

ASSET-BASED CONEXIONES: THE INTERSECTION OF STUDENTS, FAMILIES, CHILDREN’S LITERATURE, AND COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH



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MEANINGFUL engagement with families remains a sought-after goal in early childhood education. Families of our youngest learners who are from minoritized backgrounds and cultures are extremely important resources that are often overlooked, silenced, or banished. But how can we, as educators, connect with all families in meaningful ways? As a team of teacher educators/researchers and early childhood educators, *confianza* [trust] is vital to the work we engage in with families, children, teachers, and one another; it is not possible to have a meaningful relationship without it. Building *confianza* takes time and an intentional focus on what families *can* contribute to this important relationship.

As we forge meaningful relationships with families that honor their rich backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge, we have found that asset-based theories, like Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), allow us to utilize the rich foundation of children’s literature to foster *conexiones* [connections] amongst educators, students, and families in humanizing and empowering ways. After exploring the theoretical foundations of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW), we will share children’s literature and strategies that align with CCW, as well as stories from early childhood settings that portray CCW in action.

Theoretical Foundations of Community Cultural Wealth

Through our work, we seek to build on children’s and families’ ways of knowing and focus on their “repertoires of

practice—the ways of engaging in activities stemming from participation in a range of cultural practices, as well as the learning that occurs in development of those repertoires” (Gutiérrez & Johnson, 2017, p. 251). We take a critical sociocultural approach to teaching and learning and consider that learning occurs in the home and community and believe that families are children’s first teachers. We view their funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005)—the cultural practices and bodies of knowledge embedded in daily routines and practices of families and communities—as fundamental entry points for our teaching. Essential to our work is the recognition that all students have contributions to make to teaching and learning. We challenge the beliefs that communities of color have nothing to contribute and that they are deficient (Cano-Hila & Sánchez-Martí, 2024; Kinloch, 2017).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) challenges mainstream deficit thinking of communities of color and re-examines how practices and policies in K-12 classrooms contribute to continuing racial inequalities in education and advocates for ways to change them. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) identified five basic elements of CRT in education: (1) the intercentricity of race and racism: racism is permanent and is beyond classism; (2) challenging dominant ideology: problematizing neutrality, color blindness, meritocracy, and objectivity; (3) commitment to social justice: working to eliminate oppressive structures and empower minoritized groups; (4) centrality of experiential

knowledge: using stories to legitimize the lived experiences of people of color; and, (5) transdisciplinary perspective: examining deficit perspectives across varied contexts.

Yosso (2005) noted that one of the most prevailing “forms of contemporary racism in U.S. schools is deficit thinking,” (p. 75) which is exemplified in two common assumptions: (1) families do not support or value their child’s education; and, (2) minoritized students enter school without “normative cultural knowledge and skills” (p. 75). To combat this deficit thinking, Yosso (2005) developed Community Cultural Wealth (CCW). CCW is an asset-based lens rooted in CRT that recognizes and values the multiple ways of knowing within communities of color. CCW reframes possibilities and capabilities of our students and families of color and considers them holders and creators of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002). CCW consists of six forms of capital:

- Aspirational capital: The ability to maintain hopes, dreams, and aspirations for the future regardless of real or seeming barriers.
- Familial capital: The knowledge, learning, and practices that are nurtured through kinship and extended family.
- Social capital: Social and community networks and the resources that can be accessed through them.
- Linguistic capital: Multilingualism and other communication skills, including storytelling traditions, art, music, and poetry.
- Navigational capital: Includes the knowledge and resiliency to navigate oppressive and marginalizing systems.
- Resistant capital: The knowledge and skills learned by communities of color over generations of resistance to inequity and oppression.

CCW is a framework that legitimizes the experiences of communities of color and places value on the role of family and community in the lives of minoritized children and youth. Acevedo and Solorzano (2021) noted the need for scholars to join forces with practitioners to enact CCW as an “approach to facilitate learning in various PK-20 contexts” (p.12). As a team of teacher educators/researchers and early childhood educators, our work with teachers and families is centered on the various capitals they possess and on bringing recognition to what families and children of color already know.

