Social Reconstructions of Schooling: Teacher Evaluations of What They Learned From Participation in the Funds of Knowledge Project

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Anthropologists describe schooling as socially constructed (Levinson & Holland, 1996), which is an important idea, opening up the possibility of educational change of the kind that has taken place through the Funds of Knowledge project. The social context of the education of culturally and linguistically diverse students in the United States today too often includes a wide gap between home and school worlds. The Funds of Knowledge project has offered a method to conceptualize schooling so that these worlds are integrated, and it uses ethnography to challenge participants to question assumptions behind common roles and create interaction between students and teachers, teachers and parents, and teachers and researchers.

The teachers in this project have undergone a process of professional and personal transformation as a result of their participation in this collaborative project. Their insights are documented in this chapter. As Moll and González (this volume) point out, all project participants underwent a change of perspective through our collaborative work. I focus on the teachers' process of change in the way that they approach their teaching and their students and families. This chapter has emerged from conclusions drawn by the teachers themselves about what they have learned and how their perceptions of their students and families have changed over time through the Funds of Knowledge project experiences.
The study and practice of ethnography that is central to a funds of knowledge perspective has created a dialectic—between the teachers and researchers and between teachers and students—which has led to a questioning of established roles and understandings. It is this questioning that has the potential for leading to educational change. As ethnographers, the teachers have engaged a meta-dialectic between established roles and understandings of teachers and students, that, through the experience of ethnography, are challenged.

This analysis is based on interviews I conducted with the teachers and is informed by my experiences during the 2 years I served as a research assistant on the project, where I worked closely with both teachers and researchers. At the project's conclusion at the end of 1995, I conducted exit interviews, asking the teachers to reflect on their experiences for the purpose of project evaluation. Each interview lasted from 1 to 2 hours. The views of seven teachers are included here in the form of actual excerpts from transcripts of recorded interviews and quotes or references to their publications. The interviews were a formal way of capturing the teachers' evaluations, and the results are based on an established rapport between the teachers and myself. I approached my work on the Funds of Knowledge project as a student of interdisciplinary collaborative research and linguistic anthropology, but also as a participant-observer and former high school teacher now in graduate school.

During the interviews, I was in the role of the ethnographer, seeking to learn from the teachers what the impact of this work had been. In this chapter I present an analytic description of the teachers who formed the backbone of the Funds of Knowledge project. I have chosen to present narrative excerpts because I want to share with the reader the teachers' voices, through their articulate and passionate narratives that describe their experiences with this unique collaborative effort.

As Norma Gonzalez points out in the Introduction, as project participants, we are all learners. For the teachers, the shift in perspective all began with the premise of the teacher as learner idea, central to the Funds of Knowledge project and the goal of fostering home-school links and understanding. The idea of approaching one's own classroom practice as a learner, as an ethnographer, opens up the possibility of new forms of understanding, which is at the heart of ethnography, in which the anthropologist enters a new culture or social context, observes and participates in daily life, and documents some part of the patterns of life that he or she experiences. The anthropologist may undertake fieldwork in his or her own back yard as well, trying to consider a familiar context with the new eyes of a trained observer, as the teachers did.

11. SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTIONS OF SCHOOLING

"TEACHER AS LEARNER" AND THE THREE COMPONENTS OF THE FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE PROJECT

Many project teachers have spoken or written about the ideas of what teacher as learner and teacher as researcher mean to them. The first phase of training in ethnographic theories and methodologies led the teachers to more open-ended home visits than is the norm, teacher study groups, and curriculum development based on student-family funds of knowledge. These three components of the project come together to incite a shift from a "deficit view" of "linguistically and culturally diverse" students, to a positive view that considers the wealth of household knowledge that is too often overlooked, with little or no connection for the child in the classroom.

