

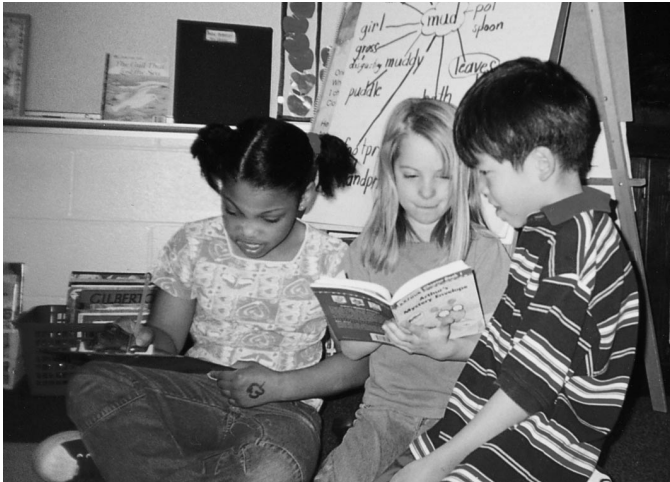
Connecting Students' Cultures to Instruction is an excerpt from *Classroom Diversity: Connecting Curriculum to Students' Lives* edited by Ellen McIntyre, Ann Rosebery, and Norma González. © 2001 by Ellen McIntyre, Ann Rosebery, and Norma González.

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Connecting Students' Cultures to Instruction

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The population of children in the United States is rapidly becoming more ethnically and culturally diverse. At the same time, the population of white, middle-class, female teachers remains stable. This mismatch between children's home cultures and the cultures of schools plays havoc with student achievement. Disproportionately high numbers of minority, immigrant, isolated, and poor children perform consistently lower academically than white, middle-class students (Miller 1995). As Jonathan Kozol notes, "behind the good statistics of the richest districts lies the triumph of the few."

Behind the saddening statistics of the poorest cities lies the misery of the many” (1991, 158). This achievement gap has caused much consternation among educators, and how we address this growing problem will determine who gets properly educated in the twenty-first century.

What is behind the gap? Why do poor children fail more often in school? Why are students of color often left out of advanced academic work? As educators and researchers, we hear these questions on a regular basis. Like others, we have no quick or easy answers. Indeed, we feel there is no *single* answer. Complex issues require complex answers, and there is no silver bullet that can reduce poverty, differential access, and educational disparity to manageable sound bites.

We believe, however, that some of the educational research done in the last twenty-five years has much to say about the design of classrooms in which today’s minority and working-class children can be successful. The work we are referring to, sometimes called a sociocultural approach, tries to understand learning as the result of social interactions among the individual, society, and culture (Rogoff 1990; Tharp & Gallimore 1993). This approach suggests that minority and working-class children can succeed in school if classrooms are reorganized to give them the same advantage that middle-class children always seemed to have had: instruction that puts their knowledge and experiences at the heart of their learning.

Understanding Sociocultural Research

To explain our point of view, we begin by sketching a brief history of the relevant research for our readers. Beginning in the 1960s, researchers from disciplines such as anthropology, cognitive psychology, education, sociolinguistics, and sociology started asking questions about the educational disparities that exist among middle-class, suburban (and principally but not exclusively white) children and working-class and poor (and principally but not exclusively minority) children. These researchers wanted to know why our schools were failing these children. Not surprisingly, no single answer emerged. However, if one looks across these studies, a pattern emerges that we believe speaks directly to teachers and schools.

This research shows that children from different home, community, and economic backgrounds learn different “funds of knowledge,” to use the words of Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez and James Greenberg (1992), and that these funds of knowledge are not treated equally in school. We are using the phrase *funds of knowledge* broadly, to mean the various social and linguistic practices and the historically accumulated bodies of knowledge that are essential to

students' homes and communities (González 1995a; Moll et al. 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg 1992).

