

THE DAMAGE OF DEFICIT THINKING

Words reflect our beliefs. Beliefs inform our actions.

Language Matters

Educators of Prosperity understand that language matters, because it translates into tangible beliefs and behaviors for our students. As a result, Educators of Prosperity are able to see potential in every student, even if that student is not (yet) able to see it themselves.

Deficit thinking assumes that students—too often students of color—are unsuccessful in school due to their own (perceived) deficits, or deficits that stem from a wider cultural context. Deficit thinking is a form of victim blaming that focuses on incorrect assumptions of what students lack and how we as a school system can “fix” them.

Deficit thinking is critically damaging in that it inflicts continual harm on student self-efficacy and any belief in future potential. It creates a pervasive mentality that some students are just unable to rise above their current level.

It is important for Educators of Prosperity to internalize that those actions which seem harmless to adults can be harmful to students. Too-common, casual phrases such as “he’s really low” and “she’s a behavior problem” go unchecked in the staff room. As Educators of Prosperity, it is imperative to hold everyone, including yourself, accountable to at-promise behavior.



“When you plant lettuce, if it does not grow well, you don’t blame the lettuce. You look for reasons it is not doing well. It may need fertilizer, or more water, or less sun. You never blame the lettuce.”

- Thich Nhat Hanh

In contrast, Asset-Based language, beliefs, and behaviors focus on student potential, talents, and capabilities. Asset-Based Practices leverage students’ strengths and consider how we can adjust the system to better serve students, rather than demanding that students conform to our system. Asset-Based Practices support students to see a bright future and believe they can succeed.

Our young minds look to us for cues as they develop self-identity and assess where they ‘fit’ in the world. As role models for our students, what we do and what we say matters.

