

Article brief

Engaging methods for exploring ‘funds of identity’ in early childhood contexts

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Article abstract

Globalisation has contributed to increasing diversity with children and families, bringing multiple languages and cultures into early childhood settings around the world. While this has enhanced our settings, research suggests that educators are struggling to find ways to support children’s learning and development in super diverse contexts. Standardised curriculum and pedagogy have complicated matters by suggesting that all children can achieve the same outcome if given the same program. Failing to recognize and acknowledge the complexity of teaching and learning in diverse settings leads to practices that position children and their families as deficient, viewing children and families based on what they lack rather than building from their strengths. In this manuscript we look through the theoretical lenses of funds of knowledge and funds of identity. The two constructs are brought together to explore how innovative, creative arts-based methods from two different research projects in ECE settings across Australia and Chile made children and families’ funds of knowledge and funds of identity visible and potentially impacted learning, participants’ perspectives, and community engagement in these diverse settings. We offer evidence of the ways arts-based methods promoted creativity and agency for all participants in and across both early learning contexts.

Article summary

In many early childhood classrooms, educators tend to focus on what the children and their families lack, rather than on their strengths. However, research shows that affirming and building on young peoples’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds and identities has a positive impact on learning (pp. 1-2). In this paper, the researchers discuss a range of activities in early childhood settings in both Australia and Chile to show how engaging with the ‘funds of knowledge’ and ‘funds of identity’ of children and families can strengthen learning, engagement, and a sense of belonging. ‘Funds of knowledge’ are those family and household bodies of knowledge that underpin everyday life (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017; D'warte, 2020). ‘Funds of

identity' extend this notion by recognising that the identities of young people are also shaped beyond the family.

Context

The researchers revisit data from two larger studies conducted in early childhood settings in Australia and Chile. The Australian data comes from an 18-month ethnographic study of schools located in socioeconomically, linguistically and culturally diverse Western Sydney (p. 5). The Chilean study included 20 early childhood centres serving families experiencing economic adversity in northern Chile (p. 5). The researchers asked 'How were children and communities' funds of knowledge and identity made visible in these projects? How and in what ways did this impact learning, participants' perspectives, and community engagement?' (p. 6).

Findings

Across the data, the researchers identified six arts-based methods for engaging with the funds of knowledge and funds of identity of children and/or families.

In Australia:

(1) Children as researchers: Working in small groups, children interviewed each about their language and literacies practices; when, where, and with whom they were speaking, learning and translating, across settings. They were then scaffolded to compile their data using simple graphs, tables and wordles (p. 6).

(2) Language mapping: Using A4 paper and colouring materials or drawing apps, children visually represented their linguistic and communicative life worlds. The maps 'revealed information previously unknown to teachers, including 'enhanced linguistic capacity, Aboriginality, and high stakes translation experiences' (p. 7).

(3) Bilingual storytelling: Using dual language books, teachers read in English while a guest (family member, teacher, student or school leader) simultaneously read in another language (e.g. Italian, Arabic, Hindi, Mandarin, Dari, Farsi, Russian). This led to parents contributing to other learning activities, for example in history, calligraphy, bread making, dance, music, video production, zoology and gardening (p. 7).

In Chile:

(4) Technology-enabled travelling media: Kits equipped with digital cameras, voice recorders and a journal were supplied to children, enabling them to document family experiences at home and in their communities so that these experiences could be shared with educators and peers (p. 8).

(5) Families' Literacies Tree: Using creative arts-based activities such as painting, drawing and collage, educators provided opportunities for families to contribute to community murals, installations and structures to share their dreams, aspirations, activities, knowledge, resources, values and commitments (pp. 8-9).

(6) Literacy Café: Teachers issued families with formal invitations to have coffee with the teachers and share informal conversations about the children's interests and family life. 'Over time these opportunities for small groups of invited parents to join the educator in conversation grew to more substantive conversations where families shared knowledge and challenges, approximating a community of practice' (p. 9).

Conclusions

Analysing the data from these two projects, the researchers found that, 'Arts-based methods supported the development of different kinds of relationships, with educators describing how funds of knowledge had changed how they viewed parents differently, in a more positive way' (p. 10). These methods, 'placed student and community knowledges at the centre of learning, in this way facilitating a coming together of funds of knowledge (family and community aspirations and practices) and evolving funds of identity' (p. 10). The researchers conclude that arts-based methods offer innovative ways for the knowledge, values and insights of *all* participants to be revealed, while also offering children different ways of learning and talking about learning, thereby creating opportunities for increased equity in learning (p. 11).

Key take-aways for practice

- When funds of knowledge and funds of identity are made visible, teachers can focus on the strengths of children and their families, rather than their perceived deficits.
- Arts-based methods enable educators, children and community to learn about and with each other.

Further reading

- D'warte, J. (2014). Exploring linguistic repertoires: Multiple language use and multimodal literacy activity in five classrooms. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 37(1), 21.
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- Hedges, H., Cullen, J., & Jordan, B. (2011). Early years curriculum: Funds of knowledge as a conceptual framework for children's interests. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 43(2), 185-205.
- Moll, L.C., & González, N. (2004). Engaging life: A funds of knowledge approach to multicultural education. In J. Banks & C. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (2nd ed., pp. 699-715). Jossey-Bass.