Asset-Based Conexiones: Strategies for Supporting CCW in Early Childhood Settings

To leverage asset-based conexiones in early childhood settings, educators can implement strategies that align with CCW. Two specific areas where rich, strategic connections with CCW can occur include children’s literature and engagement with students and families.

CCW and Children’s Literature

Children’s literature has long been lauded for its ability to serve as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990): It allows students to see themselves and their own experiences, while also allowing them to build empathy and understanding by experiencing worlds beyond their own. Therefore, children’s literature is a natural conexión for bringing CCW into early childhood settings.

When considering literature that aligns with CCW, it is important to start with sources that portray a variety of cultures and backgrounds. Table 1 lists several award lists focusing on specific cultures that are often underrepresented in children’s literature.

Table 1
MULTICULTURAL CHILDREN’S LITERATURE AWARDS

NAME OF AWARD	AWARD/CULTURAL FOCUS
Américas Award	Authors, illustrators, and publishers whose books portray Latin America, the Caribbean, or Latinos in the United States
Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children’s Book Award	Authors and illustrators who depict the Mexican American experience
Pura Belpré Award	Latino/a authors centering the Latino cultural experience
Coretta Scott King Book Awards	African American authors who center African American culture and overall human values
Middle East Book Award	Building meaningful understanding of the Middle East
American Indian Youth Literature Award	Books by and about Indigenous people in North America

Children's literature that aligned with the six areas of CCW were identified after reviewing books from the 2018-2022 award lists, (as well as the Caldecott and Newbery lists). Many of the books on these lists are considered multicultural picturebooks or books that "highlight the lives of people from marginalized and underrepresented groups in the United States" (Short, 2016, p. 5). The awards provided a starting point for locating picturebooks with authentic representations of children's and families' lived realities, thus allowing readers the opportunity to see CCW within the pages of picturebooks. Physical recordings, digital copies, or video recordings of each of the identified books as read alouds were then located and independently coded for elements of CCW. We discovered opportunities to enhance our collection by incorporating books recognized by the Middle East Book Award and the American Indian Youth Literature Award. This approach enriched our offerings and better highlighted the voices of marginalized communities.

Books featuring animals and/or inanimate objects as main characters were not included because these types of books contribute to "colorblind notions" (Boutte et al., 2008, p.953) and "steer away from portrayals of diverse experiences and critical conversations" (López-Robertson & Wells, 2024, p. 12). We espoused the notion that picturebooks with human characters more strongly embodied elements of CCW. While we highlighted two examples within each CCW area below, each area of CCW is frequently interwoven with others. For a full list of books, please see, López-Robertson & Wells (2024).

Aspirational Capital Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes, dreams, and aspirations for the future regardless of real or perceived barriers. In *Soñadores/Dreamers* (Morales, 2018), the author uses her own experiences to lead readers on a journey that follows a mother and her sons as they immigrate into the United States. The characters face challenges learning to navigate an unknown country, but also encounter celebrations—like discovering the magic of a local library. (Américas Award Commended Title, 2019; Pura Belpré Award for Illustration, 2019; Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award, 2019)

Another book selection where aspirations abound is *The Me I Choose to Be* (Tarpley, 2021). A recurring refrain beautifully captures the power of self-love as aspiration: "My creativity and curiosity flow without end, and if I meet an obstacle, I just begin again. I am a planet, a limitless galaxy, and I am

the me I choose to be." Families can read this book together to share the dreams they have for their loved ones. (Coretta Scott King/ John Steptoe New Talent Illustrator Award, 2022).

