



# **Funds of Knowledge and Community Cultural Wealth: Exploring how Pre-Service Teachers can Work Effectively with Mexican and Mexican American Students<sup>1</sup>**

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*Stacy D. Saathoff, University of Arizona*

## **Abstract**

*This article examines how pre-service teachers can work effectively with Mexican and Mexican American students. Using the foundation of funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) and the critical race theory concept of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), the article weaves together these ideas to discuss how they can be implemented in teacher education programs. Added to the conversation is the importance of historical context in better understanding current educational situations affecting specific communities. Given the specific Southwest location, this article focuses on mostly white female pre-service teachers working in schools with a primarily Mexican and Mexican American student population. The purpose is to educate pre-service teachers and provide a close analysis of funds of knowledge and community cultural wealth as ways to give pre-service teachers tools to investigate their own practice.*

**Keywords:** *pre-service teachers, teacher education, funds of knowledge, community cultural wealth, historical context, Mexican and Mexican American students, culture*

*We [teacher educators] need to expose new teachers to the cultural and social realities their students face, as well as the historical and systematic forces that have contributed to our deeply unequal public schooling system (Harding, 2013).*

## **Introduction**

I begin this article with a few of my reflections as an instructor of pre-service teachers during one semester in particular that raised the questions I address in this article. During this semester I was teaching a course about different methods of classroom instruction to a group of mostly white female pre-service teachers. For this course pre-service teachers were required to complete

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<sup>1</sup>. For the purposes of this paper Mexican refers to students who were born in Mexico and Mexican American refers to students of a Mexican background born in the United States. Valenzuela (1999) articulates this distinction well in her study of high school students in Houston, Texas, and addresses how Mexican and Mexican American (U.S.-born) youth in the United States divide themselves according to language, place of birth, etc. I realize that identities are highly contested, complex, and fluid depending on context. My intention is not to simplify these identities.

a certain number of hours of fieldwork at local schools in the Tucson, Arizona area. Most students in these classrooms come from a Mexican or Mexican American background. For some of the pre-service teachers in this course their classroom experiences during that semester may have in fact been their first experience with students of color. Some of the pre-service teachers spoke of culture shock when entering these classrooms for fieldwork and used othering language when discussing the experience and the different students that they interacted with during fieldwork. Different in this case means non-white, from another socioeconomic background, and in some cases non-English speaking. As the above epigraph suggests, pre-service teachers need to deal with sociocultural issues that they may have never faced before. I define sociocultural issues as the complex and often times overlapping issues such as race, language, gender, socioeconomic status, family values, documentation status, country of origin, religion, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. In this paper I am looking specifically at language, socioeconomic status, family values, country of origin, and ethnicity.

As mentioned earlier some of the pre-service teachers I worked with during that semester used othering language and often talked about culture shock when they stepped into their fieldwork. The concern is that perhaps later they will enter their own classrooms without critically questioning their own beliefs and ideologies surrounding race. Many also seemed to have an underlying sense that their experiences were typical of all people and considered normal. Furthermore, they did not critically question race itself and took it as a given. King (1991) refers to this thinking as dysconscious racism. She defines dysconsciousness as “an uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (King, 1991, p. 135). This dysconscious racism was further exemplified by some pre-service teachers in the course who viewed school segregation not by race but instead by wealth. However, they did not question who has the wealth and why; inequities in society simply are as they seem. Examining their own beliefs and ideologies through a critical lens allows pre-service teachers to use these skills to analyze larger issues present in their students’ lives. This opportunity for pre-service teachers is vital to how they think about their teaching, students, and society. If they take the opportunity and invest the necessary time, they will have an informed worldview. In this article, I offer several ways for pre-service teachers to think about the perceptions they hold about students and their families in ways that are more educationally supportive.

