Deficit Thinking

vs

Strengths Perspective

Brian McSkane

Department of Sculpture and Expanded Practice

Faculty of Fine Art and Education

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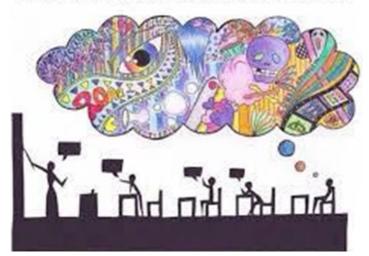**Strengths Perspective**

Brian Mc Skane

17367561

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Introduction

This essay will attempt to examine Deficit thinking vs Strengths perspective in education. The following image has been chosen to be discussed throughout this essay because of its visual representation in relation to the students within a class setting and the theme, Deficit Thinking vs Strengths Perspective. The image is of a classroom setting of five silhouettes, four students and one educator at the front of the class. The main figure that is of interest in this image is the student at the back of the class. The reason for this is because they are being portrayed of having a mind full of creative thoughts that flood upwards bursting with colour. While the other students raise their hands to the attention of the educator that one student at the back remains seated with their hands by their side. *"The one who never says anything…"* is the wording above the image. This statement is automatically linked to that one student at the back. Insinuating that the student with the mind full remains silent and is either day dreaming, shy or unconfident within the classroom setting. This essay will be analysing; deficit thinking and strengths perspective within schooling in detail which will then be applied to the image to evaluate it in relation to the chosen theme. A brief personal experience that I feel is connected to the chosen image and theme will be explored before I conclude.

Theme Detailed

Deficit thinking is when the educators and educational system "blames the victim" for school failure instead of examining how schools are structured" (Valencia R. 2010, p2). From this we can acknowledge that deficit thinking is not the most suitable outlook and should not exist as "schools are one of the most important contexts in young peoples' lives" (Norrish, et al. 2013, p147). For this to happen within schooling defeats a large portion of the purpose of education, that being to help shape young people in "preparing students for successful lives despite the realities of their circumstances" (Hambacher, 2015, p3). The educator sees this deriving from the background of the students whether it be the social class, race or any other minority within mainstream society. This is a result of multiple layers of years of social segregation and this is "deeply embedded in the culture" (Hambacher, 2015, p1). Although some educators don't meaningfully or intentionally aim to label students as failures, they attribute to it blindly as it is a track within society and the education system which has a "label that is tossed around rather indiscriminately." (Swandener, 1998, p138). This label that is tossed around is, *at risk,* and is a comrade of deficit thinking, used to categorise an individual student or group that is seen to be at fault for their own behaviour and learning resulting in excluding themselves from schooling and society. While having the ability to label these students it takes the burden of the school and allows them to avoid paying attention to "how schools are institutionally implicated in ways that exclude students from optimal learning" (Valencia R. 2010, p18). In defence of the schools Valencia does say "that students who are failing in school must – along with their parents – muster every effort they can in achieving school success." (Valencia R.

2010, p16).

While teachers are seeing, or looking, for faults in the students to, somewhat, pin the blame on them for their (lack of) learning, they should be looking, and seeing, the strengths, in the students. This is Strengths perspective and is the opposing side to Deficit thinking and is taking from social work studies by Denis Saleebey. He looks at how we can't know "the upper limits of a person's capacity to grow and change" (Saleebey, 2000, p127). This highlights the fact that deficit views should not be projected on to students. If it is the case that students are faced with issues that may cause some delay in their progression it does not mean that they cannot overcome this to grow and change. The teachers aim should be to, yes, acknowledge the issues but to work with the student, to extrude the student's strengths and make them visible to the student, in doing so "equip students with the necessary tools to help them achieve success." (Hambacher, 2015, p3). In doing this it could help the student to excel in areas that include their strengths. Helping to conquer the hurdles and pave a way for progression in life and could result in achieving a sense of fulfilment. From a strength's perspective, "everyone has unique abilities and capacities that can help them to flourish and perform at their best" (Norrish, et al. 2013, p151). This process is viewing the students, *at promise,* rather than, *at risk.* Working towards a school environment that promotes strengths over deficits can develop positive wellbeing which is essential for individuals to flourish.

