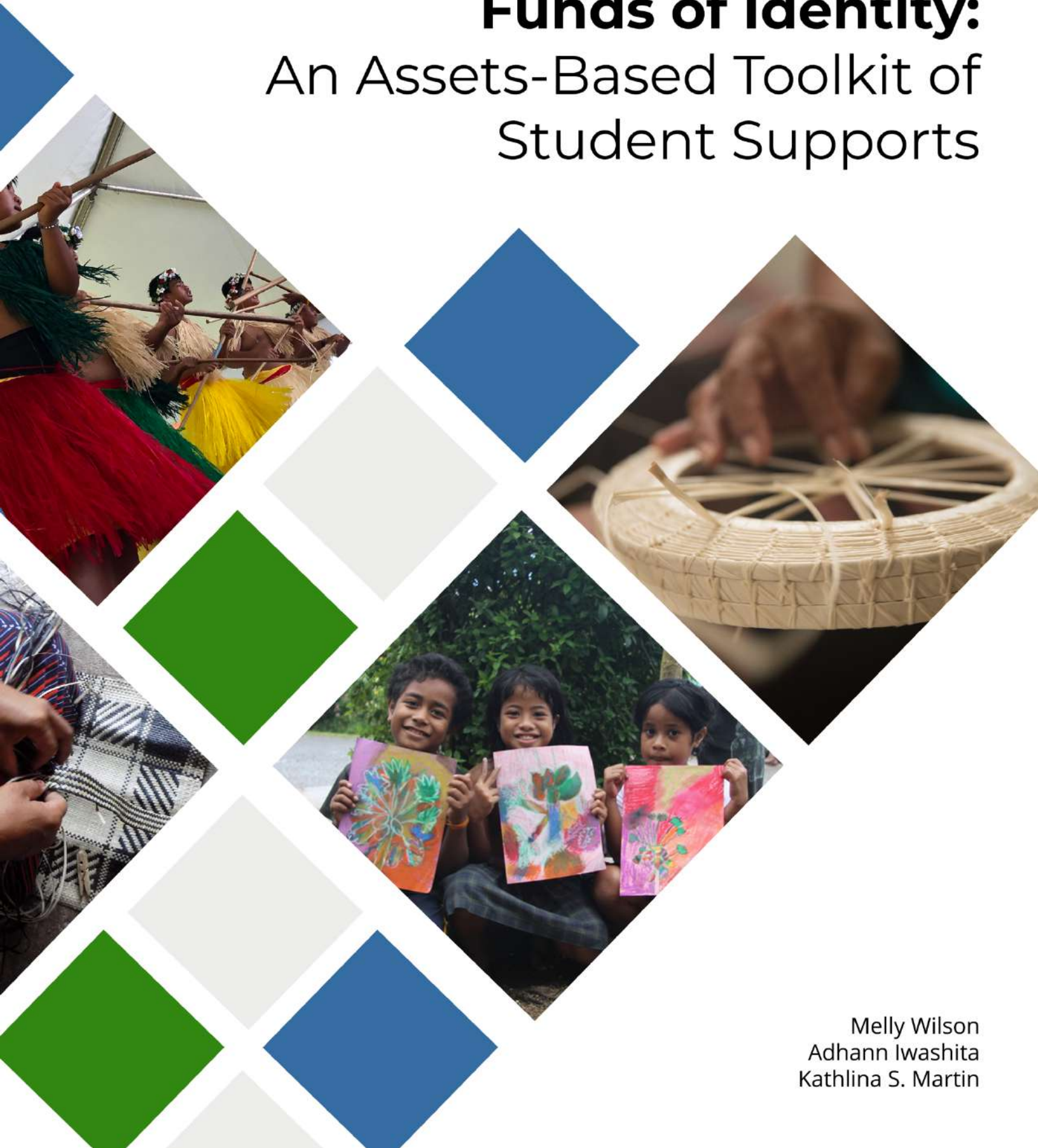




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Funds of Identity: An Assets-Based Toolkit of Student Supports



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WHAT IS “FUNDS OF IDENTITY”?

