

Moving our Thinking about Family-School Relationships: From Deficit-Oriented to Assets-Based

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Introduction

This curriculum module - *Moving our Thinking about Family-School Relationships: From Deficit-Oriented to Assets-Based* - focuses specifically on the goal of “ensuring that family and community perspectives are at the heart of the culture of the school, through ensuring that school personnel understand, respect, and value the unique experiences, strengths and challenges of all families, especially those whose children have been placed at-risk of educational failure.”

The following module provides participants in leadership preparation programs with the opportunity to:

- 1) recognize patterns of “deficit thinking” within family-school relationships;
- 2) identify an “assets-oriented” view of family-school relationships; 3) distinguish between parent-school involvement and parent-school collaboration; and 4) demonstrate specific leadership strategies to increase collaboration between families and school personnel. First, a brief literature review introduces the idea that deeply held beliefs and assumptions about students and families impact how school leaders engage in their work. The concept of “deficit thinking” is presented as well as how to move our thinking about students and families from a deficit perspective to an “assets-oriented” view, particularly in relationship to our work with students with disabilities and students placed at risk of school failure. Next, information about best practices in family-school relationships is presented, highlighting the differences between family-school involvement and family-school collaboration. Lastly, a case study is presented in order for participants to apply the concepts presented in the literature review to an authentic school-based problem.

Goal of Module

To increase appreciation for the strengths each student and family brings to the school community and to develop ways to use these strengths in facilitating authentically collaborative family-school relationships.

Objectives

- 1) Recognize patterns of “deficit thinking” within family-school relationships;
- 2) Identify an “assets-oriented” view of family-school relationships;
- 3) Distinguish between parent-school involvement and parent-school collaboration; and
- 4) Demonstrate specific leadership strategies to increase collaboration between families and schools.

Time Frame

60-90 minutes

Materials

- [Introduction to Module](#)
- [Review of Literature](#)
- [Case Study](#)
- [Reflective Questions](#)
- butcher paper and markers

Instructional Agenda

- Introduce purpose of module (see [Introduction](#)).
- Students read the module [Introduction](#) and [Review of Literature](#).
- Guiding Questions:
 - How do our school policies and individual practices reflect a belief that all students can learn - particularly, students our schools have labeled “disabled” or “at risk”?
 - How do our policies and practices reflect a belief that all families bring assets to family-school partnerships?
 - How do our beliefs and assumptions translate into action when we are thinking about and engaging in family-school partnerships?

In order for students to process the information outlined in the Review of Literature conduct a “Graffiti” large group cooperative learning structure. (Directions are attached.) The Graffiti activity is designed to ensure that students understand the meaning of the terms “Deficit Thinking” and “Assets-Oriented” Thinking and that they can distinguish (list similarities and differences) between the concepts of Involvement and Collaboration in terms of family-school relationships.

The following topics should be listed on the butcher paper (1 topic per sheet):

“Deficit Thinking”		“Assets-Oriented” Thinking		Family-School Relationships
				<u>Involvement</u> <u>Collaboration</u>

- Guide the students through the following application-to-practice exercise. This case-based instructional approach can be facilitated in a variety of ways: small groups of students, a Think-Pair-Share cooperative structure, or individually.
- Read the assigned case study:
[*Making an Appropriate Special Education Placement: Conflict Abounds!*](#)
Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership, 4 (2), (Spring 2001)
George P. White & Thomas A. Mayes, Lehigh University

(Note: For the purposes of this module, it is only necessary to read the case itself, and not the entire case study which includes Teaching Notes which are not pertinent to the content of this module.)

- Discuss [Reflective Questions](#).

Assessment Strategies

- Students respond (orally or in writing; small group or individually) to [Reflective Questions](#).
- After reviewing the Reflective Questions, students engage in a simulation of the IEP meeting described in the case study. This simulation allows students the opportunity to “put into practice” their responses to Reflective Questions 3-6. Key players are listed on p. 15 of the case.

Evaluation Criteria

Student is able to define the term “deficit thinking” and apply the concept within the context of working with students with disabilities and students placed at risk of school failure and their families.

Student is able to define the term “assets-oriented” view and apply the concept within the context of working with students with disabilities and students placed at risk of school failure and their families.

