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Asset-based Teaching; Uncover, Cultivate, and Empower Students' Uniqueness

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How frequently do we consider what knowledge base the children have before they come to school? Have we ever thought about relying upon those to inform our instructional planning and assessments? Do we know their personal interests, cultural influences, lived experiences, and subject-matter background knowledge?

This article reviews the application of the asset-based approach and guide you through using it with immediately applicable strategies. Each of these strategies will guide you to cultivate and enhance your students' unique skills and abilities, and help you navigate your approach to teaching and learning in an innovative manner. As you read through the examples that follow, think about how your new approach will improve the culture of your classroom.

Terminology Reflecting an Asset-Based Approach

When working with diverse learners, it may be effective to reflect on how diverse learners from different cultures and languages are labeled. Consider the term *English language learner* (ELL). Upon close examination, the term could connote a deficiency in the learner. It conveys a message that the learner lacks full English language capability. In contrast, Cummins (2015), suggested the term “*Students who speak English as an additional language* (EAL).” When one reads or hears the term, the student is perceived as one who is somewhat literate in one or more languages. Teachers' perception of that particular student's language abilities pivots. They would view the student as having a bank of literary knowledge in their native, second, or third language which could aid them in acquiring English skills. Zoeller and Briceño (2022) further asserted that using other terminology such as *bilingual learners* strengthens and enhances the teachers' pedagogical arsenal in effectively facilitating instruction.

The Asset-Based Approach

Research in teaching and learning in the past 30 years has demonstrated an asset-based approach to classroom instruction can lead to improved outcomes for children from diverse socio-economic, cultural, and geographic settings. The asset-based approach recognizes student diversity as an added benefit to their abilities and capabilities of learning academic content. When thinking about diversity, this should include components such as background knowledge, individual strengths, languages spoken, and personal and cultural values and beliefs. Culturally responsive teaching has been a strategy to incorporate diversity and respect for diversity within school curriculum, classroom management and engagement plans, assessment of learning, and family engagement initiatives (Flint & Jagers, 2021). Essentially, content-based educational opportunities can be framed around the bright young minds entering into the classroom on a daily basis. Particularly, in our post-pandemic world, teachers are addressing student individualities more deeply and more regularly in an attempt to personalize learning experiences for children. This serves to not only extend previously learned knowledge and experiential learning, but also to link new learning to pre-formed memories and known concepts.

Finding an Asset-Based Approach to Design Classroom Instruction

A student's uniqueness is not identified by their talent, such as athletic talent. It is also not being a “gifted” learner. Rather, finding a child's uniqueness is determining what they were born to do; how they are wired for learning and global contributions. How can we unfold each of

these, and understand and foster the individuality in each student? Let's start looking at all of our students as unique and rich with assets to benefit their capacity to learn.

According to Mark Twain, there are, "Two most important days: The day you were born and the day you find out why." The power of this quote lies in an educator's hands. When we approach teaching and learning with a new mindset, of our students' assets *versus* deficits, we can start seeing in each student an opportunity to strengthen their uniqueness (Ferlazzo, 2019); each one becomes valued for what they bring to the classroom *versus* what they are deficient in. Teachers have the power to influence students in finding out how to apply their assets in learning. We can have a part in helping find a student's assets and thereby encouraging and empowering them. This lens replaces looking at a student's deficits. We have an immediate opportunity to embrace a growth mindset as we reflect on student assets as a resource for growth, development, and continuous improvement.

Classroom Strategies for Collaborative Uniqueness Cultivation and Strengthening Social

Skills

In the classroom learning environment, collaborative learning methods can support individual recognition and cultivation of their unique abilities, as well as provide opportunities for each student to work with others as they strengthen their social skills and collaborative abilities. Research on cooperative learning describes outcomes for student learning through individual contributions of ideas and students developing social skills by being responsible for individual and group learning outcomes (Silalahi & Hutaaruk, 2020). Let's look more specifically at five strategies to promote asset-based teaching in the classroom.

Number One: Model

Give praise based on the process, not the product (Ferlazzo, 2019). Instead of stating "I love your drawing," highlight the student's specific skill demonstrated in the process, such as "I love how you planned out your drawing and paid such close attention to each detail." When providing specific feedback in this manner, the students are more equipped to self-reflect upon their abilities and critical thinking skills applied in the learning process.

Number Two: Observe

Make observations on what the student is doing well *versus* what they may be struggling with (Gonzalez, 2021). For instance, rather than stating, "Make sure to use proper writing form for your letters!", you can instead remark, "I appreciate your creativity and persistence!" This may help us strategize our next steps to challenge them in their areas of strength and cultivate unique skills. You may also notice their interactions with others, demonstrating their social-emotional abilities. Furthermore, this provides you an area to coach them on their interpersonal skills, such as empathy, resilience, persistence, and self-discipline.

Number Three: Learn

Be intentional with your conversations (Raish, 2019). Always seek to learn about each student and then share what you learn and converse with them about it. For example, if a student is a good soccer player, you can ask them how practice is going and what they have been

working on to improve. You can use soccer references to make connections to concepts in their learning, making it individually relevant. This is a win-win because now the student becomes more articulate and self-aware as you gain details about them.

Number Four: Plan And Incorporate

You can now incorporate any combination of your students' assets into your lesson plans, making the atmosphere of your classroom engaging and real! One way you can capitalize on students' interests is to implement project-based learning. For example, one teacher in Arizona implemented a project called the Independent Research Project (IRP); however, it can be adapted for any grade level. The purpose of this is to improve students' research skills and prepare them to be critical thinkers. Also, as a culminating event, they present their project at a large event at the end of the year. It involves heart, head, hands, and mouth. *Heart*: First step is to choose a topic such as *What's your passion? What makes you Excited? Mad? Interested? Motivated?* Next, *Head*: the research piece begins with *Let's learn all you can about it*. From there, *Hands*, which go to work and do something with their knowledge to make a difference with service to the community. Finally, *Mouth*: they present and persuade others in a culminating celebratory event to family and community. Overall, the goal of a class should be for students to walk away with the love of learning, which means being more curious, risk taking, and, of course, reflective in their learning.

Number Five: Continuously Assess

As you continue to identify student strengths, you will be able to be more intentional with your teaching. You will perform serendipitously with a culturally responsive classroom (Harper, 2020); it will be a warm, trusting environment where student differences are celebrated and assets are highlighted. Your students will feel cared about. Additionally, your students are going to feel that they own their learning, because they see their interests are part of the learning. Cemented information will be gained because we remember what we enjoy doing - talk about empowerment!

Conclusion

When we consider the assets students bring to our individual classrooms, our teaching becomes more personalized and relevant to their learning needs. By implementing these teaching practices, we are uncovering, cultivating, and empowering their unique abilities. Ultimately, we want our students to be able to apply their knowledge, skills, and abilities in improving their lives and enable them to make contributions to be productive and contributing members of society.

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