I use this commentary to set the context for the question of whether or not traditional teacher education programs are preparing teachers to work effectively with students of color. I define traditional teacher education programs as four-year Bachelor’s programs where pre-service teachers take general courses first and then progress into education specific courses that concentrate on student assessment, instruction, classroom management, and child development, for example. A requirement for several of these education specific courses is fieldwork experiences in classrooms at different grade levels. After completing these courses, pre-service teachers enroll in a semester of teaching methods where they learn how to specifically teach content areas such as science, social studies, math, and language arts and create lesson plans which they implement in their fieldwork classrooms. The final semester before graduation is when the pre-service teachers student teach in a local classroom. Upon graduation, pre-service teachers have successfully completed their programs, passed all teaching proficiency exams required by the state, and have become certified in the particular state in which they received their undergraduate education.

This writing will examine the funds of knowledge framework (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), in particular González's chapter on culture, and the critical race theory concept of community cultural wealth proposed by Yosso (2005). I add to this conversation the importance of historical context to better understand current educational situations. I then weave these ideas together to discuss how they can be implemented in teacher education programs. Given the specific location within the Southwest context and contemplating these ideas since having those conversations with the pre-service teachers in my course mentioned earlier, this article focuses mostly on white female pre-service teachers working in schools with a primarily Mexican and Mexican American student population. My purpose is to educate pre-service teachers and provide a close analysis of funds of knowledge and community cultural wealth as ways to give pre-service teachers tools to investigate their own practice.

### **Situating Funds of Knowledge along the United States-Mexico Borderlands: Educational Implications**

Funds of knowledge has its roots in the economically changing landscape of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1992) write that "historically, these households [along the border] not only produced or bartered for much of what they consumed, but their members also had to master an impressive range of knowledge and skills. To cope and adapt to changing circumstances and contexts, household members had to be generalists and possess a wide range of complex knowledge" (p. 317). In order to ensure a sense of economic security households made an effort to control their labor and resources (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992, p. 314). Social networks also became vital in coping with changes. As a result, the many forms of knowledge and skills that families possessed were transmitted to the children of the household which can be used by educators in the U.S. These cultural funds assist educators in understanding the cultural systems which U.S.-Mexican children bring to the classroom (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992, p. 313).

González, Moll, and Amanti (2005) advance this work as they define "funds of knowledge" as the notion that "people are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge" (p. ix-x). In order to draw on students' funds of knowledge teachers can create activities, projects, and lessons that allow for students to further the different types of knowledge that they have gathered from the home and their lived experiences and connect it to what they learn in school. This particular framework presses some pre-service teachers to change their view of Mexican and Mexican American households in poor communities as lacking knowledge. Instead, these households have several resources that can be utilized by the teacher in the classroom.

Funds of Knowledge actually began as a pilot project in 1990, in Tucson, Arizona, with the goal of using the households' knowledge, cultural funds, and skills to inform classroom practices (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, p. 91). The project was a collaborative effort between local Mexican households in working-class neighborhoods, university researchers, and four teachers primarily from the elementary school level. The teachers assumed the role of researchers and conducted three interviews with selected families with open-ended questions. These interviews were used to collect information about the household's funds of knowledge. The teachers made note of their experiences and got together as a large group with other teacher researchers and university researchers involved in the project to discuss their findings. What they gathered from each household was used to guide the classroom curriculum. As the next section high-

lights, teachers also had opportunities to expand their understanding of culture in ways that viewed culture as processes that occur every day in the lives of students.

## Culture

It is important to introduce the concept of culture at this point and I will revisit it later when discussing how to connect it to teacher education programs. In the volume about funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) there is a chapter by González (2005) in which she traces the history of culture in society and the field of anthropology. Before 1900, culture was used in ways to promote racism and was equated with race (González, 2005, p. 30-32). González proposed a new way to look at culture as dynamic and changing. Often in the education field, culture is used to explain the failure of students or as the culture in students' households being "deficient in cognitive and social resources for learning" (González, 2005, p. 34). Through the funds of knowledge approach, the role of the household upholds this view of culture as a process. González (2005) affirms how the daily activities of everyday life "are a manifestation of particular historically accumulated funds of knowledge that households possess. Instead of individual representations of an essentialized group, household practices are viewed as dynamic, emergent, and interactional" (p. 41). This notion can further be applied to viewing communities through the same lens as vibrant and resourceful.

