

# Supporting Student Assets and Demonstrating Respect for Funds of Knowledge

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## Abstract

Much has been written about the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy which can motivate and stimulate learning. Proponents of the Funds of Knowledge theorize that cultural relevance is founded on the student's culture, community, and family. These aspects of students' worldview are referred to as assets. The extent to which teachers learn about students' assets is termed Funds of Knowledge. To increase students' sense that they are a part of the classroom community, it is recommended that teachers learn about students' families, community, and culture. Understanding these assets can then be leveraged to intentionally invite students into learning that results from enhanced engagement, cognition, and comprehension. Appreciation for the exchange between teacher and student of the assets attributed to Funds of Knowledge theory aligns with Invitational Education theory and practice, which encourages personal and professional opportunities to be intentionally caring, optimistic, respectful, and trusting toward others' pursuit of their human potential. Research indicates teachers that implement tenets of these theories foster a positive learning environment that promotes their students' self-concept.

*Keywords:* Funds of Knowledge, Invitational Theory and Practice, English Language Learners, Cultural Respect, Culturally Relevant Experiences

## Introduction

Invitational Education (IE) theory and practice, suggests teachers should be personally inviting with students, which is one of the steps in the "Four Corner Press of being personally and professionally inviting with one's self and others" (Purkey & Novak, 2016). For students to feel that they belong in the classroom community, teachers should learn about their students' families and outside interests, as well as willingly share information about themselves and their own activities outside of the classroom. The Funds of Knowledge framework postulated by Moll (2001), refers to this reciprocal knowledge as "assets."

Assets are personal and contain knowledge of the student gained from the student's family, community, culture or their religion. Culture relates to the customs and practices that students bring to the learning environment. These include the traditions, languages, dialects, worldviews, literature, art, etc. that a teacher can draw upon to support learning. Community denotes common backgrounds and experiences that students bring from where they live, such as resources, local landmarks, community events and practices, and so on, that a teacher can leverage for learning. Both the Funds of Knowledge framework and IE theory and practice promote respect by

encouraging autonomy and sharing the responsibility for learning with the student. Educators with an IE mindset respectfully invite students to share their interests and needs on issues that influence their own learning (Purkey & Novak, 2016).

Assets are specific background information that a student brings into the learning environment. Students may bring interests, everyday experiences, family backgrounds, and academic previous knowledge, which a teacher can draw upon to support learning (Purkey & Novak, 2016; Moll & González, 1996). Both the Funds of Knowledge framework and IE theory encourage embracing students' prior knowledge from lived experiences in both the home and in their community as useful for the transference of knowledge from student to teacher (Purkey & Novak, 2016; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). A research scenario established for a study by Moll et al. (2009) allowed teacher-participants to take the role of co-researchers, whereby teachers visited their students' homes and community to learn about their lives outside of school. During the study, this activity connected the teacher-participants with their students' worldview. The result was increased perceptions of a more inclusive classroom environment. When a teacher extends an invitation to join a lesson, that teacher exhibits an intention to lead her or his class in an instructional activity whereby students feel encouraged to take part in the learning process.

## **Background**

An intentionally inviting teacher understands that some students may accept the teacher's invitation while others may decline it. Crucially, the student's choice is to be respected. Teachers invite autonomy as an inclusive practice. IE theory supports autonomy as an "ethical" approach used by inviting teachers to share the responsibility of learning (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. 8).

Managing learning styles and the freedom to participate influences the student's ability to make a choice to learn. The sharing of responsibility is demonstrative of mutual respect. This initiative taken from Invitational Education theory (Purkey & Novak, 2016) allows teachers to manage their classrooms and educate their students with dignity and empathy rather than with punitive measures. This IE practice is supported by the Funds of Knowledge framework.

