



Integrating the Funds of Knowledge Approach into ESOL Teacher Preparation

Brian Hibbs

Dalton State College, United States

Abstract

Cho et al. (2019) explain that culturally and linguistically diverse students are “learners who are part of an ethnic and/or language group considered to be different from that of the majority population” (p. 54). Numerous scholars have commented on the fact that public school classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse for a myriad of education, social, and/or political reasons and that, as a result, teachers must necessarily be prepared to teach students coming from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. These learners have traditionally been viewed from a deficit perspective (Valenzuela, 1999) in that their previous cultural and linguistic experiences were not identified, understood, or valued; more recently, however, these pupils are progressively being considered from an asset-based perspective (Bartlett & García, 2011) in which their linguistic and cultural identities are supported and advanced through a variety of means. One such procedure which has gained certain notoriety in recent years is the funds of knowledge approach, defined by González et al. (2005) as “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 72). Consequently, this paper will outline an exploratory study designed to equip ESOL pre-service teachers with the skills and strategies needed to effectively instruct these learners via the funds of knowledge approach. The paper begins with an overview of a course unit on the funds of knowledge approach integrated within an ESOL culture and education course for teacher candidates enrolled in an elementary-education program at a small liberal arts college in the southeastern United States. Next, the paper outlines the logistics of the course unit along with the readings, corresponding activities, and assignments that constituted the unit. The paper then reviews the structure and organization of an investigation conducted to document students’ perspectives concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the course unit via a mixed-methods post-course questionnaire. Finally, the paper presents preliminary findings obtained from the study suggesting that the course unit successfully familiarized participants with both the theoretical underpinnings and specific techniques for recognizing and validating English learners’ cultural and linguistic assets.

Keywords: *Culturally and linguistically diverse learners, Educator preparation, ESL, ESOL, Funds of knowledge, Teacher education*

1. Introduction

Numerous scholars have contended that elementary and secondary classrooms have become increasingly diverse both culturally and linguistically over the last decade or so and will continue to be more diverse moving forward. For instance, between 2010 and 2021, the percentage of students who identified as Caucasian/White decreased from 52% to 45%, while the percentage of students who identified as Hispanic/Latinx increased from 23% to 28% during the same period (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022) despite the fact that the teachers of these students still tend to be predominantly White (79%) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). These statistics suggest that, although the American public education system is becoming progressively diverse, the assessments, curricula, programs, etc. are still largely based on White/Eurocentric norms and expectations and are not accounting for the vast array of academic and life experiences possessed by these students. For example, with respect to Black students, Ware and Ware (1995) contend that “the predominant curricular values and traditions in American...education were developed...when African-Americans and other people of color were excluded from the dominant intellectual community” (p. 1152), implying that education in the United States was largely established to promote the values and virtues of White European culture. In response to these trends, educators have been gradually working to challenge and question this status quo by integrating the linguistic and cultural abilities, competencies, expertise, skills, etc. that students from minoritized populations possess and exhibit. Cho et al. (2019) define culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students as “learners who are part of



an ethnic and/or language group considered to be different from that of the majority population” (p. 54). Sprott & Msengi (2019) clarify that this population consists of “individuals or a group whose culture, language, and ethnicity are different from the dominant group” (p. 166). These learners have customarily been perceived from a deficit standpoint (Valenzuela, 1999) in the sense that their previous academic and life experiences were seen as being at variance with expected knowledge and expertise of other (White) children

This, it is essential to not only identify and acknowledge the cultural and linguistic assets these pupils demonstrate but also effectively incorporate them

2. Theoretical Background

Two overarching frameworks framed the study examined in this paper: asset-based pedagogies and funds of knowledge; each theory is summarized below.

2.1. Asset-Based Pedagogies

Seipel et al. (2022) defines asset-based teaching as “the process of identifying, focusing, and developing a student’s talents, strengths, and interests...” (p. 181). Du and Breazeal (2022) explain that asset-based pedagogy is “an approach [which] seeks to unlock students’ potential by focusing on their talents” (p. 113) and observe that this style of teaching “...contrasts with the more common deficit-based style of teaching which highlights students’ inadequacies” (p. 113). These definitions highlight the fact that no student, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, exceptionality, language, religion, etc. arrives at school as a *tabula rasa* (“clean slate”); all learners possess an infinite range of aptitudes, capabilities, proficiencies, etc. when they enter a given classroom. Consequently, for the educational enterprise to be effective, teachers should strive to determine what exactly this previous learning consists of and establish the relevancy of in-school learning to their students’ out-of-school backgrounds and experiences. In sum, educators who view their students from an asset-based perspective are thus “...opposed to identifying and focusing on a student’s weakness[es]” (Seipel et al., 2022, 181) by “using the student’s cultural differences as a strength” (Garcia & Garcia, 2021, p. 157), thus inverting the traditional educational paradigm which has advanced and promoted the view that CLD learners are lacking in some form or fashion. Additionally, Artze-Vega and Delgado (2019) note that one of the fundamental strengths of the approach is that it “shift[s] the focus from individuals or groups’ perceived limitations or weaknesses to the resources and capacities inherent to them or associated with their lived experiences” (p. 40). In other words, it is ultimately the system which needs to adapt and adjust to the academic and life experiences of students, not the other way around. More specifically, with respect to multilingual learners of English, this approach “offer[s] multilingual students an opportunity for a more equitable and accessible educational future” (Arias, 2022, p. 8).

