

# Educational Leadership

September 2006 | Volume 64 | Number 1

Teaching to Student Strengths Pages 42-45

## Challenging Deficit Thinking

**Urban teachers must question unspoken assumptions about the sources of their students' struggles.**

*Lois Weiner*

Although my research and expertise are in urban teaching, I am now regularly asked to assist schools that are a far cry from the typical urban school. Clearly, teachers and school leaders in suburbs are now grappling with many of the challenges traditionally associated with urban schools, including growing demographic diversity and financial stress. In addition, suburban educators increasingly work in the kind of regulatory environment that has long characterized urban schools' operations and influenced their culture.

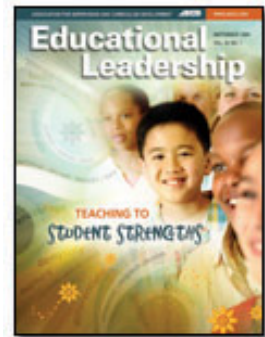
We know from research on urban schools that an impersonal, bureaucratic school culture undercuts many of the teaching attitudes and behaviors that draw on student strengths (Weiner, 2000). This bureaucratic culture fosters the pervasive assumption that when students misbehave or achieve poorly, they must be "fixed" because the problem inheres in the students or their families, not in the social ecology of the school, grade, or classroom.

The deficit paradigm that is so deeply embedded in urban schools mirrors a proclivity in national debates about a range of problems. For example, in response to the epidemic of obesity in our youth, public debate and proposed solutions frequently focus on individual behavior and character: If individuals would just say no to french fries or make healthy meals for their children, we could solve the crisis. Of course, many of us would do well to spurn the temptations that await us in supermarket aisles and restaurants. But the social causes of childhood obesity are at least as important as individual failings and choices. Advertising aimed at children, the abundance of cheap fast food, and such school policies as eliminating recess to make time for more literacy and math instruction are powerful influences. A narrow focus on individual weaknesses obscures the importance of these other, more potent, factors.

School practices and assumptions emerging from the deficit paradigm often hide student and teacher abilities. These assumptions are especially powerful because they are unspoken. We overlook our taken-for-granted ideas and practices to an extraordinary degree.

### Uncovering Tacit Assumptions and Practices

The graduate program that I coordinate at New Jersey City University provides university-based professional development focusing on teaching and learning in urban schools. The



September 2006

program guides teachers in uncovering, contextualizing, and challenging tacit assumptions about students' weaknesses. Most of the younger teachers are stunned when we question the pervasive diagnoses of student problems. They assume that a "hyperactive" 1st grader requires medication and placement in special education. We challenge them to think about how this explanation makes the teacher a mere referral agent and locates responsibility for student achievement beyond the teacher's reach.

In our discussions, I describe the racially segregated elementary school I attended in Wilmington, Delaware, where as a 1st grader I had recess three times a day (10:00 a.m., after lunch, and 2:00 p.m.) and a nap after lunch. Back then, "heterogeneity" consisted of mixing children of upwardly-mobile Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic European-American families. None of the children had disabilities. My blind sister could not attend the school that her siblings attended, and neither could the African American children who lived 10 blocks away.

Looking at this historical context, teachers in our graduate program can readily identify some outdated assumptions and practices, such as legal segregation and the exclusion of students with disabilities. Other changes in assumptions are more difficult for them to see at first. For example, could the definition of "hyperactivity" that their schools take for granted have something to do with today's decreased opportunities for physical activity and rest during the school day?

In one of our online courses, teachers read and analyze research about critical issues in urban education. Most of the teachers work in small suburban or rural districts far away from the university's urban campus. As a result of our readings and discussions they see, often for the first time, that problems they have considered "urban" are present—but hidden—in their communities and schools. For example, one reading helps teachers examine the disproportionate placement of African American males in special education (Civil Rights Project, 2002), and the teachers look at data for their own schools. Almost without exception, the teachers are surprised to discover that their school's special education placements conform to the skewed demographics we see across the United States.

## **Disrupting the Deficit Paradigm**

Educators may become discouraged when they come face-to-face with hitherto unquestioned practices and conditions because they know that they cannot eliminate these practices on their own. What we can all do, however, is acknowledge deficit explanations and examine them critically. Invariably this illuminates possibilities that have eluded us, including strategies that focus on student strengths. In our graduate program, teachers have designed and carried out interventions in their classrooms that have proven remarkably effective in disrupting the deficit paradigm.

## **Reframing Hyperactivity**

One project required teachers to address chronic behavior problems that they had been unable to solve. Using a strategy I have found effective in unearthing and challenging deficit paradigm explanations (Weiner, 2003), I guided the teachers in working to reframe the problem behavior

of a student or colleague. As Molnar and Lindquist (1989) explain, the reframing process has four steps:

1. Describe the problem behavior in neutral, observable terms.
2. Identify positive characteristics or contributions the individual makes. This part of the process is often challenging because we are so frustrated and angry that we cannot see the individual's strengths.
3. Create a new, positive perspective on the individual—a frame that you can articulate in a short sentence.
4. State the new frame to the person and act on it. Do not refer back to the previous frame.

Deven, a young white teacher working in a predominantly black school, chose to apply the reframing strategy with April, a student in her kindergarten class. April would not sit still and frequently wandered around during whole-class instruction, disturbing other students. Deven considered April a strong candidate for medication for hyperactivity and referral to special education. In her report, Deven described her original frame—her understanding of April's behavior:

I spoke with her and modeled the correct way to act.... When her misbehavior continued, I believed April was looking for attention. I attempted to ignore her behavior, which made the situation worse.... As I became more and more frustrated, I felt April was directly disobeying my instructions, distracting the class, and undermining my lessons.

