Equity Dimensions in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Culturally Sustaining Asset-Based Approaches

Keywords: asset-based, diversity, multicultural education, culturally relevant pedagogy

What Is the Topic

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and culturally sustaining asset-based (CSAB) approaches emphasize engaging learners whose experiences and cultures are often marginalized in mainstream educational settings (Ladson-Billings (1994). These two approaches have been proven to effectively leverage students' diverse cultural, linguistic, and experiential backgrounds as valuable assets in curriculum design and teaching methods (Irizarry, 2007). Dimensions of equity within culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally sustaining asset-based approaches encompass principles and practices aimed at ensuring equity and inclusion. This involves recognizing and addressing systemic inequities that affect students' access to resources, opportunities, and educational outcomes based on factors such as race, language, socio-economic status, and other cultural identities. In the context of English learners (ELs), dimensions of equity in culturally relevant pedagogy involve providing ELs with access to materials that reflect their lived experiences and linguistic backgrounds, ensuring that they see themselves represented in the educational content. Culturally sustaining asset-based approaches take equity dimensions further by actively affirming their home languages as valuable resources for learning and promoting bilingualism or multilingualism as strengths. As advocated by Gorski and Swalwell (2015), equity literacy principles can encourage educators and school leaders to commit to a more robust multiculturalism by putting equity, rather than culture, at the center of the diversity conversation. By recognizing and valuing the linguistic and cultural assets that ELs bring to the classroom, educators can create more inclusive and supportive learning environments. Aronson and Laughter (2016) argue that a culturally sustaining asset-based approach is also related to improvements in student motivation, interest in content, ability to engage in content area discourse, student perceptions of their capabilities, and confidence when taking standardized tests.

In this brief, we offer research and evidence-based best practices and strategies to help educators further their understanding of these approaches and better familiarize themselves with the tools needed to practice critical reflection, develop awareness of their own possible biases and create a more culturally responsive curriculum to better support the learning experiences of English learners.

What Is the Evidence Base

Several studies show that when educators acknowledge students' language and cultural backgrounds and integrate aspects of their cultures into teaching, students tend to thrive in school. For instance, Lee (2010) discovered in her review of culturally relevant pedagogy for immigrant children and English learners (ELs) that beyond the match between educator and student backgrounds, what truly mattered was teachers maintaining high expectations for students and having faith in their potential for success. Flint and Jaggers (2021) contend that adopting an asset-based approach empowers educators to more effectively address the needs of English learners. Culturally sustaining asset-based approaches shift away from deficit-based perspectives allowing educators to better tailor instruction and provide equitable opportunities for ELs to thrive academically and linguistically. In a study about the effectiveness of asset-based teaching strategies for elementary English learners, Hecht (2022) demonstrated that asset-based strategies such as culturally responsive teaching and the use of home languages positively impacted student academic growth. The following research-based frameworks have been used to help educators better understand and address the needs of ELs to provide meaningful learning experiences that value their cultural and linguistic diversity.

1. **Multicultural Education**

Multicultural education (Banks, 1994) has been used as a framework that has been proven to help educators better understand and address the experiences and needs of marginalized students, including English learners. This framework encourages educators to recognize the narrow boundaries that have traditionally shaped mainstream knowledge by addressing various aspects of schooling, including classroom structure, curriculum design, and instructional practices. For example, the State of Oregon encourages educators to honor the diversity of their students by including multicultural perspectives in the curriculum, so it reflects the contributions of the State's diverse communities. Banks (1995) identifies five dimensions within this framework:

- Knowledge Construction: Understand the implicit cultural assumptions and perspectives of the discipline they're teaching.
- Content Integration: Use examples, data, and information from a variety of cultures and groups to illustrate key concepts, principles, generalizations, and theories in their courses.
- Prejudice Reduction: Lessen the amount of prejudice within students.
- Equity Pedagogy: Use techniques and methods that facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups.
- Empowering School Culture: Restructure the culture and organization of the school, so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience educational equity and cultural empowerment.

