

# Teaching from an Asset-Based Perspective: The Key to Student Success

by Natalie Olague—Program Coordinator and Patrick Werito—  
Coordinator of Tribal Initiatives, DLeNM

## *Teachers working with English learners and students with diverse backgrounds*

Contextualized Learning for Access, Validation, Equity and Success (CLAVES™) is an instructional framework developed by DLeNM that provides educational stakeholders with the professional learning needed to create an environment of differentiated, inclusive, and validating instruction in schools that serve culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, with specific emphasis on English learners (ELs). The key beliefs that serve as the foundation of CLAVES™ are that English learners

- ❑ deserve equitable access to content and language development, and
- ❑ have linguistic and cultural assets that should be validated and built upon in all aspects of their school community.

As we have worked with schools throughout the country implementing CLAVES™, it has become increasingly clear that these key, asset-based beliefs are essential to the success of CLD students. Therefore, the essential question becomes: “Do teachers have and use an asset lens when working with their CLD students?” In our work with teachers in a variety of contexts, we have found that any professional learning for teachers focused specifically on English language development (e.g., planning language objectives, presenting strategies and activities that develop both language and content) is less effective if teachers do not engage their CLD students from an asset lens. Children are less inclined to be motivated and to participate enthusiastically and fully if the message they receive from their school administrators and teachers is that their experiences, behaviors, languages, and traditions are problems to be fixed.

In our efforts to answer this essential question, we have designed professional development activities that guide teachers to reflect on the lens they use as they work with their English learners. It is our belief that deep self-reflection will move the entire school forward in serving their CLD students with an asset lens.

After studying these results and reflecting deeply on the many school communities with which we engage, we have come to believe that critical cultural behaviors in which teachers transform their lens from one which focuses on students’ deficits toward one which focuses on the experiences and strengths they bring to the classroom is essential in order for culturally and linguistically different students to achieve success in school. We once believed that structural change alone would achieve this goal—a dual language program could be implemented and teachers could receive professional development in sheltered or contextualized strategies. While those actions and activities are important and necessary to support our students, it is the cultural change in educators’ perspectives that will ensure that schools and classrooms support and nurture the cultural and linguistic assets their students bring with them. The purpose of this article is to present some results of a self-reflection activity, serving as qualitative indicators from hypothetical schools (compilations of schools that we have recently worked with) to provide a basis for engaging the DL community in this critical dialogue.

## *What does it mean to have an asset-based approach or asset lens?*

An asset-based approach to education values all students for what they bring to the classroom, as opposed to what they may be deficit in. Sometimes when schools focus on family and community involvement, they come from the perspective that the community needs to be “saved”—their experiences, attitudes, and behaviors must be changed in order for their children to succeed in school. Suggestions that parents speak only English to their children instead of their native language, statements that conclude that students don’t want to learn English or that it is part of their culture to be unmotivated in school all speak to a deficit lens.

An asset-based approach is when every community is seen as having strengths and potential. Statements like, “This student comes from a deep storytelling tradition. I can motivate him to read by introducing this short story orally before we start

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to read,” or “My students who come from a more rural background can expand the whole class’ understanding of what the character in our book’s life was like,” reflect an asset lens.

*Are cultural responsiveness, cultural relevancy, cultural awareness, and cultural sensitivity all terms that mean the same thing or does each refer to something different?*

“In order to reach students, we have to know what they know – not just what they don’t know. We need to see them – and have them see themselves as capable learners who can learn and do anything.” (Turk, 2018).

Seeing students through an asset-based lens is foundational to culturally responsive teaching, a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students’ cultural references in **all** aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994). It is also the basis for culturally relevant pedagogy which focuses on ensuring students engage in academically rigorous curriculum and learning, more fully understand and feel affirmed in their identities and experiences, and are equipped and empowered to identify and dismantle structural inequities—positioning them to transform society (Escudero, 2019). Cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity are very similar to having an asset lens but include the idea that educators must have a baseline of understanding of cultural elements outside of their own (Mercer, 2018), especially those intangible elements of deep culture (e.g., beliefs, values, norms). Understanding the cultural elements of an Indigenous community may begin with recognizing how it has been impacted by the ideologies of manifest destiny which have suppressed the community’s norms and values. Recognizing and affirming diverse community norms and values as assets begins to validate the students’

and community’s cultural identity. Sociocultural competency, the third pillar of dual language education, underscores the importance of having an equitable lens and cultural sensitivity toward students, their families, and their communities (Howard, et al, 2019).