While cultural assets may influence a student's learning style and/or participation, the intentionally inviting educator is mindful of student characteristics and develops a curriculum that makes allowances for freedom. Furthermore, utilizing the Funds of Knowledge framework allows administrators and teachers to build curricula around the events and situations observed in households and in the community to then leverage increased understanding of student strengths as a foundation for learning within the classroom. Implementation of IE theory and the Funds of Knowledge framework can serve as an instructional support for successful learning. This is most clearly evident in relation to ELLs, diverse learners, and students with individual education programs. Especially with these populations, learning is personalized with more meaningful learning outcomes realized when aligned with the student's social schema.

## **Review of the Literature**

Research on the extent to which culturally relevant educational methodology may activate cognitive processes to facilitate learning has been ongoing for decades. IE theory and practice conceptualized transfer of knowledge is mediated by the relationship between student's prior knowledge and classroom learning. Advancing self-concept theory and perceptual psychology,

Purkey (1970) examined self-concept and academic achievement, focusing upon the relationship between self-esteem and students' school achievement. Initial research found effective educator efforts to facilitate learning and academic development encouraged productive social interactions (Purkey, 1970). Given Purkey's belief that humanistic cognition is built on the foundation of self-esteem and achievement, both IE theory and the Funds of Knowledge framework are based upon socio-cultural interactions.

The worldview that a student gathers from lived experiences is useful in both the home and in their community. The transference of this knowledge from student to teacher can be facilitated by the intentionally inviting educator (Purkey & Novak, 2016; González et al., 2005). A study by Moll et al. (2009) described teachers' role as co-researchers, while exhibiting IE tenets and exploring the efficacy of Funds of Knowledge. Five teachers visited the community to learn about students' lives in their cultural contexts to connect with the students and then intentionally invite sharing of life experiences within their classroom environment. This study sought to investigate the phenomenon of using Funds of Knowledge to promote a more inclusive, intentionally inviting classroom environment that positively influences student success.

### **Significance of the Study**

This demonstration study herein examined mutual respect that addresses behaviors and beliefs at both the teacher and student level (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004). Utilizing the assets gained from the Funds of Knowledge framework in this manner allows administrators and teachers to design a curriculum derived from sociocultural linguistics that is infused with challenges that associate with student strengths. Considering the value that humanists place on relationships, Purkey (1967) cited how the self was a social product comprised of perceptions and interactions with the environment. Purkey and Siegel (1968) were known to train educators in a more personal and humanistic approach to use in their teaching. Culturally relevant pedagogy and the collection of previous knowledge and interests as assets for learning were addressed by Purkey and Siegel as early as 1967. The importance of these assets is now firmly affixed within the domains, core elements, and tenets of Invitational Education (IE) theory and practice (Purkey & Novak, 2016).

Intentionally inviting educators can leverage the strengths and assets gained from knowledge of their students to offset potential academic deficits by building relevance into the curriculum with themes drawn from the information and interests observed during the student's home or a community visit (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014). The cultural differences between teachers and their diverse students can impact a student's learning (Rodriguez, 2013). Parallel to the Funds of Knowledge framework (Moll, 2009), an IE theory and practice mindset can support an educator's endeavor to learn about the students' strengths and interests. Therefore, the information can be infused into the curriculum and lesson planning which builds upon prior learning and academic skillsets. The curriculum plan relies on a learning context that is inclusive of demographic discovery of all students' abilities, instructional resources including technology and academic staff. However, too often curricula fail to provide the rich cultural knowledge that an individual can bring into the classroom (McLaughlin & Calabrese Barton, 2013). As a result, McLaughlin and Calabrese Barton (2013) developed an elementary level science curriculum that

intentionally taps into this wealth of knowledge. Their learning platform intentionally invites pedagogical procedures that optimize motivating forces for sustained learning.

