from low-income families and communities of color as deficient and responsible for their own academic struggles. This discursive construction has profound consequences. It shapes teacher expectations, influences resource allocation decisions, obscures structural causes of educational inequality, and undermines political support for equitable funding. Despite decades of research demonstrating that adequate funding significantly improves educational outcomes (LaFortune et al., 2016; Baker, 2018), deficit discourse continues to attribute poor performance to student characteristics rather than inadequate resources. Challenging these discursive patterns is essential for achieving educational equity. As Backer's (2025) four tenets of critical school finance suggest, transformation requires demystifying funding realities, counter-interpellating dominant narratives, mobilizing communities for change, and transforming systems through transparent, participatory processes.

The persistent underfunding of schools serving predominantly Black and Brown students represents not merely a budgetary concern but a fundamental equity crisis with far-reaching consequences (EdTrust, 2022). The evidence demonstrates that inadequate and inequitable funding perpetuates achievement gaps, limits access to experienced teachers and advanced coursework, and denies students the resources necessary for success in an increasingly competitive global economy.

These funding disparities are neither accidental nor inevitable. They stem from historical policy decisions, property tax-based funding models, and systemic inequities that continue to concentrate resources in wealthier, whiter districts while systematically underinvesting in communities of color (Black, 2023; Sosina & Weathers, 2019). The discursive practices analyzed in this article play a crucial role in maintaining these inequities by naturalizing them as individual rather than structural problems. Addressing this crisis requires more than incremental adjustments. It demands fundamental reform: weighted student funding formulas that account for student needs, state-level interventions to ensure adequacy and equity, increased investment in high-poverty schools, and sustained community engagement to ensure resources reach those who need them most. It also requires transforming the language we use to describe students, schools, and educational challenges. Our students deserve better. Black and Brown children deserve the same quality facilities, experienced educators, comprehensive curricula, and support services available to their peers in well-funded districts. As Diem and Welton (2020, p. 144) advise, educational leaders must "try to humanize the policy under review by bearing in mind how certain groups would be differently affected upon the policy's implementation." This humanization must begin with the language we use.

Closing funding gaps is not only a moral imperative but an economic necessity for building a more just and prosperous society. It requires recognizing that education is a public good deserving of public investment, that all students have potential deserving of cultivation, and that systemic inequities require systemic solutions. By transforming both the discourse and material reality of school finance, we can move toward a system that truly provides equal educational opportunity for all students, regardless of race or socioeconomic status.

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