## Community Cultural Wealth

Closely connected to funds of knowledge is a critical race theory concept, community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), which further challenges the notion that households and communities of color are deficient. For the purposes of this article the discussion is to engage this concept with teaching Mexican and Mexican American students. Community cultural wealth offers a more expanded view of thinking about the resources and knowledge that students of color bring to the classroom. Yosso describes community cultural wealth as a way to think about the knowledges, resources, skills, and abilities students bring to the classroom. Many times specific knowledge is valued in a family context but not in the school context (Yosso, 2005, p. 76). For example, a student who translates documents for her parents who do not speak English and assists them with transactions at stores among other tasks goes to school only to find that in the school context her knowledge of two languages is not as valuable.

Yosso (2005) offers a critique of Pierre Bourdieu who argued that the knowledges held by middle and upper class families are *capital* that is valuable in a stratified society (p. 70). If someone is not born into a middle or upper class family (i.e. with cultural or economic capital), one could still access these knowledges through school (Yosso, 2005, p. 70). Bourdieu advanced the notion that some people (including working class or people of color) do not have the capital needed to succeed in society. Yosso (2005) argues against this notion and highlights six forms of capital that communities of color possess: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant.

First, Yosso (2005) stated that *aspirational capital* is the idea of having dreams and hope for the future despite the real or imagined barriers that exist (p. 77). Second, *linguistic capital* refers to "the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style" (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). *Linguistic capital* acknowledges the languages students bring to the school setting and realizes that these students may also have ac-

quired certain skills such as memorization, rhyme, vocal tone, and volume associated with various storytelling traditions in the home (Yosso, 2005, p. 78-79). Art, music, and poetry fit under *linguistic capital* as well. Third, *familial capital* is the “cultural knowledges” that are fostered among family “that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Yosso references “funds of knowledge” in her discussion of *familial capital*. Fourth is the concept of *social capital* which is the networks of people including peers and community resources (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). *Navigational capital* is the skills needed to traverse through institutions such as schools (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Lastly is *resistant capital* which “refers those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). These six forms of capital together are known as community cultural wealth and the recognition of this wealth by schools and teachers has the potential to radically transform how students of color are educated. Introducing pre-service teachers to Yosso’s concept of community cultural wealth allows them to begin to think about and discuss forms of capital students bring, along with their funds of knowledge, to the classroom. I will expand on this idea later in the article.

### Setting the Historical Context

I add to the funds of knowledge and community cultural wealth conversation the significant role history has played (and continues to play) in structuring the educational opportunities for students of color. In this section I emphasize the educational experience of Mexican and Mexican American students historically in schools in the Southwest. This history demonstrates how imperative it is for educators to shift their perceptions of students by drawing on their funds of knowledge and community cultural wealth.

Socioculturally the United States-Mexico border region has been an area of fluidity given historical ties, family networks, communities, labor, exchange, and migration (Vélez-Ibáñez, 1996). In 1848, the United States signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo with Mexico which extended the United States’ territory to include the Southwest. After 1848 public schools began to segregate white students from their Mexican American peers (Valencia, 2010). Valencia (2010) asserts “The treatment of Mexican Americans as nonpeers allowed Whites via deficit thinking and racist policies to maintain their system of privilege and domination” (p. 11-12). Mexican and Mexican Americans were viewed as inferior and traditional. Deficit thinking is the idea that people of Color, in this case Mexican Americans in particular, have limited intellectual abilities, poor behavior, and linguistic deficiencies (Valencia, 2010, p. 6-7). Mexican Americans were subjected to various forms of prejudice and discrimination. Applied to the educational context, the culture, home life, language, and behavior of Mexican Americans are to blame for their failure to achieve in education. This model clearly does not take into consideration the historical background of these communities and the various ways schools and society structure inequality.

