

# Elaborating Funds of Knowledge: Community-Oriented Practices in International Contexts

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## Abstract

This article discusses a sociocultural approach we have developed, which we refer to as *funds of knowledge*. The emphasis of the funds of knowledge work has been to develop both theory and methods through which educators can approach and document the funds of knowledge of families and re-present them on the bases of the knowledge, resources, and strengths they possess, thus challenging deficit orientations that are so dominant, in particular, in the education of working-class children. In this article, I present a translocation view of funds of knowledge and what we can learn theoretically and methodologically from this body of work. I review four studies conducted in different countries and sociocultural contexts. In each context, the researchers reorient the concept of funds of knowledge to address issues germane to their settings. The four studies from New Zealand, Spain, Australia, and Uganda used *funds of knowledge* to generate new ideas and *positionalities* regarding work with teachers, students, and families. None of the projects simply replicated the original studies conducted in the United States. The four studies documented empirically and represent pedagogically families and students as resourceful and helped educators

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arrange environments that are academically sound and strongly oriented to building on such resources for learning.

### **Keywords**

funds of knowledge, translocation, families, cultural resources

This article discusses a sociocultural approach we have developed, which we refer to as *funds of knowledge*, and our attempts to formulate a community-oriented pedagogy. I will start by summarizing the basic elements of this approach, developed in Tucson, AZ, with mostly, but certainly not exclusively, U.S.-born and immigrant Latino families (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). The work involved close collaboration with teachers as coresearchers and used ethnographic-like household observations and interviews with family members to document their social history, cultural practices, and funds of knowledge. The emphasis of the work has been to develop both theory and methods through which educators can approach and document the funds of knowledge of families and re-present them on the bases of the knowledge, resources, and strengths they possess, thus challenging deficit orientations that are so dominant, in particular, in the education of working-class children.

There is considerable literature on this work (e.g., González et al., 2005; Moll, 2014; Moll, Soto-Santiago, & Schwartz, 2013) so I will not attempt a thorough review, just the basics. I will then present four studies conducted in different countries that build on a funds of knowledge approach. I am interested in the translocation of the approach and what we can learn theoretically and methodologically from this work.

### **The Original Project**

For readers unfamiliar with our funds of knowledge work, the central idea is that families, especially those in the working class—who have been our particular focus of study—can be characterized by the practices they have developed and the knowledge they have produced and acquired in the living of their lives (see González et al., 2005). The social history of families and their productive or labor activities (e.g., in farming, construction, gardening, household maintenance, or secretarial work) in both the primary and secondary sectors of the economy are particularly salient because they reveal experiences that generate much of the knowledge household members may possess, display, elaborate, or share with others.

It is also the case that household subsistence may involve establishing and participating in social networks, often with kin, through which such funds of knowledge may be exchanged in addressing some of life's necessities. For example, in a *mundane quid pro quo*, one might help a neighbor fix a car because one has the required knowledge and experience as an auto mechanic, and the neighbor incurs an obligation to reciprocate and help paint one's house, a task that is within his or her areas of

expertise. Notice, then, that the exchange here is not of capital for labor, as in commercial transactions; it is an exchange in another currency, that of funds of knowledge, hence the metaphor. One could say, then, that the funds of knowledge in a particular household or in a network of households may form part of a broader (nonmonetary) household economy.

Thus this type of research, especially if conducted in close collaboration with teachers, provides one with an opportunity to (a) initiate relations of trust with families to enable discussion of their practices and funds of knowledge, (b) document these lived experiences and knowledge that may prove useful in defining households, individually and collectively, as having ample resources or assets that may be valuable for instruction, and (c) establish discursive settings with teachers to prepare them theoretically, methodologically, and analytically to do the research and to assess the utility of the findings for classroom practice (González et al., 2005; Moll, 2014). In other words, the knowledge base one can accrue through this approach to households can be treated pedagogically as bona fide cultural resources for teaching and learning in schools. It represents, one could say, an opportunity for teachers, as part and parcel of their pedagogy, to identify and establish the *educational capital* of families often assumed to be lacking any such resources.

