

Turning Toward Asset-Based Pedagogies for Multilingual Learners

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*“Learning in school may be facilitated if the out-of-school culture practices of students are viewed as resources, tools, or assets”
(National Academies of Sciences, 2018, p. 140).*

In the early 20th century, educational theorists such as John Dewey (1938) and Maria Montessori (2013) urged educators to move from teacher-centered to learner-centered learning. Dewey emphasized inquiry instruction, based on children’s interest—thus placing the child, not the curriculum, at the center of schooling. Similarly, Maria Montessori called for instruction that involved child-led activities, with teachers designing curriculum based on careful observation of students’ learning. The idea that many of these educators shared was that education should focus on what children bring in order to prepare them to actively engage in society.

Learner-centered education has been particularly relevant in early childhood education. Over time, the concept of learner-centered education has taken a back seat as educational reforms such as No Child Left Behind introduced an accountability system based primarily on standards and test scores. According to Darling-Hammond (2007), the consequences of No Child Left Behind included “a narrow curriculum, focused on the low-level skills generally reflected on high-stakes tests; inappropriate assessment of English language learners and students with special needs; and strong incentives to exclude low-scoring students from school” (p. 245). This focus, in turn, produced an outlook on student progress based solely on academic achievement. Broadly speaking, high-achieving students were those who scored well on standardized tests. “At-risk” students were those who scored poorly and, in general, many minoritized students fell into this category (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997).

Educators today are witnessing a paradigm shift in thinking about the education of students of color. No longer do the labels “at risk” or “low achieving” accurately describe or do justice to the educational reality of minoritized students. The page has been turned, and a different, more embracing perspective has emerged, revealing the many strengths that multilingual/multicultural students bring to school. In today’s world of cultural and linguistic diversity, educators can turn away from a deficit perspective with a new view towards the benefits of multilingualism and a positive orientation toward the language and culture students bring to school.

For example, the National Academies of Sciences (2018) report, *How People Learn II*, concluded that “effective instruction depends on understanding the complex interplay among learners’ prior knowledge, experiences, motivation, interests, and language and cognitive skills; educators’ own experiences and cultural influences; and the cultural, social cognitive, and emotional characteristics of the learning environment” (p. 160). It further stated that “learning in school may be facilitated if the out-of-school cultural practices of students are viewed as resources, tools, or assets” (p. 140). The report described how connecting students to their community funds of knowledge and creating “a third space” between students and teachers were two examples of an asset-based approach to instruction.

It is an infusion into culturally sustaining pedagogy that displaces the deficit model of teaching approaches that spans years and years in the history of education in the United States (Paris & Alim, 2014).

There are several perspectives on “a third space.” Perhaps the most familiar is positioning the third space as a way to build bridges from community knowledge and discourses that are often marginalized in school settings to the learning of conventional academic knowledges and discourses. According to Moje et al. (2004), “The ‘third space’ merges the ‘first space’ of people’s home, community and peer networks with the ‘second space’ of the discourses they encounter in more formalized institutions such as work, school or church” (p. 41).

In the decades that Gutiérrez has studied the third space, she emphasized that classrooms are the places where people attempt to make sense of their identity and that the diversity students bring is an asset. In studying Mrs. Rivera’s classroom for 3 years, Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, and Tejeda (1999) emphasized that diversity and conflict became catalysts for curricular change and individual learning. She noted that “acceptance and use of diverse, alternative texts and codes, ways of participating, sharing expertise and mediating literacy learning were part of the normative practice of this community of learners. Diversity in this context was a resource” (p. 291).

In the last 30 years, we have seen a growing literature coupled with research that provides an alternative perspective on the theories and practices for historically marginalized youth. Ladson-Billings’ (1995) conception of culturally relevant pedagogy, the funds of knowledge research by Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992), and Paris’ (2012) culturally sustaining pedagogy provide a new frame for educating students of color. Collectively, these practices and theories are known as *asset-based pedagogies* in which students’ cultural frames of reference and funds of knowledge are viewed as strengths and are drawn upon in the learning process. Much like learner-centered instruction, the focus of ABP is the student.

