

Linguistic and cultural funds of knowledge in the classroom

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In the summer of 2015, one crisis sparked another: The Syrian refugee crisis sparked a refugee crisis in Europe. Crises such as these, coupled with globalization, are causing unprecedented levels of migration (Castles & Miller, 2008). In the last five years, over 100,000 Bhutanese refugees resettled in eight Western countries, including Denmark and Canada (Government of Canada, 2015). These refugees are ethnic Nepalis who were expelled from Bhutan some 30 years ago, and lived in refugee camps in Nepal ever since then; however, Syrian and Nepali-Bhutanese refugees are but two examples of people ‘on the move’ internationally. Just as Western governments try to meet the challenges that accompany heightened migration, Western educators try to ‘manage diversity’ as global movements of people are also felt in the daily life of schools (Little, Leung & Van Avermaet, 2014).

Increasingly, educators are called upon to play the dual role of teachers and front-line settlement workers in culturally diverse, linguistically complex, ‘worlds-in-a-classroom.’ How can Western educators manage the diversity that accompanies migration? What resources are in place to assist them in recognizing the multitude of ‘knowledges’ that children from diverse backgrounds bring into the classroom? These questions frame the present study.

Moll and González (1997) introduced the notion of *funds of knowledge* to challenge the view that refugee and immigrant children unfamiliar with the language and culture of Western schools ‘know



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nothing'; the view that the knowledge they learn at home and in their communities are valuable and legitimate counters deficit views of them knowing 'nothing' because they do not share the dominant group's knowledge base. That view flies in the face of a basic educational doctrine of 'starting with what they know.' As Mette¹ (one of the Danish educators who participated in the research) remarks: "Intensionen, og det står der også i folkeskoleloven, det er jo intensionen hos de fleste lærere at bringe det, børnene de kan, i spil." In that way, educators can build upon what children already know. In so doing, educators can draw on students' lived experiences in their sociocultural-historical contexts; they can observe what students take up from instruction, and teachers can use that knowledge of what students draw on to scaffold home/community knowledge and academic knowledge. Ideally, teachers learn from their students – either through in-class observations or home ethnographies (Moll & González, 1997) – then reformulate instruction to fall within children's "zone of proximal development" (the level they have the potential to attain with the help of a more experienced other's mediation; Vygotsky; 1978, 1986). The scaffold that drawing on children's actual funds of knowledge creates (by teaching within children's *zone of proximal development*) enables them to internalize and reformulate new information; make new knowledge comprehensible and their own, and meet their potential (Engen, 2009).

Whether children's knowledge is recognized, valued (legitimized), or drawn on as a scaffold has implications for their feelings of self-worth and identity development. This view is both supported by Cummins' (2001, 2015) identity work, and harks back to Sahl and Skjelmo's (1983) seminal work ("Du er ingen") on the harm that not valorizing students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds can do to their self-image (or identity 'text'), and subsequent academic achievement. As Taylor and Cummins (2011) observe, if "students feel valued in their learning situations, and exert their autonomy by investing themselves (affectively, socially, culturally, and academically) in their learning," but if they experience damaging representations of who they (or their community members) are they distance themselves as a self-preservation mechanism, disengage from (potentially damaging) learning environments; mechanisms that "can lead to academic underachievement and elevated student dropout rates" (p. 184). Holmen (2011) observes that Danish language arts classes (i.e., content teaching in mainstream programs, not Danish as a second language) frequently prioritize exclusionary, 'national heritage' approaches to identifying valid knowledges to include in the curriculum. Such

approaches neither prioritize globalization nor legitimize alternative knowledges. The opposite also holds true. Teachers can orchestrate instruction to transfer students' prior funds of knowledge to enable to them to understand and engage with it in a new context (Cummins, Bismilla, Chow, Cohen, Giampapa, Leoni, Sandhu & Sastri, 2005; Cummins, Hu, Markus & Montero, 2015). Yet, even the most dedicated teachers question how they can learn about and draw on students' alternate knowledges when they come from so many different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Mette aptly observes: "Det er nemmere at tage udgangspunkt i de børns erfaringer og viden, der ligner os selv, nemlig majoritetsbørnene. Det er sværere at tage det vores minoritetsbørn kommer med, både deres familiebaggrund og deres sprog." These questions guided my research.

The comparative/international case study

I intended to conduct research in Denmark and in Canada, but I was not able to conduct the planned research in Denmark as a major Danish school reform led to a period of teacher unrest. I was able to observe Danish teacher education courses in a University College (e.g., Danish, French, and Danish as a second language). Overall, participants included teachers of Danish- and English-as-a-second language (DSL and ESL/ELD) and a teacher of French as a second language/FSL) in Canada teaching language-as-subject and 'mainstream' classrooms². I observed the Canadian ESL and FSL teachers when they were involved with who cohorts of Nepali-Bhutanese refugee children in their last year of elementary school; primarily during the half-days they spent in a self-contained ELD classroom with their ESL/ELD teachers, but also when they were in a mainstream setting with their FSL teacher. I examined the pedagogical materials available to the DSL and ESL teachers, and the academic work produced by the Nepali-Bhutanese children that was displayed around the classroom and in the hallway.

For this paper, data are drawn from discussions and interviews with educators in Denmark (Mette), the Nepali-Bhutanese refugee children's ESL(ELD teachers (Polly and Lee) and FSL teacher (Renata), formal observations in the two Canadian ELD classroom (e.g., teacher practices; pedagogical materials), informal observations in a University College in Denmark, and observations made outside the classroom when the students were mainstreamed, and during events Polly, Lee and Renata invited me to attend (e.g., community fundraisers and benefits organized in the wake of the earthquakes that

struck Nepal in April 2015, and a city-wide dance festival in which the students competed).

