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7 min read

Deficit thinking in schools is a social justice issue. Here's why we need to do better.

**Let's talk
about deficit
thinking in
schools**



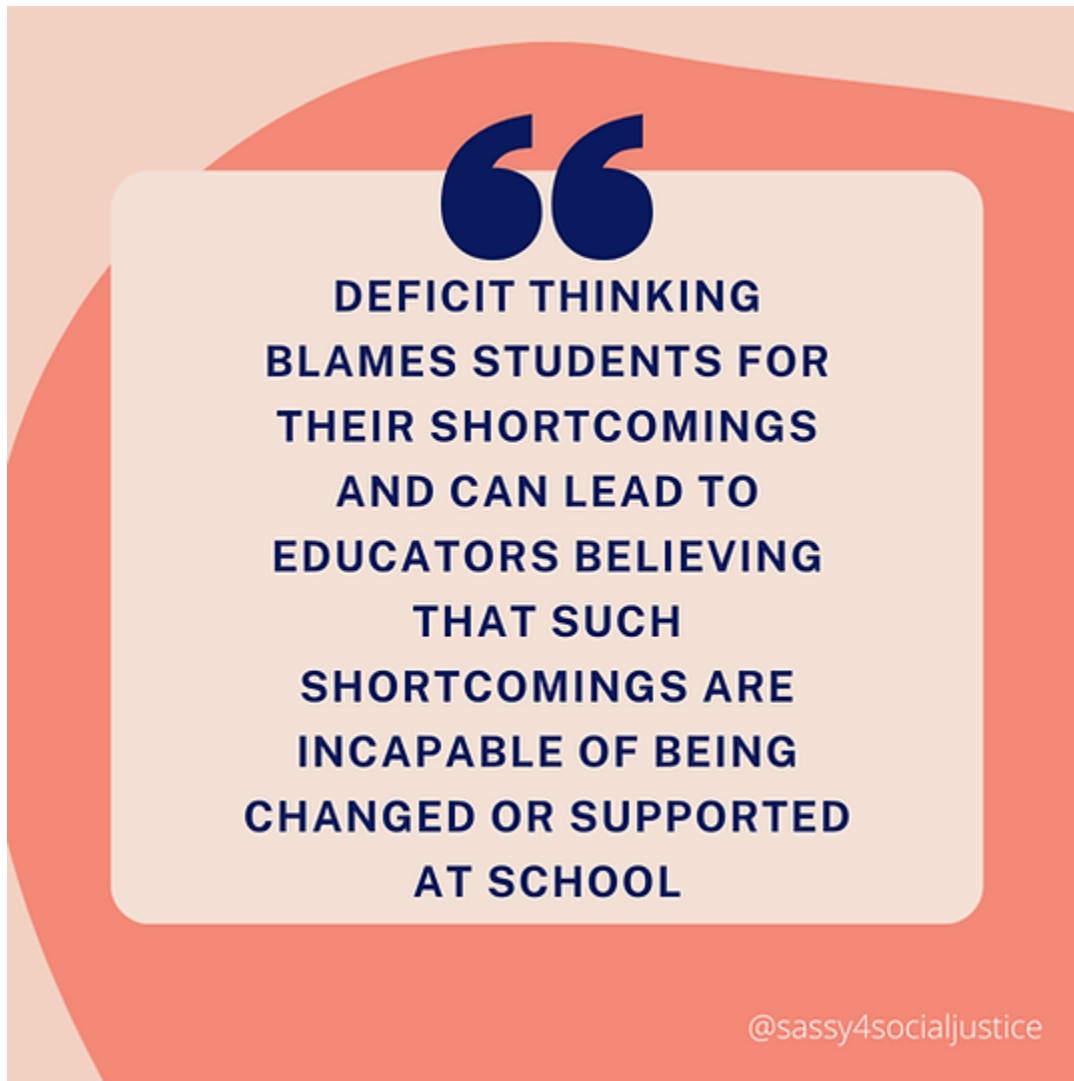
**because it's a
social justice issue**

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"Public education has successfully shifted the blame for the failure of schools to meet the needs of minority students on to the shoulders of the clients they purport to serve. They have pulled off the perfect crime, for they can never be held accountable since the reason for failure in school is said to be the fault of poor homes, cultural handicaps, linguistic deficiencies, and deprived neighborhoods. The fact that schools are geared primarily to serve monolingual, White, middle-class and Anglo clients is never questioned."