One way in which schools have been utilized historically to educate Mexican and Mexican American students is through the Americanization program (Gonzalez, 1990, 1997) which focused on the acquisition of English skills, adopting so-called American ways, and ridding students of their culture. Gonzalez (1997) writes about the Americanization program in the Southwest throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The integration of Mexican and Mexican Americans into society was crucial and without this integration, in this case known as assimilation, they were seen as a threat to “modern” society (Gonzalez, 1997, p. 160). A common language was seen as a necessity to this cohesion of society and became a fundamental part of the assimilation process.

In this case English was to be the language of instruction and Mexican and Mexican American students were to learn it and utilize it. Gonzalez (1997) sums up the Americanization process at the end of his chapter with these words:

Through the program of Americanization, the Mexican child was taught that his [or her] family, community, and culture were obstacles to schooling success. The assumption that Mexican culture was meager and deficient implied that the child came into the classroom with meager and deficient tools with which to learn. This implication was quite consciously woven into the methodology and content of instruction. (p. 170)

Throughout the Southwestern United States Americanization programs were established and supported by State Departments of Education. Gonzalez mentions one researcher who examined the teaching methods of thirty teachers in southern California who actually encouraged students in the classroom to make fun of Mexican students who were “lazy” and “dirty” (Gonzalez, 1997, p. 165-166). One school in East Donna, Texas, serving Mexican students required “morning inspections” and if students did not pass inspection, they had to wash before beginning the day (Gonzalez, 1997, p. 169). If students had dirty clothes, they were to borrow clean clothes from the school (Gonzalez, 1997, p. 169).

Language was a crucial element of the Americanization programs and a focus for both educational literature and policy (Gonzalez, 1990, p. 37). The foundation of the Americanization programs was built on assimilation theories (Gonzalez, 1990). Instead of addressing language as a way to help in educating Mexican and Mexican American students, the goal of school officials was to resolve the larger issue of Americanizing Spanish-speaking students (Gonzalez, 1990, p. 37). For many school directors and superintendents the common language of English was viewed as unifying the United States as a whole (Gonzalez, 1990, p. 37-38).

The intertwined relationship between language and culture signified that the so-called poor habits and customs of bilingual children negatively impacted their learning “therefore, assimilation could not be realized until Spanish was eliminated” (Gonzalez, 1990, p. 38). Gonzalez (1990) writes of how in one school in Harlingen, Texas, the principal organized an English Club where students who had not spoken Spanish for six weeks could join. Students were given special privileges such as picnics that were not available for only Spanish-speaking children. Teachers at this school would check daily as to the language the student used. During roll call, students were to respond with either “Spanish” or “English” as opposed to “present.” If students lied, there were offenses that ranged from being suspended or expelled from the English Club.

Language continues to be a fiercely debated issue in the Southwest, particularly in Arizona. In the year 2000 voters passed Proposition 203, known as “English for the Children,” which was an anti-bilingual education initiative (Combs, 2012). Given the historical context and politics of the Southwest, Arizona in this case, it is crucial that pre-service teachers understand this history and the community in which they are teaching. This background is important to not only the instruction that will take place in their classrooms but also the relationships pre-service teachers will form with students, families, and communities.

## **Educación**

It is imperative at this point to explain the cultural definition of the Spanish term *educación* in Mexican and Mexican American communities to provide further framing; perhaps an-

other tool, for pre-service teachers to be cognizant of when working with students from these backgrounds. The meaning of *educación* goes beyond its English translation which refers to school in a particular context. Instead, *educación* has a much deeper significance (Valdés, 1996). Valenzuela (1999) writes that *educación* “refers to the family’s role of inculcating in children a sense of moral, social, and personal responsibility and serves as the foundation for all other learning” (p. 23). Manners are also a part of *educación* (Valdés, 1996, p. 125). The concept further references respect and dignity for others (Valenzuela, p. 23). Thus, both formal education and other forms of knowledge, such as familial values, provide an individual with skills to live in society “as caring, responsible, well-mannered, and respectful human beings” (Valenzuela, p. 23). An understanding of this concept assists pre-service teachers in the ways in which they will interact and relate to students. Understanding the concept of *educación* also helps pre-service teachers to shape student-teacher relationships that are more reciprocal (Valenzuela, 1999). Disregarding a deep sense of what *educación* means to students, teachers can at the same time dismiss an embedded Mexican cultural value of students. Students may view this act as a rejection of their culture (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 23) and I would argue further that it threatens students’ sense of self and who they are in the world.