In her influential study *Ways with Words*, Shirley Brice Heath (1983) described the language practices of three communities in the rural Piedmont Carolinas. One was a working-class, predominantly white community, one was a working-class, predominantly black community, and one was a middle-class community with a history of formal schooling. Working in cooperation with teachers and local residents, Heath found that although the people in these communities lived within a few miles of one another, they socialized their children into talking, reading, and writing in profoundly different ways.

As she followed the children into school, she found that their different language practices carried implications for their academic success. The children from the working-class families, both black and white, fell behind in school—some early on, others more gradually—and eventually dropped out. Children from the middle-class families, while not all top scholars, graduated from high school.

It is important to point out that Heath found that the children of all communities were immersed in rich and stimulating language environments. Early on, they all learned to value stories and printed texts; they were encouraged to listen to, practice, and try out the various forms of talk used in their communities; and they were all impressed with the importance of doing well in school.

Building on Heath's work, other researchers described the discontinuities that children from diverse backgrounds can experience between the worlds they know at home and the world of school. To varying degrees, these children may find that they do not know how to show the teacher what they know in ways she can recognize. They may be asked to engage in activities they do not fully understand. And they may find that the teacher talks in ways that are unfamiliar and confusing. From the start, minority and working-class children can find school a confusing and sometimes uncomfortable place (Ballenger 1999; Delpit 1995; Gallas 1994; Gee 1990; Heath 1983; Michaels 1985; Paley 1979; Philips 1972; Purcell-Gates 1995; Tharp & Gallimore 1993).

Children from middle-class homes, where the funds of knowledge correspond nicely to those of school, experience much less discontinuity. For example, they know what the teacher is talking about most of the time and if they don't, they know how to ask for help in ways the teacher recognizes. They are likely to know how to tell stories in ways the teacher understands. They can talk about objects and experiences in decontextualized ways, that is, outside the situation in which they were experienced, and they have learned how

to organize and remember objects according to abstract attributes, for example, physical characteristics, functions, or spatial characteristics (Heath 1983; Michaels 1985; Wertsch 1985).

It seems that middle-class children and children from families with a history of formal schooling learn these funds of knowledge at home because they need them to be functional, contributing members of their families and communities. It also happens that these funds of knowledge are closely aligned with those valued at school. Because of this, middle-class children enter preschool and kindergarten already knowing much of the stuff of school. Right from the start, they know what to do and what to say in order to have their ideas heard and their activities valued by the teacher and the school.

Minority and working-class children likewise acquire funds of knowledge at home. Not surprisingly, they learn those things that enable them to be useful and productive members of their families and communities. In recent years, researchers and teachers have begun to describe the rich and varied funds of knowledge these children learn at home. They include specialized knowledge of mathematics, science, and history; knowledge of how to tell stories from memory that require the orchestration of a number of different people, places, and events; command of a range of creative, poetic, and dramatic uses for language; and familiarity in making imaginative connections with natural phenomena. Unlike the funds of knowledge that middle-class children learn at home, however, these funds of knowledge often go unrecognized in school. And in some cases, they may actually be in conflict with those valued in school (Ballenger 1999; Gee 1990; González 1995a; McIntyre et al. 1999; Michaels 1985; Tharp & Gallimore 1993; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg 1992; Warren & Rosebery 1996).

During the late 1970s and the early 1980s, Western psychologists and educators learned of the work of the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky spent much of his career studying how children learn and describing learning as a process that involves social as well as cognitive transformations. His writings emphasize how interactions between people are central to the ways in which individual learning and development occur. He argued that children internalize the kind of help they receive from others and eventually come to use it independently to direct their own problem solving.

For Vygotsky, the shift from needing help to accomplish a task to accomplishing it independently constitutes learning. Central to his theory is the belief that children learn best when parents and teachers create instructional activities that use what children already know as resources for learning new knowledge and practices.

Building on this research, educators began to see teaching and learning in a new way. They realized that, from this point of view, the curricula in most

American schools seem to build almost exclusively on the funds of knowledge of middle-class children. Some wondered what would happen if the curricula in schools that served minority and working-class children were revised to leverage their funds of knowledge as resources for learning. With this in mind, a new line of classroom-based research emerged.

