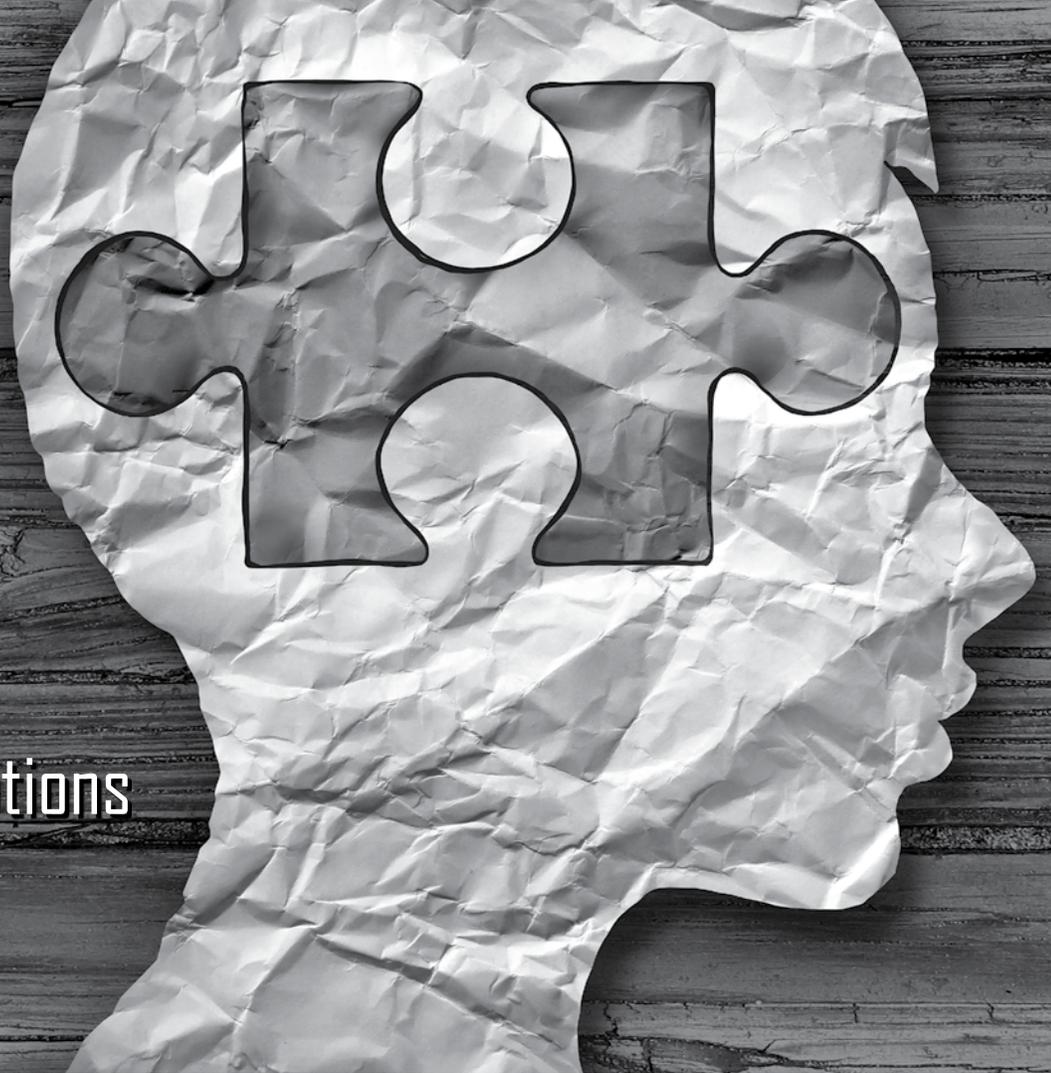


Very Good, B+

Making the Right Assumptions as Educators

By Kayla Logan



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Abstract: The author begins with the position that educators have a special responsibility to cleave to positive assumptions rather than “deficiency” assumptions when interacting with both students and adult peers. Establishing her credibility as both a classroom teacher and teacher-leader with 20 years of experience in a high-needs public school, the author argues for directly examining and refining our assumptions, their impacts on our behaviors, and the outcomes of those behaviors. The author poses several examples of deficiency assumptions and offers the alternative constructive assumption. Presenting and rebutting the counterargument of assuming the worst, the article reiterates the importance of making constructive assumptions. Constructive assumptions come from a model of caring that will motivate both students and adults alike.

Keywords: literacy, secondary education, English language arts, teacher education, teacher attitudes

What a wonderful request—to be called upon to write “the teacher’s voice!” This call is timely and empowering. It comes just when we need it—a time of change that has the scary potential to magnify the frustration that we already feel about the standards we teach. As English educators prepare to understand and adapt our instruction (once again) to meet *new* state standards, I long to share a personal realization of positive thinking in the face of cynicism. Instead of writing about the standards, my message turns rather to our mental and emotional perspective as teachers.