-Tomas A. Arciniega (1977)

If you were to ask teachers WHY they thought a student was misbehaving, what types of responses do you think you would receive? This question was one important aspect of my dissertation which sought to understand why some school districts use exclusionary school discipline practices more than others. I originally hypothesized that districts with higher rates of suspension and/or expulsion likely had a school culture where teachers and school staff engaged in higher rates of deficit thinking.



Deficit thinking can be broadly defined as a way of thinking about something that blames the victim. In schools, deficit thinking involves the act of blaming a student, a student's family, or a student's culture for academic or behavioral difficulties that occur at school. For example, school staff may assume that a student is acting out because they're innately a "bad kid" or because the student's parents "didn't raise them right."

This form of thinking is harmful for two reasons: 1) it can lead to educators assuming that nothing can be done to support the student; and 2) it can lead to educators lowering expectations for the student. Research shows that when educators have high expectations for students, their students will rise to those expectations. In contrast, when educators hold low expectations for students, students are less likely to succeed.

Unfortunately, research also indicates that educators are more likely to engage in deficit thinking when working with students of color, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, students with disabilities, and EL (English Learner) students. This can lead to teachers unintentionally lowering their expectations for students based on factors outside of the student's control. This also paves the way for inequitable outcomes of students from historically marginalized backgrounds. One example of such an outcome is the disproportionate referral of historically marginalized students for suspension or expulsion compared to other students.

In order to examine the relationship between deficit thinking and school discipline patterns, I distributed a questionnaire to 300 teachers from six different school districts. The six districts each had their own unique school discipline patterns (e.g., some had a history of high suspension patterns, some had a history of low suspension patterns, some had large racial disparities, others had no disparities by race). The questionnaire started with a brief prompt asking teachers to think about a student they've worked with who has engaged in "disruptive and/or negative" behavior in class. One of the questionnaire items that followed asked teachers to record what they believed to be the "root cause" of that student's misbehavior.

Results revealed a troubling pattern, as 86% of all teachers reported a root cause that was considered "deficit-based." In other words, 86% of teachers reported a root cause that blamed the student or their family in some way. This also means that my hypothesis was not met, because this deficit thinking occurred in all schools regardless of discipline data patterns.

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HOW DOES DEFICIT THINKING MANIFEST IN SCHOOLS?

When asked why they thought a student was misbehaving, the majority of teachers said things like:

"FAMILY BACKGROUND"

"LACK OF STRUCTURE AT HOME"

"DOMESTIC ISSUES AT HOME"

"NO PARENTAL SUPPORT"

"LEARNING DISABILITY"

"FATHER NOT PRESENT"

"LACK OF EDUCATIONAL SKILLS"

"CHAOTIC HOUSEHOLD"

"SPOILED AT HOME"

"NOT GETTING ATTENTION AT HOME"

Some examples of the deficit-based root causes were:

- "family background"
- "lack of structure at home"
- "domestic issues at home"
- "the student is seeking attention because they are not getting attention at home"
- "no parental support"
- "learning disability"
- "father not present"
- "lack of educational skills"
- "chaotic household"
- "spoiled at home"

I know you may be wondering why some of these root causes are problematic. For example, if a student has a learning disability, isn't it somewhat fair to attribute the student's misbehavior to their disability? If a student has a difficult home life, isn't it somewhat fair to assume that the student may engage in problematic behavior at school because of it? To these questions I respond, sure it's possible. But sometimes the problem does not lie in the root cause we attribute, **the problem lies in how we talk about and think about our students** because of these root causes. In other words, root causes that are out of our control are problematic because they likely determine how we treat students at school and the expectations we hold for them.

The infographic features a dark blue speech bubble on the left containing the text "the problem lies in how we talk about and think about our students". To the right, the text "@sassy4socialjustice" is positioned above a thin black L-shaped line. Below the speech bubble, three white dots are arranged horizontally. Underneath the dots, the title "DEFICIT THINKING IN SCHOOLS" is written in bold, dark blue capital letters. At the bottom of the infographic, a block of white text reads: "BELIEVING THAT A STUDENT IS ACTING OUT AT SCHOOL BECAUSE OF THEIR HOME LIFE OR BECAUSE THEY HAVE A DISABILITY CAN SUBSEQUENTLY LEAD TO TEACHERS BELIEVING THAT THERE IS NOTHING THAT THEY THEMSELVES CAN DO TO CHANGE THE STUDENT'S BEHAVIOR". The entire graphic is set against a light red background.

