

Funds of Knowledge: Connecting Culture, Play, and Learning in the Early Years

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Abstract

The interests of young children are greatly influenced from unique and specific experiences in their families, communities and cultures. This article promotes the view that the theoretical framework of 'funds of knowledge' provides a unique lens for early years educators to interpret the interests of young children in early childhood education settings.

Keywords: children's interests, early years pedagogy, culture, diversity, equity, play, educator-family partnerships

Introduction

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"Wait, no, we don't throw rice over our heads!" I explained to K.S. a (JK) student playing at the sensory bin. Our sensory bin is currently filled with rice and alphabet letters for students to discover, and in theory, students would quietly engage in exploration and find the hidden letters, and perhaps even identify them along the way. Soon, another student joined K.S. and he began throwing rice over his head too. They both giggled, and as the rice flew in different directions and landed on our classroom floor, I wondered if the rice in our sensory bin was a good idea.

I stopped for a moment. *And then I realized, K.S. was not 'throwing' rice, she was mimicking a gesture commonly used in South Asian rituals and*

ceremonies. Because of its life sustaining properties, rice has a deep spiritual and ritual significance in the Indian culture; it is often believed to be a symbol of auspiciousness, fertility, and prosperity, and as such, it is used extensively in rituals to celebrate occasions such as weddings, the birth of a baby, and harvest festivals. I thought back to the many South Asian weddings, birth ceremonies, festivals and religious rituals I had participated in as a child, and realized that *K.S. was simply 'playing' with the rice in a way that was meaningful to her*.

"Is this what you do with rice sometimes at home?" I asked.

She nodded and smiled. We both laughed and began to dig for some letters together.

Connecting Culture and Play

Ontario is an incredibly diverse province (Pascal, 2009; Pelletier, & Corter, 2005), and as such, our Kindergarten students often come to school from a variety of cultural backgrounds, bringing with them, unique interests and prior knowledge. These interests and understandings are often influenced by the experiences young children participate in with their families and communities (Hedges, Cullen, & Jordan, 2011), and are considered to be 'funds of knowledge' (Hedges, et al. 2011; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) - a term described by Hedges (2015) as "the bodies of knowledge, including information, skills and strategies, which underlie household functioning, development and well-being (p. 86). In an early childhood education context, the theoretical framework of funds of knowledge extends to include cultural traits such as language, beliefs, values knowledge gained from community events, and sociocultural understandings of popular culture (Hedges, 2015; Riojas-Cortez, 2001), and therefore social and cultural experiences can be diverse and varied among young children (Hedges, 2015). The knowledge passed to young children through cultural experiences and processes are believed to influence their self-esteem (Riojas-Cortez, 2001; Velez-Ibanez, & Greenberg, 1992), and contribute to children's understandings of the

relationships, roles, rules, beliefs and values of society (Hedges, et al. 2011; Riojas-Cortez, 2001).

Recognizing the unique and specific funds of knowledge young children bring with them into the classroom helps towards a stronger interpretation of their interests, and can therefore be considered a meaningful starting point for educators to understand and further extend authentic learning opportunities (Hedges et al., 2011; Hedges, 2015; Moll, et al., 1992). Riojas-Cortez (2001) suggests that funds of knowledge can effectively identify children's interests and capabilities, and therefore, can inform curriculum, and can assist educators to help young children to develop larger academic skills such as language and literacy.

It is also important to note the positive impact of understanding funds of knowledge on home-school partnerships; when educators find opportunities to show interest in, and appreciate the unique cultural experiences of young children, they are able to acknowledge the significance of these experiences and foster engagement with families and communities in meaningful ways (Hedges, 2015). Funds of knowledge provide a theoretical framework for early childhood educators to establish culturally responsive pedagogy (Hedges, 2015; Riojas-Cortez, 2001), thereby including the unique and multiple realities experienced by families within a school community.

Conclusion

For K.S., 'throwing' rice over her head at the sensory bin connected to the cultural ceremonies she had participated in with her family. This is where our learning will start. I wonder, what kinds of ceremonies has she participated in? What might she want to tell her peers about these special occasions? Through her funds of knowledge, the opportunities for literacy, oral language, mathematics, and the Arts are endless. Maybe she will write a story, or draw a picture, or make invitations for pretend play.

As I begin to think about how our learning will unfold over the course of the school year, I am increasingly drawn to the importance of engaging each and every one of our students through their unique funds of knowledge. For me, this means making sure to ask *why* they might be playing with materials in a certain way, and *how* their play connects to what they already know. As an educator, this possibility excites me as it means that for our students, there will be opportunities for *many* conversations, learning paths, and best of all, stories to tell.

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