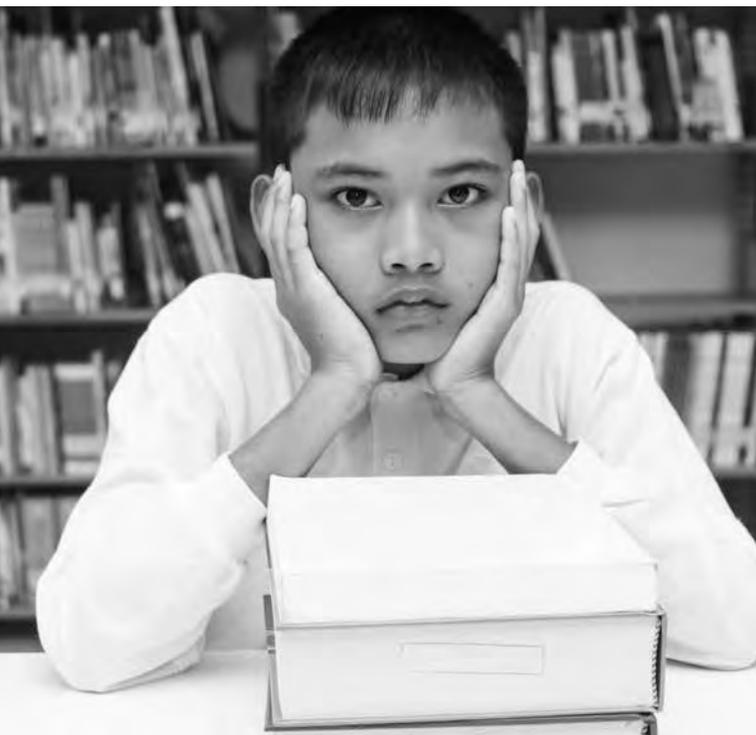
Most teachers are, by nature, critical. I mean the word “critical” both as an adjective signifying a negative response (as in something could be better) and as an adjective signifying the ability to analyze and consider deeply a topic or issue. Good educators have a great eye for what needs to be fixed, and we use our knowledge and reasoning skills deftly to pinpoint it and fix it! Critical thinkers are often quick to spot areas of need and attention with an eye toward constant improvement. This view is an appropriate one for a great teacher; however, when working with others, this critical eye can become a burden.

We all know the old, familiar adage: Don’t ASSUME because it makes an ASS of U and ME. I remember seeing this quip on coffee mugs and t-shirts during my youth. And one must admit, there is some truth to the saying. Making incorrect assumptions can be detrimental in a number of situations, and even devastating in others. Over the course of my 20-plus years in education, however, I’ve come to believe that there are some assumptions that should be made. Mine is not an epiphany narrative; rather, it is a series of

reflections on the pivotal moments that brought me to understand a constructive model of assuming—one in which educators routinely assume that individuals are performing their best. This positive outlook can foster the positive outcomes that we seek as educators.

Why We Need to Analyze Our Assumptions

In the late 1990s, when I was still new to teaching, I had a friend and colleague who was completing his master's degree in education. He was studying the impacts of teachers' caring on student perceptions and performance. He was conducting focus groups with gifted and talented students in the high-needs secondary school where we worked. "I think that kids do better in classes in which they believe the teacher cares for them," he said. I remember looking at him as though he was crazy—"Do we really need to research that?" I asked. It seemed obvious to me that students worked harder in classes where the teachers show care for students by being present, on time, and prepared with engaging lessons and assignments. At that point in my career, I didn't recognize the value of studying caring in educational environments, nor did I understand the value of taking time to really think about the way we think as educators. "While he's studying an abstract concept, I'm involved in the hands-on, *real* work of teaching students," I thought.



But my friend's line of inquiry gnawed at me for several months. The scores at the school were low, so the problem may be related to a lack of caring by teachers. I began to pay more attention to the behaviors of teachers on my campus beyond being present and prepared. That, sadly, revealed that some teachers seemed to NOT care. I mean, they probably wouldn't *tell* you that they didn't care, but when I observed their interactions with students, their behaviors did not demonstrate caring. For example, one teacher talked harshly. Another teacher ignored a student while sharing a personal conversation with her coworker. Yet another wrote up the same kid, at the same time, for the same misbehavior every day. One teacher looked *really annoyed* when a student approached her with a question. It was easy to see that these behaviors (though

perhaps originating from a deeply hidden place of caring) were not overt actions of caring. As I watched and judged these teachers, my critical eye kept turning toward myself, for I had done these behaviors before on "bad" days. Taking time to consider the abstract concept of caring forced me to see my behaviors from my students' points of view rather than only from my own. I came to an upsetting and earth-shattering conclusion: My students didn't know that I cared about them.

