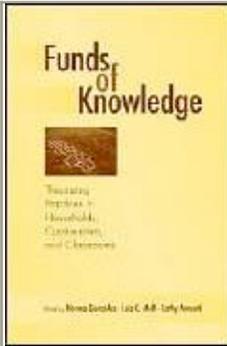


Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms

Author:	Norma González, Luis C. Moll & Cathy Amanti, Editors (2005)		
Publisher:	Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates		
Pages	ISBN	Price	
Pp. xii + 307	0-8058-4918-1 (paper)	\$34.50 U.S.	

This book describes the discoveries that teacher-researchers made when they tried a new approach to learning about their students' families. In extended interviews with families, they focused on finding out what family members actually did and how they talked about what they did, with the purpose of finding out how much "real world" knowledge their students already had gained about math, science, literacy, and relationships through their rich social network. Seeing these "funds of knowledge" as educational resources helps to remove deficit or dysfunctionality assumptions that some may apply to poor and minority families. The educational philosophy of the contributors, a group which includes anthropologists, educational researchers, and teachers, will nourish critical inquiry and provide an important voice in future educational research and program development.

The editors state in the preface that this book is "written for educators who are willing to venture beyond the walls of the classroom," and that is exactly what participating teachers did. Their collaboration and research has been underway for years, and the contributors have been generously sharing their findings in many forums, so the ideas contained in this book may be familiar to some readers. At the same time, the presentation of the project's operational philosophy, the evolution of its ethnographic tools, and the participants' descriptions of its implementation are comprehensive and engaging. Supporting institutions for the project include the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Center for Research on Diversity and Second Language Learning, the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence, and the University of Arizona.

What establishes the relevance of this collection is precisely what the project is not. It

is not just another parent education or involvement project as they are generally conceived and executed. Although participating teachers visited the homes of their students at least three times for extended interviews, the purpose of those home visits was unique, even startling. Proceeding from the Vygotskian premise that the construction of knowledge is mediated by the tools of language and culture, teachers trained in participatory ethnography entered the homes of their students, not in order to transmit knowledge about how to do school, but in order to discover what knowledge and skills families already possessed. Their observations began on the drive into the neighborhood as they searched for signs of skilled labor or crafts such as carpentry, mechanics, gardening, masonry, and so on.

Many of the families studied are connected to networks of extended family members and friends. The children who grow up within this network are exposed to many adults outside of their immediate family unit and learn about different trades and crafts through these relationships. This "dense exchange" of useful skills and daily decision-making imbues children with an intuitive knowledge base. This knowledge base can provide valuable connections to school learning, provided teachers know what to look for. The benefits of seeking to understand what children already know as a preface to academic learning not only validates their intelligence and worth, but also invites natural, intuitive knowledge into their preset for learning--which simply makes good sense.

The implications of this approach to building home-school relationships are discussed throughout the book, culminating in the final chapter by Luis C. Moll titled "Reflections and Possibilities." Among these opinions are recommendations for replicating the learning process described in the book by implementing parent interviews, followed by teacher study groups in partnership with university classes. Contributors advocate strongly on behalf of language policy that supports bilingualism as well as for learning environments that build on student strengths and social skills. A strong recommendation for using cooperative strategies is made for three reasons: (1) children socialized within the rich networks described in this study tend to have highly developed social skills; (2) cooperative learning systems may contribute to interethnic relationships; and (3) minority children may achieve academically at higher rates.

Professional educators will benefit from Norma González's critique of familiar cultural- training concepts in Chapter 2, "Beyond Culture: The Hybridity of Funds of Knowledge." Among the points she emphasizes are the following:

- culture is commonly used as a synonym of race
- the term "culture" is overused and therefore lacks meaning
- the teacher training that emphasizes "knowing" the culture of students may lead teachers to assume that children from diverse cultural backgrounds have deficits which need to be addressed
- culture as an educational concept often covers power structure and equity issues.

González objects to the "essentializing" or "typologizing" of groups as a way of learning about culture or reforming education; instead, she characterizes culture as a "set of inquiries" or "processual" skills and language. This location of knowledge within daily activities and the meaning people construct through talking about these

activities provide the foundation for the research project described in this book.

In spite of an impression a reader might form that teachers and researchers had tapped into an incredible source of, for example, "natural" math knowledge, the accounts of teachers trying to locate curricular pilings that support more formal academic knowledge construction lack certainty. There is no formula provided for building curricula around core "funds of knowledge," and no formal research is reported here that shows increased student achievement as a corollary to this approach.

Although much of the discussion centers on math or science concepts, there is some mention of first language as a knowledge fund as well. In one chapter Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez and James Greenberg describe what is termed "fracturing," that is, eliminating literacy activities in Spanish in U.S.-Mexican households and a shift to oral Spanish only. This separation of the younger generation's literacy from their elders' literacy tradition is unparalleled in English-speaking families. Children of Spanish-literate parents miss out on academic Spanish as the oral Spanish of household life becomes the only form of that language they are regularly exposed to. It goes without saying that, in many English-dominant schools, Spanish-speaking parents are not often active partners in the English literacy acquisition process. The English that students are learning is unconnected to cross-generational experience and becomes, instead or solely, the means for children to serve as the translators for their parents and grandparents. The subsequent separation between one generation, literate in Spanish, and the next generation, literate in school English, is viewed by the authors as a significant loss for these families.

There is a strong underlying advocacy for minority families and students in this study. Family histories of resiliency and creativity were shared as teacher ethnographers uncovered funds of knowledge accumulated through the collective experience of extended families. This approach challenges certain "culture of poverty" assumptions that low-income families are dysfunctional in their approach to life and that their children require a deficit-compensation model of education. The editors state that one of the purposes of the research project is to change the way that working-poor families are viewed. It is their hope that this book will help educators see the inherent resources and strengths these families possess and will suggest ways to experiment with curricular design that honors and builds on these strengths.

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