



Tapping into the Funds of Knowledge of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students and Families

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"It's called 'La Tamalada... Yolanda knows how to make tamales. My dad will make the meat and my mom will make the corn stuff that goes on the husk and we set the kids on the stools around there and we give them a pile of the masa and Yolanda knows how to put the corn husk down and rub the masa and meat and wrap it. We make our own tamales...!"

(Alejandra, interview)

In the context of doing home visits and interviews as part of a research study on parents' participation in their children's literacy learning conducted by the second author (Semingson, 2008), Alejandra, a single parent of four school-aged children, was given a book, *Family Pictures/Cuadros de mi Familia*, by Mexican-American author Carmen Lomas Garza. Alejandra explicitly connected the Lomas Garza literary text

with a Mexican cultural tradition in the household: making tamales. She connected this cultural experience with the types of school literacies and texts her second-grade child, Yolanda, was engaging with in the classroom, drawing resourcefully on cultural and linguistic Funds of Knowledge present in her bilingual/bicultural household (Moll & González, 2004) to support her daughter's literacy learning.

Introduction

Creating meaningful connections between home and school is not always an easy task, especially when parents and families speak a language other than the one spoken by the classroom teacher. The challenges become even greater when these families belong to a different culture than one's own. Additionally, researchers have argued that a focus on assimilation and devaluing of students' language and culture can result in notions of subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Worthy, Rodríguez, Assaf, Martínez, & Cuero, 2003). In contrast to such deficit models, an additive model seeks to build on students' and family's strengths and abilities and transform teachers' and schools' ways of perceiving the families with an overall goal of increasing student achievement (Amaro-Jiménez & Semingson, 2010;

Moll & González, 2004; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992).

In this article we advocate for the implementation of additive practices for educators, teachers, and administrators to meaningfully engage with Latina/o students and families, drawing upon a Funds of Knowledge framework (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). We first examine the term Funds of Knowledge referring to the original use of the term by Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg (1992). We then highlight selected recent studies that have drawn on the Funds of Knowledge in bilingual and multilingual classroom settings to offer concrete suggestions for teachers and administrators of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) children and families.

Defining Funds of Knowledge

The literature on Funds of Knowledge suggests that educators must draw upon students' background knowledge and experiences to enhance learning. Studies have suggested that drawing on the experiences that students have accumulated in their households with siblings, peers, friends, communities, and parents are not only valuable to students' lives, but can assist teachers in understanding the ways in which these experiences can be practically and meaningfully connected to classroom curriculum (e.g., Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992). In an ethnographic study, Riojas-Cortez (2001) examined the ways that 12 bilingual preschoolers' play in a South Texas classroom reflected their use of Funds of Knowledge. Her data suggest that the preschoolers drew upon their culture and language in their interactive play (e.g., in the kitchen center) and other shared spaces. Drawing on Moll and colleagues' work (1992), Riojas-Cortez developed a useful taxonomy of 12 categories of Funds of Knowledge the children drew upon during play, which included child care, family, education, farming, and construction, among others. The author suggests that educators should intentionally draw upon these Funds of Knowledge exhibited and make connections to classroom curriculum.

In fact, a key component of the Funds of Knowledge framework is to be able to identify what unique experiences students and their families possess and later link them to instruction (Riojas-Cortez,

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Huerta, Flores, Perez and Clark, 2008). Gutierrez (2002), for example, documented how drawing was used to build bridges between a third grade bilingual student's background experiences and his academic achievement in school. The researcher and classroom teacher used bilingual books and writing topics that were based on the student's interests in soccer. By tuning in to his interests through close observation, the teacher was able to create contexts whereby the student was successful in classroom literacy practices such as writing.

However, being able to tap into students' household experiences and bring them to classroom instruction can be challenging. Interestingly, Upadhyay's (2009) study of a Hmong teacher suggests that doing so may be less of a challenge for those whose experiences resemble the children's lives. By closely analyzing Lee's classroom interactions and implementation of classroom activities, the author suggested that Lee was able to bring in a variety of culturally-relevant activities into her instruction because she had, herself, direct knowledge of cultural dynamics present in Hmong families. For instance, because Lee knew about the role that gardening plays among Hmong's families and culture, she was able to make a direct connection between the household experiences and the content they were learning in the classroom. Bringing these experiences, along with her sensitivity for the children in the classroom who were not Hmong, allowed these students' to not only understand why science is relevant to their lives but to develop a greater understanding of the science content taught in the classroom.