Student is able to articulate at least three (3) differences between parent involvement and parent collaboration within the context of working with students with disabilities and students placed at risk of school failure.

Student is able to articulate at least three (3) leadership strategies that would assist in moving the thinking of school personnel from a “deficit thinking” perspective to an “assets-oriented” view of students with disabilities and students placed at risk of school failure and their families and describe how those strategies would increase authentic collaboration between families and schools.

Related ISLLC/NCATE Leadership Standards

2.1 Promote a positive school culture

2.2 Provide an effective instructional program

4.1 Collaborate with families and other community members

6.1 Understand the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context

6.2 Respond to the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context

Other Information

- Directions for Graffiti Cooperative Learning Structure

Directions for Graffiti Cooperative Learning Structure

(Exerpt from Bennett, B., Rolheiser, C., & Stevahn, L. (1991). *Cooperative learning: Where heart meets mind*. Toronto: Educational Connections, p. 210)

Graffiti (Gibbs, 1987) is a cooperative structure that facilitates brainstorming and also doubles as a group energizer. Each cooperative group of 3 or 4 is given a piece of butcher paper and different colored felt pens (one for each group member allowing each individual's contribution to be tracked). Then each group is given a different question, topic, issue, or statement to which they respond. For example, "I feel happiest when..." or "What words come to mind when you think of the ideal school classroom?" or "Ways to conserve energy," etc. For a short period of time every group in the room writes their "graffiti" (words, phrases, graphics) on their particular topic. The teacher then stops them, asks each group to pass their graffiti sheet to the next group and the process repeats itself, with each group now responding to the new topic. The process continues until the group's original sheet returns to them. Then, as a group they read all of the new comments in order to draw conclusions or present a brief summary presentation to the class. Note that if the class is large, each topic could be repeated once, so instead of 8 topics, there might only be 4, and rotation would only occur to half the class (while the other half rotated through the same topics at the same time).

Another variation of graffiti is to have each group follow the same initial step as outlined above. The only difference is when the teacher stops them the first time, all members depart from their group, leaving their graffiti sheet behind. Over the next number of minutes all class members can go to any other graffiti sheet in the class and add their comments/visuals to it. They cannot return to any one graffiti sheet to read, discuss, summarize, and possibly present it (as outlined in the previous variation).

Graffiti works very effectively as an anticipatory set or closure activity, or as an energizer during any lesson where generation of ideas is desired.

The Power of Our Thinking

Best practices and empirical research in the field of educational leadership assert that one of the essential roles of a school leader is to create a school culture that values “relationships that are built on trust, deep familiarity, and genuine appreciation for the assets of the family and community” (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 7). (Link to [*What We Know About Successful School Leadership*](#), an AERA Division A Report, for a current synthesis of the empirical research and best practices literature in the field of educational leadership.) The majority of leadership candidates, however, enter leadership preparation programs with educational and community experiences that do not match those of the students they serve, particularly students with disabilities and students placed at risk of school failure. One way school leaders can build an inclusive school culture that facilitates a genuine appreciation for the strengths each child and family brings to the school community is by recognizing how our beliefs about students and families influence our work as educational leaders.

Deeply held beliefs and assumptions about students and families impact how educators engage in their work (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997; Young & Laible, 2000; Scheurich & Young, 1997). Researchers and educational leaders have documented the influence of “deficit thinking” (Valencia, 1997) on the way educators interact with students and families, particularly students with disabilities, students from low income homes, students of color, and students whose first language is other than English (Bishop, Foster, & Jubala, 1993; Delgado-Gaitan, 1993; Doyle, 2002; Heshusius, 1995; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Quigney, 1997; Riester, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). In his book *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking* (1997) Richard Valencia “unpacks” the notion of “deficit thinking” - an idea that has developed over hundreds of years that seeks to explain why school failure is “pervasive and disproportionate” (p. 1) for particular students in our schools. He explains:

