Learners First

Dedications

Denise:

For Tim and our kids, who just accept my crazy journeys without question: I'm very grateful for our life, and I'm proud to call you mine.

For my parents, my sisters, my brother, and the rest of our big, beautiful family: Thank you for providing me with a sense of belonging and a home base.

For my village of strong, intelligent, beautiful women (many of whom contributed quotes and vignettes for this book): We are worth it and our voices matter! I appreciate you all more than you know.

For Dr. Keri: Thank you for being you, authentic, passionate, and kind. I love you!

Keri:

For David, my best friend and the other half of my Libra scale, who gives me balance; thank you for loving me every day. I love you beyond!

For my parents, especially Mommy (I am your little engine that could and did), and my brother, my bonus daughter Laila, all the powerful women in my life (aunties, girlfriends, bonus mothers, sisters-in-law, nieces) who inspire me, and the rest of my family (uncles, cousins, and brothers-in-law), too numerous to mention: Thank you for being the best family. I love all of you!

I am surrounded by phenomenally fierce females! This is our journey. Thank you for being supportive.

For Dr. Denise: One of my "She-Roes." I love you! On to the next one!!

Dedicated to the memory of all my ancestors: I am your dreams fulfilled.

Learners First

Purpose and Practicality in Your Early Years of Teaching

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CORWIN

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PUBLISHER'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Dr. Keri Orange-Jones is a middle school assistant principal and adjunct professor at Montclair University and William Paterson University. She has been an educator for twenty-seven years. Keri is also part of the Drew Writing Project and National Writing Project, and a member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority. She has offered her insight as a guest speaker on podcasts and several virtual professional learning communities. She has also published blogs and journal articles and contributed to other publications. She is an advocate for equity and accessibility for all students, regardless of socioeconomic status. Additional research interests include teacher education and evaluation, student assessment, positive school culture and climate, and the importance of representation and diversity in the educational field. She lives in New Jersey with her husband David and her bonus daughter Laila. She takes great pride in being a daughter, sister, niece, aunt, cousin and friend. She is also a foodie, loves to travel, and enjoys beach vacations. You can connect with her on Instagram/Threads @drkcorange.

INTRODUCTION

Education today is an ever-changing journey, and it is critical to continue learning throughout our careers. The resources of the past simply do not address the issues of today and tomorrow. It is important to reframe and reimagine the role of educators to match the diverse needs of learners and their families—as well as the different landscapes of the future. Not only do educators need to have the academic and pedagogical knowledge that is crucial to engage learners in critical thinking and learning, but they must have a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and social contexts of education.

While this book is primarily designed to support educators early in the profession, the reflections and conversations on these topics must be had by educators and stakeholders in all positions and with different levels of experience. This book is designed to encourage activating connections and prior knowledge before learning new concepts (or exploring familiar concepts through a different lens). Each chapter begins with some reflection questions and key vocabulary to understand before reading. Quotes and vignettes from current educators provide context and background perspective to the educational concepts covered. While each chapter addresses a different topic for educators, the common threads of equity, access, respect, and empowerment are laced within every word.

Educators who see themselves as learners engage their students to value questioning, collaboration, and listening over one's lifetime. We designed this book to meet the needs of today's educators with the unique challenges that form the conversations we all must be having. We are two career educators who have served learners, their families, and their teachers through a variety of roles (in a combined total of over 50 years in education!). Throughout our respective educational journeys, we have witnessed shifts in policy, perspectives, strategies, and roles of educators—just to name a few. These experiences inform this guide to what educators need to best meet the needs of the learners and families they serve today.

Denise: Over my career as a public-school teacher, I taught grades K–12 in different educational roles for over twenty-five years. Like Keri, my path in education has taken some unexpected turns, and I am grateful for them. Although I spent much of my career in one district, I did wind up teaching in four different towns over those years—giving me valuable perspectives on the diverse needs of learners in different areas. My work in mentoring new teachers and eventually as an instructional coach led me to taking the leap to working at a university full time as an assistant professor of education. At the university level, I supervise student teachers, and I teach graduate students seeking additional certifications in literacy and language education. It was then that I saw a need for authentic resources to support educators entering our profession. Previous to this project with Keri, I wrote a book for teachers of multilingual learners called *Voices of Newcomers: Experiences of Multilingual Learners.* It was through all these experiences that I realized the value of mentorship and support for *all* educators (novice and veteran!) in ways to keep learning and growing.

