

---

## Reframing Deficit Thinking: How to Change Perceptions for the Better

Posted on [June 18, 2018](#) by [Free Spirit Author](#)

By [Richard M. Cash, Ed.D.](#), author of [Self-Regulation in the Classroom: Helping Students Learn How to Learn](#)

Many of you know that my work in curriculum and instruction has been to raise the ceiling for all kids. I challenge educators to increase the rigor for all kids, not just gifted or advanced learners. When sharing examples of “raising the ceiling,” I will often hear teachers remark, “My kids can’t do this,” or, “My students are so disruptive they will not be able to do this.” Well, as the old adage goes: “Whether you think they can or you think they can’t, you are right!” How we see children has a profound effect on how we educate them.

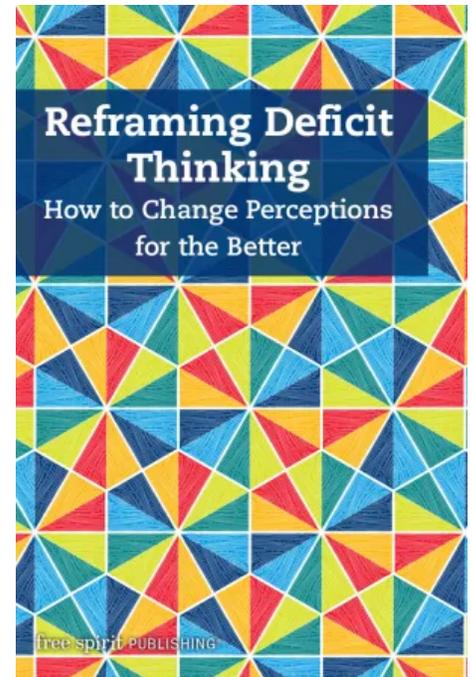
These negative beliefs about children are defined as “deficit thinking”—the spoken and unspoken assumptions about a student’s lack of self-regulation, ability, or aptitude. The most devastating impact of deficit thinking is when *differences*—particularly socio-cultural differences—are perceived as inferior, dysfunctional, or deviant.

Additionally, deficit thinking has a profound negative influence on confidence and self-efficacy. The beliefs we have about our abilities and talents directly affect our academic performance. When children receive negative messages regarding their performance or behaviors, they begin a serious downward spiral in confidence and self-efficacy.

Typically, schools are designed to “fix” students who are achieving poorly or misbehaving. However, by blaming students, we exonerate ourselves as the possible cause—using the symptom to overlook the source.

I’d like to offer a process based on work by Lois Weiner (2006) on how to shift deficit thinking to more productive surplus thinking.

1. Objectively scrutinize and describe in observable, specific terms **what** behaviors or performances you find concerning. Avoid using “loaded” language (wording that is highly emotional, subjective, biased, or stereotyping).
2. Identify **when** the behaviors or inferior performances happen. Is it early morning, late afternoon? Is it when the child may be tired, hungry, disinterested, or unaware of the value of the activity? Typically, behavioral disruptions follow a pattern. Maybe the subject is not of interest to the child or the child lacks the fundamental skills to succeed. Maybe it has nothing at all to do with the child’s ability or aptitude.



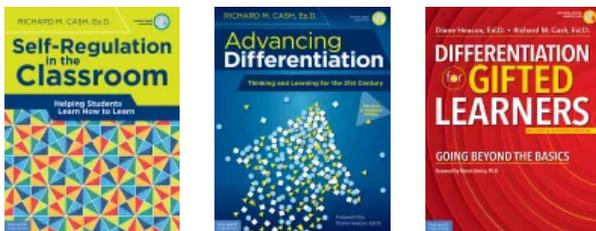
3. Investigate **where** the issues arise. Is it in a classroom other than yours? What kinds of structures are in place, or is there a lack of structures? All this can impact how a student behaves or performs.
4. Consider **who** is bothered by the behaviors. If it's only you or other teachers, then maybe it's an adult issue and not the child's issue. If a behavior is impacting other students, then there is reason for concern.
5. Now it's time to **revise your own thinking** about your student. List those positive characteristics the child possesses. *No* child is born naughty, and *every* child wants to learn. Even if you must dig deep to find it, all children have something of value about them and all want to develop their talents.
6. From this list of positive characteristics, create short sentences to **reframe** how you approach the issue. Below are examples from my own experiences. James was always getting into "trouble," and Sasha was a nonproducer. Here is how I reframed my thinking about these students:
  - "James has an amazing sense of humor."
  - "Sasha enjoys read-aloud time."
7. Now, **add to that reframing** in a positive way. For example:
  - "James has an amazing sense of humor. Maybe his clowning during class means that he needs a time and place to share his talent. I'm going to suggest theater training to his parents."
  - "Sasha enjoys read-aloud time. Therefore, she may prefer listening to text rather than reading it, so I'm going to provide her with an audio version of the novel."

Given that teachers have an enormous amount of power in students' classroom performance and in recommending and placing students in special education and gifted or advanced level programs, our beliefs and attitudes can have a dramatic effect on student success. It is our moral imperative to scrutinize and challenge what we assume about children and reframe the way we think about them from "they can't" to "they can with my help."

[Richard M. Cash, Ed.D.](#), writes the monthly [Cash in on Learning](#) blog posts for Free Spirit Publishing. He has given hundreds of workshops, presentations, and staff development sessions throughout the United States and internationally.



### Free Spirit books by Richard Cash:



We welcome your comments and suggestions. Share your comments, stories, and ideas below, or [contact us](#). All comments will be approved before posting, and are subject to our [comment and privacy policies](#).

### Reference

Weiner, L. (2006). "Challenging Deficit Thinking." *Educational Leadership* 64, no. 1: 42-45.



© 2018 by Free Spirit Publishing. All rights reserved.

This entry was posted in [Teaching Strategies](#) and tagged [classroom strategies](#), [deficit thinking](#), [Free Spirit author](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

## **1 Response to *Reframing Deficit Thinking: How to Change Perceptions for the Better***

Pingback: [Michigan Advancing Equity in STEM \(MAE-STEM\): deficit thinking – Michigan Mathematics and Science Leadership Network](#)

---

Free Spirit Publishing Blog

Powered by [WordPress.com](#).