The empirical studies below suggest that principles of this framework can support educators to build a more culturally responsive classroom:

- In this study about the effects of multicultural Education on English learners, findings indicate that schools that implement multicultural education principles in their classrooms positively benefit ELs psychologically, socially, and academically.
- Using multicultural education perspectives, Freire (2020) suggests that when educators deliberately incorporate principles of biculturalism and sociopolitical consciousness, they can make progress toward achieving equitable Dual Language (DL) education goals.

- A study using principles of multicultural education found that a 10-month program for refugee students from Iraq with no prior schooling showed significant improvement in literacy when immersed in a culturally aligned learning environment (Nykiel-Herbert, 2010).

2. **Culturally Responsive and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy Framework**

Educators who engage with culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogy, are tasked with making positive changes across various dimensions of education, including instructional techniques, materials, student-teacher relationships, classroom climate, and self-awareness (Hammond, 2015). Gay (2010) emphasizes the importance of adopting an asset-based view for educators to effectively create a culturally sustaining classroom. The Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Pedagogy Framework holds particular significance for English learners (ELs), who often experience additional barriers due to language and cultural differences. For English learners, culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy offers a pathway to inclusion and academic success. This approach not only facilitates language acquisition but also promotes a positive sense of cultural identity and belonging among ELs. The empirical studies below show how principles of this framework can support educators to foster educational equity and engage in critical teaching reflection practices.
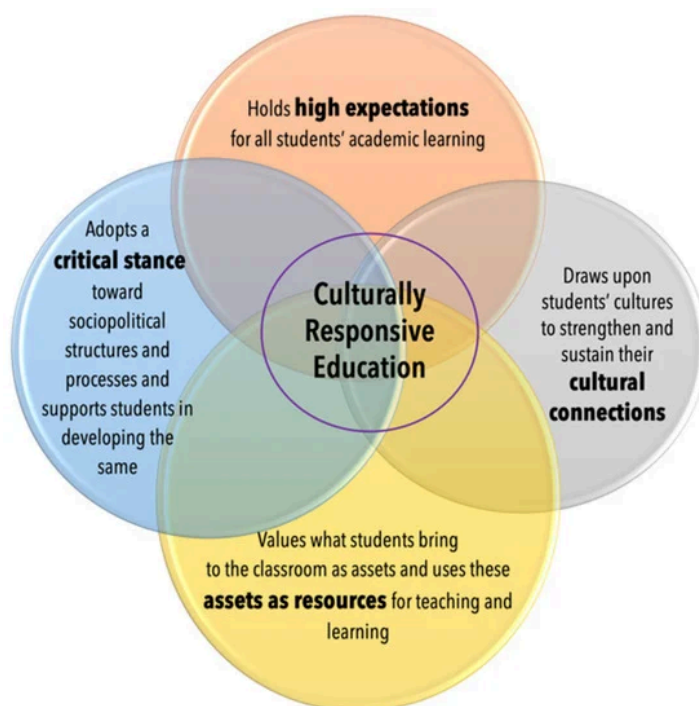
Figure 1. Culturally Responsive Education Framework

- Choi (2013) delves into how an exemplary teacher utilized social studies curriculum and pedagogy to engage ELs in culturally relevant and meaningful learning experiences. As a result, newcomer ELs successfully navigated the mandated social studies curriculum, leading to increased student achievement.
- In the study conducted by Johns (2008), findings suggest a situated approach to professional development, specifically in relation to the prior knowledge and experiences

- of students, enhances educators' abilities to support the literacy learning of emergent multilingual students.
- Savage et al., (2011) evaluated the impact of teacher professional development to instill culturally responsive pedagogies. The results show that the majority of teachers showed evidence of culturally responsive practices and students reported increased engagement and sense of self from teachers who participated in the program.