Teachers must also be recognized for their knowledge as professionals in a constantly challenging vocation. The simple premise of respect for each participant's funds of knowledge was the modus operandi of the project. One teacher explains her view of parents as experts, a perspective she developed through participating in the Funds of Knowledge project:

We're taking a whole new focus. The parent involvement that [other programs] had was—Yes, they come into the classroom and they participate, and that's very strongly encouraged. And yes, they go on home visits, but the home visits are always "here's a little math game that you can play at your house, here are some ideas that you can use." And the parent workshops are always what the teacher has to offer the parent. And this is totally changing the whole role. And I think that these teachers are very excited about that, and interested in how I've used their ideas [the parents], and made them feel like they're the experts. I think that that's really exciting for them and for me to see that. And it also makes me change my attitude. I mean I just don't think about parents as not knowing things. I think about them as being very knowledgeable and having amazing skills.¹

This teacher's changing attitudes toward parents have been prompted by her home visits and the analytical discussions with the other teachers and researchers in the study groups. The idea of the teacher going into a home as a learner has a strong impact on all of the participants. These are a different kind of home visit than what the teachers had previously experienced, as we see in the following excerpt:

¹Transcription conventions: italics indicate vocal emphasis, and additional information is enclosed in brackets.
Before, when I was a PACE [pre-school] teacher for five years, and we went into the homes...we, the teachers, were more the imparter of the knowledge type person. So we would bring games into the homes. And we would bring activities the parents could do with the students, and there was a lot of reciprocal communication, and the parents are very, you know, open and we would end up finding out some information about the family, but we really didn't look at the whole situation as a learner.

And with the funds of knowledge program, if I went into the same home—well in this case I did—the same home...I saw things in a totally different light. And I was trained more in observational skills; instead of me doing all the talking, I would do more of the listening. It's amazing what you can find out, when you listen and observe [laughs]. And you know, reflect on what people say, and I remember the family I visited—the Campbells. Mrs. C was talking to me about her job in the original home visits when her son was in the PACE program. I knew she was a nurse, but that's as far as it went. I didn't know that she had all these other things that she did with her leisure time. And um, she was a wonderful cook. And she did sewing and she did crafts and I found out a lot of other things about the father, besides his job. So I think the whole outlook was different for me and I gathered more information. I looked at the students in a different light, because I started seeing them as a contributor to the curriculum. You know, what the student could bring to the class. And the other focus was what I could give the family. Like, me developing curriculum for them to do at home. So it was a totally different approach.

Seeing the students and families as a source of knowledge, and the potential application of this knowledge in the classroom, has been a topic of much discussion and analysis in the study groups, where the teachers can engage with the theories they are reading, with each other, and with the researchers. Teachers begin to view households as repositories for knowledge that can be drawn out to shape classroom curriculum. As Luis Moll points out in the Introduction, these study groups were key to the success of the project.

When I taught high school, I remember feeling as though I were teaching on an island, that my colleagues and I never had the time or the opportunity to sit down and discuss our work. The study groups are important for brainstorming, to provide a time, place, and forum for colleagues with common interests and experiences to reflect and share ideas about teaching theory and practice. The teacher quoted below described her view of the teacher study groups in fulfilling this need for teacher communication:

One complaint teachers have is we don't necessarily get much time to plan together and to talk, you know, and to share ideas. And sometimes that camaraderie—when you just have another person that's been through similar experiences, you get very excited about implementing ideas when there's another person that you can bounce ideas off of. And I think everyone needs support, and encouragement. And that's what that did for me. And I would get new ideas every time I went. I'd see another way a different teacher would look at the knowledge that came from the household and develop curriculum that maybe you'd never thought of. So it was really helpful.

The training in ethnographic theory and method went hand in hand with the study group discussions where the teachers could, in a workshop format, recount and analyze their experiences with their household visits, their interviews, and their field note write-ups. This follow-up allowed for the group participants to make articulations between the theory they were reading and their experiences with conducting ethnographic interviews in a way that was directly meaningful to them—in the context of their studies with their families:

And what was great was the little study groups, and we got to share information with each other. And, the actual—the, you know sometimes we would have speakers that would teach us specific skills—observational skills. But what I liked, we'd go out and practice and we could come back, and meet together and share our experiences. So I thought the training was very helpful.

The development of curriculum specific to a teacher's classroom and community context is a main goal of the Funds of Knowledge project. This is fostered through the exchange of ideas that takes place in the teacher study groups. This exchange is exemplified in this teacher's description of what happened when she told the study group about a student who had brought in his uncle's small coin collection:

...and I just offhandedly mentioned it in one of our teacher study groups. And one of the teachers picked up on that right away. She said, "well, why couldn't you do a study on money?" So then I—that turned the light bulb on and we thought, "Oh yeah, that would be great. It would fit into social studies, it would fit into math, it would fit into language arts." And so we went ahead and did this study—the study of money that worked out really well. We got into the barter system, how an economy works. The money itself, how it's produced, how it's made. We got into exchange rates. It was just a really interesting course of study. And it was all based on the collection.