The theory of school failure that is the subject of the present book is termed deficit thinking. Of the several theories that have been advanced to explicate school failure among economically disadvantaged minority students, the deficit model has held the longest currency - spanning well over a century, with roots going back to the late 1800's (see Menchaca, Chapter 2, this book). The deficit thinking model, at its core, is an endogenous theory - positing that the student who fails in school does so because of internal deficits or deficiencies. Such deficits manifest, it is alleged, in limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn and immoral behaviors. The proposed transmitters of these deficits vary according to the intellectual and scholarly climate of the times. We shall see that genetics, culture and class, and familial socialization have all be postulated as the sources of alleged deficits expressed by the individual student who experiences school failure. Given the parsimonious nature of deficit thinking, it is not unexpected that advocates of the model have failed to look for external attributions of school failure. How schools are organized to prevent learning, inequalities in the political economy of education, and oppressive macropolicies and practices in education are all held exculpatory in understanding school failure.” (p. 2)

In addition to describing the contextual influences that have shaped the evolution of “deficit thinking,” Valencia points out how easily the assumption that school failure is due to internal student or family deficiencies - whether based on individual or group identity (e.g., race or economic background) or personal characteristics (e.g., disability label, student’s motivation to learn, family’s value of education) - becomes an unchecked rationale for educators’ lack of success with many students in our schools. Thus, the “evidence” we provide to explain why a student is not achieving is itself rooted in the notion of “deficit thinking.” The very process of labeling students as “disabled” or “at risk,” for example, reinforces the assumption that school failure is due to internal student or family deficiencies.

The notion of “deficit thinking” is not the type of educational theory that school leaders typically discuss during professional development seminars, such as constructivist theory or the theory of multiple intelligences. The idea of “deficit thinking” is so deeply imbedded in the policies and practices of everyday schooling that many educators do not acknowledge its influence (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Young & Laible, 2000; Scheurich & Young, 1997). This silence is deceptive and powerful. However, as school leaders come to recognize how personal and cultural assumptions about students and families influence family-school relationships we begin to move our thinking from a “deficit thinking” perspective to an “assets-oriented” view (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003).

The following reflective question assists us in understanding how our beliefs and assumptions influence our thinking:

“Do I - deep inside where my most firmly held and private beliefs reside - truly believe it is possible in the immediate future to create and sustain schools in which literally all children will be highly successful?” (emphasis in original, Scheurich & Skrla, 2003, p. 10).

An “assets-oriented” view of students and families assists school leaders in creating schools “in which literally all children will be highly successful.” This is not a dream far off in some distant future but a reality chronicled across the United States (Doyle, 2002; Quigney, 1997; Reister et al., 2002; Reyes, Scribner, & Paredes Scribner, 1999; Scheurich & Skrla, 2000).

Applying the notion of “deficit thinking” specifically to the work of school leaders, James Scheurich and Linda Skrla (2003) provide insight into how our beliefs and assumptions about students and families inform our thinking. The following is an excerpt from their book entitled *Leadership for Equity and Excellence: Creating High-Achievement Classrooms, Schools, and Districts* (2003) describing the “barriers to believing” that all students will be successful in our schools. Although this book chapter speaks specifically about “deficit thinking” in terms of students of color and students from low-income homes - two groups of students who have historically been placed at risk of academic failure by school practices and policies - the fundamental message applies to our work with students with disabilities as well.

Additional Reading:

Scheurich, J.J. & Skrla, L. (2003). "Learning to Believe the Dream is Possible."
Leadership for equity and excellence: Creating high-achievement classrooms, schools, and districts, p. 9-27. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

As we reflect on the nature of "deficit thinking" and the importance of an "assets-oriented" view of students and families, several questions come to mind: How do our school policies and individual practices reflect a belief that all students can learn - particularly, students our schools have labeled "disabled" or "at risk"? In addition, how do our policies and practices reflect a belief that all families bring assets to family-school partnerships? And more specifically, how do our beliefs and assumptions translate into action when we are thinking about and engaging in family-school partnerships? These questions will be considered next.

Working with Families: From Involvement to Collaboration

Family-school collaboration is an essential component of an effective education for all students we serve, but particularly important in our work with students with disabilities and students placed at risk of school failure. Research to date points to the important role the school leader plays in ensuring the successful implementation of support services to students with disabilities and students placed at risk (Doyle, 2002; Gartner & Lipsky, 1997; Guzman, 1997; Riehl, 2000; Riester et al., 2002; Lyman & Vallani, 2002).