Familial Capital Familial capital is about the knowledge, learning, and practices that are nurtured through kinship and extended family. *Grandad's Camper* (Woodgate, 2021) honors the power of family memories. Grandad and Gramps loved to go on adventures together in their camper. However, since Gramps died, Grandad has not wanted to go on adventures. After hearing stories about their adventures, their granddaughter has an idea to help Grandad go on adventures again. This book showcases the power of families to make memories together, even after loss. (Stonewall Honor Book in Children's and Young Adult Literature, 2022)

On the Tapajós River in Brazil, families live in houses on stilts during the dry season, and they move to the forest to stay dry during the wet season. *Along the Tapajós* (Vilela, 2019) follows a family as they relocate to the forest but then return to their stilted house for an important mission: to save their pet tortoise, who accidentally got left behind. In addition to showing a family's bond, this book models how people live in the rainforest, which may be a topic few children have read about in other books. (Américas Award Commended Title, 2020)

Social Capital Social capital supports building connections amongst social networks, such as those in schools or neighborhoods. In *A Friend for Henry* (Bailey, 2019), Henry has been looking for a friend in his classroom at school. One day, all the activity overwhelms his needs as a person with autism. It starts to seem like he will never find a friend—but then his social networks come together. (Schneider Family Book Award, Young Children Honor Title, 2020)

Birdsong (Flett, 2019) follows Katherena and her mom, who have moved to a new place. When Katherena meets her next-door neighbor, Agnes, they work on the garden together and discover shared interests. When Agnes becomes too weak to go outside, Katherena comes to Agnes's house to help her. This book shows how social networks are built and evolve as individuals' needs change. The book has a glossary that defines the Cree words used throughout the text. (American Indian Youth Literature Award, Picture Book Honor Title, 2020)

Linguistic Capital In *Salma the Syrian Chef* (Ramadan, 2020), Salma, a Syrian refugee living in Vancouver with

her mom, utilizes her linguistic capital through her multilingualism and other communication skills. Salma worries that her mom misses Syrian food, so she works with adult translators in the Welcome Center to find Syrian ingredients and spices in her new home. Salma translates ingredients in Arabic into her new language of English, and when she doesn't know the proper English names, she draws pictures for her adult translators so they can teach her the English words. (Middle East Book Award, Picture Book Winner, 2020)

Through poetry and vivid illustrations, *Fuego Fuego! Fire, Little Fire* (Argueta, 2019) explores the importance of fire in glyphs and codices from central Mexico's Indigenous groups. This book supports linguistic capital by including bilingual poems in English and Spanish on each page, and then ends with the entire poem translated into Nahuatl, an endangered Indigenous language from El Salvador. (Américas Award, Commended Title, 2020)

Navigational Capital Navigational capital, the knowledge and resiliency to navigate oppressive and marginalizing systems, can be expressed in many ways, even in the simple acts of daily life and survival. *A Different Pond* (Phi, 2017) follows Bao and his father as they go on a fishing trip on a small pond. Waiting for fish to bite, Bao's father tells stories of another pond in which he fished when he lived in Vietnam. Navigational capital appears throughout the book, such as the father working two jobs because everything in America is more expensive and knowing where to get bait and go fishing to obtain affordable food. (Caldecott Medal Honor Book, 2018)

In Kabul, Afghanistan, access to education--especially for girls--is not guaranteed. *The Library Bus* (Rahman, 2020) shows how Pari and Mama use their navigational capital to bring books and literacy to villages and refugee camps via their Library Bus. In addition, when Pari announces her dreams of being able to read one day, Mama shares how her family used navigational capital to allow her to learn to read during a time when girls were not allowed to go to school, and her grandpa taught her at home. (Middle East Book Award, Picture Book Winner, 2021)

Resistant Capital Resistant capital emerges in a variety of circumstances, including those where rewriting current or historic circumstances allows for a more humanistic experience. In *Between Us and Abuela: A Family Story from*

the Border (Perkins, 2019), María and Juan are excited to celebrate La Posada Sin Fronteras with their abuela; however, they live in the United States, she lives in Mexico, and the fence at the border stands between them. This story demonstrates resistant capital as the children find creative ways to transcend the barriers separating them from their abuela and to celebrate together as a family. (Américas Award, 2020)

The People Remember (Zoboi, 2021) is an artful counter-narrative of Black achievements throughout history. Through the seven principles of Kwanzaa, the narrative retells the history of African descendants in America--including their African languages and traditions, how they resisted and survived centuries of oppression and prejudice in the United States, and how they thrived. This book demonstrates resistant capital by presenting a celebratory, asset-based history of these African ancestors and how they have continued to shape and influence American culture and history. (Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book, 2022)

CCW with Students and Families

When working with students and families, there are many ways to build CCW into instruction, policies, and interactions. Table 2 offers suggested strategies aligned with each form of capital in CCW.