This section highlights the importance of pre-service teachers understanding the concept of *educación* when working with Mexican and Mexican American communities. Although this is a specific example it can be applied to other cultural contexts. The significance is that pre-service teachers can become familiar with the local community in which they are working. Knowing the values of both the community and families connect pre-service teachers to these resources. It also aids pre-service teachers in expanding their view of the multitude of factors that inform students’ perceptions and ways of being in the world.

### **Connecting Culture, Funds of Knowledge, and Community Cultural Wealth in Teacher Education Programs**

Returning to the discussion of culture highlighted earlier in the article, it is beneficial for pre-service teachers to be exposed in their teacher education programs to ways that allow them to both question and analyze their own beliefs. Some pre-service teachers see culture as static and as something that is only celebrated during certain holidays. Yosso (2005) defines culture as the “behaviors and values that are learned, shared, and exhibited by a group of people” (p. 75). She explains how culture can serve as a resource for students of color. Thus, it is part of their funds of knowledge.

Pre-service teachers can be aware and take part in the dialogue occurring around them regarding students and culture. Gloria Ladson-Billings is a prominent scholar in the field of education and some of her work addresses how teachers can work effectively with students of color, most notably African American youth (1994), and culturally relevant pedagogy (1995a, 1995b). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) are credited with bringing Critical Race Theory into education. Ladson-Billings (2006) notes how culture is used to explain everything from behavior issues to school failure of students (p. 104). Pre-service teachers can develop a critical awareness of the various ways culture is utilized to justify certain thinking patterns such as the deficit thinking model; this awareness is imperative to their practice. Culture and race are often used interchangeably and these terms refer to students who are non-white. Yosso (2005) also notes how “race is often coded as ‘cultural difference’ in schools” (p. 75).

Based on her research with mostly white pre-service and new teachers, Ladson-Billings (2006) underscores three recommendations for teacher education programs to assist pre-service teachers in developing their ideas about culture in the classroom. First, they need to relate to students in non-school settings such as at community centers, teams, or after-school activities where students may be more successful (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 108). I would add that pre-service teachers should interact with students in other social settings such as religious venues and during community events. Identifying what is important and of value in the lives of students would enrich lessons in the classroom and draw on students' funds of knowledge and their different forms of capital.

Second, Ladson-Billings (2006) discusses how essential it is for pre-service teachers to be cognizant of their own culture:

Thus, teacher educators need to structure experiences and activities so that our students can take a close look at their cultural systems and recognize them for what they are—learned behavior that has been normalized and regularized. As they begin to recognize the cultural underpinnings of their own beliefs, attitudes, and practices, they may become more open to the power of culture to shape the learning and experiences of the students they will teach. (p. 109)

Two ways that pre-service teachers can become more cognizant of their own culture is through journaling exercises and discussions with peers about their beliefs and practices. Journaling exercises can have prompts for pre-service teachers such as “How do you define culture? What does culture mean to you?” or free writing about the subject. Discussion with peers can be structured around guiding questions such as “How have your perspectives on culture in the classroom been informed? What does this mean for classroom practice?”

Lastly, Ladson-Billings (2006) emphasizes the need for pre-service teachers to be exposed to a more global perspective in which they see schools in other parts of the world. An opportunity to work in schools in another country at some point during pre-service teachers' preparation program can help expand their views not only about culture but also education. This experience can create greater awareness and a more informed viewpoint among pre-service teachers.