For this study, the author explored these concepts in relation to the academic reading practices within a college classroom. The current structure of college developmental reading remediation is the support of deficits using out-of-context reading strategies and vocabulary instruction (Hofsetter, 2003). This is a bottom-up strategy particularly disadvantageous for diverse learners who have limited academic language proficiency upon which to build and therefore rely on their basic intercommunication skills for learning, such as is the case with ELL, diverse, and students with language-based disabilities. The reliance on use of their basic communication skills aligns with the utilization of a student's social strengths to scaffold for learning. Moll et al.'s (2014) research design centered on the ELL elementary students and elementary school teachers. Students may mature or changes in perceptions may occur in the ways in which students relate with teachers and peers. Hence, the initial premise for this study stemmed from Moll's preliminary work to provide insight on this phenomenon with students at the college level.

### **Methodology**

The current study utilized a case study research design to describe cultural relevance, student characteristics, and social learning in an academic reading section for ELL college students. The current study attempted to identify themes in present in order to understand the culturally relevant experiences of the ELLs in their educational environment (Hatch, 2002). This case study took place in an educational setting, where data was collected through classroom observations and personal interviews designed to triangulate and demonstrate relationships that emerged during data analysis (Creswell, 2003). The participant pool consisted of heterogeneously grouped first-year college students attending English immersion classes that were typically categorized based on three areas of ELL proficiency:

- 1) Exhibiting varying levels of academic and English-language proficiencies,
- 2) Being an English-Language Learner,
- 3) Having received majority of formal education outside of the United States.

### **Instrumentation**

Observation guide and an Academic Conversations Checklist as a matrix containing dimensions related to cultural relevance (Moll, 2001). The purpose was to record culturally relevant conversations present in academic reading classes for English- language Learners. The checklist was inspired by Miller (2010), an advocate for English- language Learner students. Miller (2010) describes factors in a classroom that may direct education professionals to implement effective teaching strategies.

The faculty observations were intended to identify characteristics about English-language Learner faculty that may enhance culturally relevant classroom conversations. Moll et Al., 2009, investigated the teacher's ability to learn about the identity of their learners, Funds of Knowledge, hence supporting instruction in the classroom and further instructional practices.

A student interview guide questions were intended to capture the experiences as perceived from the English-language Learner. The interview questions inspired by Tare and Gelman, (2010) who write about the bilingual student's ability to use two languages for a different set of circumstances and how students can transition between languages corresponding to the level of

difficulty of tasks. A secondary source to support these questions are founded in the works of Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky postulated that students learn through the social context of the lesson from the More Advanced Other. The More Advance Other could be the instructor or classmate peers (Moll, 2014).

## **Procedures**

Data Collection consisted of interviews and observations. The personal interviews were held with 15 English-language Learner students. The classroom observation took place during academic English reading class. The observation focused on the frequency of culturally relevant themes and pedagogy, teacher-student interactions, and student-student communication. The duration of the observation was scheduled to extend for the 1.5 hours class.

## **Data Analysis**

The data was transcribed into NVivo qualitative research software. NVivo is used for qualitative data analysis and was designed to analyze rich narrative based information. The NVivo software program organized the narrative transcriptions to yield a report identifying themes and patterns from the collected data. Themes were then analyzed investigating for emerging themes and patterns of English-Language Learner student responses, reading faculty responses, and observations. All relevant sub-themes were merged into the resulting overall themes. Finally, cases yielding erroneous information were reviewed for further inquiry.

## **Results**

The results indicated three major themes/patterns emerging from the phenomena: *Cultural Relevance*, *Social Learning*, and *Student Characteristics*.

*Cultural Relevance*: This theme was informed by coding cultural awareness, cultural characteristics of the learner, culturally informed interests, and teacher knowledge of cultural facts of and from the students. Students reported wanting more opportunities to discuss their culture and reported that they felt that the teacher should learn their culture as well as sharing them about American culture.

*Social Learning*: This theme contains four categories including collaboration/sharing with mentor (i.e. teacher, advanced student peer), academic support, and social strengths.” and that the “students are non-participatory,” suggesting that the students lack the experiences communicating with teachers and other students.

*Student Characteristics*: This theme may be informed by a student’s culture, family, and community.

A noteworthy extended theme also revealed *self-regulated learning*.