Conexiones in Action: CCW Stories from Early Childhood Settings

In the following section, we share examples of two early childhood educators who make conexiones between their schools and families in ways that leverage CCW. Mary Jade Haney is a school librarian, and Rocio Herron is a preschool teacher; both have collaborated with Julia extensively for over ten years and with Melissa over the past few years. As time has passed, we have become more intentional in our collaboration and the work we do with children and families to validate the wealth of knowledge and experiences all families share with their children and within early childhood educational contexts. Intentionally selected children's literature is one vital aspect of the way we approach this work, combined with engagements with teachers, preservice teachers, children and families.

Too often teachers are presented with theories, but no ideas or examples of the application of these theories; we feel that the power in this section is in the actionable practice/lived experiences of the people who work directly with chil-

dren and families. We invited Mary Jade and Rocio to reflect on the practices they engage in with children and families that encompass CCW and asked them: (1) how do you build on families' strengths; and, (2) what are your stories of families demonstrating CCW?

Building on Families' Strengths

CCW is a framework that legitimizes the experiences of communities of color and places value on the role that family and community play in the lives of minoritized children and youth. The examples below highlight some ways that Mary Jade and

Table 2

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES FOR UTILIZING CCW WITH STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

CCW AREA	WORKING WITH STUDENTS	WORKING WITH FAMILIES
Aspirational Capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brainstorm both short-term and long-term hopes, dreams, and aspirations with students. Invite varied guests to talk to students about their roles and lives, and constantly interrupt stereotypes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brainstorm hopes, dreams, and aspirations with families, both for their children and for themselves. In conferences, focus on celebrating what is going well and on planning for future dreams and goals. Listen and build <i>confianza</i>, which is shared trust “reestablished or confirmed with each exchange [between families and educators that] leads to the development of long-term trusting relationships” (González et al., 1993, p. 3).
Familial Capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Validate all kinds of family structures. Write classroom books about family. Curate books that portray multiple family structures and how families support each other. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use inclusive language (“family” vs. “parent/guardian”). Schedule events where other family members are welcome. Revisit school policies and traditions to be inclusive of all families.
Social Capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Model and explicitly teach social networking, collaboration, and problem-solving. Integrate collaborative learning (such as STEM design challenges). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask families to suggest classroom visitors from their own social networks. Give families formal and informal spaces for building community and supporting each other.
Linguistic Capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore texts in various languages and dialects. Incorporate translanguaging into learning experiences. Translanguaging affirms students’ linguistic backgrounds, views them as assets, and encourages multilingual individuals to use all their linguistic skills fluidly (García & Wei, 2014; Vogel & Garcia, 2017). Practice contrastive analysis, which directly compares multiple linguistic systems (i.e., Wheeler, 2008). For example, a sentence could be presented in three different linguistic systems, such as African American Language (AAL), Spanish, and English, to compare syntactical features like negative sentence structures (both AAL and Spanish do use double-negatives, whereas English does not). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage families to speak their home languages. Educate families on the benefits of bilingualism. For example, multilingual people have strong thinking skills (Cummins, 2007) and can learn other languages with greater ease (Jessner, 2008). Consider how your school can be welcoming and inclusive of multilingual families.
Navigational Capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invite community members to be expert speakers. Complete community mapping projects. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build a resource center for families in a central location (front office, family room, etc.). Make “invisible norms” in social institutions (including schools!) transparent.
Resistant Capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read and write counter-narratives. Model interrupting deficit assumptions encountered in classroom discussions, books, media, or other sources. Explicitly teach strategies for practicing resistant capital (like role-playing). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish trusting forms of communication where families can offer suggestions or critiques. Follow up with families when they demonstrate resistant capital. Be willing to grow.