Funds of knowledge and community cultural wealth are tools that pre-service teachers can apply directly to classroom practices. Weaving the funds of knowledge framework throughout teacher education programs for pre-service teachers can inform their teaching philosophy on a larger scale. This foundation can establish more effective teaching of all content areas and positive teacher-student relationships. Pre-service teachers can also visit households to conduct interviews on its funds of knowledge as the teacher-researchers in the Tucson study. Doing this would help pre-service teachers develop an expanded definition of knowledge. They can then implement this new knowledge in their lesson planning to create engaging lessons that draw on students' lived experiences which in turn transforms curriculum. Curriculum, in this case, refers to the content taught, the way in which that content is taught, materials and resources used, and the interactions that take place in the classroom among students and teachers. Curriculum should go beyond rote learning and include opportunities where students can use their knowledge and apply it to a real world context or what Brazilian educator Freire (1970) calls problem-posing education which encourages creativity, reflection, action, and transformation. Often for students of color there is a disconnect between their lives and the curriculum when they are offered a curriculum focused on memorization and remediation of skills (Cammarota, 2007). Cammarota



(2007) provides an example of the Social Justice Education Project (SJEP) with high school students in Tucson, Arizona. The SJEP is grounded in Freire's work and engages students in a meaningful, relevant, and challenging curriculum which connects to their lived experiences. This connection in turn leads to higher levels of academic achievement among students.

Underscoring the importance of community cultural wealth, pre-service teachers can have fieldwork experiences where they map out the various forms of capital that students possess. They can obtain this knowledge through active research—interviewing students, families, teachers, school administrators, and community members, and take detailed notes about these experiences along with participant observation. Having an awareness of this wealth allows pre-service teachers to reach a deeper understanding of students and the multiple sociocultural issues embedded within their lives.

Pre-service teachers need to be encouraged to develop a more expanded view of what constitutes education and knowledge for that matter. I would add that pre-service teachers can also challenge mainstream ideologies of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, Elenes, Godinez, & Villenas, 2006). Teachers' emphasis should always be on the specific population of students in which one is working—their needs, hopes, histories, and experiences. Within this expanded view of education, pre-service teachers need to identify community resources and the resources the families possess. Perhaps families can work together on in-home projects or investigate questions they have about the community in which they live. The projects could take a social justice and participatory action research approach (see Cammarota & Fine, 2008, for examples with youth). Dyrness (2011) offers an example of a group of Latina immigrant mothers, calling themselves *Madres Unidas* (Mothers United), in Oakland, California, who through participatory research became educational advocates for their children and created a space of transformation in their own lives and the lives of their children. Both parents and children could work together, through a participatory action research approach, to address a social problem in their community.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

I began this article with a few reflections on ideas I have been contemplating since that one semester in particular with pre-service teachers. I encourage pre-service teachers to challenge their beliefs and ideologies about students. Developing these critical questioning skills as a pre-service teacher will better prepare them when they begin as teachers. Without this critical questioning there can be a tendency for some pre-service teachers' beliefs and ideologies to lead to deficit thinking. Both the funds of knowledge framework and community cultural wealth destabilize this deficit thinking model that some pre-service teachers, teachers, administrators, and other educators hold about students of color. By using the funds of knowledge framework and community cultural wealth, pre-service teachers are provided with the tools to develop a more informed view of students' strengths and resources. These tools, along with knowing the specific values of the community and the community's history, provide an added benefit for pre-service teachers to be able to examine situations in both schools and society through a critical lens. The focus of pre-service teachers on the experiences of students is not only valid but also valuable as a key to more effective teachers with students who are motivated to learn. González (2005) writes "by drawing on household knowledge, student experience is legitimated as valid, and classroom practice can build on the familiar knowledge bases that students can manipulate to enhance learning in mathematics, social studies, language arts, and other content areas" (p. 43). All

educators can keep this in mind as they work with youth to create more authentic and meaningful learning experiences.

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**Stacy Saathoff** is currently a doctoral student and an instructor in the Department of Teaching, Learning and Sociocultural Studies at the University of Arizona. Her focus is anthropology and education and she is also pursuing a minor in Mexican American Studies. Her research interests include bilingual education, Critical Race Theory, critical pedagogy, and the process of ethnic and gender identity construction among Mexican and Mexican American adolescent young women. She has previously worked as an elementary classroom teacher in both bilingual and English-only settings. She also has experience as a coordinator of youth community programs.