Moving away from a deficit model of teaching to an asset-based model requires an alternative definition of students’ cultural wealth. The asset-based approach in language pedagogy is nested within sociocultural theories of language learning, which promote the view that language learning is a

social process in which culturally and historically situated participants engage in culturally valued activities, using cultural tools.

This commentary reviews the fundamental components of Asset Based Pedagogy and provides two examples of lessons based on the linguistic, familial, and social concepts of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2006).

Asset-Based Pedagogy

An asset-based approach to teaching requires that educators abandon a focus on the perceived limitations and weaknesses in students and expand their understanding of the strengths, assets, and funds of knowledge that students and their families possess. This requires getting to know the complexity of the multilingual student and community and the values and aspirations that multilingual parents have for their children. Asset Based Pedagogy views the diversity that students bring to the classroom, including culture, language, ableism, socio-economic status, immigration status, and sexuality, as characteristics that add value and strength to classrooms and communities (California Department of Education, 2021). Rather than attempting to ignore this diversity, Asset Based Pedagogy requires viewing student in a new light, recognizing that these characteristics can be a catalyst for learning.



Teachers are crucial to the implementation of an asset-based approach that values the strengths of students' identities, language, and culture. In order to initiate an asset-based approach, teachers must question the current standardized curriculum, which privileges the dominant group, and work to transform it so that it centers around the resources that children bring to school. Building a curriculum that reflects the

resources that children bring to school is a transformative idea because the standardized curriculum and state standards hardly ever include the lived experiences of minoritized students. Specifically, with regard to literacy instruction, the standardized curriculum values the ways of knowing of a Eurocentric, English-dominant, middle-class perspective. Especially when it comes to instructional materials, picture books are not representative of the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students. Flores and Springer (2021) emphasized: "As educators, we advocate for literacy classrooms in which the language, practices, and resources of students and families are central to our collective learning of what it means to be a reader, writer and storyteller" (p. 312).

The asset-based approach requires teachers to incorporate students' cultural experiences at home and in the community into daily activities, to use cultural artifacts and community resources

throughout any lesson or unit, to use culturally relevant examples and analogies drawn from students' lives, and to consider instructional topics from the perspectives of multiple cultures (García & Ozturk, 2019). Additionally, teachers need to be aware of the language diversity existing in the school community, that is, understand multiple students' language repertoires. This requires an reexamination of the Eurocentric English-dominant middle-class ways of knowing that have displaced the linguistic practices and ways of knowing of families and communities of color (Paris, 2012).

López (2017) identified three Asset Based Competencies needed to prepare teachers for these contexts:

- **Critical cultural awareness.** In order to appreciate community cultural wealth, teachers need to consider students' cultural knowledge that is not typically validated in school settings. Accordingly, this awareness encompasses teachers' knowledge about how to access and validate students' prior knowledge in genuine ways that consider students' culture as assets.
- **Cultural content integration.** Cultural content integration requires that teachers possess cultural knowledge to determine "what information should be included in the curriculum, how it should be integrated into the existing curriculum, and its location within the curriculum" (Banks, 1993, p. 8). ABPs require that teachers incorporate students' culture into the curriculum to affirm "the legitimacy of cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum" (Gay, 2000, p. 29).
- **Pedagogical language knowledge.** Pedagogical language knowledge refers to knowledge of language that is directly related to disciplinary teaching and learning and that is situated in the particular as well as multiple learning contexts in which learning takes place. It is the link between cultural knowledge and cultural content. As Darder (2012) pointed out, "It is critical that educators recognize the role language plays as one of the most powerful transmitters of culture, and as such, its central role to both intellectual formation and the survival of subordinate cultural populations" (p. 36).



Faltis and Valdés (2016) stressed the importance of pedagogical language knowledge. It entails:

- Being aware of the role of language as a medium for learning in all tasks. Such a practice validates the feelings, thoughts, and actions from both the teachers' and students' perspectives, thus acknowledging multiple language varieties.