The Canadian school in which the research was conducted was in a high needs area. Charity groups donated food for a ‘breakfast club’ at the school, which provided nutritious food so children would not start the school day hungry. The ESL teachers both described keeping their classroom stocked with food for the Nepali-Bhutanese refugee children as well, which the teachers paid for themselves. Many Canadian background children in the mainstream courses were on modified learning programs. A cultural support worker was assigned to the school to assist the refugee children’s parents with family financial literacy classes, and they also attended adult ESL classes.

Legitimate knowledge in the Canadian school system

The Nepali-Bhutanese refugees arrived in Canada the summer before the children started Grade 8. The children had limited prior schooling in the refugee camp in Nepal. They initially scored at the Kindergarten level in reading ability, and almost reached the Grade 2 reading level by October. Polly taught the children in the younger cohort, and Lee taught the children in the older cohort; both actively drew on the students’ cultural knowledge. They found reading material related to Nepal in libraries and at book sales, and attempted to link academic assignments to the students’ prior experiences. The following is an example of these teachers’ attempts to scaffold the children’s learning. Early in the school year, Lee taught the children about measurement by measuring the angles of the Nepali flag during the “early numeracy” portion of the ELD class. In late autumn, the social studies teacher modified a “Job Fair” assignment. To supplement the activity, Lee tasked the children to prepare posters that identified skills (i.e., knowledge) they had learned in the refugee camp. One such skill was building homes from bamboo: a skill that was transferable to future jobs in Canada (e.g., carpentry). (See photo, attached).

The ESL teachers, Polly and Lee, were less successful in drawing on their students’ prior linguistic knowledge than was their French teacher, Renata. This could have been due to their unfamiliarity with South Asian languages, but more likely due to Renata’s attempt to thread general language awareness into her French teaching (e.g., drawing on cognates, etc.); however, Polly and Lee did not impose English Only policies in the ELD classroom, and supported the

students having ‘space’ to use their L1 to explaining concepts to peers and scaffold their learning. Still, the ESL educators’ focus on the students’ prior funds of knowledge centred more on providing pedagogical material to which the children could relate (and see themselves). Both teachers stressed the power of picture books to capture the children’s lived experiences. Polly discussed the challenge of finding culturally responsive reading materials as follows: “You know, trying to find anything that is written about Nepal or is from Nepal so at least they can see themselves reflected in it.” Following the 2015 earthquakes in Nepal, Polly and Lee tried to find information on earthquakes at the children’s reading level. Their goal was for the children to write reflective pieces to provide, as Polly explained, “an outlet ... for stuff sort of bubbling under the surface ... in terms of worry and concern” because “that kind of creating writing is a really good way to get [their emotions and fears] out.” None of the teachers drew on linguistic materials in the children’s L1s (Nepali and Tamang) per se, but they encouraged them to jot down words in their L1 to help them learn English and French. A notable exception was an activity Renata organized for a ‘cooking club.’ It involved a mixed group of 16 sixteen children (Nepali-Bhutanese children and others) who got together and cooked multicultural recipes after school one day a week. Her culminating activity was for the children to produce a video. Renata encouraged the Nepali-Bhutanese children to record themselves speaking Nepali on the video, and translate what they said into English by using subtitles. This activity provided the most explicit support for L1 use observed over the course of the study.

Comparing educator views on (il-) legitimate *knowledge(s)* in Denmark and Canada

There were commonalities in how the DSL and ESL teachers’ viewed minority children’s literacy and numeracy needs, and mainstream teachers’ views of the children. Polly described some Canadian mainstream teachers’ reaction to ELD refugee children as: “They can’t speak [English]! They don’t know anything!” and “How do you teach them ’cus they don’t know anything and they don’t get it?” She also described other, well-meaning reactions teachers have such as “You poor thing – go play on the computer,” which leads to children feeling bored and unchallenged, and negatively effects their self-esteem. Polly also suggested that teachers underestimate students’ knowledge base when they are in the early stages of developing English proficiency: “I think sometimes that people underestimate what they are able to do, but ... you’ve got to know how to scaffold.”

Mette described a parallel scenario with a Gr. 8, Arabic-L1 refugee student in Denmark, and the need to look deeper than a child's current stage of DSL development:

Det er to rigtig gode ottende-klasser vi har og gode lærere. Men den der pige skal lave projekter på kryds og tværs, og pigen har selv spurgt, må jeg ikke godt blive fri, hun kan simpelt hen ikke deltage. Så har jeg jo hende ovre sammen med nogle andre børn, jeg også underviser, ... og det er jo så gået op for mig, at den pige rent faktisk er rigtig dygtig. Hun har bare store sproglige vanskeligheder, og hun har det simpelt hen for svært.

Mette could see what lay behind the label of DSL to the student the refugee girl could become with proper support.

Conclusion

Countries such as Canada and Denmark stand to benefit from sharing information about positive steps taken in each to recognize and value minority L1s and cultures as alternative knowledges as a way to enable teachers to meet student needs. Educator orientations to learners' funds of knowledge may be seen in the instructional environments they create—how they select pedagogical materials, present the curriculum, assess learning, and interact with minority students and communities. Educators are not expected to become anthropological databases, but if they are open to it, they can learn about their students' funds of knowledge. Polly sums it up well:

“I’m coming to learn about you because you have things to teach me I need to learn from you and I would like you to learn a few things from me and when we are all done we will understand each other better.”

Teachers can learn about the worlds-in-their-classroom if they see their students through new eyes: as individuals with valuable knowledge to teach their teachers.

Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used instead of the participants' real names for purposes of confidentiality.
2. 'Mainstream classrooms' refers to classrooms in which children from language minority and language majority groups are taught through the medium of the dominant societal language (English or Danish).

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