The empirical evidence, as far my students were concerned, came from about 45 minutes of interaction per day. When I really began to become conscious of the teacher that my students saw, I realized that I was demanding, scolding, assigning, and assessing all of the time. The assumption that teachers don't care enough for their kids turned itself upon me with horrible red eyes and menacing fangs! I made a conscious decision to change my behaviors: I stopped worrying about setting up my classroom for the next class. Instead, I walked outside to greet my students at the door. I learned their names (and their nicknames) on the first day, and I used their names all of the time in class and in the hallways. I commented positively on their clothes, their hair, and their shoes. I asked questions like: Did you get your little sister to the doctor yesterday? What do you think about the new [*student's favorite band*] album? Did you see the [*student's favorite sports team*] game last night? I made sure to remember the answers so that I could follow up later.

I refused to be part of the negative assumption that teachers did not care about their students. I knew otherwise because I certainly cared for my students. So, I needed to refine my initial assumption that teachers didn't care. Instead of *Teachers don't care for their students*, I reworked my assumption to be: *Teachers do care about their students, but they need to reflect on and modify their behaviors so that students perceive that caring*. My first assumption was based on a deficiency model—a negative view about myself and others. But I needed a perspective that could propel me forward. I needed to assume the best about teachers rather than the worst.

In the same way that we need to research caring and other socio-emotional phenomena in education, we need to take some time to consider and analyze the outcomes of the assumptions we're making every day in our classrooms, faculty meetings, and data-analysis sessions. Like me, teachers like to believe that we never assume. We always base our knowledge on evidence, but in spite of our efforts to make evidence-based decisions, our day-to-day lives are fraught with small assumptions that impact our ability to be successful educators.

For example, I use methods and strategies in my classroom that are based on research, but when I take a "research-based" strategy from one classroom into another, I am really assuming (believing without evidence) that the strategy will work in the same way. If it doesn't, I might feel compelled to blame myself or my students. But this type of "deficiency thinking" leads to frustration at best and a toxic environment at worst. The types of assumptions that we make are important. It's best when a classroom teacher is dispositioned to make constructive assumptions.

Deficiency Assumptions Versus Constructive Assumptions

It seems that pessimists rarely consider themselves pessimists. "I'm a REALIST!" they say emphatically. After so many years of teaching, I realized that realism wasn't working for me. What I needed was a nearly idiotic optimism. I needed to believe that everyone was

trying his or her best all the time. When I assumed this, I ceased to blame others, and I began to move more efficiently toward solutions. Here are some examples of deficiency assumptions that I have made in the past. (You should judge me because I was judging everyone else.)

“My student did not do his best work.”

“My class did not even try on this assignment.”

“The parents of this kid must be terrible.”

“That teacher is not working as hard as he should be.”

“The principals are clearly doing nothing to solve this problem.”

In my defense, and in defense of all humanoids who have dedicated their lives to enhancing the learning of others, these are natural thoughts. But they are not thoughts that lead immediately to positive change. A memorable example of the detrimental impact of a deficiency assumption occurred in a recent conversation I heard in the teachers’ workroom. Here’s how it went:

Teacher 1: Are your students able to write an expository essay?

Teacher 2: They struggle with organizing their ideas.

Teacher 1: The papers I got were so bad. I just gave them back to [the students] today and said that this work is not meeting standards for college-readiness.

Teacher 1: What happened next?

Teacher 1: They just didn’t care. They just wanted to get on their phones.

Teacher 2: Yeah. Sometimes if you go in with that, the students will just shut down on you.

The first teacher had made some deficiency assumptions; she thought that she had made them based on evidence. The first deficiency assumption was that the students did not try on the papers. The second was that the students didn’t care. The third was that student didn’t care about anything but their phones. Here are some better assumptions and where they could lead:

Deficiency Assumptions	Constructive Assumptions
The students did not try on the papers.	The students tried, but they did not succeed. I need to provide better instruction based on where they are now.
These students don’t care.	These students care, but they don’t know the right questions to ask. I need to probe for more information about their knowledge and skill level.
These students don’t care about anything but their phones.	These students care, but they are distracted by and/or reaching for their phones to avoid the problems that they are experiencing. I need to engage students through their devices to get them to learn.

I call the assumptions on the right side of the chart Constructive Assumptions. They are positive statements that assume the best. When these positive assumptions do not match up with the outcome, the terrible papers, then it is up to the educator to move forward immediately.



