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Challenging Assumptions, Revealing Community Cultural Wealth: Young Adult Wisdom on Hope in Hardship

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Young adults cultivate and utilize community cultural wealth - resources and strategies - to help others, navigate challenges, and persist in general. Such capital is often overlooked in young adults who are stigmatized by societal stereotypes of “dropouts.” These findings from Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions reposition such young adults as contributing members of society who have not had equal access to opportunities.

... the whole stereotypical, 'you're a dropout so you'll never amount to nothing,' I think that's all crap because I look at it like a bigger picture because there's hope for all of us.

– “Edward” [all names are pseudonyms]

By many societal measures, the 16 young adults interviewed for this study would not be considered successful. All have struggled with schooling, many have experienced abuse, some struggle with drug dependencies, and a few have been incarcerated. Yet, a closer listen revealed community cultural wealth as an abundant and important resource in the lives of these young adults and the communities they live in.

A community cultural wealth framework shifts the lens of research to focus on the various cultural knowledges, skills, and abilities nurtured by families and communities that influence persistence and social mobility, often in the face of significant obstacles. Yosso (2005)¹ has identified six types of community cultural wealth:

- Resistant Capital: challenging inequity and subordination
- Navigational Capital: maneuvering social institutions
- Social Capital: networks and community resources
- Linguistic Capital: communicating in different languages or styles
- Familial Capital: cultural and/or family knowledge and history, a commitment to community well-being
- Aspirational Capital: aspirations and hope despite challenges

Community cultural wealth values and resources were found in abundance in our work with youth and young adults. While many of these values and resources were already present within families and communities, others were created as protective measures against the absence of consistent access to quality education, health and social services. To surface community cultural wealth and position the young adults as experts, we used the methodology of *testimonio* – an approach that involves the participant in a critical reflection of personal, political, spiritual, and intellectual understandings of self and community. Following are examples of linguistic capital and aspirational capital.

Linguistic capital

Six young adult participants had a language other than English spoken in their homes including Spanish, Laotian, and American Sign Language (ASL). The concept of linguistic capital pushes us to think critically about the work these young adults engage in as linguistic and cultural brokers. For

example, "Angelica" shared her experiences interpreting for her parents from an early age and spoke of the nuances involved in interpreting from English to ASL stating, ". . . if I were to talk to you, just how I am now and translate it to my parents, they wouldn't understand it. I [would] have to sign it in a way [they could] comprehend and it's hard." Angelica's work as her family's primary interpreter has taught her remarkable skills including, meta-linguistic awareness, civic and familial responsibility, social maturity and cross-cultural awareness. Linguistic capital also helps us think about the multiple ways young adults communicate that are often overlooked in schools and society, including visual art, writing, and music. Many of the young adults shared their creative pursuits. "Aurora", for example, spoke at length about her art and sketched throughout her interviews, creating images that words alone could not capture.

Figure 1: Aurora's artistic rendition of her home – an apartment she shares with her partner and her partner's father. "*Sometimes it's like a prison but sometimes it's like a sanctuary*"

Aspirational capital

One stereotype that young adults who leave school early wrestle with is the prevailing notion that they do not care about their education. What we found, however, was that they felt their schooling stood in the way of their aspiration to learn.

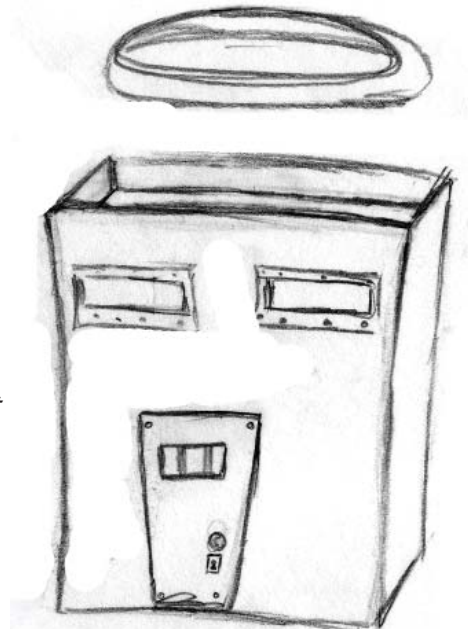
Interviewer: *If you could learn more about one thing, what would it be?*

Angie: *I would say [. . .] math [. . .] because math is really hard for me, so I really wanna learn like hecka' math skills and tricks to get around it because it's always been real hard for me, math was not my favorite subject.*

Interviewer: *Have you had a class that you liked or a teacher you liked that showed you how to do math well?*

Angie: *Not that I could . . . no.*

Like "Angie", all 16 of the participants in this study shared that they aspire to learn more than they had been taught in schools. A common critique among participants was that they did not have opportunities to connect what they learned in school with their own lives and future plans.



The young adults interviewed demonstrated various community cultural wealth values and resources they drew upon in their daily lives. To build on these assets, it will be necessary to reprioritize resources to better support the various forms of capital they have managed to create and maintain despite challenges and disappointments they have faced. While community cultural wealth alone cannot guard against all systemic or personal barriers, various forms of capital used to navigate these challenges are important to everyday persistence and are too often overlooked. All 16 of the participants voiced interest in continuing to work with Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions to ensure that their experiences and recommendations are shared in ways that make a difference. As young adults who are navigating and anticipate facing more challenges, they hold critical insight into how to approach change—wisdom well beyond what could be compiled in this overview. To this end, it is critical for adult decision-makers, adults who work with children and youth anywhere, to listen to these young adults in their own voices.

ⁱ Yosso, T. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91.