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**DEFICIT THINKING
IN SCHOOLS**

BELIEVING THAT A STUDENT IS ACTING OUT AT SCHOOL
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Again, **deficit thinking blames students for their shortcomings and can lead to educators believing that such shortcomings are incapable of being changed or supported at school.** Thus, the problematic nature of these root causes lies in the way

they are framed. Believing that a student is acting out at school because of their home life or because they have a disability can subsequently lead to teachers believing that there is nothing that they themselves can do to change the student's behavior. If the root cause is believed to be out of our control, what does that say about the expectations we likely hold for the student? And what do we know about the impact of expectations on student success?

So what about the other 14% of teachers? What types of root causes did they mention? Based on prior research in this area, I've termed this small minority of responses as "putative malleable" root causes which can be defined as "root causes that examine the role that school factors play in contributing to and/or causing the problem behavior and are capable of being changed via school-based intervention" (Reed, 2020). Some examples of such teacher responses that fall under this category of root causes were:

- "we need more social-emotional training for teachers and admin"
- "student is bored"
- "inconsistent expectations from teacher"
- "the student might not be engaged in the current activity"
- "negative relationship with teacher"
- "student isn't being challenged enough"
- "needs assistance completing work"
- "teacher/school involvement within teams is lacking"

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ALTERNATIVES TO DEFICIT THINKING IN SCHOOLS

When asked why they thought a student was misbehaving, a SMALL minority of teachers said things like:

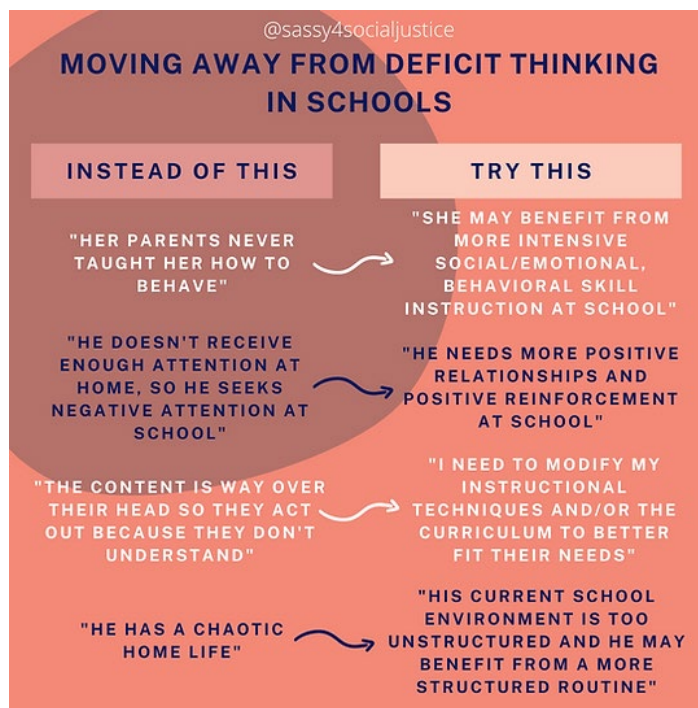
- "WE NEED MORE SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL TRAINING FOR TEACHERS AND ADMIN"
- "STUDENT IS BORED"
- "INCONSISTENT EXPECTATIONS FROM TEACHER"
- "NEGATIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH TEACHER"
- "THE STUDENT ISN'T BEING CHALLENGED ENOUGH"
- "NEEDS ASSISTANCE COMPLETING WORK"
- "THE STUDENT MIGHT NOT BE ENGAGED IN THE CURRENT ACTIVITY"
- "TEACHER/SCHOOL INVOLVEMENT WITHIN TEAMS IS LACKING"

While some of these responses fall directly within the line of school factors that can be altered (e.g., inconsistent expectations, social-emotional training), others can be thought of as a minor reframe in the way students are perceived (e.g., a student is bored, needs assistance completing work). Notice that while responses from the latter could be interpreted in a deficit light, the difference lies in the fact that these variables do not place inherent blame within the student. If a student is acting out because they're bored, what can be changed about the instruction, content, or delivery of material to be more engaging?

If the student is acting out because they need academic assistance, how can we ensure that the student receives the help they need to prevent misbehavior? How can we alter our everyday practices to meet the needs of our students? In other words, rather than associating a student's difficulties with a "learning disability" or "lack of educational skills," we need to shift our thinking to consider what supports we are failing to provide for a student with a disability or for a student who is struggling academically.