At this point, you may be thinking that there *really are* times when students do not try, and that there *really are* times when teachers are not trying their best, and that there *really are* times that administrators are doing nothing about the problem. That may be true, but does pointing out the reality help? At one time, I believed that it did. I felt that students who struggled needed a reality check. They needed to recognize that they needed to work harder. They would then motivate themselves and improve. That a frank one-on-one conversation about how they needed to try harder would push them to success. This belief was based on personal experience. In my home, the assumption was never that I did my best, but that I could do better. The tacit belief was that by not acknowledging a successful performance, I would be dissatisfied and this would motivate me to move forward. While this approach might work for some children sometimes, I believe that it is not the best way to move forward.

Deficiency assumptions are counterproductive and educe negative perceptions. The one-on-one conversations that I had with students that started with “You didn’t seem to be trying on the test” rarely turned out well. By the time a struggling reader is in the tenth grade and still reading on a third-grade level, she needs more than a pep talk. I had to assume that this reader was doing her best—the burden was on ME to come up with a different way to build confidence and motivation. Starting a conversation with a student by pointing out that she didn’t do her best is not a great starting place for trust and growth. It comes out as an accusation, puts a child on the defensive, and positions both the student and the teacher at odds.

Learning to First Assume the Best

I didn’t experience one specific moment when I understood the futility of deficiency assumptions. Optimism did not come naturally to me as a person and as a critical thinker. Rather, I observed these constructive behaviors in excellent educators.

First, during my graduate-level courses, I had a professor who was an expert at providing trenchant feedback, but she always tempered these criticisms with several positive comments throughout the paper that she scored. It was a joke among my classmates that we received papers that stated, “Very Good! B+.” We marveled at how she could make us feel so great about what we formally considered mediocre scores. The way that she did it was by coming first with our strengths. Here is an example of how I changed my assumption.

Deficiency Assumption	Constructive Assumption
I'm not doing my best. (AKA: The grade of B+ is not very good.)	The grade of B+ is the best that I could do on that last assignment; I can find ways to improve my work.

Another outstanding educator who helped me improve my ability to motivate students through feedback was the district skills specialist who helped with writing conferences around the time of the STAAR End-of-Course (EOC) exam. She always started by asking the student what he or she did well. How interesting that almost every time, the student would instead point to his or her own area of need. Starting with negative assumptions or observations is not necessary for moving forward in many instances!

Deficiency Assumption	Constructive Assumption
Students need to have everything that they did wrong pointed out before they can move forward. (AKA: This essay is unreadable.)	By focusing on strengths, students can become motivated to target and improve areas of need independently.

A third exceptional educator who helped me to make positive assumptions was the academic dean for whom I served as a team leader and classroom teacher. After the STAAR EOC results were posted, of all campuses in the district, ours were the lowest. I went to my dean in tears. I was disappointed with myself and angry with my colleagues. When I took on the role of tenth grade leader in our present age of accountability to state and national standards, my focus widened to encompass not only my own practice but that of my team members as well. I liked that collecting and analyzing data kept me honest about *my* performance, but data meetings and holding team members accountable were hard to navigate.

When the terrible scores came in, I recounted some team members’ lack of effort and marched down to the dean’s office. I wanted to see heads roll. I even felt that I should be punished for being a bad teacher. Rather than pointing out my shortcomings or taking my side against my peers, he said that he had already lined up professional development sessions for next semester. He was neither angry nor disappointed. He viewed the scores as the best we could do at that time. Although I couldn’t create the constructive assumptions at that moment of despair, these are the ones that he must have known, and that I was able to understand almost 10 years down the line:

Deficiency Assumption	Constructive Assumption
I'm not being the best teacher I can be. (AKA: I taught that all year and they still don't get it.)	I've been teaching my hardest, and I will find creative ways to be more effective with these learners.
My team members require punitive measures in order to improve. (AKA: It's a data meeting; where's your data?)	My team member would benefit from mentoring and professional development.

Putting the Burden on Ourselves

This was not an epiphany moment. It took me years to realize the lessons that I learned over time. I use my teacher voice to share them now with the clarity of hindsight. Cultivating an idiotic optimism helps me move forward every day—caring for my students, my colleagues, and myself in ways that avoid blame and foster growth. This optimism may seem like mumbo jumbo—the glass is half-full, that kind of thing. But we cannot continue to bear the brunt of deficiency assumptions. Catch yourself, understand that these negative feelings are normal, then flip your view. Try out the opposite assumption and determine what you can do in order to actualize the reality you desire. Assume the best: Your students want to learn; your peers want to be successful; you are doing the right things. It is possible to make progress in a world of expectations and standards that feel impossible to achieve. If we, as educators, do not call attention to the ways that we form and make decisions based on tacit assumptions, then we stand to lose quite a bit.