And then other kids brought in collections that they had. They shared their experiences about going across the border, and spending the pesos, and each day the peso was worth less, because it kept being devalued, and we got into some political issues. It was just very, very all-encompassing. I really enjoyed that.

The creativity of individual teachers leads to many different curricular applications of funds of knowledge from the student households. The fol-
The following teacher began by visiting the home of a student who was having a challenging time in the classroom. Not only did the student improve in class, but the teacher also found a rich source of ideas from the household that provided the seeds for a successful classroom project that benefited all participants:

The second student I visited was a young girl. And what was interesting about that situation is that she was a discipline problem in the classroom at first. Minor discipline problem—she had a little, um, attitude you might say. But she was very bright and creative and through her home visits—I it was a different situation. I didn’t feel as accepted—the father didn’t really talk to me until after the third visit was over. But what happened was that little girl also—she became a real leader in the classroom. And what happened with the knowledge I gained from that household—she was doing a lot of clapping games I noticed at P.E.

So really, what we based the curriculum on wasn’t something I gathered from the home, although she learned the games in the home. I didn’t really see them during the visit, but I saw them in the school playground and she did a lot of singing and clapping games. And what we did was we had a program and invited the parents. And her father came, even though he hadn’t been very verbal in the visit. He came and he took off work. And so did the other father of the student that I was visiting. And both mothers came, and we had a little performance. And this little girl taught everyone in the class the clapping games. And she put them on charts with a group—she ran a language arts group. So again they were using the reading, the writing, and movement and singing, and then they did the performance on the stage and we invited the principal. And it helped with not only her academic skills, but also her social skills and she had a way to channel her creative energy. And the rest of the year I had no problems with her—her behavior, discipline.

It’s interesting because I didn’t think, at the time, that doing those games—the written dart games, and then the verbal clapping games—would make such a difference in these . . . children, but it really did . . . The little girl I did pick because I saw such wonderful qualities in her and I wanted to see if this would help our relationship, which it did.

This teacher’s home visit to learn about this family improved her communication with the parents, and her increased skills of observation led her to notice the games the child played outside of class. The decision to include the games she observed on the playground in her classroom curriculum further opened doors between the teacher and her students because she created a student-centered curriculum unit based on her new knowledge.

The applicability of a funds of knowledge approach to special education classrooms is also fruitful, as discussed later, because the teacher’s connections to the students’ families can have a very positive effect in challenging situations:

The next year when I did the same funds of knowledge project with my special education children that had severe emotional problems, I did pick two of the students that were having most of the difficulties . . . . I had made home visits when I taught special education before but not in the same light. So what I did was in this situation, I picked the toughest kid in the class, and if you look at the outcome of it, it was interesting for him. The way you’d measure success I guess would be, he—we only had to call the police on him once and the year before they had to eight times. So that was quite a reduction. That was one little measurement that—objective measurement.

But his home visits proved to be really amazing—what happened to this student. And um, he came from a very, um, real abusive environment. And when he started doing all the leadership roles of planning our African American studies—that’s what he did. He just really—just really helped his behavior, you know he felt, he was already kind of a leader in the classroom, when he was in control of his anger. And he was a very, very bright student. And he was—he just blossomed and he even went into the sixth grade class that he was mainstreamed—they were integrating it for social studies.

The teachers suggest that the main components of the Funds of Knowledge project have challenged them to learn new things about their students and students’ families and therefore about their own roles as teachers and their practices. The ethnographic interviews and observations challenge them to see their students as children with lives outside of the school and become less judgmental of their students’ parents.

