

# Empowering English Learners as Assets

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Johanna Even and Mawi Asgedom help us empower English learners through an asset-based mindset

A refugee from Ethiopia has just joined your first-grade class. During the first two weeks, you learn the following about him: 1) He does not know a word of English. 2) He has already been in three fights. 3) He wears the same clothes several days a week. 4) His mother has never been to school and his father is legally blind.

What thoughts do you have about this boy? Do you worry about his future?

Now, consider these additional facts: 1) This boy already speaks two languages, his native Tigrinya and Arabic. 2) He can already add and subtract. 3) He is an excellent soccer player (he played every day in the refugee camp). 4) His parents value education and ensure he arrives at school on time every day.

The young boy in this story is Mawi Asgedom. The first set of facts focus on his deficits, the second on his assets. Because Mawi had enough educators who saw his assets that he was able to recognize and build upon them. Mawi went on to graduate from Harvard and become a bestselling author and founder of Mawi Learning.

### **Where Is Your District on the Scale?**

Mawi was an anomaly in his suburban Illinois school. Like most suburban towns in the early '80s, Wheaton had few English learners in its schools, and only a handful of educators had the opportunity to work with students like Mawi. Fast-forward 30 years, and the demographics have changed dramatically.

When we work with district leaders, they tell us that they believe English learners bring tremendous value to their school communities and that building an asset-based culture is important. Yet when we ask these same district leaders to rate themselves on a scale of one to ten—one meaning the district views English learners as a burden and ten meaning everyone welcomes them and recognizes their potential—most district leaders rate themselves a three or a four. While these administrators want to cultivate an asset-based culture, they do not believe they have successfully built organizations that embrace what English learners bring to their schools and communities.

In this article, we share strategies that all educators can use to shift their thoughts, words, and actions to move those ratings from a three or four to a nine or ten. Readers may wonder, why are we focusing on all educators? Why do we not emphasize the role of ESL teachers, since they have the most direct impact on English learners?

Consider this scenario. Imagine you go on a family vacation to another country. You arrive at the hotel and all of the signs are in a language you do not understand. At the front desk, the receptionist seems irritated that you do not

speak the language. You wait for an assistant to help you with your bags, only to find out that one is not available in this hotel.

When you finally get to your room, you have a completely different experience. The room is comfortable and welcoming. The cleaning staff stops by and welcomes you in their best attempt at English—and they even teach you a few words in their language. Do you ever want to leave your room?

If we rely only on ESL teachers to do this work, our students' experience will be much like this. They will be reluctant to leave their metaphorical rooms to achieve their full potential.

### **Start from the Top: Superintendent and District Leadership**

Let us return to our hotel analogy. You may have visited a hotel chain that gives out warm chocolate-chip cookies upon check-in. These cookies communicate a vision for the brand—one of hospitality and welcome. The decision to invest in cookies for every guest did not come from the hundreds of receptionists who greet guests every day. It most likely came from a senior leader who was building a strategy to operationalize a vision. This strategy, however, likely impacts mindsets and actions of employees at all levels of the organization. It is pretty hard to act grouchy when handing someone a delicious, warm chocolate-chip cookie.

As the senior leader in your district, you set the vision and build the strategy. You also create the conditions under which people collaborate. To truly shift your district from a three to a ten, all staff need to contribute to a shared vision of English learner success. No more silos.

You likely already have a vision of what you hope to achieve on behalf of your students. This probably includes academic achievement, career success, and developing happy, healthy, and productive citizens. Your vision may have been developed when circumstances and your student population were different. As a

leader, you are faced with a choice—raise your current reality toward your vision, or lower your vision toward your new reality (Senge, 1990).

Unfortunately, all too often, leaders lower their vision to adjust to their new reality. The key to raising your reality to meet your vision is to make intentional shifts in mindsets, words, and actions.

As a leader, every word you say and action you take is watched and interpreted by many and can have a tremendous impact. Consider this powerful example: Illinois district 135 has historically had a majority Caucasian population. In recent years, the district has enrolled an increasing number of Arabic-speaking students. On opening day for staff, the school board president and the superintendent acknowledged the changing demographics and highlighted the district's commitment to helping all students succeed. Their message was clear and unwavering. "Our diversity is an asset."

This intentional choice to publicly embrace demographic shifts during perhaps the most important speaking event of the year is powerful culture setting. Although this statement may have carried political risks for both the board president and the superintendent, their willingness to take a stand on behalf of students sent a strong message to the entire district community.

### **The EL Director**

District EL directors are uniquely poised to lead the cultural shifts needed to empower all English learners for success. Unfortunately, all too often, EL directors are viewed as monitors of compliance rather than leaders and vision setters. How can EL directors meet the complex requirements of compliance while developing district-wide asset-based practices?

Here are some examples of what an EL director can say and do to lead the shift to asset-based thinking.

## **The School Leader**

School leaders, much like superintendents, set the vision and the tone in their buildings. With many competing demands on their time, what they choose to focus on communicates a clear message about what they value.

With limited resources such as professional development hours, physical space, stipend money, and extracurricular funding, allocation decisions communicate values and priorities. The school leader, through words and actions, also sets the tone for whether the school community will view English learners through an asset-based or deficit-based lens.

## **The Teacher**

Imagine this scenario. You are waiting for your turn in line at the copier. The teacher in front of you says, "I just got a new student today. She is an EL and she only speaks Arabic. I have worked so hard to get my scores up and now they give me the new EL student." What do you say?

If you respond, "I know. That's really tough. I have three EL students in my class. I will never have the highest scores in the grade," you are essentially affirming the deficit-based view shared by your colleague.

What happens if you respond differently? "I felt that way, too, last month when I got a new EL student. But I am so amazed at all the progress she has made in such a short time. And she has taught me how to say a few words in Arabic. I love having her in my class." With this response, you have shifted the conversation from a level three conversation to a level nine or ten. Teachers have similar opportunity to shift conversations—and, as a result, mindsets—with families and students.

## **A Mindset Shift with Profound Impact**

In our work with school and district leaders, we have seen the tremendous impact of an asset-based approach to English-learner education. An asset-based mindset provides the foundation for empowering practices that shift school culture and accelerate student growth. By changing our perspectives, adjusting our words, and choosing asset-based actions, we can have a remarkable impact on the culture of our schools and the lives of our English learners.

### **References:**

Asgedom, Mawi and Johanna Even, *Empowering English Learners for Classroom Success: 6 Keys to Academic and Social-Emotional Growth*. Chicago: Mawi Learning, 2017.

Senge, Peter M. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1990.

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