## **Conclusion**

Moll’s (2009) theory explained how the students’ personal resources can be tapped into for optimal learning (Funds of Identify). These assets are what one develops from culturally relevant exposure to situations learned within households and from the community. The transfer of this knowledge from the student onto the teacher is termed, Funds of Knowledge. The present study supported the IE mission to promote intentionality, care, optimism, respect, and trust (I-CORT).

Funds of Knowledge describes learning students gain from their family, community, and cultural background (2005). A characteristic of the Funds of Knowledge theory concerns personal resources. Educators can leverage the strengths gained from students' Funds of Identity to offset their academic deficits by building the curriculum with themes that align with the strengths or patterns observed in the English-Language Learner's home or community (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014). During the analysis of the interview data, this theme emerged recurrently as the social culture of the student learner was a major consideration within the dynamics of this learning context. Thus, the experiences the student participants held had shaped their in-class behaviors. For the purpose of this discussion, an inviting teacher informed by this knowledge understands that his or her exposure to the Eastern educational philosophy, may have affected the student's classroom behaviors which then, contributed to a passive disposition. Furthermore, embracing student characteristics fostered a positive learning environment and avoided common characteristic of low self-efficacy. Through an analysis of his research, Rodriguez (2013) postulated the cultural differences between teachers and diverse students can impact student learning. Therefore, when aligned with tenets of IE, embracing the Funds of Knowledge can support educators' endeavor to learn about student strengths and interests and avoid miscommunications that interfere with learning.

Unfortunately, many curriculums fail to capture the rich equity that a student brings into the classroom (McLaughlin & Barton, 2012). The student participants in this study recognized that the focus of their instruction was to successfully read English so that they could continue into college credit-bearing courses. The curriculum from the present study outlined thematic lectures focusing on reading skills and objectives. Vocabulary instruction was an important aspect noted by the participants. The participants employed self-regulation with use of technology for assistance. Students' motivation, self-regulated learning, and technological savvy exemplified the student's strengths and leveraged sustained learning as suggested by Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014). Developing a curriculum that embraces Funds of Knowledge ideology and an IE mindset would be respectful of each student's worldview and effectively bring the assets of knowledge from the family, community, and culture into the classroom.

The current study revealed patterns of culturally relevant academic conversations, factors related to reading acquisition, and the resulting implications for the college-bound English-language Learner. The study also provided details about the careful and respectful identity of the learner, which included student characteristics, student role association, and learning behaviors. All of these were informed by one's culture. Consistent utilization of Funds of Knowledge aligned with a mindset willing to implement IE's I-CORT tenets was shown to empower students and improve programs. Recognition of the parallel between IE and Funds of Knowledge provides insight for the pedagogical practices for English-language Learners. The findings herewith may also generalize to all students. This discussion has revealed interesting information about cultural relevance and the culturally relevant characteristics, or assets that may support the IE educator. Therefore, utilizing IE theory and practices to support student assets through respect for their Funds of Knowledge demonstrates intentionality, care, optimism, respect, and trust.

## Relevance for Future Practice

Existing reading instruction practices may fail to recognize the culturally relevant learning experiences of ELL students or their funds of identity. Funds of Knowledge and IE practices play a pivotal role for the educator in understanding student motivation, priorities, and familial values as shown with research on student socialization (Purkey & Novak, 2016; Zayas & Solari, 1994). Implementing Funds of Knowledge and intentional invitations to succeed into college programs could tailor remediation practices to further student engagement, academic reading acquisition, and ultimately college success. Effective educators implementing IE practices can utilize motivation as an intrinsic force that is unique to each person and cannot be bought with stickers, rewards, and other extrinsic reinforcers (Purkey & Novak, 2016). The effective IE educator realizes that the “how” process is equally as important as the outcome. An educator that respects the Funds of Knowledge framework and advocates for IE practices understands positive relationships are best explained by the need for “care”, a core element of IE theory. Caring teachers exhibit empathy, warmth, and positive regard for their students and themselves (Purkey and Novak, 2016).

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