Implementing an Additive Framework in the Classroom and School

As it has already been argued, teachers and administrators must value the cultural and linguistic resources that CLD students bring into the classroom. However, they must begin by being pro-active in order to seek out specific ways to engage and value parents' language, experience, knowledge, and participation within the curriculum and the learning that takes place in the classroom.

Identifying the Funds of Knowledge Present in their Households

In order to enact an additive framework for working with CLD students and families, teachers need to first identify the rich kinds of experiences that students and their families possess (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005). Teachers should also be aware that the parents themselves may not be completely aware that these experiences can and in fact are valuable (Spielman, 2001). While it is certainly important to gather information related to their countries of origin, language(s) spoken at home, number of siblings, etc., these pieces of information can be gathered through traditional means, including classroom discussions, parent-teacher conferences and school events. On the other hand, visiting their community and home can provide teachers with a wealth of information which may not be available otherwise, such as information about their daily lives, their family dynamics, and the ways in which learning opportunities are provided in the household. By doing these visits, teachers will also move away from making use of stereotypes or overgeneralizations about their students'

backgrounds and rather use information gathered from the children and families themselves, to identify their strengths and to highlight how unique their experiences are.

Prior to collecting these data, teachers will need to think about how the information gathered will help them better understand their student and his/her family, how their students learn, the kinds of supports available at home, and the conditions for learning for the child. In fact, González et al. (1995) have suggested that teachers conduct research visits, as opposed to home visits, where teachers solely collect data about the family involved. Field notes, a personal journal, and questionnaires can be used while doing these visits (González et al., 1995). A list of questions, in both English and Spanish, like those provided in Table 1, can be used as a starting point. Note that gathering information about the child and families, as well as building rapport and trust with the families, should be both an ongoing and systematic process.

Becoming a Reflective Practitioner Who Understands the Role of the Funds of Knowledge in their Instruction

Practitioners need to make strategic use of the information they have collected about the child and families. To do so, they need to adopt the role of a reflective practitioner—this is a role which will allow them to not just analyze the information gathered, but who will critically reflect on what they do and identify areas of improvement. They can ask themselves: (1) How am I incorporating my students' and their families' assets and strengths in my teaching already?, (2) How am I taking into consideration the assets and strengths these families have in my teaching?, (3) What can I do to improve how I communicate with the parents?, and (4) What can I do to improve what I do in the classroom that is responsive to their unique lived, cultural, and linguistic experiences? (See Table 1) In other words, this reflection exercise will allow them to think about how they will use that information, and how gathering such information will aid their teaching. Asking these questions will also allow them to find ways to become more proactive in incorporating these aspects into their teaching.

Figure 1. Questions that can be used to gather information about the Funds of Knowledge – A Focus on Literacy Practices

| English | Spanish |
|--|--|
| What do you remember about your own schooling experiences? | ¿Qué recuerda de sus propias experiencias escolares? |
| What kind of support did you have at home when you started reading and writing? | ¿Qué tipos de apoyo tuvo usted en su hogar cuando comenzó a escribir y a leer? |
| What were your strengths/weaknesses in learning in your native language? | ¿Cuáles considera eran sus fortalezas y debilidades al aprender en su idioma nativo? |
| Do you read and/or write in another language (second language)? If yes, which language? | ¿Escribe o lee usted en algún otro lenguaje (segunda lengua)? Si la respuesta es sí, diga cuál lenguaje. |
| Tell me about your experiences learning to read and write in your second language. | Dígame de sus experiencias aprendiendo a leer y escribir en su segunda lengua. |
| Do you recall the moment when your child began to read and write? If yes, tell me about that moment in his/her life. If not, please explain why you think you do not remember that moment. | ¿Recuerda usted el momento en que su niño(a) empezó a leer y escribir? Si la respuesta es sí, hábleme de ese momento en su vida. Si la respuesta es no, por favor explique por qué cree usted que no recuerda dicho momento. |
| Describe the kinds of experiences that your child has with reading and writing at home. | Describa los tipos de experiencias que su niño(a) tiene con la lectura y escritura en el hogar. |
| Do you help your child with reading and writing at home? Please explain why. | ¿Le ayuda usted a su niño(a) a leer y escribir en el hogar? Por favor explique por qué. |
| Please give me examples of things you do at home to help your child with schoolwork. | Por favor deme ejemplos de las cosas que usted hace en su hogar para ayudarle a su niño(a) con cosas de la escuela. |
| What are some of the things you find helpful when working with your child in school tasks? | ¿Cuáles son algunas de las cosas que encuentra usted son beneficiosas cuando está trabajando con su niño(a) en cosas de la escuela? |
| Do you prepare your own materials to help your child with reading and writing? If yes, what are these and are any of these materials or ideas especially helpful? If not, please explain what you use. | Prepara usted sus propios materiales para ayudarle a su niño(a) con la lectura y escritura? Si es así, qué materiales son estos y de qué manera le son útiles estos. |