Keri: Being in the education profession happened quite by chance. I worked in corporate finance after college graduation and fell into this honorable vocation. As an alternate route teacher, I always looked at education through a different lens, one of innovation and experimentation. Now, after twenty-seven years, I am still excited about teaching our youth. But I am also passionate about guiding educators, especially novice educators, because they need our support. Teacher retention is an area of concern, and my hope is to assist those who desire to stay in the profession. I have mentored novice educators, and I teach in teacher education departments at two universities. In addition, I also guide educators who wish to transition to supervisory and administrative roles. Every chapter in our book will be useful to anyone in this profession. Much of the information included in this book is things that I wish I knew or experienced in my early years. This book is not a passion project. It is our attempt at *paying it forward* and providing support to those who desire it!

As you read this book—whether it is for a course, a mentorship program, or as personal preparation as you enter our profession—please consider the following statements as you dive into each of the concepts and vignettes.

- Our own education (and life!) experiences are valid, and our voice is valuable. Those of the learners and families we serve may be different from our perceptions, but they are no less important. Setting up our own opinions and background as a starting point is a great place to begin as we grow and understand different perspectives. In other words, identifying our own thoughts and experiences before diving into learning about others is crucial in learning about ourselves and others.

- No one knows everything, and being open to learning and listening is crucial at all points in our lives. We don't always have to know all the answers. Admitting we don't know or that we may be wrong is sometimes difficult but can be a key part of our own growth. If educators get to the point that they feel they are the experts and cannot learn from the learners and families they serve—or from their colleagues—there may be little value in teaching for them. The term *lifelong learner* may be a bit overused or cliche, but it is authentically what keeps educators fresh and constantly improving their craft. As you reflect on the chapter addressing professional learning, you will see that this is essential throughout your career.

- Uncomfortable conversations are key to growth. When there are questions or statements that make you feel uneasy or queasy in your stomach, it is time to learn more about this topic. While we are learning, we don't have to always speak, and we don't have to share our thoughts right away—but finding colleagues with whom you can have these safe conversations in which you are all learning and growing may be helpful. If you are asked for your point of view as you are still researching information, it is perfectly acceptable to respond that you are still *listening and learning* as you gather your thoughts. This may be particularly connected to the chapters on being an equity innovator, the *alphabet* acronyms, and learners with diverse needs.

- There are many things that new educators must navigate in their first years, such as evaluations, observations, assessments, and maintaining their own positive social emotional mental health. Keeping this book handy as you confront these benchmarks in your first years may remind you of ways to best maneuver them. While these formalities vary in different states and districts, we share some key tips and tricks to support you in these areas. Remember that these are learning experiences and you may struggle at times—and that is OK. Kindness to yourself as you are learning and listening to the signals of your body are key to your health and progress.

- Instead of a delineated focus on classroom management as many resources have done in the past, we maintain that every topic covered in this book will help build a positive classroom culture and climate. The notion of *management* clearly translates to *control* and a certain role of the educators. While we do not want any classroom or school to be out of control, we acknowledge the importance of establishing structured and empowering strategies that encourage buy-in from all stakeholders in the classroom climate. With a positive climate, behaviors often will demonstrate those feelings as well.

- Days may be great and inspiring, and days may be draining—many times within the same 24 hours. In every chapter of this book, we share reminders and tips to help you thrive and survive. These first years are a lot of trial and error that help build a foundation for a solid career. Ride the highs of those successes while remembering not to sink too far into those lows.

- As you can see, we have taken risks in our careers that started with Day 1 for both of us. While those decisions were definitely not easy, we wouldn't be where we are today if we hadn't stepped out of our comfort zones to try new things.

- Kindness to yourself, compassion to the learners and families you serve, and collegiality with your fellow educators will keep you on the path to staying in this profession—with satisfaction and enthusiasm. This book shares ways that you may strive to understand others and yourself better as an educator to avoid burnout and to foster positive connections with those around you. Remember that you are human and (and your learners) begin fresh every day. The chapters about multilingual learners, avoiding a deficit mindset, and responsive learning remind us all about keeping the perspectives and experiences of the learners and families you serve at the forefront of everything you do.

