

## Funds of Knowledge



make literacy meaningful

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### Introduction

Schools teach according to a curriculum, and, depending on the country, this curriculum is shaped either at national, regional, or local level. The aim of the curriculum is to arrive at some level of parity, to be able to rationalise and compare data across cohorts, and to create equal opportunities for children within the education system.

The notion of a 'curriculum' has long been problematized. Kelly (2004), for example, points out that, when we talk about 'the curriculum', we actually mean the 'educational curriculum', i.e. that the concern is never just what is covered, but also why it is covered, from an education perspective. He furthermore explores the holistic perspective of a 'total curriculum', making sure that individual subjects are not seen as being in isolation, but contributing to a learner's overall experience. Finally, the 'hidden curriculum' covers aspects that may not officially feature in a school's curriculum, but nevertheless is considered an important aspect of educating young people, such as encouraging social responsibility and a moral code.

When we consider the curriculum, it is important to be critical of it – who decides what should be learned? Who decides what is important? Broadfoot (1996) warns that the way we design and assess the curriculum imposes norms which may not necessarily be appropriate for all children. The curriculum is designed on a deficit model, meaning that it is constantly defined by those who do not meet certain criteria. Language such as 'narrowing the gap' and references to 'problematic' backgrounds drives home that there is a specific way to be successful. If a child who is constantly being defined by what they cannot do, this raises important questions about their perceptions of self and identity (Reay and Wiliam, 1999).

### Funds of Knowledge

The concept of funds of knowledge acknowledges the potential associated with knowledge that arises from pupils' active participation in multi-generational household and/or community activities. Pupils do not arrive in the classroom as blank slates, and they do not arrive with only their prior school learning. Funds of

knowledge theory argues that 'instruction should be linked to students' lives, and the details of effective pedagogy should be linked to local histories and community contexts' (Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti, 2005, p. ix). Households are 'repositories of knowledge' (Gonzalez, 2005, p. 26), and these forms of knowledge can be transferred to school contexts, thus affording opportunities to bridge the space between pupils' lifeworlds and school.

### **Social Development Theory**

Teaching through a funds of knowledge approach is more involved than celebrating diversity in the classroom, and, in fact, Grace (2008) warns that through simply 'celebrating cultural differences, stereotypes may actually be reinforced rather than diminished' (Grace 2008, p. 137). Funds of knowledge theory has its origin in Vygotsky's (1978, 1980) Social Development Theory, which is built on three concepts: social interaction, the more knowledgeable other, and the Zone of Proximal Development. Together, these principles argue for a social approach to learning, where there exists a kind of apprenticeship, enabling children to bring their own experiences into the classroom and to explore and build on them in a way that acknowledges them as individuals, with individual funds of knowledge.

#### *Learning Connected to Communities*

When we seek to apply funds of knowledge, we arrive at a curriculum which seeks to connect homes, classrooms and communities – and since homes, classrooms and communities are distinctly different, it would make sense that the curriculum, too, would differ.

*We should pay greater attention to providing teachers with opportunities to learn how to incorporate the funds of knowledge from their students' households into learning modules that approximate the total reality of the population. (Velez-Ibanez and Greenberg, 2005, p. 67)*

Funds of knowledge are concerned with making learning 'real', and to get out of the existing deficit model. Having said that, funds of knowledge does not mean that certain communities would never enter higher education, or meet standardised assessment criteria. The point is to pay attention to the journey, rather than just measure the shortcomings against the destination. Moje et al (2004) argue for a 'Third Space', a conceptual space that bridges the space between marginalised funds of knowledge and academic knowledge. In this space, different discourses between home and school contexts are explored, and everyday knowledge is integrated with academic learning to create new ways of knowing.

### **Problematising Funds of Knowledge**

Zipin (2009) points out that working with children's funds of knowledge does not necessarily mean that these funds of knowledge are inherently positive. A classroom which necessarily includes multiple funds of knowledge from different children

means that teachers must be aware of ways in which these funds of knowledge may interact, and the time it takes to work with each child on a funds of knowledge-based approach undoubtedly has an impact on teachers' workload. Finally, it may well still be true that certain funds of knowledge are considered to be 'worth more' than others, which again raises questions on equitability.

## Summary

The funds of knowledge approach builds on a social development and learning theory, arguing for an acknowledgement of children's home and community experiences, and exploring how teachers and schools may use these funds of knowledge to help individual children to create personalised ways of knowing. Issues undoubtedly exist in terms of equitability and workload, but the approach offers a critical lens for curriculum development, helping teachers to understand 'where the learners are coming from'.

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