2.2. Funds of Knowledge

In summary, adopting an asset-based framework in one’s instruction “requires that educators abandon a focus on the perceived limitations and weaknesses in students and expand their understanding of the strengths, assets, and funds of knowledge that students and their families possess” (Arias, 2022, p. 3). Thus, in order to challenge the status quo in education which tends to privilege White, mainstream, middle-class standards and ideals, Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1992) first coined the term “funds of knowledge” to refer to the cultural and linguistic resources that Mexican-American families possessed and exhibited. González et al. (2005) explain that funds of knowledge are “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 72). Esteban-Guitart (2016) affirms that funds of knowledge constitute a “repertoire of cultural and intellectual resources...that households accumulate and use to maintain their welfare and quality of life” (p. 81). In a similar vein, González et al. (2011) explain that the approach consists of “a body of scholarship and practice...that...has engaged with the knowledge and skill sets available in the households of students” (p. 481) and that intended to emphasize the knowledge base of communities that have traditionally been marginalized. The funds of knowledge approach thus seeks to center education on the linguistic and cultural strengths of CLD students by capitalizing on their knowledge and integrating these learners’ expertise into the classroom, thus not only demonstrating the applicability of their previous experiences to their education (and vice versa) but also affirming their cultural and linguistic identities. González et al.



(1994) explain that the approach was established in the 1990s as a partnership between university researchers from the University of Arizona and classroom teachers in Tucson. During this project, educators (1) conducted an ethnographic study of the households of several of their students by visiting these families, interviewing them, and documenting the literacy practices they exhibited, and (2) attended after-schools with the researchers in which they reflected on the learning gained from the home visits and worked collaboratively to plan instructional lessons that incorporated the families' funds of knowledge. Results of the project demonstrated that it was successful in problematizing participants' views of culture and challenging them to understand culture as an organic and vibrant phenomenon while also helping them see their students from a strengths-based perspective. Additionally, this work also encouraged teachers to move from being mere consumers of educational knowledge to producers of such knowledge (González et al., 2011). Ultimately, the funds of knowledge approach "is motivated...by...the desire to promote educational equity and to redress inequality of educational opportunity" (González et al., 2011, p. 484) by identifying, acknowledging, understanding, appreciating, and valuing the cultural and linguistic histories and legacies of our students.

3. Research Context

The current study took place during the summer semester of 2023 and involved elementary-education teacher candidates enrolled in one of two sections of an ESOL culture and education course taught by the author. As part of the course, students engaged in a multimodule unit within the course designed to familiarize them various aspects of the theory and practice of the funds of knowledge approach. The logistics of the course unit are described in this section.

3.1. Course Unit

Table 1 below summarizes the modules of the course unit.

Table 1. Funds of Knowledge Course Unit Modules

| Module | Description of the Module |
|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Overview of the Funds of Knowledge Approach |
| 2 | The Funds of Knowledge Inventory Matrix |
| 3 | Funds of Knowledge Interview |
| 4 | Strategies for Incorporating Funds of Knowledge in the Classroom |
| 5 | Course Unit Reflection |

In the first module, students completed a variety of readings (Amaro & Semingson, 2011; González et al., 1994; Keefer et al., 2020; Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.) that provide a thorough yet succinct overview of the principal tenets underlying the funds of knowledge approach. In the second module, students became acquainted with the Funds of Knowledge Inventory Matrix (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.) which provided them with an opportunity to consider their own personal funds of knowledge, identify funds of knowledge they (did not) share with a classmate, and prepare for the next module. In the third module, students attended a summer program for elementary children during which they interviewed one or more CLD students and utilized the matrix to ascertain and document these learners' funds of knowledge. In the fourth module, students engaged with several readings (Di Stefano (2017; Newman, 2012; Riojas-Cortez, 2001; Street, 2005) intended to familiarize students with a variety of activities that can be used in both primary and secondary classrooms to identify and recognize learners' funds of knowledge in their current/future classrooms. In the fifth and final module, students finalized an assignment based on the interview completed in the third module in which they explored the demonstrated funds of knowledge of this/these learner(s), imagined that the pupils were actually students in their classroom, and explained how they would accommodate and adapt their instruction to the cultural and linguistic assets of the child(ren).