The concept of Funds of Identity (FOI) comes from a theory of learning that emphasizes the importance of recognizing and using students' cultural, linguistic, and personal backgrounds to enhance their educational experiences. FOI is like a “toolbox” of resources that people gather over time. These resources are shaped by historical, cultural, and social experiences and “are essential for a person’s self-definition, self-expression, and self-understanding” (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014). FOI builds on the prior concept of Funds of Knowledge (FOK), defined as “the historical accumulation of abilities, bodies of knowledge, assets, and cultural ways of interacting” (WA OSPI).

There are differences between FOK and FOI. FOK is considered a body of knowledge, skills, and resources primarily created through the family that can be used to make learning more relevant for students. However, FOI theory says that students also create FOK outside of the home and through a variety of life experiences (Poole, 2017). FOI goes further to say that students are continually exploring and defining who they are in many ways, and this process can be harnessed and directed within the classroom to guide their development and maximize their learning. At its core, teaching and learning through an FOI framework means that: (1) students use their imagination, agency, and creativity to connect what they know to who they are in an ongoing way; (2) identity work itself is a subject in the curriculum; and (3) schools use a range of resources and educational practices that identify, develop, and make use of FOI (Esteban-Guitart, 2021).

Parallels with Culturally Relevant Education (CRE)

In the context of Hawai'i and elsewhere in the Pacific region, FOI overlaps with locally relevant teaching and learning paradigms, such as culturally relevant education (CRE). Like FOI, CRE focuses on using students' lived experiences and treats these experiences as valid and powerful sources of knowledge (Kaul, 2019). And by focusing on these experiences, CRE can function as an important vehicle for recognizing, exploring, and validating students' rich and varied identities (Evans, 2021; Kaul, 2019)

For example, the Hawai'i Department of Education (HIDOE) has formally integrated culture-based standards for teaching and learning, Nā Hopena A'o (HĀ), into the K-12 curriculum. The purpose of the Nā Hopena A'o is to “develop the skills, behaviors and dispositions that are reminiscent of Hawai'i's unique context, and to honor the qualities and values of the indigenous language and culture of Hawai'i” (hawaiipublicschools.org). A big part of developing these skills, behaviors, and ways of thinking, is the active exploration of how our life experiences shape who we are and who we are becoming.

Addressing Educational Equity Through Funds of Identity

An FOI approach fosters an equitable and inclusive learning environment by recognizing the resources that students from non-dominant cultures already have and focusing on those resources to create opportunities for these students to perform more optimally (Veerman et al., 2023; Hogg & Volman). It is important to also note that an FOI approach better ensures that teachers will make the effort in the first place to acknowledge the FOI of students from non-dominant cultures, and especially immigrants, whose “funds” are often less visible or relatable to teachers (Hogg & Volman 2020; Poole, 2017; Esteban-Guitart, 2014).

When teachers recognize and work with students' existing resources, students are more likely to demonstrate improved knowledge and academic outcomes. Using students' FOI helps them to feel seen and valued at school, leading to increased engagement in lessons and ultimately improved achievement. FOI approaches also consider personal and social conditions, like students' motivation for learning, well-being, and self-efficacy, all of which are linked to improved learning and academic achievement (Veerman et al., 2023).

Overall, FOI approaches challenge deficit ideologies that children and families often face as immigrants or minorities. It does so by fostering collaborative spaces for children and their families to engage in projects that validate their experiences, identities, and linguistic diversity as a part of classroom instruction (Alvarez, 2021).

Please reflect on why you think and feel how you do. What and how do you get to talk about differences at home, and at school?")

- Answer a questionnaire about their lives.
- Self-definition task ("Who am I?")
- Draw self-portraits ("I would like you to show me on this piece of paper who you are at this moment in your life. If you wish, add the people and things most important to you at this moment in your life;" and "Please draw a self-portrait highlighting the things you think people first notice about you. Be prepared to talk about how it makes you feel, and what else you want people to notice about you.")
- Create one-page summaries of their most important people, objects, activities, and hobbies (e.g., "Significant Circle" activity).
- Write or tell a story. ("Write or tell a story about your name, including the meaning your name holds for you." Or "Write a story about a meaningful place or time.")
 - Create a word cloud. ("Reflect on words that represent you/make you feel like you belong. Create a word cloud from these words with the largest words representing the most central qualities to their identity.")