As we look at moving our thinking about students and families as well as family-school relationships from a deficit perspective to an "assets-oriented" view we need look no further than the world of special education. Parent participation in the education of their child with a disability is guaranteed legislatively through the Individual's with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). However, mandated involvement does not always translate into authentic collaboration.

The following excerpt from *Lifespan Perspectives on the Family and Disability* by J. O. Berry & M. L. Hardman (1998) provides a thorough overview of the principles of effective collaboration in family-school relationships.

Moving from Involvement to Collaboration

What we know about schools is that they are most successful when they establish positive relationships with the family (Hardman, Drew, & Egan, 1996; Newton & Tarrant, 1992). This is true for all children, but takes on even more meaning when we are addressing the challenges facing students with disabilities and their families. A fundamental component of a strong home-school relationship is a clear understanding of each other's philosophical and practical approaches to meeting the needs of the child with a disability. Without this understanding it is not possible to develop the collaborative ethic necessary to establish a consistent and meaningful program for the child that promotes growth in both school and home environments.

Involving parents in their child's education does not mean they have become a collaborative member of the child's educational team. In order to understand how parents become active participants in shared educational decision making, we must distinguish between the terms involvement and collaboration. Involvement can be described as a "one-way communication process" in which the school imparts information to parents in much the same manner that parents give information to their child when they are using a didactic approach to teaching (Dettmer et al., 1993). As such, parent involvement may be passive in that information flows one way: school to home. Parent concerns and interests may not be heard or addressed. Thus decisions regarding the child's education are solely in the hands of education professionals. Parent involvement activities may include student progress conferences; parent information and training meetings; school or class newsletters; parent support in the classroom: follow-up on homework assignments, tutoring students, or preparing materials. In each of these activities the school is offering a system of one-way communication that is missing a key ingredient for a successful partnership: mutual problem solving and shared decision making (Dettmer et al., 1993).

Collaboration, in contrast, suggests a two-way communication process in which there is an established partnership between the home and school and decisions are made jointly. The process involves two or more parties who share information, consider each other's input in the problem-solving process, and reach a joint resolution. Implied within the collaborative ethic is that a mutual respect exists between the two parties and each views the other as a competent member of the team (Dettmer et al., 1993). Table 8.1 describes some of the many characteristics of successful home-school partnerships. (p. 200)

TABLE 8.1 Components of Effective Home-School Partnerships

Successful Programs

Are designed with the expectation that parents will be collaborators.
Tailor activities to meet the needs of particular parents involved.
Include a variety of types of parental involvement.
Utilize creative and flexible program activities.
Communicate expectations, roles, and responsibilities.
Consider staff skills and available resources.
Recognize variations in parents' skills.
Are characterized by a balance of power so that parents are involved in decision making and administrative decisions are explained.
Provide increased opportunities for interaction.
Expect problems but emphasize solutions.
Empower parents and school personnel.
Are minimally intrusive.
Are clear and specific.
Are designed with obtainable goals and objectives.
Have an acceptable cost-return ratio.

Assess parents' and school personnel's perceptions of the program.

Source: Welch and Sheridan (1995) (p. 201)

Next Steps

In order to build inclusive school cultures that value “relationships that are built on trust, deep familiarity, and genuine appreciation for the assets of the family and community” (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p.7) school leaders must first recognize how “deficit thinking” plays a role in the everyday policies and practices of schooling. The following case study offers you an opportunity to consider how deeply held beliefs and assumptions about students and families influence our work as educators. Additionally, the case study challenges us to imagine how we as school leaders can move our school’s thinking about students and families from a “deficit thinking” perspective to an “assets-oriented” view.

Reflective Questions for Case Study

1. How would you categorize the relationship between school personnel and the Phillip's family?
2. Given the case scenario identify examples of "deficit thinking" by school personnel.
3. What would an "assets-oriented" view of the Phillip's family or Carey look like?
4. Develop at least three (3) leadership strategies the principal might use to move the staff's thinking from a "deficit thinking" to an "assets-oriented" perspective:
 - before the meeting
 - during the meeting
 - after the meeting
5. Where in the case would you intervene in order to facilitate authentic family-school collaboration? How might you as the principal (or other staff present at the meeting) do this?
6. Identify at least three (3) elements of collaboration that would need to be present in order to move the family-school relationship from involvement to collaboration.

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