You'll notice that there are stories and quotes shared by a variety of voices in education. We have novice teachers with under five years of experience who share current ideas of what is helping them find belonging and success in this profession. Veteran teachers reflect on things that they have learned over the years that they wish they knew earlier. Instructional coaches who are in and out of various classrooms daily discuss things that they see that are insightful and exciting. Administrators' perspectives on how to navigate your first years are included as well. Finally, there are some pieces shared by educators who speak from the points of view of family members and the unique points of view that we can appreciate and learn from. As we (Keri and Denise) have had diverse experiences in our journeys, we acknowledge that there are many more to share with you, and we sought to include those voices in this book.

While this book is crafted to have those critical conversations with our novice educators, we appreciate the veteran teachers who are taking their journeys alongside them. We see you, and we hope that this book reminds you of your incredible contributions to the lives you touch. We hope that the conversations you have with your colleagues continue to flourish as we all grow as educators.

Thank you for reading this book and allowing us to take this journey through your first years and beyond with you. We understand the calling that only education has for all of us, and we support you and we believe in you. You make a difference in people's lives daily, and children will look back at their time with you to reflect on things that they learned alongside you. You shape the future.

DANGERS OF A DEFICIT MINDSET

Frontloaded Vocabulary

deficit speech: Language and thinking that classifies a particular group as being inadequate or deficient. This language often targets marginalized groups.

asset-based language: Language that focuses on the strengths, gifts, and talents of individuals and/or groups.

learning loss: The idea that due to a lapse in education due to certain experiences, such as COVID and virtual learning or summer break, students' learning has regressed.

self-efficacy: A person's belief in their ability to complete a task(s) that will influence change.

teacher-efficacy: Teachers' belief in their ability to positively impact students' lives and educational goals. ●

Who remembers *The Little Engine That Could*, by Watty Piper? As a child, it was my favorite book! I still have my copy from my childhood! It is the ultimate example of the power of positive thinking and how positive thinking can inspire achievement. "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can, I think I can." Because the Little Engine believed in its ability, it was able to overcome something thought to be insurmountable simply by repeating a positive affirmation. Imagine how powerful this tool could be if used with students daily.

Think back to March 2020, which was the beginning of many changes to the landscape of education. COVID-19 was the inspirer

of ingenuity as educators formulated innovative ways to instruct our students in the virtual space. It was a difficult time for many. But somehow, our students found a way to be resilient, and they soon found their way back to the traditional classroom environment, which was not so traditional anymore. Things changed; our students changed, but their strength and resilience were apparent. Our students were success stories in so many ways. However, soon discussions about learning loss began to develop, and concerns about our students' academic growth—or lack thereof—began to become more pervasive. Despite being strong in the face of uncertainty during a challenging time, instead of focusing on the positives, the conversations turned toward the negatives. *Learning loss* became the prevalent language used when discussing our students. *Negative* or *deficit speech* became more dominant after the quarantine. Education professionals and other stakeholders began to talk about our students from a lens that was not positive, and we found ourselves reinvigorating the use of deficit thinking in education.

What Is Deficit Thinking?

"Your mindset is your habit of thinking, your mental attitude about life. Attitudes are contagious. You are in a high stakes position where you are shaping minds. If you have a negative outlook on life, you are teaching impressionable minds to do the same."

—Donna, teacher and BOE member, Massachusetts

Deficit-thinking is rooted in biasness that places blame for subpar academic performance on marginalized and disenfranchised student populations (Fergus, 2022). It focuses on perceived shortcomings in certain groups that are cultural, and race based (Fergus, 2022). How many times have you heard a teacher say, "These kids can't learn" or "Nothing works. They just don't get it?" If you reflect on Donna's quote, she makes a valid point about how having a negative outlook can impact the students. However, this is not the first time we have encountered deficit speech. If we look at prior usage of the terminology, we will see that ideology of *learning loss* is preceded by similar deficit speech such as *achievement gap*, *at-risk*, *limited English proficiency*, and *summer decline*, all of which are directed at various cultural and lower socioeconomic groups while ignoring systems as solutions (Diamond et al., 2004; Gorski, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Lehman et al., 2021).