Putting Students' Funds of Knowledge First

The teachers and researchers who were asking these questions realized quickly that they were breaking new ground. In some cases, they found that they did not know enough about students' funds of knowledge to move forward. In other cases, they found that they had to challenge basic and pervasive assumptions about what and how minority and working-class children learn in order to accomplish their goals.

Some began by examining how minority and working-class children spend their time in the classroom. Research in urban classrooms showed that reading instruction for most working-class and minority students, for example, focuses on learning decontextualized skills and subskills rather than on making meaning (Anyon 1980; Goodlad 1984; Moll et al. 1980; Oakes 1986). Students spend their time practicing skills associated with phonics, spelling, and grammar in isolation from their home-based oral and written literacy skills. They complete workbook pages and drill sheets instead of using and expanding their knowledge of these skills while engaged in meaningful reading and writing activities. In short, these researchers found that students' funds of knowledge are essentially absent from reading instruction in urban schools.

Lest we be misinterpreted, we think it is crucial for all students in American classrooms to become fluent readers, writers, spellers, and speakers of Standard English. What is open to question for us, however, is *how* students learn these things. We believe that a false and unexamined assumption underlies a heavily skills-oriented approach to reading: that minority and working-class students need to master the “basics” before they can—or should—engage in “higher order” literacy activities. From our point of view, this assumption ignores the fact that all students, regardless of background, use oral language on a daily basis to engage in sophisticated acts of literacy and communication, including argumentation, interpretation, and critique, in the schoolyard, in the hallway, at home, and elsewhere.

If a sociocultural perspective finds an exclusively skills-based approach to reading problematic, what kind of instruction would it suggest? One of the most comprehensive efforts to implement a sociocultural approach to learning and teaching took place at the Kamehameha Early Education Program

(KEEP). KEEP represents a broad-based, interdisciplinary effort to improve the education of children of Polynesian descent, Hawaii's indigenous minority. To improve students' reading ability, instruction was redesigned from a phonics-based program to "direct instruction of comprehension" through the discussion of stories. After the new program was put into place, KEEP staff noticed that in some classrooms, the discussions gradually took on an overlapping-turn structure similar to the overlapping speech common in ordinary Polynesian conversations and in a public storytelling event called "talk-story."

In talk-story, a story is co-narrated by at least two people and the speech of the narrators is overlapped by audience response. It is practiced widely throughout the Polynesian community in Hawaii and, as such, is part of the children's home-based funds of knowledge. The KEEP teachers and researchers found that when a teacher was willing to relax her control of turn taking, the children gradually introduced the talk-story form into the new reading comprehension discussion format. Some teachers, aware of the changes introduced by the children, began to experiment with the discussion format. Instead of addressing questions to specific individuals, for example, a teacher might address her questions to the group. Teachers found that children volunteered answers with unexpected enthusiasm, often chiming in and overlapping one another's turns.

Teachers and researchers paid close attention to this emerging instructional interaction and its effects on students' participation and learning. They noticed that when teachers allowed what they eventually called "instructional conversation" to go on, the children participated more, had a higher number of correct responses to teachers' questions, and offered a greater number of ideas and logical inferences related to the story's content than they did during more traditional question-answer sequences. In other words, the students learned more and performed better when they were allowed to use household-based funds of knowledge, in this case particular features of the talk-story form, to support the development of reading comprehension (Au 1980; Jordan 1985; Tharp & Gallimore 1993; Tharp et al. 1984; for a discussion of the KEEP reading program, see Cazden 1988).

Enlarging Sociocultural Approaches

By emphasizing the social and cultural situatedness of learning, sociocultural approaches served as a counterpoint to models of learning as structured individualized cognition. They helped conceptualize the notion of *difference* rather than *deficit* in learning. In the years since these initial studies were car-

ried out, however, shifting theoretical landscapes have begun to problematize aspects of sociocultural theory and the sometimes unanticipated ways it has been taken up and interpreted.