Let me give you a few more examples:

- Instead of: "her parents never taught her how to behave," try: "she may benefit from more intensive social/emotional, behavioral skill instruction at school"
- Instead of: "he doesn't receive enough attention at home, so he seeks negative attention at school," try: "he needs more positive relationships and positive reinforcement at school"



- Instead of: “the content is way over their head so they act out because they don’t understand,” try: “I need to modify my instructional techniques and/or modify the curriculum to better fit their academic needs”
- Instead of: “he has a chaotic home life,” try: “his current school environment is too unstructured for his needs and he may benefit from a more structured routine”

Notice these reframes? **Imagine if we did our best to reframe all root causes that blame families or blame students into root causes that are within our control. Not only does this encourage a more positive outlook toward the student, it prevents us from giving up on the student.**

Perception is everything. Framing is everything.

We may have good intentions when we think about difficulties that arise for students outside of school. But the real question is, when is it helpful to consider the impact of such factors and when is it harmful? How are we using the information we know about the student? How can we reframe the behaviors we’re observing at school to be strengths? How can we use these strengths to better support our students instead of marginalizing them further?

While I was surprised to see that my original hypothesis was not met, this finding got me thinking about the culture of our schools and the way in which we, as a society, think about problematic behavior. The lack of relationship between deficit thinking among teachers and school discipline data does not mean that deficit thinking isn’t harmful to students.



In fact, I argue that it is reflective of an even more troubling finding--**our schools are breeding grounds for deficit thinking.** We see deficit thinking everywhere. And it's not because teachers are ill-intentioned. It's because our school staff are not being equipped with the tools or capacity to think about behavior in this way because our larger society does not value this type of thinking. This is why deficit thinking in schools is a social justice issue.

Our current method of addressing student behavior in schools is exclusionary because we believe that students who engage in misbehavior are "bad" and/or "unable to change" rather than taking the time to think about what we could be doing differently to support them.

And just like most social justice issues, our historically marginalized students continue to bear the brunt of the impacts of deficit thinking.



While beyond the scope of this article, fortunately, a separate finding from my dissertation supported the fact that **prompting teachers to intentionally consider root causes may**

increase the likelihood that they will engage in a proactive response to a misbehaving student rather than a punitive one. Hopefully, my future research will continue exploring this relationship.

So the next time you're working with a difficult student, rather than blaming the student, lowering your expectations for them, or deeming them a "lost cause," I challenge you to consider the malleable factors that are contributing to the student's difficulties.

If you find yourself thinking in a deficit light, how can you reframe that root cause into an addressable action?



**WE CANNOT CONTINUE
ALLOWING A STUDENT'S
IDENTITY TO PREDICT THEIR
ABILITY TO SUCCEED IN
SCHOOL. THEIR ABILITY TO
SUCCEED LIES IN OUR
ABILITY TO SEE THEIR
GREATNESS.**

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A simple modification of language can ultimately make a huge difference in our actions. Which hypothesis leads to the unintentional lowering of expectations? Which hypothesis empowers you to support the student? You tell me.

Author Bio:

Dr. Kelsie Reed is a school psychologist at Prince George's County Public Schools and a recent graduate of Loyola University Chicago. Dr. Reed's research and practical interests are alternatives to exclusionary discipline, racial disparities in exclusionary discipline, the school-to-prison pipeline, and educational inequities faced by youth of color. The current article references one portion of Dr. Reed's dissertation which sought to examine school-related predictors of exclusionary discipline patterns via a mixed-methodology approach involving a quantitative analysis of contextual factors, and a qualitative/quantitative examination of the role of teacher perception in contributing to exclusionary discipline patterns. View Dr. Reed's entire [dissertation here](#) and follow Dr. Reed's social justice advocacy Instagram page [@sassy4socialjustice](#) to see more of her work!

Discussion Questions

1. Reflect back to your list of reasons why a student is not completing class work. What percentage or how many of your reasons would you consider Deficit Thinking? How could you phrase or approach them differently to make a more actionable statement?
2. Discuss the following excerpt from the reading:

We may have good intentions when we think about difficulties that arise for students outside of school. But the real question is, when is it helpful to consider the impact of such factors and when is it harmful?

3. How do we both value the importance of knowing a student's background (for example Adverse Childhood Experiences) and avoid deficit thinking?
4. Discuss the connection between implicit bias, deficit thinking, and disproportionate exclusionary discipline.