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Use a systematic approach for deconstructing and reframing deficit thinking

An interesting change occurs as educators develop cultural proficiency. After about a year of participating in ongoing professional development, they begin to develop a pluralistic or social justice lens. Ethnocentrism — the idea that one’s own culture is superior — is replaced by an understanding that an individual viewpoint is one of multiple perspectives. Each perspective is neither right nor wrong, but different. They begin to see inequities they hadn’t noticed earlier. As their lens widens, educators identify systemic inequities in

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practice and policies that favor some student groups over others. For example, they can recognize culturally irrelevant instruction and curriculum, culturally biased assessment procedures, and exclusive parent involvement programs.

Educators with this newly acquired social justice lens are eager to address the inequities they see. They understand they cannot do it alone, so they often want to assist colleagues in becoming culturally proficient by leading book or article studies related to culturally responsive teaching and learning. To be effective, these studies must be led by a skilled facilitator who can challenge and reframe the deficit thinking that will inevitably emerge. Educators express deficit thinking when they attribute students’ struggles in school to their cultures and, specifically, to how they assume those cultures deny students’ access to resources, effective parenting, and early learning opportunities. Some educators mistakenly believe just reading the right materials will be enough to transform deficit thinking. This is not the case. Most people do not transform their deficit thinking solely through reading. They require guidance from a facilitator with an extensive knowledge of culture along with the courage to question, probe, and push thinking.

Carefully selected literature on systemic inequities and culturally responsive practice will surface deficit beliefs because they find it difficult to believe research that counters long-held

assumptions, generalizations, and stereotypes. With little to no authentic experience with diversity, this new information measured against their personal experiences and middle-class standards produces cognitive dissonance.

Struggling to reconcile this dissonance, individuals usually voice deficit beliefs when providing examples of personal interactions with culturally,

linguistically, and economically diverse students and parents. It is not uncommon to hear comments like, “These kids come without any experiences,” “These children are loud and don’t know how to sit still,” or “These parents don’t come to meetings because they don’t care about their child’s education.”

ADDRESSING ASSUMPTIONS

To deconstruct and reframe deficit beliefs, facilitators need to consistently use one approach each time they hear a deficit belief. The approach we use is adapted from a model of reflection developed by Hatton and Smith (1995). This approach requires that trust be established within the group so that members feel supported rather than



attacked when deficit beliefs are challenged. When deficit beliefs surface, resist the urge to respond using a didactic approach. Preaching about cultural differences or multiple realities does little to change deficit thinking and may result in a heated debate or lack of participation as individuals become defensive or hurt. To more effectively deconstruct deficit beliefs, encourage individuals to step back from the events and actions and describe, rather than interpret, the behavior of those involved in the situation. Help them understand that describing promotes problem solving, communication, and trust, which builds relations with students and parents, while interpreting or judging behavior shuts down communication and alienates students and parents.

The next step in deconstructing deficit thinking is to understand the origins of such beliefs. Ask purposeful questions to help group members identify assumptions governing their behavior, how they developed these assumptions, and how these assumptions are related to expectations for student and parent behavior.

Start by describing a common scenario that is encountered in schools or an expectation that is often held by educators. Ask group members to discuss their assumptions and beliefs about the scenario or expectation.

Here is just one example. Many educators believe education should be an equal partnership between teachers and parents. Formed from observing their own parents' involvement and teacher preparation coursework, this assumption is reinforced daily in school.

Consequently, educators expect parents to help with academic learning and behavior management at home and in school, maintain regular communication, and volunteer at school. When culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse parents do not meet these expectations, educators assume the parents are unsupportive and don't value education.

REFRAMING ASSUMPTIONS

Once such deficit beliefs are identified, they must be reframed. Have group members identify alternative explanations for behavior using the content of the articles they've read. The purpose here is to understand problematic situations in light of multiple perspectives. Use questions such as: "What else could be going on here?" "What's another way of thinking about this situation?" or "Based on what you've read on culture, what beliefs might be governing students'/parents' actions in this situation?"

Next, asking group members to consider the effects of their actions on students and parents and develop alternate actions informed by the reframing of the situation. Questions here might include: "What role did your actions play in the situation?" "What was the impact of your assumptions/beliefs on students and parents?" and "What alternate actions can you take?"

As the facilitator repeatedly models this process in study group sessions, educators learn to explore and reframe their own deficit beliefs. Once internalized, they apply this process to new situations and transform practice using the cultural knowledge they learned from their readings and discussions. In turn, they will use this process to challenge others' deficit beliefs.

Throughout the process, group members may offer personal experiences as evidence to validate deficit beliefs (i.e. "My friend who is Hispanic does..." or "My black co-worker says..."). When such claims surface, provide alternate examples to help group members understand individual cases from personal experience do not necessarily represent the experiences of an entire cultural group. Emphasize the necessity of reading multicultural research, which aids in understanding the experience of many and not just a few individuals. Also underscore that being a person of color does not automatically equate to

having a deep understanding of one's cultural identity.

THE POWER OF WORDS

Another caution for facilitators is to be aware of the deficit beliefs hidden in everyday language. Although often thought of as benign, expressions such as "ghetto," "Jew them down," and "redneck" or even subtle ones like "I'm just a teacher" or the "Subpopulation at our school is composed of..." label certain people as less than others. Allowing such language to go unchallenged suggests that listeners condone its use. In many cases, group members only need to be made aware of the power of language and its impact on others to understand why deficit language cannot be tolerated.

When comments like these surface, help the individual reflect by saying, "I heard you say Is this correct?"

Without judgment, give the individual an opportunity to explain the comment by asking, "What do you mean by the term . . .?" Then explain what you heard or ask others in the group to explain their interpretations to help the speaker realize language often sends unintended messages. When this practice becomes the norm, group members will become more conscious of word choice and the intended and unintended messages of language.

Deconstructing and reframing deficit thinking requires knowledge of culture, group facilitation skills, courage, and, even more importantly, a systematic approach. Without those, the best intentions are likely to fail.

REFERENCE

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