

Impact of deficit thinking on minority students



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Deficit thinking has greatly influenced the way in which educators perceive their students and students' families. Often exposing negative prejudice mentalities towards the capabilities of students and families of different races and cultures, specifically Indigenous Australians. This reading addresses this issue, critically analysing and exploring the historical context of deficit mentality and how this still resonates through the education system. As well as, exploring solutions to deficit mentality such as democratic classrooms, restorative justice and collaborative partnerships. Looking at how these models are successful in creating positive relationships between educational institutions and families.

Deficit thinking has had quite the negative impact and influence on students of different cultures, ethnicity and race. Knight (2002) discusses problems of deficit mentality and exposes how it has shaped and influenced the educational practices and policies used by the Australian government between 1964 and 1970, in particular the "Education deprivation thesis" (Knight, 2002, 92)

"some social scientists hypothesized that black, brown or poor white people are genetically or culturally inferior" (Knight, p. 94, 2002)

This quote expresses deficit mentality, exposing the negative connotations targeted towards racially different students. These negative connotations being, that educators and the curriculum are not the blame for unsuccessful students but rather their heritage and culture. Knight explains that historically, conservative views were favoured in determining the reasons for failing students. These views being that schools were at an

adequate level of teaching, that the curriculum and delivery of said curriculum were being taught successfully. That the true cause of failing students was the background and up-bringing of these students, and the connection they share with their families. That these students have underlying disabilities, limitations and are genetically disadvantaged. Essentially that they do not have the mental capacity to learn or be educated “ properly”(Knight, 2002). This is further supported by Vass (2012) in his article about indigenous education in Australia.

Vass (2012) discusses the same prejudice ideas viewed by these conservative educators. Expanding upon these ideas and exposing that although even with some positive development moving into the 1970s. With Indigenous people being given the ability to grasp a stronger foot hold in building a national profile. As well as, Being granted the access to discuss key aspects and specific problems with the curriculum. That the mindset of these educators, blinded by their own beliefs and the deficit mentality that the students cultural heritage and not the education system, were the true faults for failing students. This resulted in the halting of any progress of a positive change towards a better education for indigenous students (Vass, 2012).

“...This generally fell on deaf ears, as State education providers appeared resistant to the self-reflection or critique required to support meaningful change in educational practices or policies” (Vass, p. g. 88, 2012)

Education has developed quite significantly since 1970 and the idea of “ if you want to join us you have to be like us” from the 1950s (Knight, 2002)

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has dissipated. The foundations of these deficit mentalities however, still resonate in the educational development of the indigenous people. Vass (2012) it explains that indigenous education is regularly referred to with negative connotations.

‘ Indigenous education’, all too often it is framed and positioned as a ‘ problem’ that needs ‘ fixing” (Vass, p. g. 85, 2012)

These conservative views on this deficit mentality has ultimately had a negative impacts on the development of aboriginal students and their education. These prejudice ideas expose the mentalities and negative thought’s towards these students. Vass (2012) explains that this deficit mentality has the ability to create a pathway for indigenous students to attain low results when it comes to their academic scores and targets. As well as lacking some effective communication skills and knowledge in in the correct manner of conduct for a classroom setting. Some students even suffer from identity problems with the pressure to racially categorise themselves as Indigenous.

“ Deficit thinking potentially leads to lowered expectations of Indigenous students academically and behaviourally in the classroom”

(Vass, p. g 88, 2012)

This statement is furthers supported by literacy and Numeracy results, otherwise known as NAPLAN, exposed by Vass (2012). With the introduction of NAPLAN the low percentage of literate year 5 indigenous students was exposed and shows how this closely correlates to the low number of indigenous students with successfully completing year 12.

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This idea of deficit mentality has had quite the detrimental effect in the outcome of indigenous students education. However, the idea of a “*democratic classroom*” (knight, p. g 103, 2002) is a successfull deterrent in the fight against this deficit thinking mindset. A democratic classroom as described by knight (2002) can be broken into two parts, the first part being about the environment and circumstance in which people in our society live. The second part being about the way in which people are treated within our society

“ The first equality is distributive justice, defined as the equalisation of life condition. The second equality is fairness, it is the extent to which a society acts to ensure everyone has an equal encouragement to achieve success in all of societies sanctioned activities”. (knight, p. g. 103, 2002)

This quote highlights these key points about a democratic classroom. These ideas can be translated into an educational context, with distributive justice referring to the curriculum and the relevant information being delivered to students. How this needs to be equal across the board but also consider the equity of the students and understanding their needs in education. The second point refers to the way in which students are treated and perceived in our educational institution. Meaning that students need to be treated fair and just so that they have equal amount of opportunity in succeeding in the society they are a part of. Furthermore, this of idea of democratic classrooms would eradicate any form of streaming or racially defined educational legislations that reinforce deficit thinking.