- Developing an understanding of the varied ways that language is used in specific content areas.
- Using instructional scaffolding strategies that are differentiated according to student proficiency level and language strengths.
- Focusing on students' use of language for meaning-making, interpretation of talk and text, and performance using newly learned language to show understanding of academic content.

These three core competencies—critical awareness of cultural knowledge, cultural content integration, and pedagogical language knowledge—are key to implementing Asset Based Pedagogy.

Community Cultural Wealth

An important cornerstone of ABP is to identify and rely upon community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2006). Community cultural wealth is a concept that challenges the deficit-based views of children of color and asserts that there are several types of community cultural wealth that have been overlooked in the traditional curriculum. Yosso (2006) identified six components of community cultural wealth:

1. **Aspirational capital** is “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future even in the face of barriers,” nurturing a culture of possibility.
2. **Linguistic capital** is reflected in language styles, language blends, trades, oral narratives, and heritage-based literature, folktales, proverbs, songs, and wisdom, developed from being raised in multilingual homes.
3. **Familial capital** consists of the cultural knowledge drawn from families and the deep commitment to extended family and communities.
4. **Social capital** is gained through community, familial, and other networks of people that support and teach students as they move through the world (Flores & Springer, 2021).
5. **Resistant capital** refers to the knowledges and skills cultivated through behavior that challenges inequality. A parent who questions a student’s program placement, who knows how to advocate for and lodge a complaint or make a recommendation, displays resistant capital.
6. **Navigational capital** refers to the skills of maneuvering through and between social institutions (Yosso, 2006). A student with the ability to translate documents for the family, bridging health providers and family, demonstrates navigational capital.

The infusion of community cultural wealth into ABP can displace deficit models of teaching.

Examples of Asset-Based Pedagogy

Two examples of Asset Based Pedagogy that incorporate teachers' critical awareness of cultural knowledge, cultural content integration, and pedagogical language knowledge are provided below, one at the elementary level and the other at the secondary level.

Developing Literacy Skills in Elementary Classrooms with Latinx Students

Learning started with the voices and experiences of parents through the invitation to share cuentos and personal histories that highlighted community cultural wealth.

Flores and Springer (2021) take us into Sandra's third-grade classroom where the students are focused on a folktales and legends unit as required by state standards. The authors acknowledge that the resources to teach folktales and legends are primarily Eurocentric and the resources (e.g., picture books) that are provided as models for teaching folktales and legends mainly focus on the dominant culture and are not representative of the knowledge and traditions of Sandra's students. "The majority of Sandra's students come from Latinx families, and folktales and legends are the oral stories that are shared at family gatherings and at bedtime by parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents" (p. 316) These stories point to a rich storytelling tradition as a valuable form of linguistic capital.

To begin, Sandra makes this unit meaningful by inviting parents to share their *cuentos* and personal histories. In this instance, Sandra engages her cultural knowledge, by confirming the linguistic capital of her students' families.

The students spend time sharing, comparing and contrasting legends from their communities, including different regions of Mexico and other Latin American countries. In addition to the *cuentos* from home, Sandra has the students read picture books about legends and folktales from around the world. She notes that these resources are difficult to find, especially in languages other than English (Flores & Springer, 2021).

In the next phase of the unit, Sandra uses these folktales from home to teach her students about the features of the genre. Using graphic organizers, Sandra scaffolds the literary features of *cuentos*/legends. As students explore their connection to the *cuento*, their appreciation for the importance of the story in the community grows and supports them in their writing process. The unit concludes with students publishing family stories to create a class book that will become part of the classroom library.

Sandra integrated home and community knowledge in ways that pushed against traditional approaches to involvement and engagement. Her knowledge of the community informed the way she elicited parental participation. Parents could be engaged and were engaged, without having to physically come to school, and gained an understanding of the curriculum and teaching taking place

during the school day. Her knowledge of community linguistic capital was foundational to the development of the unit on folk stories and legends. Her engagement of students to actively produce an authentic book of folk stories recognized the contribution of students and families.