## The Translocation of Funds of Knowledge

In what follows, I review four studies conducted in different countries and socio-cultural contexts. In each, the researchers reorient the concept of funds of knowledge to address issues germane to their settings.

### *New Zealand*

The work of Hedges, Cullen, and Jordan (2011) in New Zealand is a case in point. These researchers, as part of their work in early childhood education, documented children's interests through observations and interviews and used the findings as a basis for the children's schooling. The preschool programs in this study already placed a clear emphasis on play as a way to engage children in the curriculum, but the teachers tended to ignore other interests that children brought to the classroom. The researchers identified various topics related to the children's everyday experiences, some inspired by adult activities in the home (e.g., rugby or cooking), others unrelated to adult activities or family relations. The study of how relations with siblings or peers become important mediating sources of interests, and funds of knowledge was an area that was recognized but not elaborated upon in our original writings on funds of knowledge. As Hedges and colleagues (2011) point out,

Spending time with parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, friends, teachers, and peers provided opportunities for children to develop funds of knowledge. These opportunities occurred in the contexts of family homes, early-education settings, during other family

and community activities, and through the affordances of family social capital such as holidays, cultural celebrations, and technologies. Further, through children's funds of knowledge-based interests, culturally valued conceptual knowledge such as literacy, mathematics, and science begin to develop, as children engage with teachers and families, without the need for didactic teaching approaches. (p. 198)

In addition to documenting the sources of children's interests and knowledge, Hedges and Jones (2012) have written about *working theories*. These are children's best ideas about what is going on in their lives—their “inquiries into meaning,” strategies to make sense of experience, whether in or out of school, and help them gain some control over learning. Working theories also serve as mediating mechanisms, products of children's agency, helping children elaborate how to begin connecting the everyday knowledge they accumulate through their social relations with the scientific knowledge that is the basis of their schooling. As Hedges (2012) writes,

Experience and understanding of concept therefore first occur on the social plane as children express, test out, and revise working theories and are later internalized to the cognitive plane through complex processes of working through levels and relationships of understanding. Vygotsky based his associated research on the assumption therefore that concepts could not be assimilated by a child, but needed to undergo a process of dynamic, creative and complex development during social and cultural interactions. (p. 145)

Once again, we find the importance of establishing pedagogical relationships based on teachers' understanding of children's funds of knowledge. This broader recognition helps teachers respond to children's attempts to think and theorize about their lives and worlds, thus becoming valuable tools for addressing learning (Hedges, Cullen, & Jordan, 2011). The concept of working theories, then, applies not only to children's attempts to make sense of their realities but also to teachers' attempts to make sense of children's thinking and relationship to knowledge. Working theories help teachers learn how to guide children's thinking in relation to the academic agenda, the development of scientific concepts.

## Spain

Saubich and Esteban-Guitart (2011) used a funds of knowledge approach in studying immigrant families in the region of Catalunya, Spain. Spain has experienced major and diverse immigrant flows, among the largest in Europe, which pose a major challenge to its schools. In this study, in addition to documenting funds of knowledge and making elaborate curricular adaptations, the researchers focused on documenting family incorporation and identity—central aspects of the immigrant experience.

Instead of emphasizing primarily ethnographic observations and interviews, their approach relied on administering a series of tasks to family members that addressed

both funds of knowledge and identity. These included an arts-based projective technique to form a self-portrait, a self-definition task, an assessment of family artifacts, picture-taking to depict family and educational routines, a sense-of-community questionnaire, and a depiction of networks and connections to significant others and institutions in family members' lives.