With support from other teachers in the course, Deven developed and acted on a new explanation of April's behavior:

I told April that I understood that she had a lot of energy, and that was great! I let her know that lots of people need to move around in order to learn. It was just another thing that made her special.... I asked that April please do her exercises on the carpet or by the classroom library. I let her know that whenever she felt she was ready, she could return to the group. I also predicted a relapse. I said that I knew she might forget to move to the carpet or library to do her exercises, but that was OK and I would remind her with our special sign—touching the tip of my nose. She seemed a little surprised, but she said she understood.

Reporting on the results of her intervention, Deven commented,

The reframing changed my negative, critical attitude toward April's behavior to a positive, supportive outlook. As a result, the exercises and movement no longer upset or distracted me. Once I became comfortable with the reframing, April's behavior really improved. Now, April automatically moves to the carpet or library to exercise. The other students don't seem to mind at all, and there is no more tattling. April is happier and more relaxed during whole-group instruction. My teaching assistant thought that this was a crazy idea. Neither one of us can get over the change. We are already planning to reframe several other behaviors.

Deven's new way of understanding April's behavior—that “lots of people need to move around in order to learn”—drew on Deven's previous knowledge of multiple intelligences. Although Deven had been able to access this previous knowledge in earlier conversations about April, she was unable to *apply* it without the push, from the assignment and her classmates, to reject her negative explanation for April's behavior.

### **Reframing Incivility**

In another project, teachers applied ideas from Courtney Cazden's classic book *Classroom Discourse* (2001). Teachers identified a problem in achievement connected to discourse practices in their classrooms and designed instructional changes to address the problem. Their analysis of the problem and the changes they planned to make in their instruction were grounded in data they had collected about students' use of language, either through videotaping or audiotaping.

Veronica taught in one of New Jersey's poorest communities. For her project, she chose to address the problems she encountered with the class of 5th graders she met for homeroom and math. She wanted to alter the students' discourse to build a sense of community that would support academic work.

Hired to take over this class in March after the (unsuccessful) teacher had deserted it, Veronica felt overwhelmed. She could not implement her excellent ideas for lessons because students treated one another so disrespectfully, cursing and jeering at any perceived error. A student who answered a question incorrectly or stumbled over a word would be taunted as a “stupid ass.” Those who followed instructions and did their work were ridiculed for behaving well.

Although Veronica is the daughter of Hispanic immigrants and is alert to the ways in which deficit paradigms can obscure student strengths, she was dismayed at her students' behavior. When she observed videotapes of her lessons, she was equally stunned at her own unfriendly tone of voice and her incessant nagging. She observed students' increasingly glazed looks as one scolding followed another. Veronica had taught a kindergarten literacy pull-out class in the same school, and in watching the videotape she became aware of her previously unrecognized assumption that older children should already know acceptable norms of behavior and speech.

The other teachers in our class reminded Veronica that her 5th graders had been *miseducated* about acceptable norms of conduct by the previous teacher's failure to clarify, support, and enforce appropriate behavior. I suggested that Veronica include role-playing exercises to help students experience and practice their new language skills. In a subsequent class meeting, Veronica reported delightedly that role-playing had become a highlight of homeroom, especially when normally polite students assumed the role of the person using inappropriate discourse and the usual offenders suddenly became well-mannered.

Changing the class ecology brought out the creativity and leadership of Veronica's most troublesome student, Tyrone. Tyrone proposed, created, and led his classmates in using a remarkably effective tool, which he called the *Helping Hand*—an illustration on a wall chart of a large hand whose fingers contained reminders of words and phrases that students should use.

Tyrone foresaw, correctly, that students would need a helping hand when tempted to use familiar but inappropriate language. At this point, they could turn to the chart and find an acceptable substitute. For instance, instead of saying “you stupid,” the Helping Hand reminded students to say “I see it differently.” Tyrone's role in this venture helped him earn a new reputation, as a class leader and star student.

## **Teacher Strengths, Student Strengths**

Although this discussion has focused so far on deficit thinking as it relates to students, the deficit paradigm actually takes two contradictory forms. The first variation casts *student and family* deficits as the cause of poor achievement. Teachers often find this version seductive because it locates responsibility outside their classrooms. The second variation presents *teacher characteristics and deficits* as the only factor that really counts in undermining student learning. Legislators and parents often find this explanation persuasive because it implies an uncomplicated solution: Fix the teachers we have or hire new and better individuals.

Unfortunately, most professional development, even when the training is aimed to arrest deficit thinking about students, is based on the teacher deficits variant. Like remedial programs for students, professional development programs “fix” teachers by identifying what they don't know or do and telling them how to do it. In my work with teachers in the New Jersey City University graduate program, I have found that both experienced and new teachers already know enough—after learning to challenge their deficit frameworks, scrutinizing qualitative data about their own practice, and working with other teachers who provide support as critical friends—to significantly improve student achievement.

Deven and April, Veronica and Tyrone taught one another. Their learning and growth were synergistic. Assumptions reinforced by school practices, traditions, and political and social conditions initially obscured both teacher and student strengths. Deven and Veronica are urban teachers, but their success in altering their classrooms to capitalize on these strengths has implications far beyond schools that serve primarily poor, minority, or urban students.

As social and political changes alter the face of public education, it becomes increasingly important that all educators scrutinize and challenge tacit assumptions. We can make powerful changes when we break through the pervasive influence of the deficit paradigm and recognize the untapped strengths of students and teachers.

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