

Difference and Deficit

There is a long research tradition in education that examines the interpretation of differences as deficits. When students come to school not speaking English, from different ethnic or racial groups, from different social classes, from families with different parenting approaches, research demonstrates they are often seen as deficient, rather than different. The goal of the school is then to remedy their deficiencies (teaching them ‘proper’ English or exposing them to middle class cultural experiences or instilling in them the need to work hard and demonstrate individual accomplishment), to provide the experiences families, cultural groups, and communities are not providing.

There are a number of reasons that schools see children who are not middle class and white as deficient. One is xenophobia or fear of people who are different. The classic example in the history of Canadian schooling is the dislocation of aboriginal children to Indian Schools where they were meant to learn how not to be who they were, culturally and linguistically. Others reasons are unfamiliarity and the inability to understand dialects or other languages.

Assuming children and families who are different are deficient has some predictable consequences. Teaching strategies may not take advantage of culturally distinct learning styles, for example, cooperative group learning over individual learning. Especially young children experience frustration when the norms of the school are unfamiliar. Most significant is that children and their families begin to see the school as an unwelcoming place if you do not act and speak in ways prescribed by the school.

Educational researchers promote culturally relevant education as an alternative, an approach that assumes all children have “funds of knowledge” that should be welcomed and shared in classrooms. Getting to know families and their cultures is key to this approach. Rather than seeing differences as a problem, differences are assets and resources to schools in their interaction with children and their families and in deciding what is taught, including recognition of the value of languages other than English.

An interesting read on this topic is Lisa Delpit’s *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*.

Sandra Mathison, PhD
Professor of Education, UBC and McBride parent
sandra.mathison@ubc.ca