Here, the emphasis was on understanding beliefs, ideas, practices, abilities, perceptions, and skills—what Foucault called “technologies of the self” (as cited in Saubich & Esteban-Guirtart, 2011). They wrote:

[In our work] identity takes the form of a story originated by and distributed to family members, which involves community life and shared artifacts such as television, the Internet, books, flags or cultural beliefs. In this way, identity can be understood as a cultural and social process, a product of family and community socialization. Hence, when a teacher is studying the funds of family knowledge, he/she is studying their funds of identity as well. (p. 84)

Therefore, funds of knowledge are also an essential aspect of the story that members of a family create about themselves as a family, of the self-understanding of who they are, what has happened in their lives, and what they hope to accomplish, which they can relate to others as a form of self-definition. From this point of view, funds of knowledge, which are often provisional and fluid, help mediate the formation of an equally fluid sense of identity. Both are grounded in the changing sociocultural dynamics of family and community life.

### *Australia*

The question of how students' fashion identities was also central in an Australian study by Zipin, Sellar, and Herman (2012) that used the notion of funds of knowledge. In this study, the research was conducted in what the authors called “liquid and abject” neighborhoods. Rather than more or less cohesive or settled communities, the researchers found communities “undergoing complex unsettlements” (p. 183) as a consequence of globalization. In addition to Anglo blue-collar areas, they found diverse mixes that included Indigenous populations and immigrants from Vietnam, Cambodia, Bosnia, and Somalia. A variety of first languages were spoken by children in the schools.

Zipin and colleagues (2012) challenged the usual sense of what constitutes a community by questioning the nature and meaning of funds of knowledge in abject conditions and their pedagogical uses and relevance. The authors call for an inclusive approach, involving a pedagogical and ethical commitment, that would consider what Zipin (2009) calls “dark funds of knowledge”—Knowledge about difficult aspects of life that some students experience, such as violence and abuse. The point is that children's adverse experiences in their *lifeworlds*—their “complexly situated lives

outside school boundaries” (Zipin, 2009, p. 329)—will also mediate how they perceive and come to participate in their *schoolworlds*.

Therefore, this particular funds of knowledge perspective includes two dimensions, both related intimately to understanding the cultural mediation of thinking in and about these fluid, complex poverty settings (Zipin, 2013). One dimension is the call for a more inclusive pedagogy, that is, to develop authentic lifeworld pedagogies, one must acknowledge and understand, rather than avoid, the dark funds of knowledge, the consequences for students of living in difficult circumstances. The other dimension is the particular household pedagogies that also contribute to students’ light funds of knowledge, which may be brought into play in classroom teaching. The claim, then, is that failing to acknowledge and create pedagogical space for both dark and light funds of knowledge, or for particular ways of knowing, may constrain students’ identities as learners. And this, in turn, may constrain teachers’ understanding of who their students are and what they are capable of accomplishing. As Zipin (2009) explains:

If students thus recontextualise their lifeworld ways of being, protectively restricting how they show themselves to teachers, then teachers may perceive a narrow social ambit of students’ lives partly by misreading students’ ways of inhabiting schoolworlds as equivalent to lifeworld ways. (p. 329)

Thus, although conceptually aligned with the original funds of knowledge work, Zipin (2009) applied a different methodology. The goal of their work was for teachers to negotiate curriculum units with students that “connected meaningfully to lifeworld locales: in effect, putting students to work as ‘researchers’ of their own lifeworlds” (p. 320). This approach challenged the boundaries between students’ dark funds of knowledge and the school’s curricular practices by incorporating the former as learning assets.

Furthermore, Zipin and colleagues (2012) proposed that for students from such marginalized communities, part of an inclusive pedagogy involves not only fostering academic development but also enabling students to exercise their agency “for creating new futures through the work of critically understanding and re-imagining their cultural-historical present” (p. 188). This is a process of not only building on extant funds of knowledge but also creating innovations—new funds of knowledge—to stimulate a rethinking of the present and considerations of future possibilities.

## Uganda

In the households featured in Uganda, the children were orphaned by the premature demise of their parents, who died of HIV/AIDS—a disease that ravaged the region. There is no doubt that these are certainly unfortunate and vulnerable children, but they are also capable and resourceful: displaying agency by generating funds of knowledge for survival and protection.