For example, some research has assumed that culture can be embodied in particular learning styles and shared assumptions. This work assumed that all members of a particular group shared a bounded and integrated body of knowledge and that these norms shaped individual behavior. A basic tenet of sociocultural models is that children learn bodies of knowledge through guided participation in ongoing cultural activities as they observe and participate with others in culturally organized practices. In some instances, these points of view led researchers to characterize communities of diverse students according to sets of “shared” traits. Students from particular cultural, ethnic, or linguistic backgrounds were stereotyped as “nonverbal,” “field-dependent,” or “kinesthetically oriented.”

However, as researchers and educators looked more closely at diverse communities and their activities, they realized that these communities, like all communities, are constantly in transition, that the meanings and forms of activity that exist in any community are always being contested and negotiated by its members. From this point of view, previously assumed shared bodies of knowledge began to seem not so shared. It became clear that lists of characteristic traits could not accurately describe cultural, ethnic, or linguistic groups. Instead, researchers and educators found it more productive to attempt to describe the broader social, political, and economic conditions influencing students' lives in and out of school (Foley 1990; Willis [1977] 1981; see Levinson et al. 1996).

Enlarging sociocultural perspectives in these ways has helped us visualize the fluid and dynamic nature of students' experiences and the varied cultural practices in which they participate. And it has highlighted the shortcomings of approaches that attempt to characterize groups according to stereotypical traits. It shows that such lists are based on false assumptions about culture and its transmission and that no list can be flexible, dynamic, or complex enough to describe an individual's point of view, let alone the points of view of a group of individuals. Finally, it carries another important implication: because these characterizations fall short, it is a mistake to use them as the basis for instructional design and decision making. Instead, by focusing on practice—that is, on what households and communities actually do—we can bring the multiple dimensions of students' lived experiences to life in the classroom. One important result of such work is its description of the ways in which households and communities make use of their multiple cultural systems as strategic resources in their lives and work (González 1995b; Moll et al. 1992).

Practicing a Sociocultural Approach in the Classroom

In recent years, teachers and researchers have begun working together to explore ways of using minority and working-class students' funds of knowledge as the centerpiece of instruction. But doing this is easier said than done. It provokes a host of questions. How can teachers know what funds of knowledge their students bring with them into the classroom? How can they know which of the many rich and varied funds might become a productive foundation for teaching school-based funds of knowledge? The stories in this book attempt to answer such questions through rich descriptions of contextualized teaching, detailed by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE).

This book illustrates how teachers around the country are engaging minority and working-class students in meaningful learning as indicated by some of the above practices. The stories show African American, Haitian American, Latino, Native American, and rural white students of Appalachian descent learning how to read and write and engaging with mathematical and scientific ideas and practices. All of the classrooms described here share one important characteristic: they use students' household-based funds of knowledge as resources for learning school-based funds of knowledge. Teachers and researchers sought to build on the deep connections between the classroom curriculum and the knowledge and practices of students and their households. They do not believe that a simple transmission of knowledge from the community to the school or from the school to the community will put the students' funds of knowledge first or result in authentic curriculum or pedagogical reform. Instead, each chapter tells how teachers and researchers sought to transform available knowledge bases for academic purposes and thus build bridges in nontraditional ways.

In Chapter Two, "Connecting Cultural Traditions," teacher Sharon Maher describes the challenge of acquiring knowledge of local norms from her students' homes and community in the Zuni Pueblo in New Mexico. Maher, in collaboration with Georgia Epaloose and Roland Tharp, explains how she designed activities for her middle school students that connected traditions from the Zuni culture and at the same time improved her students' expository writing skills.

In Chapter Three, "Ring My Bell," Michele Foster and Tryphenia Peele describe the many ways that teacher Vivette Blackwell uses her knowledge of her mostly African American students' community, cultural preferences, and linguistic abilities to create a classroom environment in which they are comfortable and expected to achieve at high levels. Vivette does this by providing opportunities for parents to participate in learning activities, planning her

classroom activities around her students' knowledge and experiences, and helping them make connections between school, home, and community knowledge.