“ simply describing good pedagogy; it does not have to be framed as good pedagogy for Indigenous students”. (Vass, p. g. 93, 2012)

This quote from Vass supports this idea, stating that it needs to be understood that the creation of culturally diverse curricular, specifically for indigenous people generates this idea of student streaming which in turn creates a deficit mentality. However, if educators approached educating with a unbiased framework and simply approached teaching with a good prelogical structure that was equal and just, then students may find the merit in education.

This equal and democratic classroom creates a safe educational space for students, allowing for positive academic results to be achieved. Thus, with the equal treatment of students, generates a platform for all students to achieve quality and equal results, which inevitably allows for “ equality of opportunity” (Knight, p. g. 104, 2002). Meaning that all students can have a successful education and be positively received into society. This view of democracy for the classroom, instead of a deficit thinking, allows indigenous students and families to truly feel welcomed into the schooling system as healthy participants in education.

This positive democratic classroom environment can further be reinforced by other means of positive education perspectives. Evans (2016) discusses the idea of restorative justice and the “ *just and equitable learning environment* ” (Evans, p. g. 3, 2016) that it promotes. Although restorative justice is historically not associated with education it does however, offers a myriad of benefits and positive attributes to the education system. These

attributes can closely correlate with the idea of democratic classroom and help deter deficit thinking.

Restorative justice can provide a safe platform for students to project their thoughts and feelings, truly believing that they are being heard. This is because restorative justice promotes the idea of a an equitable learning environment (Evans, 2016), which inevitably means that all students can feel accepted for who they are, whether it be by race, culture or gender. Which can allow for the bond between families and the schooling system to be a positive and welcoming partnership

Another approach in the fight against deficit thinking and the defect mindsets of students of different races, is the idea of a collaborative partnership. Amatea (2013) discusses this ideology and explains the shift in educational paradigms.

“ Some educators believe that home and school should be separate spheres, each having separate goals and responsibilities and providing different inputs to the education and socialization of children” (Epstein, 2010)

This quote highlights some interesting points about assumptions that be made from a separative partnership . It can be inferred from this separation paradigm, that in this setting deficit thinking could easily have negative implications for students. As it states, that some educational practitioners believe that the experience shared between the schooling system and the homelife of students should be in complete separation of each other. If deficit mentalities such as ones discussed in this reading took place, then potentially these educators whom share these conservative views could

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potentially choose to neglect any factual information that could be learnt from the environment of their students homelife, but instead choose to believe information based upon assumption and not factual evidence.

As discussed earlier by Knight (2002) with the introduction of NAPLAN, revealed the low number literate indigenous students in Australia, compared to the high number of literate non- indigenous students. This presents some interesting question to why this may have occurred. A study made by WoolFolk (2016), discusses aspects of multiculturalism and the integration of migrant people into Australia. Touching upon factual information about the myriad of different dialect and diverse languages spoken by the Indigenous Australians.

“ There are over 250 Indigenous Australian languages..... About 110 of these are severely endangered. About 50 Indigenous Australian languages are still spoken by children” (Woolfolk, p. g. 1, 2016)

This quote points out that the Indigenous language is still being spoken, not only older Indigenous Australians but also the younger generations. From this it can be inferred that these factors can greatly influence the results achieved by indigenous students in an education context, as English may not be there first language. Thus, the academic results received by NAPLAN are of a bias view towards Non-Indigenous Australians, of which majority speak English as there first language.

If school adopted this separation partnership between students and their families, then the possibility of knowing this information about their pupils is unattainable. If educational institutions however, adopted a collaboration

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partnership with families then knowing this would become achievable and working towards a solution would become possible. As expecting families into the school can help with development in the education of indigenous students.

Deficit thinking has had an incredibly negative influence on the education of students of different race and culture in Australia, specifically negative effects on the indigenous Australians. Deficit mentality in the form of “Education deprivation thesis” (knight, 2002, 92) has greatly impacted and oppressed the education of Indigenous students, as the assumption that they do not have the mental capacity to learn or be educated, fuelled the minds of many conservative educators. These mentality however, can be successfully deterred by approaching education and teaching pedagogy with an equal and equitable framework. Creating a safe and inviting environment for students through using a democratic classroom structure and other supporting perspectives such as collaborative partnerships and restorative justice model. This can successfully create an inviting educational space, that is equal and equitable, for students and families.

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