Figure 2. Example of self-portrait (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014).

These become "identity texts" or "identity artifacts" from which educators can draw to create lesson plans and content (Subero et al., 2018; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Cummins & Early, 2011). Funds of identity can also be found in the family, among peer groups, or within popular culture (e.g., video games). More recently, social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok have become significant sources of information for students and can serve as FOI (Veerman et al., 2023). For example, students could find or create a hashtag that relates to their selves and reflect on how/why a collection of images/tweets/TikToks with this hashtag represents or relates to them (e.g., *#beingmicronesian*, or *#luckylivehawaii*).

Documenting identity artifacts is part of the FOI identification process. Identity artifacts can represent any topic, such as art, language, music, food, fashion, technology, or sports. The State of Washington's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), for example, uses a straight-forward inventory matrix. The "Home / Community Practice" left-hand column is for identifying students' FOK. The "Classroom Application" column is for how these artifacts can inspire a specific classroom activity or experience.

Funds of Knowledge	Home/Community Practices	Classroom Application
Economics		
Geography		
Politics		
Agriculture		
Sports		
Technology		
Religion		
Language		
Health		
Childcare		
Art		
Cooking		
Entertainment		

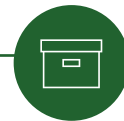
Figure 3. WA OSPI Funds of Knowledge Inventory Matrix. Retrieved from www.k12.wa.us

Step 2: Using Students’ Funds of Identity

Upon identifying students’ FOI, educators then find ways to integrate them into the classroom setting and curriculum. This can be done in many ways. For example, educators can have multilingual labels or words on walls; can have multilingual texts as academic texts; and can allow students to write and express themselves in a multiplicity of languages, including pidgins/creoles and translanguaging, as appropriate. They can also learn to properly pronounce students’ names, and respect names students want to be called.

Educators can build lessons around the question of identity and difference. For example, teachers can ask students what indicates respect to them and in what contexts (eye contact, distance of people from one another, body language, speaking up/listening being quiet, etc.), and can use students’ responses as a jumping off point for discussion around difference, compromise, and mutuality. Projects that allow students to explore their identities (speaking with an elder or with community with whom they share similarities) and field trips that allow for exploration of host culture and compare/contrast to one’s own culture are opportunities that allow for discovery and sharing.

An FOI approach is less likely to align with fixed curricula, teacher-led approaches, or pre-defined teaching methods. In other words, teaching and learning through FOI is more likely to happen when educators create space within their lessons for student input and allow students to guide learning activities (Gilde & Volman, 2020 in Veerman et al., 2023). In this way, many activities can be exploration of the diversity of ways of knowing and being, and at appropriate levels, learn to investigate power, context, and value. Within and beyond this practice of making space, teachers can continue to develop their own criticality, and create an environment where students with all their identities feel safe, seen, and valued. The following example showcases how a teacher used FOI pedagogically to facilitate student learning in their classroom (Subero et al., 2016).



All About Me Shoebox (Home-School Knowledge Exchange Project, United Kingdom).

Project Purpose: To develop activities that support knowledge exchange (“mobilization”) between students’ in-school learning and out-of-school experiences. Exchanging information in this way establishes continuity between learning contexts (e.g., family and school).

“All About Me” Shoebox Activity: In this activity, the shoebox is considered a “fund of identity” that teachers can use pedagogically to connect learning between home and school. Students were sent home with an empty shoebox and letter to the family explaining the activity’s purpose – to discover what motivates their children to learn, and that this information would be used in the school curriculum. They were instructed to fill the shoebox with a variety of artifacts, such as photos, toys, books, postcards, writing, and drawings. Families were invited to participate. Students then presented what they had put in their shoeboxes to their class.

From students’ presentations, teachers were able to develop guided activities to support learning in literacy. Some example activities included: label the items in blue ink, explain how these words are nouns, they can be drawn/seen/touched; choose an item and describe it using adjectives; compose sentences about some of the objects; write a story; and other literacy activities. These activities were based on information about student identities and were designed to get students to actively produce spoken and written content rather than having the content given to them.