> *"When my son had some difficulties in middle school, he was placed in a self-contained behavioral class to give him the support 'he needed' to find his way again. He knew immediately that the math in this course was way below his level and he asked quickly to leave the room for an inclusion setting—and received a lot of resistance from teachers and administrators. He moved and did well in the class. He then asked to leave the self-contained room for science. The teacher laughed in his face and laughed in my face as well. She said no student from their class has ever been successful in that class because there is so much group work. Well, he moved into the science course and earned a 100 each marking period. When I asked if he succeeded just to spite the people that thought he couldn't do it, he laughed and replied, 'Absolutely!'"*
>
> —Rose, parent

LABELS

> *"I heard all types of educators call students 'low' right in front of them or detail the things they think the student 'can't' do. I think people think they are sharing information that is helpful, but that type of label is never going to benefit a student—whether or not they are there to hear someone say it."*
>
> —Denise, ML educator and author

When one considers ways that we refer to learners, sometimes the labels that we use highlight things about children that are not their strengths. Historically, the names that the field of education has used to identify subgroups of learners have been used to delineate diverse groups from learners who are the "norm."

As educators, we find that labeling students can be problematic because it puts the students in categories that enable the people around them to view them in a singular lens. For example, let's discuss students who are labeled as "gifted." There is an expectation that these students are going to excel regardless of circumstances. But we must remember that our students are still children. Thus, they will have moments when they are not performing well. Should they then be subjected to comments such as "I know you can do better than that" or "You are in these classes for a reason. Do you want to risk not being in gifted classes anymore?" These types of comments don't consider what the underlying issues may be. Is the student struggling and uncertain how to ask for assistance? Are there issues at home? Teachers who fall into this trap can begin to adopt a negative mindset that can be potentially dangerous to the student if they don't know how to verbalize or compartmentalize their thoughts and feelings. No student is safe from a deficit

mindset or deficit-based speech, no matter how they are categorized, as long as educators continue to experience and express negative thoughts about them.

There has been a movement in various areas in education to intentionally move away from negative jargon. Administrators in particular need to challenge all staff to use positive language when describing students. Educators should begin with the positives and then move on to offering assistance and comprehension of what the student needs.

> *"This student is so low."*
>
> *"This student is a behavior kid."*
>
> *"Those parents aren't involved."*
>
> *"I've been told a LOT of really deficit-driven statements like the ones above. And—to be honest—I've also SAID a lot of deficit-driven statements like these as well. It is only within reflective conversations, lots of a-ha moments, and tons of professional growth that I've realized how problematic a lot of these statements are—and now that I know better, I do better. I'm constantly calling myself out for my own language choices. I'm constantly reflecting and becoming more and more aware of my own biases (we all have them!)."*
>
> —Carly, ML/EL specialist, Illinois

Can we give Carly a round of applause?! How many teachers have that moment of self-realization and notice that they use deficit speech often? Teachers are indoctrinated into a culture that is rife with negative speech. Education is a profession where the conversation is often centered around how students are failing, teachers are failing, and how "no child should be left behind." When teachers are blamed for their students' learning deficits, the default language or thought becomes "These children can't learn" or "I give up."

To avoid using deficit speech, it is good to identify language that would be deemed negative. Table 1.1 is a suggested list of language and ideas to avoid when discussing your student population.

Table 1.1

Language to Avoid When Discussing Your Student Population

DEFICIT TERM	WHY IT'S HARMFUL	ASSET-BASED TERM	WHY IT'S BETTER
Clustering: grouping students based on similar learning needs	Reinforces stereotypes and can highlight inequities	Flexible grouping	Focuses on addressing various learning needs
Tracking	Focuses on students with deficits and limits	Student goal setting	Focuses on the positive aspects of student achievement
Ability-grouping	Groupings are focused on deficits rather than strengths	Flexible grouping	Focuses on addressing various learning needs
Intervention kids	Labels and categorizes students based on challenges and deficits	Students receiving support	Reinforces strengths and does not focus on a particular group
Inclusion classroom	Implies that it is not a standard classroom environment	Supportive or diverse learners classroom	Suggest that all learners require support based on diverse learning needs
Inclusion program	Focuses on the disability of the students	Universal support program	Encompasses all students and does not single out one group of students
Inclusion kids	Focuses on the disability of the students	Students receiving support	Suggest that all learners require support based on diverse learning needs
Subgroups	Separates students based on deficits	Collaborative learning groups	Suggests that students work together without the idea of labeling being present