Summary

Review of relevant literature: Theoretical basis	Review of relevant literature: Support of identified research and practice	Empirical evidence on how it serves students and promotes systemic change
Multicultural education has been proven to help educators better understand and address the experiences and needs of marginalized students, including English learners.	It helps educators address various aspects of schooling, including classroom structure, curriculum design, and instructional practices to make them more culturally responsive (Flint and Jaggers,2021; Freire, 2020; Nykiel-Herbert 2010).	It encourages educators to recognize and address systemic inequalities in education through their teaching approaches and teaching practices. This study shows when educators implement multicultural education principles in their classrooms, it positively benefits ELs psychologically, socially, and academically.
Culturally Responsive and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy foster positive changes across various dimensions of education by helping educators understand inequities in education and find the tools to address such inequities.	It offers educators the knowledge and tools to build a pathway for inclusion and academic success through strategies, materials, student-teacher relationships, classroom climate, and self-awareness (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994).	It promotes a positive sense of cultural identity and belonging in students, particularly those from marginalized groups. Johns (2008) found that a situated approach to professional development grounded in this framework, enhances educators' abilities to support the literacy learning of emergent multilingual students.

Equity Considerations

As educators and school leaders develop and employ culturally responsive pedagogy and culturally sustaining asset-based approaches, we suggest looking into the diversity that English learners represent. For example, Native American English learners and newcomer English learners bring valuable linguistic and cultural assets to the classroom and culturally relevant practices may help to honor their identities and support their learning and academic success. It is vital for educators and school leaders to recognize the impact of systemic inequities on ELs' educational experiences, including racism, stereotypes, and immigration-related challenges. These factors can influence ELs' identity development and sense of belonging in the classroom. Therefore, educators should be aware of their own biases and collaborate with stakeholders to address social-emotional learning challenges and create a supportive school environment for ELs. Additionally, in order to better support newcomer ELs, educators and school leaders should consider employing a proactive approach that capitalizes on their assets and strengths to support their academic and social-emotional success. For example, Native American ELs may experience unique linguistic and cultural barriers, requiring tailored instructional practices that acknowledge their diverse backgrounds and experiences. By adopting an equity-focused lens in culturally responsive pedagogy and culturally sustained asset-based approaches, educators can create more inclusive and supportive learning environments that empower ELs to succeed academically and socially.

> ***Example from the Field***
>
> "Culturally sustaining pedagogy is…more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people—it requires that they support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence."

Considerations for Local Context: Strategy Selection

As we consider the optimal next steps for educators to establish culturally responsive teaching and asset-based practices, a valuable source of information lies in the local context of the district and/or school. In this brief, we refer to local context, as the factors within the community and local school districts that may impact the ways in which educators understand and perceive the socio-cultural aspects of the communities and the needs of ELs and their families. The following questions can also serve as guidelines for educators to navigate and incorporate principles of culturally responsive and asset-based practices in their classrooms:

1. How can I leverage the cultural assets present within and outside the school community?
2. In what ways can I collaborate with colleagues and community members to gain insights and resources that support culturally responsive teaching for English learners?
3. How do my own cultural background and experiences influence my interactions with English learners, and how can I use this awareness to promote ELs academic success?

What Can Educators and School Leaders Do: Strategies for Success

As educators explore ways to learn more culturally responsive and asset-based practices to enrich their instructional approaches, the strategies below serve as examples of potential options rather than definitive recommendations. The resources below can provide educators with a better understanding of how to identify, adapt, and implement strategies according to the demographics and backgrounds of ELs, their families, and local communities.

Strategy 1: Creating a Culturally Responsive Curriculum Workshop

Primary audience: educators and school leaders

Description: This is an interactive activity designed to equip educators with the knowledge and tools necessary to develop and implement curriculum practices that honor the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of English learners. Through a guided exploration of key components and reflective exercises, teachers will engage in critical self-reflection and practical application, fostering a deeper understanding of culturally responsive teaching strategies and asset-based practices. In a study conducted by Mitchell (2015) about how educators participate in a workshop to reflect about their own cultural identity, the results show that the participants became more culturally responsive, expressing intentions to make a difference in the lives of their students.

How to use it?

- Begin by providing an overview of the importance and principles of a culturally responsive curriculum.
- Facilitate a discussion around each of the five components outlined in the activity: awareness of student diversity, classroom setup, contextual learning, building relationships with students, and reflection on current curriculum.
- Encourage other educators to reflect on their own teaching practice and consider how they can integrate each component into their curriculum development process.
- Lead participants through the reflection of practices section, guiding them to evaluate their current approaches and identify areas for growth in culturally responsive teaching.