Theme Applied

The selected image above is suited to the theme Deficit thinking vs Strengths perspective for the following reasons. The main figure at the back is isolated due to their nonparticipation in the class. This is visually represented by their position in

contrast to the other three students. This can be viewed from the two perspectives; One being from the student (Strengths perspective) and the other from the teacher (Deficit thinking). As the figure in question is being portrayed as having a mind full of thoughts and has the words, *the one who never says anything*, accompanying them it leads the viewer of the image to assume that the student isn't participating as a result of self-confidence or perhaps they aren't being encouraged to. If it was for either reason, the teacher can help the student to resolve this by "empowering students by giving them voice" (Hambacher, 2015, p7). It is also feasible that the educator is, ignoring or not being inclusive because of their personal views of the student, whether it be the students background, race, productivity or the apparent lack of interest. If the teacher mistakes the students, under confidence, for their, lack of competitiveness in the class it can cause the teacher to ignore that student. The competitiveness is visible in the image through the actions of the other three figures competing for the attention of the educator. Why is this been treated or depicted as a competition? And should it be? On the other hand, this situation could be viewed through the eyes of a deficit thinker and it could be a result of the student's behaviour and they may be disruptive and outright neglectful to the class and the teacher's efforts of inclusion. If a student does not learn to contribute to the class and learn to work with others it can result in them not only being isolated in a class but also in society, they must learn to "engage with the classroom environment in ways that promote learning and build competence not only academically but also socially" (Shoshani, 2012, p1166). Although this example may be the case in some classrooms it doesn't suit the setting depicted in the above image as a result of the aesthetics. The aesthetic aspect of the image is the burst of colours floating out of

this one figure. The colours and designs within the bubble suggest to the observers that the student is an artistic person. Influencing the thought that the student is day dreaming or the topic of the class just isn't relevant or suited to their needs. If this was the case, then the student's strengths are in the artistic spectrum and should be examined and integrated by the teacher where possible. "Individuals who use their strengths have been found to report increased vitality and subjective and psychological wellbeing" (Norrish, et al. 2013, p151-152).

Personal Reflection

Often, I arrive into a class, take a seat in the back row (the corner), listen to what is been taught, learn from it (sometimes) and remain relatively silent. This is something that I have done and varied through my time in education and schooling. Although I remain silent, often I may know the answer to the question that is being asked or have something to say to contribute to the lesson, but I don't. The reason for this is because of how I developed through my time in education starting from primary school. At times students get singled out in a classroom setting or certain things happen that can have a negative impact on their self-confidence. My first experience of this was (from what I remember) in baby infants (as it was called) I was made stand in front of the class because I was sniffing because I had a head cold. Although this may seem like nothing, I can still remember it and it still plays a role in how I act within a class. So, I suppose it could be said from Saleebeys quote "everyone who struggles learns something from their struggle" (Saleebey, 2000, p127) (Don't sniff Brian, the teacher doesn't like it!). As I progressed through secondary school my behaviour varied in totally different directions. To try pin this down I will identify two milestones. In around 2010 when I was in second year in second level education, I

began a program, the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP). I did not have any knowledge on what this program was until recently when I realised, I was been seen and labelled as *at risk* of leaving school early as a result of my behaviour and engagement (lack of) in class. This contrasts with when I was in sixth year in 2015, I was nominated for student of the year when I was acknowledged for my turn around and how they could see me progressing on to third level and doing great things. I only fully became aware of this in recent years and now that I am in third level, preparing to become a teacher myself and understanding that I myself was seen as, *at risk* and then *at promise.*

Conclusion

As Deficit thinking continues to exist within schooling and the education system students will continue to get the blame for there (lack of) learning so that the system can avoid the burden. While more individuals are viewed like this the bigger the groups get and the more categorised, they will become. There is a need for a new track to be formed within society that will integrate through education so that strengths perspective can be embedded within the classroom. This will help the teachers to engage more with the students on there strengths and help them to aim for achievements in life. My own experience helped me to not only acknowledge and relate to, at risk and, at promise but also to choose the image for this text. The image identifies both views of the theme and can support a view from strengths or from deficit. The perspective from students and from the educators. To work towards an environment that can help aid the educators and the students we must look at both sides of the coin and not be biased.

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