Rocio build on the families' strengths and enact CCW by engaging with the families through a variety of events that occur both in and away from school. We focus this section on aspirational, familial, and social capital.

Aspirational capital is about the ability to maintain hopes, dreams, and aspirations for the future regardless of real or seeming barriers. Rocio values the importance of family time and has found ways to build quality time spent together as a family into her classroom throughout her career as a preschool teacher. She shared, "I have learned that having a direct connection with parents opens the doors for me to be able to help my students in a more authentic way, not only academically but holistically."

Rocio prioritizes home visits to families (throughout the year, not only at the beginning) and holistic teacher-parent conferences that address not only academic performance, but also socio-emotional needs of students and assisting families with accessing healthy habits, financial aid, school registration, and any other areas in which families need support. During these home visits, she also talks with families about their hopes for their children for the school year, throughout their schooling and for the future. These home visits and holistic conferences support families' aspirational capital as experts in and advocates for their children's growth and well-being.

As the school librarian, Mary Jade celebrates families' cultures at family literacy events, as a way to support *familial capital*, which is the knowledge, learning, and practices that are nurtured through kinship and extended family. For example, she collaborates with other teachers, such as the Multilingual Learner Specialists and the Spanish Teacher, during school literacy events to integrate read alouds, food, dances, and the arts that celebrate all families' backgrounds and nurtures co-learning among teachers, students, and families. At one event early in the year, Mary Jade read *The Day You Begin* (Woodson, 2018). The story is about a little girl starting school and experiencing loneliness because she feels different. As the day progresses, she learns that everyone is different and decides to take the brave step to get to know her classmates. Mary Jade asked everyone to think about what makes them feel different. One family shared that they knew how to speak Spanish while another shared that they lived with their grandparents and always ate dinner together on Sunday. As the families and children continued talking, they learned that they enjoyed Sunday dinner together because it gave them time to talk with each other and have fun as a family.

Social capital refers to social and community networks and the resources that can be accessed through them. To acknowledge social capital, Rocio intentionally holds events in the community that utilize families' existing social networks. Several families live in a mobile home park that is located across the street from the school; in the middle of all the homes is a large plot of land, some playground equipment, and a large cement gathering area. This location has become a gathering place for the annual 'Palmetto Night'. After the first year of the event, the families have taken it upon themselves to organize the food and clear the area for the event while Rocio and her team arrive with everything else.

After a puppet show performed by students from a local university, families rotated through different stations, including a reading comprehension game; technology information, (e.g., the district's family portal, WhatsApp, and Google Translate); outdoor games; Lotería (a traditional Mexican game of chance like BINGO but played with a vibrant deck of cards); forms for at-school flu shots; and, two stations (face painting and a family traditions book), hosted by students from a local university. The university students also organized a passport that families took to each center to be stamped upon completing the activity, with prizes awarded accordingly. Many teachers from the school volunteered to help and participate, and families loved seeing their children's teachers in their community. Rocio supported social capital by uniting teachers, families, and community members in a community-based event where families organized food, decorations, and seating.

Stories of Families Demonstrating CCW

In the section above, Mary Jade and Rocio shared stories of how they built on families' strengths; in the section that follows, we asked them to consider and share stories of how they see families demonstrating CCW. We focus on linguistic, navigational, and resistant capital.

Linguistic capital refers to multilingualism and other communication skills, including storytelling traditions, art, music, and poetry. In the example above, Rocio's Palmetto Night included a family traditions book station where families engaged in a read-aloud of a few stories from *Family Pictures/Cuadros de familia* (Lomas Garza, 1997), a beautiful book about the author's childhood, filled with colorful paintings and accompanying short stories. Families were invited to consider a family memory, create an illustration and then write about it. These pages were then bound together in a class book.

Families were asked to write in whichever language they preferred. Rocio overheard one child asking his mother to write in Spanish to which the mother shyly replied, “I don’t know how, we don’t speak Spanish”. Her son looked at his mom and said, “It’s okay, Daniel will help us”. Sure enough Daniel used his multilingual skills and helped his friend write in Spanish while both children’s mothers looked on smiling.