3.2. Research Study

At the conclusion of the course unit, participants completed a mixed-methods post-course questionnaire consisting of ten Likert-scale statements and five open-ended questions designed to



collect information about their perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses of the components of the course unit and their recommendations for improving the course unit. The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and the qualitative data were studied via thematic analysis. Since the results of the analysis of the quantitative data have previously been reported (see Hibbs, 2024), this paper focuses on the findings established from the exploration of the qualitative data. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns...within data” (p. 79). In thematic analysis, researchers familiarize themselves with their data, determine essential semantic features (codes) existing within the data, identify patterns (themes) emerging from the data, refine their system of codes and themes, and report on substantial findings based on the codes and themes surfacing from analysis of the data. In this particular case, an inductive thematic analysis was conducted in the sense that the author engaged in “a process of coding data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 83). In other words, rather than employing an *a priori* system of analyzing the data based on existing theory or research, the process of establishing determining codes and themes was developed exclusively from participants’ comments.

4. Preliminary Findings

This section highlights important results emanating from the analysis of participants’ comments with respect to these five open-ended questions from the post-course questionnaire:

- 1. Which aspects of the course unit on funds of knowledge did you enjoy the MOST? Why?
- 2. Which aspects of the course unit on funds of knowledge did you enjoy the LEAST? Why?
- 3. Which aspects of the course unit on funds of knowledge did you find MOST helpful? Why?
- 4. Which aspects of the course unit on funds of knowledge did you find LEAST helpful? Why?
- 5. What suggestions do you have for improving the course unit on funds of knowledge?

Since participants’ observations referenced specific elements of the course unit, namely the articles, the inventory matrix, the after-school program, and the final reflection. The findings presented below are organized by component and describe overall trends regarding the strengths and weaknesses of each one along with suggestions for improving the unit in regards to the particular constituent of the unit.

4.1. Articles

Numerous participants commented that the readings adequately explained the theory and practice of the funds of knowledge approach, offered them different perspectives on teaching multilingual learners of English, provided lots of information, were interesting and fun to read, promoted their awareness of possible activities they could implement in their future teaching, and served as good preparation for the student interview completed in the third module. Some participants also observed that, from their perspective, some of the readings were too long and difficult to read and that some of the reading were less than effective since they preferred to learn about the approach via hands-on activities. Since the time span of the class was sort (four weeks) and many of them were taking additional classes simultaneously, participants occasionally remarked that they either did not have time to complete the readings or forgot to complete them entirely. To improve the course unit with respect to the articles, various participants mentioned that class time could be spent on reading and discussing the articles or that jigsaw groups could get together and split up the article amongst the group members by deciding which members will read which section(s).

Additionally, several participants indicated that they enjoyed the jigsaw activity because it fostered collaboration by exposing them to other points of view concerning the readings.

4.2. Inventory Matrix

Participants consistently shared that the matrix helped them identify their own personal funds of knowledge, fostered collaboration between teacher candidates by understanding funds of knowledge they (did not) share with their classmates, provided them with a sample activity they could utilize in their future instruction, was an effective vehicle for better understanding the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students, and prepared them to interviewed the student(s) with whom they worked in



the third module. Some participants also noted that the matrix was quite cumbersome and unwieldy, which made it somewhat difficult to use with elementary-age children. Moving forward, participants suggested that the matrix could be more friendly by either reducing the number of categories contained in the matrix or creating subcategories by collapsing categories that relate to each other.

4.3. After-School Program

Numerous participants remarked that they appreciated interviewing and working with the students at the after-school program because they gained experience working with diverse students and were able to apply the knowledge acquired during the course unit in a hands-on fashion. Several participants commented, however, that they did not feel prepared enough for the experience and would like to have had additional time with the student(s) they interviewed.

4.4. Final Reflection

A good number of participants observed that the final reflection gave them an opportunity to extend the knowledge gained during the course unit by identifying ways to strategically and thoughtfully incorporate the approach into their future teaching. However, some participants felt that the assignment was mere busy work, repetitive, and/or overwhelming.

5. Conclusion

This paper outlined an exploratory study intended to document and understand pre-service elementary-education teacher candidates' views with respect to a multimodule unit on the funds of knowledge approach embedded within an ESOL culture and education course. The paper began with an examination of culturally and linguistically-diverse learners and the importance of recognizing and acknowledging these students' cultural and linguistic assets. The paper then reviewed two theories that framed the course unit (namely, asset-based pedagogies and funds of knowledge) and then explored both the components of the unit and the logistics of the research project. Finally, the paper highlighted important findings that emerged from the thematic analysis of participants' responses to the open-ended questions on the post-questionnaire. It is hoped that this paper may inspire educators to identify, acknowledge, and embrace the linguistic and cultural strengths of their students and stimulate educator preparation programs to consider familiarizing teacher candidates with the funds of knowledge approach by strategically embedding the approach within their curricular offerings.

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