*Do teachers have/use asset lens when working with students?*

The question “Do teachers have and use an asset lens when working with their CLD students?” logically leads to the question, “How do you know if you have an asset lens?” Most teachers, especially those who teach CLD students, enthusiastically claim to have an asset lens. But sometimes in a day-to-day climate that puts a high emphasis on academic achievement at all costs and affects teachers’ evaluation and salaries, it is easy for teachers to lose sight of the asset lens and succumb/contribute to the built-in biases inherent in education. We designed an activity as part of our CLAVES™ training in which we asked participants to answer the question, “Who are your language learners?” We used a Paper Chat protocol during which participants in small groups discussed this question in writing only. The members of the small group shared a single piece of paper on which they wrote their responses. They were encouraged to comment on, annotate, and/or expand on each other’s thinking while they wrote and then discussed orally. Below are the results of this activity from two “hypothetical” schools.

**Who are your language learners?**

Hypothetical School #1	Hypothetical School #2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊗ Can’t even spell words</li> <li>⊗ Some of them are quiet</li> <li>⊗ Part of their culture to be unmotivated</li> <li>⊗ Need larger base of word knowledge</li> <li>⊗ Make up 40% of our student population but are not reported, 10% reported</li> <li>⊗ Students who are low-level readers and writers</li> <li>⊗ Students for whom English is their first language</li> <li>⊗ Lack of academic language</li> <li>⊗ Students who do not have a lot of practice in fluent speaking and reading</li> <li>⊗ Students whose parents and grandparents speak a language to their children that is not English</li> <li>⊗ Students who have not had much language instruction in the classroom</li> <li>⊗ Energetic</li> <li>⊗ Bright</li> <li>⊗ Athletic</li> <li>⊗ Enthusiastic</li> <li>⊗ Beautiful</li> <li>⊗ Funny</li> <li>⊗ Hispanic</li> <li>⊗ Courageous</li> <li>⊗ Diverse</li> <li>⊗ Loving</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊗ Spanish learners</li> <li>⊗ English learners</li> <li>⊗ Some students come from Spanish- speaking households</li> <li>⊗ Hispanic population</li> <li>⊗ Bilingual learners</li> <li>⊗ Academic language learners</li> <li>⊗ Need scaffolding with new language</li> <li>⊗ Students who are mastering/reaching proficiency in two languages at once</li> <li>⊗ Love technology and elective class – learning computer language, math language, music language</li> <li>⊗ Part of a community - Parents, the whole school community are language learners!</li> <li>⊗ Most of them low-income families</li> <li>⊗ Some newcomers to the state</li> <li>⊗ Bring something new to the classroom</li> <li>⊗ Have their own meaningful experiences</li> <li>⊗ Hard working</li> <li>⊗ Diverse learners/learning types</li> <li>⊗ Good communicators</li> <li>⊗ Unique</li> <li>⊗ Intelligent</li> <li>⊗ Different backgrounds</li> <li>⊗ Confident</li> <li>⊗ Creative</li> <li>⊗ Talented</li> <li>⊗ Teachable</li> </ul>

*An analysis of the responses from two hypothetical schools sets the stage for open, honest conversations.*

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Analyzing the responses from these two hypothetical schools can provide a baseline or a narrative for which lens the teachers from the school are using (asset or deficit). Many of the responses from Hypothetical School #1 seem to indicate that teachers at that school see their students from a deficit perspective: they can't spell, students are low-level readers and writers, students do not have a lot of practice in fluent speaking and writing. It could be argued that some of the responses from Hypothetical School #1 indicate that teachers may also see their students through a more asset-based lens: energetic, bright, athletic, courageous, and loving. While that is an encouraging sign, the responses are unbalanced in favor of a deficit perspective.

Responses from Hypothetical School #2 seem to have a stronger basis for an asset-based school culture: students are mastering two languages at once, bring something new to the classroom, love technology and elective class – learning computer language, math language, music language, are hard-working, confident. Regardless of the interpretation of the responses, this information can be thought of as the school's narrative, an indirect indicator of school culture. The next steps for each of these schools would be to review their responses and have courageous conversations concerning the basis for them. The outcomes of these open, honest conversations would be to challenge personal beliefs and establish new norms and values of the school culture. For example, if Hypothetical School #1 discussed the deficit-lens responses and identified the “why” behind them, they could take the first step in changing the school culture. The goal would be a balanced, realistic look at the students' experience within the context of their classrooms, their relationships with staff, and their academic outcomes.

The work of changing school culture is challenging and complex, but essential. The effort is well worth it because everyone—administrators, educators, students, and their families are then able to contribute to a responsive school culture. As professional development providers, our participants often want instructional strategies they can implement when they return to their classroom. We believe



*The Paper Chat Protocol uses writing and silence as tools to help participants explore a topic in depth.*

that it is far more transformational to the entire school community to do the more difficult work of continuously reflecting on a school culture that may unconsciously influence their practice in a negative way. In future articles for Soleado, we hope to

highlight some of the strategies that have supported our partner schools in this transformation.

## References

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