Making a Direct Link between Students' Funds of Knowledge and School Curriculum

Intentionally fostering a curricular context for incorporating the Funds of Knowledge, both school- and classroom-wide, is imperative. According to Olmedo (2009, p. 27), three characteristics need to typify the school community: 'compromiso' (commitment), 'confianza' (trust), and 'colaboración' (collaboration). Parents and teachers need to be committed to learning from one another, to fostering mutual confidence and trust, and to work together in collaborative ways to improve student learning.

To bring the Funds of Knowledge into the curriculum, teachers need to begin by making students aware that the experiences

they bring from home are valued in the classroom. For example, teachers can go beyond creating pairs or buddies in the classroom to help one another academically and linguistically; the pairs can be used to allow them to compare their experiences, whether similar or different, in collaborative ways. Likewise, developing trust with the children and their families can be achieved through a variety of means, such as using family journals where the family communicates with the teacher about the successes and challenges the child may be experiencing in the classroom. Such family journal can also ensure that there will be a two-way communication between the family and the school. Other research-based strategies can be found in Table 2.

Figure 2. Connecting Recent Research Studies on Funds of Knowledge to Classroom Practice

| Research | How Students Funds of Knowledge were Connected to Practice | Implications for Teachers |
|---|---|---|
| (Dworin, 2006) | Dworin and the classroom teacher led students to draw on the writing process and their skills in writing and translating to create dual language stories. Students began the project by engaging with reading of bilingual books that developed the theme of culturally relevant family stories. Students interviewed family members and used oral stories as basis for stories. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use oral language stories as basis for writing. • Value dual language work and translation of dual language texts (reading, writing, listening, speaking). |
| (Taylor, Bernhard, Garg, & Cummins, 2008) | Students authored stories initially by dictating and drawing in response to questions posed about their culture, home, and experiences. Parents and families were invited to contribute photos and assist with translations of the stories into their native language. These often became inter-generational projects with parents and grandparents participating in the project. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage collaboration with family members in multi-media assignments. • Parents and family can provide input and assistance in the native language. |
| (Tan & Barton, 2010) | A sixth grade science teacher connected a nutrition unit to students' lived experiences by having them bring, discuss, and make connections with their foods eaten at home. This increased engagement and access to the curriculum while giving student's voices. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make connections from curriculum to students' stories and lived experiences. • Incorporate storytelling and dialogue based on students' related connections to the concepts. |

Conclusion

Teachers working with CLD children and families hold varying perceptions, from deficit to additive and in-between of how much these families bring into the education of their children. Many of these belief systems, however, do not take into consideration the social and cultural aspects of the families and contain negative assumptions about the role of parents in involvement in literacy learning, resulting in subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999; 2005). In such deficit models, it is unlikely that parents will be able to actually incorporate suggested activities in the home, if these have no relevance to them or parents lack resources to implement the initiative set by the teacher and/or school. In contrast, with positive models that are based on listening to the needs of the parents and building on cultural and linguistic strengths and assets, it is more likely that activities and program suggestions will be more likely to be implemented in the home. Listening to parents' needs about school and literacy learning in order to implement a program are crucial.

Additive frameworks, such as the Funds of Knowledge, can be seen as a starting

point for parent involvement; that is, not only is it important to see the larger context from which our students come, but it is relevant to our daily instruction to know what our students have background knowledge of so we can build on what they already know. By making the effort to contact parents and families and learn more about their lives, educators can collaborate with parents as partners, and not as empty vessels to be filled. Parents have a lot to say and contribute if only we will listen, learn, and design instruction that builds on their strengths and needs. By building on students' and families strengths, students will see that the teacher is making an effort to reach out to their home life, and this can become a source of pride for the child and the family as well. ★

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