TEACHERS’ PROCESS OF CHANGE

The teachers interviewed discussed having gone through a process of reflection on their teaching and reconsideration of their own often previously unacknowledged assumptions about their students. This reflective process is observable in the following teacher’s statement:

I think that’s one thing that we as teachers—I think we’re guilty of judging the kids and maybe even looking down on them—not seeing them at equals but as inferior to us because of the kinds of—the class of society that they may come from. I never intentionally judge the kids, not doing it intentionally and this helped me so much to realize that kids are kids—no matter what socio-economic level they’re from and that we need to encourage them in every way. And these visits helped to do that. It gave credence to what they do at home. I learned to value everything that they did at home. The intentions of the parents many times were very good, but they were so overwhelmed with day-to-day survival that they didn’t have time for things that my mother did all the time. You know, it was just very eye opening and humbling for me to be able to go into their homes and share with them.
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You know, so many times in the schools you'll hear the teachers say "Oh, they never showed up for the conference, they don't care about their children's education." But then you go into the homes and you see the kinds of things that they're dealing with and it's not because they don't care. They just have other things that need to be done. And a lot of times they don't feel comfortable in the school setting. . . . And so they don't come, not because they're not interested in their children's education, but they don't want to be judged. They feel that the school is a foreign environment for them. The language spoken in the school is English and their home language is Spanish. You know, all these things enter into it. They don't have transportation. This first family, she drove, but they had one car so he had to take the car to work so she had no form of transportation. So if I were to have a conference with her at school, there's no way she could get there. And a lot of times when you try to make contact it appears that they're not interested. But there are so many other reasons why they can't make it. So that's basically what I'm talking about. We need to be much more compassionate, understanding. And this program helps to do that.

[The parents] felt much more comfortable with me then, once I made the contact and sat down with them and talked with them about their family histories and all this. Then they felt the confianza with me. They could tell me more. You know before they might be embarrassed—I can't tell her that I don't have a car or I can't tell her that I just don't feel comfortable at the school. You know, they felt more at ease with me and they knew that I wouldn't be judging them wrongly. And that—the rapport was much much better.

This teacher's discussion of her previous lack of compassion, and of initial understanding of her students' families, underscores the importance of teachers gaining firsthand knowledge of their students. As Amanti (1995) pointed out, when teachers complete their university studies, many assume that they have learned as much about their future students as they need to, despite the fact that their studies likely exposed them to thirdhand knowledge of multicultural communities and the differences of class, race, and gender that they would encounter among their students. For Amanti, the benefit of teachers doing qualitative research in their students' communities is that they gain firsthand knowledge.

As Floyd Tetikey mentioned (this volume), teachers can serve as mediators between the worlds of home and school. It is this process of gaining firsthand knowledge that leads teachers to question their ways of thinking about their students' families. The social process of teaching and learning in the classroom can only be improved by building rapport and relationships of confianza, mutual trust, based on increased understanding between teachers and students with their families.

The teachers I interviewed all speak of stretching themselves and letting go of preconceptions over time. In the process they have experimented with new identities as teachers, and as learners and researchers.
When teachers look to their students for curriculum ideas, this involves a
shift in perspectives, and a shift in the role of a teacher from “imparter” to
“learner and researcher”:

This project makes that shift, and gives teaching a more human side. It is easy
to be objective and treat the children like small machines, not really taking
into account their personalities and their backgrounds. When you only see a
child in a classroom this is very easy to do. If your only contact with them is an
academic one, it is very easy to make assumptions, and not take into account
outside information when you are evaluating the child. So I have found that
the project gave me a chance to get to know the children in another context.

For this teacher, seeing the child in another context opens up possibilities
of new forms of understanding and communication. One teacher observed
that personalizing the institutional relationships is a key to educational
change:

So, it just really taught me a lot. About understanding people and realizing
how much worth there is in a home that can be dealt with at school. Even if we
didn’t find a curricular connection—just interviewing and having the home
visits I think in and of themselves was so helpful to give that human contact.
I’m sure many years ago when teachers were required to live in the communi-
ties where they taught, and stay at the school board member’s house, that
kind of thing, they were invited all the time to people’s homes and there was a
lot of social interaction. But now there’s a real barrier there between the
teacher and the family and so many times they don’t make that connection.
That’s really important, for a child’s whole education to have that contact.

Getting to know a student in a different light, in a different context, as a
whole person, rather than just as a “little machine” opens up many possibili-
ties for teachers, and also for parents. This personalization can be acco-
nplished through exchange (i.e., of ideas, or items for use in class). This type
of exchange between teachers and families begins to break down the tradi-
tional hierarchical relationships, in which students and families are subordi-
nate to teachers, who in turn are too often considered subordinate to
their administrators and the researchers they may work with.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EXCHANGE
IN BUILDING RAPPORT

The parent came in too and shared his expertise with the students in the class-
room and the home visits I made with him were—ended up being probably
six visits with each family. But the home visits I made with this student were—

and you know they could have gone on all year if I had had enough time be-
cause I got very close to the family. And they asked me to dinner, and, you
know, it was really amazing. The mom went on two field trips with us and the
dad, who was very resistant, decided to come in and share his expertise when
he was a cook on a submarine, [and] also a mechanic. And he brought slides
and the kids really liked it . . . so he had a lot of different skills. And so he
shared a lot of those.