As Kendrick and Kakuru (2012) explain it, the aim of their research is to expand and strengthen the current knowledge base of children living in child-headed households and how to strengthen their resources for living and advancement, even in the face of extreme poverty. One of the case studies featured a household with six children, with the oldest (Ibra) being a 12-year-old boy and the youngest (David) only 3 years old. When their mother died and they were left orphaned, Ibra assumed leadership of the household. Along with his sister, Winnie (10 years old), he approached the school to negotiate that all their siblings (excluding David because of his age) would still be able to attend the school, recognizing that schools were a key institution not only for learning but also for possibly gaining access to additional resources for survival.

For one, the researchers documented “multilingual cultural resources as tools for teaching and learning in child-headed families” (Namazzi & Kendrick, 2014, p. 728). These resources included language practices such as stories, songs, riddles, and proverbs but also translanguaging, as necessary, between Uganda and English, including in their proverbs and storytelling to help communicate ideas, feelings, and meaning. These language practices, as it had been for their parents, became resources for living.

In the absence of written history, storytelling was a major way of creating community and a sense of unity. Stories were repeatedly told for moral education, entertainment, relaxation, fun, and to help people forget their worries and gain a more positive outlook on life. Stories convey culture, experience, and social values. Given their communal, interactive, and participatory nature, they were part of children’s indigenous education in everyday matters, including initiation into adulthood. They were considered a means of orally transmitting knowledge, wisdom, feelings, and attitudes. As Kendrick and Kakuru (2012) wrote,

We view the school community and the neighborhood children as a critical means for this young family to learn and practice new knowledge and to develop positive social identities in their community. Contact with their peer group, including occasional access to the adult knowledge and resources that belonged to that group, provided a network of support necessary for their survival. (p. 406)

## Conclusion

The four projects summarized above, and several others we could mention, have used the funds of knowledge concept to generate new ideas and *positionalities* regarding work with teachers, students, and families. None of the projects were simply a replication of our studies; for example, only Saubich and Esteban-Guitart’s (2011) work included household visits, which was central to our formulation, and the methods used differed, but the intent remained the same: to learn from the families in ways that could be pedagogically productive. In addition, they concentrated on issues related to the formation of identity or how people come to understand themselves, which can be

considered inseparable from the production of knowledge, a central issue not only in immigrant adaptation or incorporation but in learning in or out of school.

Hedges and colleagues (2011) and Hedges and Jones (2012), in turn, concentrated on how children generate their own funds of knowledge, with peers and siblings playing an important role. Their interest was in the multiple social relations and sources of children's funds of knowledge, especially beyond those influenced by family relations or adult activities, and how the children, through their own agency, develop working theories about their knowledge and the connection or relation to the academic knowledge central to schooling practices. This is an area of work, the influence of peer relations, we did not elaborate in our original studies.

Finally, Zipin (2009, 2013) makes an argument for expanding what is considered valuable funds of knowledge in a student's lifeworld. In difficult circumstances, students may acquire what he refers to as dark funds of knowledge that may very well be a challenge to document and incorporate into classroom teaching but that would validate the students' ways with knowledge in a setting, such as the classroom, which usually excludes their experiences and identities. Central to his work are the students becoming researchers of their own lifeworlds; as Zipin puts it, to understand, imagine, or even reimagine their own communities.

The goal, then, as is the case of all funds of knowledge projects, is to document empirically and represent pedagogically families and students as resourceful and help educators arrange environments that are academically sound and strongly oriented to building on such resources for learning. The great advantage of a funds of knowledge approach to education is that it provides a theoretical orientation for understanding students' households, family practices, and cultural resources. Rather than a piece-meal or second-hand impression of students' families (which is, at best, what many teachers have), a funds of knowledge approach helps teachers understand the *cultural-historical basis* of household life and other formative experiences, such as students' interests, from which additional pedagogical innovations may emerge. At the heart of the approach is establishing strategic *alliances* for teaching and learning, developing new capacities and capabilities, and engaging pedagogically in ways that respect the students' social history and intellect.

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