How is it beneficial? Who benefits from it?

- Educators benefit by gaining practical strategies and reflective tools to develop curriculum practices that better meet the needs of all students, particularly those from marginalized groups.
- Students benefit from a curriculum that respects and celebrates their cultural identities, leading to increased engagement and academic success.
- The school community benefits from a more inclusive and culturally affirming learning environment, promoting equity and diversity in education.

How does it support changes in the systems?

By directly addressing the needs of marginalized students, including English learners.Through the implementation of these practices, educators play a crucial role in driving systemic change towards a more inclusive educational system that uplifts all students, especially those from historically marginalized communities (Bergeron, 2008).

Known or potential cautions? What not to do?
- Avoid superficial or tokenistic approaches to cultural responsiveness, such as simply adding cultural elements to existing curriculum materials without deeper understanding or integration.
- Be mindful of cultural stereotypes and biases, ensuring that teaching practices are grounded in genuine respect and understanding of diverse cultural backgrounds.
- Recognize that implementing a culturally responsive curriculum requires ongoing effort and commitment, and may involve overcoming systemic barriers and resistance to change.

Strategy 2: Embracing Diversity in the Classroom
Primary audience: educators and students
Description: This is an immersive and dynamic class activity designed to celebrate and honor the diverse cultural identities in the classroom. Through a series of engaging presentations that will foster class discussions, students will have the opportunity to learn about cultural diversity, empathy, respect, and appreciation for their own and their peers' cultural and linguistic characteristics. As educators prepare for this activity, we recommend reading this article about asset-based approach to support ELs. This article describes the impact of asset-based pedagogies in elementary classrooms. The results showed that teachers acknowledged the importance of culturally sustaining and asset-based pedagogies in their classrooms as vital approaches to promote well-being, agency and belonging among their students (Flint and Jaggers, 2021).
How to use it?
- Preparation: Teachers kickstart the activity by introducing the concept of cultural diversity and its significance in fostering inclusivity and mutual respect. They guide students in understanding the value of their own cultural backgrounds and encourage them to reflect on what aspects of their heritage they would like to share.
- Planning: Students are given dedicated time to prepare their presentations. This can involve creating visual displays, practicing traditional dances or songs, and preparing storytelling segments.
- Presentation: Each student or group takes center stage to share their cultural assets with their classmates.
- Engagement: Following each presentation, classmates are encouraged to engage in active dialogue and ask respectful questions to deepen their understanding of what they learned from the presentations.

How is it beneficial? Who benefits from it?
Students may experience a profound sense of validation and pride in their cultural and linguistic identities, leading to heightened self-esteem, belonging, and empathy towards others. Educators can gain invaluable insights into the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students and learn how to integrate such cultural assets into their teaching practices (Reyes and Norman, 2021).
How does it support changes in the systems?
It empowers students to become advocates for cultural diversity and inclusion, driving potential positive shifts in classroom dynamics and school climate.

Known or potential cautions? What not to do?
Provide opportunities for students to opt out of sharing personal cultural information if they are uncomfortable, and respect their privacy and boundaries.

Implementation Considerations

As we embark on creating a plan and proceeding with implementation, it is useful to consider topic-specific aspects as well as general factors and guiding questions that can increase the likelihood for successful implementation. We recommend reviewing the Oregon Department of Education Equity Lens as it can serve as a guide to inform the implementation of culturally sustaining asset-based approaches from an equity lens.

The questions below, grounded in best practices to assist educators and school leaders in navigating the process of identifying and integrating strategies aimed at fostering culturally responsive and sustaining asset-based approaches that promote equity, with a particular emphasis on supporting the academic success of English learners (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Choi, 2013). Keep in mind that these questions can be used in a variety of ways, regardless of the cultural or linguistic backgrounds of students. However, for the purposes of this brief, we tailored the following questions about English learners.