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DEFICIT TERM	WHY IT'S HARMFUL	ASSET-BASED TERM	WHY IT'S BETTER
Monolinguals/ Bilinguals	Can nurture stereotypes	Multilingual learners	Implies that being able to speak multiple languages is a positive skill
At-risk students	Labels students based on deficits and ability	Students needing support	This does not single out a particular group of students
Minority	Implies that a group is lesser than other groups	diverse	Differences are positive
Pull-out	Students are being removed from classroom and singled out based on deficits	Students receiving support	This does not single out a particular group of students; any student can receive support
Push-in	Singles out students in the classroom environment based on deficits	Collaborative teaching	Teachers are working in tandem to support all students without singling out one particular group
Transition or transient students	Suggests that there are deficits due to inconsistency or instability	Newcomers or incoming students	Does not label students based on mobility
Illegals	Implies that students are criminals or not legally in the country	Mixed immigration status	Does not specify the exact status of the student

What a list!! Any language that labels students in a way that can be thought of in a negative sense should be avoided. Changing the mindset may be difficult because as educators, we have been indoctrinated into this thought process. However, if we want to inspire our students, we need to think from an asset-based lens and not from a deficit-based lens. There are ways to create an environment conducive to implementing practices where asset-based speech is the preferred speech when referring to students.

- Create a list of terms that teachers can use when having meetings about students. This list should be used during team meetings, meetings with parents, or any meetings where students will be discussed.

- To counter, create a list of terms that teachers should not use when referring to students in team meetings, meetings with parents, or any meetings where students will be discussed.

- When interacting with students, use asset-based speech when discussing behavior, academic achievement, and social-emotional or other issues. Students appreciate positive dialogue, so engage them using positive and asset-based speech.

There will be situations when a colleague or peer continues to use deficit speech when referring to our students. Seek to redirect your colleagues in a positive manner as well. For example, it is a good idea to start meetings by reviewing meeting protocols relative to using asset-based speech. It is also acceptable to redirect in a respectful way by making a statement such as, "Is there another way for us to discuss the student using asset-based language?" It is a culture shift—but one that can positively impact students and staff alike.

Reframing Learning Loss

Let's ponder what we call the illusion of learning loss. Students experienced trauma-induced teaching and learning during the COVID crisis. Learning virtually was challenging for students because the virtual world can be isolating and students do not get to access or develop social skills they would access by working with classmates and their teachers. But who said they lost anything?

Test data has always been used to substantiate the thought that there is learning gains and/or loss, and this was highlighted even more when students were subject to learning online during the pandemic. Because students were learning in a nontraditional sense, educators need to reimagine traditional and standardized testing methods post-COVID, as they may be unfair measures of their learning and skills.

Assessment needs to focus on students' strengths and using those strengths to engage students and let them share their learning with you. Asset-based assessment, letting students have a voice in sharing with their teachers and stakeholders what they have learned, is the way forward. Classroom teachers can give varied assessments to address learning needs and styles. They are the true gauge of whether a student has gained or "lost," because they have access to varied data and they have knowledge of our students' needs, which is something to ponder and to discuss in the chapter, Grading and Assessments.

What is often not highlighted is what students *gained* post-COVID and what they continue to gain that negates the notion of deficit thinking. While a student may have struggled academically, there are other areas where students may have excelled. For example, COVID largely forced students to begin taking part in their learning. Many teachers likely saw that students would meet outside of virtual class to do work and projects. Students formed their own groups or asked to be put into breakout rooms to work with their classmates to collaborate in projects or just for the sake of socializing. They found their strengths and would use those positives to contribute to the group. This was a source of pride for students. Students did not *lose*, but they *gained* independence, resiliency, creativity, communication skills, and more. The intangible skills are valuable and helped students greatly. Students are able to voice these gains, too!! When working with students on Jamboard, a digital bulletin board platform, students discussed some of the intangibles that they took away from their experience with COVID and online learning:

- "I've learned how to be patient."
- "I should ask for help when I need it."
- "I learned that your work doesn't have to be finished in time."
- "I've learned to love myself."