Building rapport between home and school can be as simple as increasing
communication. A Funds of Knowledge project teacher developed a
method to take advantage of household knowledge by sending home news-
letters, telling family members about class activities, and inviting them to
come into school and demonstrate some of their skills. She found that by
simply asking more questions of “her families” she fosters the home-school
connection and finds new ideas for classroom projects that can encompass
a range of topics across her curriculum:

So it came about from that grandma. Later on in the year I was doing a math
project. We were really learning about tessellations, which are basically tilin,
where it’s mosaics, where patterns fit together to make a solid design. And we
got into quilting, which is a tessellation also. And so I started asking the kids if
they had any quilts . . . children started to bring in quilts that somebody in
their family had made for them. And they were beautiful! We just got really in-
volved with the designs and how they were made.

When I questioned this teacher about how she had learned about her
families’ expertise for all the projects she undertook, she replied: “I talked to
the parents. [laughs] I guess that’s one thing that I didn’t do before! Now it seems so natural, you know.”

This teacher found that she never lacks in ideas for class projects, or for
assistance in the classroom, since she sees students as contributors to the
curriculum. The theme of reciprocity and exchange is also a key to the suc-
cess of the Funds of Knowledge project. A participant above talked of the
importance of “what the student could bring to the class. And the other fo-
cuse was what I could give the family. Like, me developing curriculum for
them to do at home.” In the Funds of Knowledge project there are constant
exchanges of ideas, talents, goods (including, for instance, articles in the
study groups, and crafts in the households and classrooms), and communi-
cation in general. The fundamental basis for the change in perspective and
practice is exchange, coupled with the openness created by approaching
the educational context as a learner, through ethnography.

2For an anthropological description of the importance of exchange, see Mauss (1950/
1990).
CONCLUSION

As the editors say in the Introduction, we all felt the impact of this project: Teachers see themselves as learners, students and families take on the role of teachers, and fellow teachers become learners and "sharers" with each other and with university researchers, who are also learning from fellow members of the team. Professional development takes on new meaning as teachers reflect on their practices in a new way, in conjunction with this inversion in perceptions of hierarchical institutional relationships. What teachers experienced through participating in the Funds of Knowledge project constitutes a restructuring of common practices in educational institutions whose hierarchical roles of principals, teachers, students, aides, and parents are laden with unspoken, assumed dimensions of power (in an anthropological sense).

Through this questioning of tacit power dimensions and practices (Bourdieu, 1982), these teachers engaged in ethnographic projects have affected change in the social contexts of their schools.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How have the Funds of Knowledge project teachers' practices changed as a result of their experiences with this project?
2. How is ethnography defined?
3. What do you identify with in the teacher's narratives?
4. What do you learn from this chapter that challenges you to think about your own role as a teacher? As a researcher? Can hierarchical (power) relationships in schools be challenged and/or changed?

REFERENCES


The chapters in this part provide a window into permutations that are possible by building on local knowledge. These four chapters are variations on the funds of knowledge theme. Each takes the concept and extends it in new and sometimes unanticipated ways in response to the dynamics of particular settings. The authors in this part "problematize" what we have considered the foundational premises of the work.

In chapter 12, Marcia Brenner presents an exciting variation of the approach, documenting how teachers in an actual field research project became social scientists, gathering usable data for a large funded project. This chapter takes the funds of knowledge approach to a new level. The author participated in a social impact assessment of the oil industry in southern Louisiana. Part of the process involved gathering information from two communities, and teachers were recruited as fieldworkers. In this approach, however, teacher-researchers gathered data that were to be part of a formal study and were systematic researchers of their own communities. Because the focus was on the oil industry, teacher-researchers quickly became aware of the impact that this entity has on their own lives. Many voiced the idea that they had been unaware that their personal experiences were part of a larger patterns in the ebb and flow of oil revenues. They acquired a hi-
FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE
Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms

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