It should be noted that FOI can include challenging experiences or problematic circumstances in students' lives, as challenges shape our identities and help us to grow as human beings. These have been called "dark funds of identity" (Poole, 2017). For example, students may focus on a stressful or frightening experience of migrating to a new country, being suspended from school, the pressure of exams, and many more. These challenging experiences can be integrated into teaching like positive ones, so long as they are handled in ways that are validating, inclusive, and contribute to students' academic and social-emotional development (Hogg & Volman, 2020).

FOI and Multilingual Learners

FOI approaches are a way to generate equitable outcomes for Multilingual Learners (MLs) in particular. Examples are emerging around how FOI has been used to affirm the cultural and linguistic heritage of ML students (Guerra et al., 2020). When MLs have the opportunity to create identity texts, they get to "showcase their intellectual, linguistic, multimodal, and artistic talents...[and]...challenge the devaluation of identity" that many ML students experience (Cummins & Early, 2011). Some examples are Farrington High School's [VOICE: Poetry by the Youth of Kalihi](#), which showcases poems and stories of English Language Learner, newcomer, and immigrant students; and Waipahu High School's Rising From [Our Roots](#), a multilingual collection of short stories by EL students.

FOI frameworks are also supportive of MLs because of how the creation of identity texts engages the "bilingual zone of proximal development" (Moll 2014 in Subero et al., 2018). When students create identity texts, such as writing their family's migration story, their first language skills become mediators for advancing their performance in English speaking, writing, and reading. In other words, FOI activities encourage students to leverage all their language skills to create meaning and does so at a cognitively appropriate level at a time when their English language academic skills may still be below grade level standards (Choi, 2013; Cummins & Early; 2011). As such, connecting what students know in their first language to English is a strategy that not only affirms their identities, but fosters multiliteracy development (Subero et al., 2018).

Key Terms

Funds of Identity (FOI). FOI “refer[s] to the historically accumulated, culturally developed, and socially distributed resources that are essential for a person’s self-definition, self-expression, and self-understanding. Funds of knowledge—bodies of knowledge and skills that are essential for the well-being of an entire household—become funds of identity when people actively use them to define themselves” (Gonzalez & Moll 2014, Abstract).

Funds of Knowledge (FOK). ‘Funds of knowledge’ refers to those ‘historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being’ (Moll et al. 1992, p. 133). The FOK approach explicitly confronts deficit views that educators may have of underserved and disenfranchised communities. FOK posits that ‘people are competent and have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge’ (Gonzalez & Moll 2002: 625). Rather than the traditional curriculum that may misrepresent or ignore far too many communities, the FOK approach represents ‘communities in terms of the resources, the wherewithal they do possess, and a way to harness these resources for classroom teaching’ (p. 625).

Identity Text. Jim Cummins introduced the term “identity texts” to describe literacy projects that engaged minority and newcomer students in composing multilingual texts that reflected their lived experiences and showcased their full linguistic repertoires. Cummins & Early posit that the concept of identity text is rooted in the understanding that literacy engagement leads to literacy achievement (Cummins & Early, 2011) and that schools and classrooms are power-laden spaces that often reflect inequitable power relations and social norms. See Cummins and Early’s [*Identity Texts: The Collaborative Creation of Power in Multilingual Schools*](#) for case studies and examples.

Bilingual Zone of Proximal Development. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) was a key construct in Lev Vygotsky’s theory of learning and development. The ZPD is often defined as the space between what a learner already knows and can do without assistance and what a learner can do with educator guidance or in collaboration with more knowledgeable peers (Moll, 2014, Vygotsky, 1978).

Building on Vygotsky’s ZPD model, Moll (2014) suggested that the highest reading level in their native language for emergent bilingual students could signal their proximal development level, indicating what they can achieve with support from a teacher or peers. The English reading level, in this context, represents the actual development level—what students can do independently. Moll (2014) referred to this as the Bilingual Zone of Proximal Development.

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