Students did not mention academics, but what is mentioned is positive and evidence of the resiliency of our students. In addition, they used asset-based speech to voice their thoughts.

From Deficit to Asset-Based Communication

"There will always be some students that struggle academically more than others. It is important as educators to see each student as an individual in order to meet his or her needs. All students have the ability to learn and progress despite the adversities they may be facing in their personal lives. High expectations must be held for all students."

—Trish, educator, New Jersey

Trish's statement is true. Educators must see students as individuals. It is import because they *all* have needs. Eliminating the use of deficit speech increases teachers' sense of efficacy. Teacher efficacy is derived from self-efficacy, which is defined as "teachers'

belief in their judgments about their capability to influence and encourage student learning" (Hoy & Spero, 2005; Orange, 2018). If teachers increase their usage of asset-based language and indoctrinate their students into a culture of positive thinking, student success will result in teachers potentially experiencing an increased sense of efficacy. Teachers can create an environment that is conducive to positive and asset-based speech. Some ideas include the following:

- Give students choice when it comes to assessment. If students are assessed in a way that addresses their strengths, they may do well and experience success, thus increasing their self-esteem.

- Have a word wall with alternative positive words and phrases that students can use instead of deficit-based speech. In addition, teachers will use the word wall with the students when having conversations in the classroom. This word wall will have encouraging words and phrases as well as speech the teacher can use when reviewing work with students in small groups or during one-on-one conferences.

- When talking to colleagues about students, use asset-based speech. Students hear everything. Teachers should not have conversations about students in a public space. However, if that transpires, using asset-based speech is necessary. Also, while in grade-level team meetings, teachers should use asset-based language so that they develop a culture of positivity not negativity.

- Poll students and ask them what you can do to create a positive environment. Students know what they want and need to feel encouraged and supported in an academic space. Giving students voice always lends itself to instilling positivity in the students.

PARENTS, FAMILIES, AND COMMUNITY COMMUNICATION

Something else to consider when we think of deficit speech and changing the narrative into something asset based is indoctrinating the school community into the mindset of using asset-based language. When teachers are engaging with parents, it is important to operate from a positive lens. For example, when meeting with parents, if there are concerns about a student's academic, social, or emotional growth, frame the language from a positive scope. Parents are invested in their children and want to see their children succeed. However, there may be bumps on the road to success. It is alright to identify the issues, because parents need to know how they can support their children in the academic space. But instead of saying, "Your child can't . . .", how

about saying, "Your child needs support with. . . ." See Table 1.2 for further suggestions.

Table 1.2

Suggestions for Replacing Deficit-Based Speech With Asset-Based Speech

DON'T SAY THIS (DEFICIT-BASED SPEECH)	SAY THIS (ASSET-BASED SPEECH)
Your child can't	Your child needs support in this area.
Their behavior in class is not good.	Can you give me suggestions on how to connect with your child?
They do not pay attention in class.	What are some ways I can inspire your child to focus during instruction?
Your child is failing.	Your child needs additional support in this content area.

These are just some examples of using positive speech when engaging parents. Parents are more comfortable when they hear a teacher positively engage with them and may be receptive to receiving information that may not be positive. It is all about how you frame the conversation. In addition, parents may reciprocate and use asset-based speech when meeting with teachers, especially when they recognize that a teacher is operating in the best interest of their child. We must always remember that educating the whole child is a team effort. Everyone must engage in a healthy and constructive way, because the goal is to ensure that the needs of the child are met.

Conclusion

It is important to remember to think before you speak because students listen even when you think that they aren't listening. Speak encouragement into your students because they will benefit academically, socially, and emotionally. Use affirmative dialogue when engaging parents because they will support you in all your endeavors as an educator. You will find that those positive words are meaningful and impactful and can invigorate the learning environment for all stakeholders, including *yourself*!

✏️ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is *deficit thinking* in the educational environment?

- Think about situations in which you have experienced deficit thinking in the classroom or educational environment. Journal or share examples of your experiences.

- How does deficit thinking impact students in the classroom and the educational environment?

- How can educators adopt an asset-based mindset? How can asset-based language be used in the classroom? ●