As the school librarian, Mary Jade builds the library’s collection based on students’ and families’ needs: Families know they have voice and agency to share their preferences, and they know they have a librarian who is adept in using the funds and resources available to add to the collection in ways that honor their strengths and backgrounds. The library’s collection of bilingual (Spanish/English) books has increased, and Mary Jade has also noticed the children’s curiosity in learning Spanish; she has heard children talking and expressing a desire to be bilingual like several of their classmates.

Navigational capital includes the knowledge and resiliency to navigate oppressive and marginalizing systems. Rocio has noticed families using the information she provides in the weekly newsletters, which includes explicit recommendations for families on how to build upon school learning, revealing unspoken academic expectations within American schooling norms. For example, the attendance officer commented that she was surprised at how many of Rocio’s families are calling to let them know why their child was absent from school. In several of the weekly newsletters and in conversations with families, Rocio explained the importance of attending school and of letting the school know why the child was absent; she explained the connection between absences and federal funding.

In addition to the family traditions book station mentioned above, Rocio’s Palmetto Night had a station for filling out forms for at-school flu shots and a technology information station which explained key technology tools that families and teachers could use to communicate with one another. Free tools such as WhatsApp and Google Translate allow families and educators to utilize a multitude of linguistic systems while also helping families navigate the unfamiliar terrain of American public schools.

Resistant capital is the knowledge and skills learned by communities of color over generations of resistance to inequity and oppression. Mary Jade highlighted opportunities for students to share their culture at a summer literacy camp. Unlike the state-mandated Summer Reading Camps utilizing scripted reading curriculum for students who are not reading proficiently at grade level, Mary Jade designed Camp Discovery STEAM Academy to be inquiry-driven and standards-based. (Both camps ran simultaneously at the school.) While the state-mandated camp is limited to students in grade

three, Camp Discovery is multiage and is open to students ages 5-10 and includes middle and high school students serving as counselors/leaders.

Students in Camp Discovery engaged in a variety of activities throughout the week, including read-alouds of stories intentionally selected for their high relatability to students’ lives. *The People Remember* (Zoboi, 2021) presents a counternarrative of Black achievements throughout history and was a popular read-aloud. Through the book, students engaged in an exploration of African-American history and learned how African descendants resisted, survived, and thrived despite centuries of prejudice and oppression in the United States. Mary Jade’s Camp Discovery

STEAM Academy modeled a culturally relevant, engaging approach to build literacy skills and passion in ways that united multiple generations of students, where they were asked to listen, think about, and respond to the read-aloud.

It is evident that Mary Jade and Rocio validate the humanity, experiences, and wisdom families already possess, offering them space and resources to interrupt limiting, deficit-based assumptions often imposed by school structures and norms. Additionally, both teachers seek to introduce and engage children and families in topics beyond academic achievement to help families network, navigate, and resist systems that are sometimes designed to exclude them. Further, community-based events such as festivals, bonfires, movie nights, and game nights in the mobile home park show that not everything starts in the school building and that families and communities are equally important in building home/school partnerships.

Asset-based conexiones with families take effort to intentionally cultivate; it does not happen overnight. One must acknowledge the time it takes to establish and build relationships based on confianza, along with the commitment and shared belief that families can—and do—take active roles in their children’s education.

Conclusion

Asset-based conexiones with families take effort to intentionally cultivate; it does not happen overnight. One must acknowledge the time it takes to establish and build relationships based on confianza, along with the commitment and shared belief that families can—and *do*—take active roles in their children's education. Finally, one must respect the multiple ways of making meaning that minoritized families possess and share with their children.

We hope that our explorations of CCW, our suggestions of children's literature and strategies for utilizing CCW when working with students and families, and our stories of how we have seen CCW in action in early childhood settings will inspire you to amplify opportunities for families to share their gifts of aspirational, familial, social, linguistic, navigational, and resistant capital. While working with families within the CCW framework may be a slow process, it is also engaging and dynamic. CCW offers one avenue to build conexiones with families that uphold their assets and positively impact education for young minoritized children. •

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