Chapter Four, "Unearthing the Mathematics of a Classroom Garden," by Leslie Kahn and Marta Civil, describes a teacher-researcher project in a fourth/fifth-grade classroom designed to better understand mathematics teaching and learning within an integrated unit. Leslie describes how she and her students developed an integrated curriculum, "From Weaving to Gardening," that filtered across disciplines from social studies to language arts to mathematics.

Chapter Five, "The Sound of Drums," by Faith Conant, Ann Rosebery, Beth Warren, and Josiane Hudicourt-Barnes, tells how a teacher of seventh- and eighth-grade Haitian students used everyday and scientific resources to develop an investigation into the science of sound in her classroom. Hudicourt-Barnes describes what she and her students learned as they jointly redesigned a science unit to take advantage of her students' knowledge of and experiences with drumming.

In Chapter Six, Maureen Callanan, Pilar Coto, Ligia Miranda, Anne Striffler, Jim Allen, Cherie Crandall, and Colleen Murphy describe how a group of teachers used what they call a "child-centered and contextualized curriculum" to engage preschoolers in science. They tell how their exploration of raising chicks in the classroom was jointly constructed by students and teachers and how, because the students' interests and questions moved the investigation forward, the unit unfolded in ways that could not have been anticipated by the teachers.

In Chapter Seven, "Agricultural Field Day," Ellen McIntyre, Ruth Ann Sweazy, and Stacy Greer describe how Ruth Ann and Stacy made visits to the homes of their students in rural Kentucky to better understand the children and the funds of knowledge they brought with them to school. As a result of these visits, Ruth Ann and Stacy designed a series of reading, writing, and mathematics lessons around a major annual school event: Agricultural Field Day. In this way, they used their students' extensive knowledge of farming and farming practices (e.g., seed types, growth rates of various plants, plant parts) as the basis for their ongoing curriculum.

In Chapter Eight, "Teaching History," by Ellen McIntyre and JoAnn Archie, we learn how JoAnn focuses on community building in her primary grade classroom and extends her instructional program from this philosophy. JoAnn, a native of the mostly African American community in rural Kentucky in which she teaches and resides, explains how she uses both her professional knowledge and her deeply personal understanding of her students, their families, and the community as the foundation of her teaching.

In Chapter Nine, “Creating Learning Communities,” Melanie Ayers, José David Fonseca, Rosi Andrade, and Marta Civil tell how they discovered the mathematical funds of knowledge of Latino students in working-class neighborhoods and used them as tools for the classroom. José David, a seventh- and eighth-grade mathematics instructor, describes how he developed an architecture project called “Build Your Dream House” that engaged his students in a range of mathematical practices.

In Chapter Ten, “Creating Links Between Home and School Mathematics Practices,” Norma González, Rosi Andrade, and Caroline Carson describe the methods used in their teacher study group to discover the mathematical funds of knowledge of Latino students in working-class neighborhoods and how this knowledge is used to enhance curriculum and instruction. This chapter provides a foundation for readers interested in learning how to begin understanding their students’ and families’ funds of knowledge.

Chapter Eleven, “Seeing, Believing, and Taking Action,” by Norma González, Ellen McIntyre, and Ann Rosebery, sums up the ideas in this book by claiming that teachers who see, believe, and take action will be more likely to have students meet academic success in their classrooms. Specifically, teachers can (1) see every child as an individual with a wealth of cultural knowledge; (2) believe that their students can learn and that contextualizing instruction is one way of engaging their students; and (3) take action by getting to know the families and communities of the children they teach.

We hope these stories will be useful to those teachers who are searching for ways of going beyond the circumscribed area of the classroom and into communities. We hope the examples of what other teachers have done to redesign curricula and instruction around students’ funds of knowledge will help you rethink your teaching. More than that, however, we hope that they provide a convincing rationale for “listening to what the children say,” to use the words of Vivian Paley (1986), as a foundation for their learning and our teaching.

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