Ethnic Studies with Secondary Students

An example of ABP at the secondary level is provided by the ethnic studies curriculum. Most ethnic studies curricula include the components of community cultural wealth. Sleeter (2011) documented the benefits of ethnic studies programs, which include (1) probing meanings of collective or communal identities that people hold; (2) studying one's community's creative and intellectual productions, both historical and contemporary; and (3) examining the historical construction of race and institutional racism, how people navigate racism, and struggles for liberation.

“My classroom stories and my own family stories are the theories that I draw upon in my research as I write alongside young Latinas and help prepare teachers to create spaces that center voices and stories as powerful resources for writing” (Acosta, 2014, p. 69).

There has been an increase of scholarship indicating that critical ethnic studies courses lead to increased academic performance, especially among low-income minoritized youth (Cabrera et al., 2014). This has resulted in an increase in the number of school districts implementing ethnic studies courses and requiring them for graduation (e.g., Los Angeles Unified, San Francisco Unified, Seattle Public Schools, and Portland Public Schools) (Cabrera et al., 2014).

Dee and Penner (2017) identified features of ethnic studies courses that are very similar to the pedagogy Sandra used with her elementary students. The first similarity is that the content affirms students' cultural identities and draws from their experiences and funds of knowledge. The second feature is that the classroom organization is student centered and promotes student engagement. Finally, the coursework guides students in exploring their own identities by engaging with their community.

Much has been written about the Mexican American studies course that was developed, implemented, and then banned in the Tucson Unified School District (Cammarota & Romero, 2009). Despite the fact that quantitative data confirmed that student achievement improved as a result of participation in at least one such course, the entire program was eliminated.

We turn now to Curtis Acosta, a teacher in the Tucson Unified School District, who discussed how he developed his High School Latin@ Literature Class, which was part of the Mexican American studies program. “In the effort to build a class where both the pedagogy and curriculum reflected the issues, identities and lived experiences of my students, I had to step outside of the normalized and

standardized curriculum. There are simply no district-adopted textbooks that can reaffirm the lives of persecuted and marginalized youth or attempt to create a sense of community” (Acosta, 2014).

“I intentionally created educational experiences that provided spaces and time for students to reflect upon their world through the lens of the literature we studied in class. This practice, which was based upon indigenous epistemologies from our local community and cultural context, provided the foundation to build, not only an authentic classroom curriculum and climate where the students could analyze the experiences in their world, but also it immediately disrupted traditional school hierarchy through the organic injection of student voice as the initial step toward the rigorous study of literature.”

One book that Acosta introduced was *Woman Hollering Creek* by Sandra Cisneros (1991). He called on students both to use their experience watching *telenovelas* with their *abuelitas* and to discuss their reaction to discriminatory themes and messages in the episodes. From this initial review, literary analysis, class projects, and research papers evolved. “Not only were the students scrutinizing the societal injustices found in the literature, but they were also using that lens to examine their own lived experiences and building an academic critique that escapes merely the anecdotal level” (Acosta, 2014, p. 9).

By using linguistic, cultural, and social capital already present in Chican@ and Latin@ families and neighborhoods as a basis for education models that are not only more relevant and appropriate to the community, but also academically rigorous, Chican@ and Latin@ students will have a more authentic educational experience and be more likely to develop a positive ethos toward school and lifelong academic identity (Gonzalez et al., 2005; Yosso, 2006).

Thus, Asset Based Pedagogy both in elementary and secondary settings has at its core the recognition of community cultural wealth as a basis for content and pedagogy. This, in turn, is facilitated through teachers’ critical awareness of cultural knowledge and cultural content integration. Encircling this content is pedagogical language knowledge that accepts the many variations of student language.

Conclusion

The well-being of this diverse nation will depend upon how the strengths and assets of multilingual communities are channeled to address the future. Educators are challenged to turn away from the deficit labeling of students to embrace ABP.

Asset Based Pedagogies offer multilingual students an opportunity for a more equitable and accessible educational future. The diversity in this country is a resource, not a problem; a strength, not a weakness; and an asset, not a liability or threat to our “Americanness” (García & Ozturk, 2019).

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About CAL

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