1. How am I leveraging culturally responsive and sustaining asset-based approaches to empower English learners and promote equity in my classroom?
2. Are English learners actively engaged in the co-design of curriculum and instructional materials, drawing upon their cultural assets and experiences to enrich the learning process?
3. How am I adapting my teaching methods to accommodate the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of English learners, while also emphasizing their assets and unique contributions to the classroom?
4. How does my own racial, ethnic, and cultural background inform my leadership approach in advocating for equitable practices and resources for English learners across my district or school, with a focus on asset-based approaches?

Local Context

It is important to recognize that schools and school districts may adopt various approaches to initiatives promoting culturally responsive pedagogy and culturally responsive asset-based approaches, which may not always be explicitly labeled as such. These efforts may instead be framed within the contexts of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

When looking at areas of learning or improving culturally responsive pedagogy and culturally responsive asset-based approaches practices, the following resources offered by local education entities could be useful for educators and school leaders:

- [Oregon Department of Education Equity Initiatives](#)
- [Oregon Department of Education Integrated Guidance for Student Success](#) (2025-2027)
- [Culturally Specific After School Learning Program](#)
- [Culturally Affirming Practices](#) (Oregon)

Also consider:

- Geographical Factors:How do the location and size of the district/school impact the practical aspects of the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally sustained asset-based approaches?
- Learning Mode: What considerations are needed based on the learning mode (in person/remote/hybrid/other) prevalent in the local context?
- Duration: How long is the plan designed to last, and what measures can I consider for its continuous effectiveness?
- Reliability: Is the implementation plan reliable and realistic given the local context, and what factors contribute to its sustainability?

Implementation Plan and Process

The following questions can further enhance clarity and provide practical guidance for educators and school leaders as they navigate the implementation process and monitor progress effectively:

- **What is our capacity for implementation?**

Assessing our capacity for implementation involves evaluating our readiness and resources to effectively execute the plan for integrating culturally responsive and sustaining asset-based approaches. This includes appraising our existing infrastructure, personnel expertise, and institutional support within our school and district. Moreover, we may need to conduct surveys to identify areas where additional training or support is required. Additionally, we can leverage existing partnerships with community organizations or seek external funding to bolster our implementation efforts.

- **How are families involved in the implementation of the plan?**

Families are integral to the successful implementation of our plan, particularly concerning EL families, as they provide essential support and insights into their children's needs and experiences. We can organize family workshops and events tailored to address the specific needs of ELs and their families, such as language support sessions or cultural celebrations. By involving families in decision-making processes and seeking their input on curriculum and support services, we ensure that our implementation plan is responsive and prioritizes the cultural and linguistic assets as strong components of the ELs and their families (Gay, 2010; Reyes & Norman, 2021).

- **How will we know if the implementation is successful?**

Recommendations to gauge the effectiveness of implementation include: (a) assessing student outcomes, including academic achievement, language proficiency growth, and social-emotional

development, and (b) tracking improvements in standardized test scores, graduation rates, and English language proficiency levels among English learners. These are just examples of some essential indicators of the effectiveness of our asset-based and equity-focused strategies.

- **What resources do we need to implement the program, plan, or strategies?**

Although funding is generally not required in the implementation of the strategies offered in this brief, we suggest educators and school leaders explore what funding opportunities may be available that could be useful. While funding may not always be readily available within school budgets, educators and school leaders can explore external funding opportunities. For instance, Oregon's Department of Education offers grants and funding opportunities, and organizations like National Association of Secondary School Principals may provide additional financial support. Additionally, fostering financial stewardship and involving District Equity Committees in the budgeting process can help prioritize resources based on student and community needs. Consider reviewing the Oregon Department of Education's Guideline to spending funds responsibly.

- **Are accessibility supports in place?**

Some recommendations include providing accommodations for students with diverse learning needs, including English learners, students with disabilities, and those from low-income backgrounds. Examples of accessibility support can involve offering language assistance services, implementing assistive technology solutions, and providing flexible learning options to accommodate different learning styles. Moreover, removing physical and systemic barriers to access, such as improving facilities' accessibility and offering transportation assistance, can further enhance equity and inclusion in the school.

Learn More

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