

# Funds of Knowledge



Theorizing  
Practices in  
Households,  
Communities,  
and Classrooms

Edited by **Norma González · Luis C. Moll · Cathy Amanti**

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Norma González  
*University of Utah*

Luis C.Moll  
*University of Arizona*

Cathy Amanti  
*Tucson Unified School District*



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# Preface

This book is written for educators who are willing to venture beyond the walls of the classroom. It is for those teachers and teachers-to-be who are willing to learn from their students and their communities. It is for those who are willing to be accountable not only to state-mandated tests, but to the nurturing of students' strengths and resources. At a time when national educational discourses swirl around accountability through testing, we present a counterdiscourse to scripted and structured educational packages. We feel instruction must be linked to students' lives, and the details of effective pedagogy should be linked to local histories and community contexts. We also call for greater teacher autonomy and stronger preservice professional preparation and in-service professional development that involves collaborative research to build an empirical understanding of the life experiences of students.

Our perspective is that learning does not take place just "between the ears," but is eminently a social process. Students' learning is bound within larger contextual, historical, political, and ideological frameworks that affect students' lives. This perspective is as relevant today, despite the focus on standards and high-stakes testing and accountability, as it was when the ideas presented in this book were first conceptualized. This work is a call to invest the time and effort to create enabling structures and greater levels of professionalism for teachers, as we develop deeper insights and understanding of the sociopolitical context of diversity.

The concept of *funds of knowledge*, which is at the heart of this book, is based on a simple premise: People are competent, they have knowledge,

and their life experiences have given them that knowledge. Our claim is that firsthand research experiences with families allow one to document this competence and knowledge. It is this engagement that opened up many possibilities for positive pedagogical actions. The theoretical concepts presented in this book, a funds of knowledge approach, facilitates a systematic and powerful way to represent communities in terms of resources, the wherewithal they possess, and how to harness these resources for classroom teaching. Cummins (1996, p. 75) has argued, “Our prior experience provides the foundation for interpreting new information. No learner is a blank slate.” The approach to students’ households presented in this book is one key to unlock and capitalize on the knowledge students already possess.

This book presents an approach to local households where teachers, in their role as researchers and learners, visit families to document funds of knowledge. This approach should not be confused with parent participation programs, although increased parental involvement is often a fortuitous consequence of the work described herein. This is also not an attempt to teach parents “how to do school,” although that could certainly be an outcome if the parents so desired. Neither does this work imply that curriculum can only be related to individual students’ experiences; however, by critically examining what is taught and why it is taught it becomes an important aspect of our research. Instead, the approach presented in this volume attempts to accomplish something that may be even more challenging: to alter perceptions of working-class or poor communities and to view these households primarily in terms of their strengths and resources (or funds of knowledge) as their defining pedagogical characteristic.

We acknowledge that the households we studied may or may not, individually or collectively, have the challenges and problems that are commonly associated with poverty and urban schools. But very often these issues—such as drugs, gangs, and violence—have been transformed into the primary defining characteristic of these households or their communities, erasing the resiliency and fortitude of individuals and communities. What is often invisible is that the normative characteristic of these households is not dysfunction, but exactly the sorts of experiences and knowledge that we present in this book. These are people living, working, thinking, worrying, and caring. In the course of their lives, as individuals and as a group, they constitute households that have generated and accumulated a variety of funds of knowledge that are the intellectual residues of their activities. In a sense, we are attempting to re-present households in a way that is respectful to issues of voice, representation, and authenticity. How we go about conceptualizing, identifying, documenting, and using these funds of knowledge in classrooms is the story we tell in these pages.

At the heart of our approach is the work of teachers who conducted research in their students' households. The teachers in our study, in contrast to other approaches that emphasize home visits, venture into their students' households and communities, not as teachers attempting to convey educational information, as valuable as that may be, but as learners, as researchers with a theoretical perspective that seeks to understand the ways in which people make sense of their everyday lives. To accomplish this work, we relied on a mix of guided conversation and interviews, a sort of ethnographic inquiry. The principal task, we have come to learn, is not primarily to elicit information, but to foster a relationship of trust with the families so they can tell us about their lives and experiences. The interview, as we elaborate in later chapters, became an exchange of views, information, and stories, and the families got to know us as we got to know them. By focusing on understanding the particulars, the processes or practices of life (in Spanish, *los quehaceres de la vida*), and how people lived experiences, we gained a deep appreciation of how people use resources of all kinds, prominently their funds of knowledge, to engage life.

## HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

In this book we attempt to accomplish three objectives. The first is to give readers the basic theory and methods that we followed. The second is to present the teachers' voices as the central protagonists in this work. The third is to explore the pedagogical implications that can come about by knowing the community deeply and personally. Because the authors of the chapters have had different experiences and purposes in engaging in this type of work, the voices that you read are multiple and diverse. There is no impersonal authorial stance or unified voice that connects these chapters. Instead, each chapter reflects the author's own telling of his or her experience in connecting with communities. Some authors were teachers in our original project. Others have taken some basic premises and applied them to other contexts. Still others have redefined in creative ways how teachers and schools can learn from communities. Because we hope this book can be used for preservice teacher training and inservice professional development, we have written a series of "Reflection Questions" at the end of each chapter. These can guide the reader to deeper and more extensive discussions on the material that is presented.

The organization of this book reflects our objectives. The book is organized into four parts: (I) Theoretical Underpinnings; (II) Teachers as Researchers, (III) Translocations: New Contexts and New Directions, and (IV) Concluding Commentary. Each of the first three parts begins with an introduction to the themes of the chapters that can serve as a road map to the reader. Because this work has been ongoing for some time and has

been published in other venues, some of the material that is presented may be familiar to the reader. We have selected key texts that encapsulate the diverse threads of this work. In Part I, Theoretical Underpinnings, we present reprints of three published articles that describe the theoretical basis for the work. Part II, Teachers as Researchers, describes the firsthand experiences of teacher-researchers who have participated in the project and who present their own insights and challenges in going beyond the classroom walls. In Part III, Translocations: New Contexts and New Directions, we present examples of how the basic methodology has been adapted and transformed to meet particular contextual needs. Part IV, the concluding chapter, attempts to connect deeply with theory and research, and reflects on the implications of the work.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Because this work has a long history, we find that there are many people who should be thanked for bringing it to this point. First and foremost, we acknowledge and thank the students and students' families who have graciously allowed us into their homes. Of equal importance are the teachers who have participated in the various stages of the work, teachers from many schools who have been willing to go beyond their classroom walls. In addition, we gratefully acknowledge the principals who have supported and permitted this project in their schools. We would like to especially thank Gene Benton, Assistant Superintendent of Tucson Unified School District when we began our work, for his vision in caring about communities, households, and schools.

As in most work of this nature, it could not have progressed without the able support of dedicated and grossly underpaid graduate students. We thank these many colleagues for their participation. We also acknowledge the deep influence of Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez and James Greenberg on the formulation of our theoretical understanding. We are also grateful for funding from the W.K.Kellogg Foundation, the Center for Research on Diversity and Second Language Learning, and the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence. We also express our appreciation to the Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology and to the Department of Language, Reading, and Culture, both at the University of Arizona. Finally, we thank Naomi Silverman of Lawrence Erlbaum Associates for her unflagging support and professionalism.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction: Theorizing Practices\*

Norma González  
*University of Utah*

Luis Moll  
*University of Arizona*

Cathy Amanti  
*Tucson Unified School District*

*The problem with many empirical data, empirically presented, is that they can be flat and uninteresting, a documentary of detail which does not connect with urgent issues. On the other hand, the 'big ideas' are empty of people, feeling and experience. In my view well-grounded and illuminating analytic points flow only from bringing concepts into a relationship with the messiness of ordinary life, somehow recorded.*

—Paul Willis (2000, p. xi)

In this introduction, we present a brief description of how we have brought our theoretical concepts into this sort of relationship with the “messiness of ordinary life.” These are the everyday practices that we attempt to theorize, practices that are at times emergent, perhaps counterintuitive, and sometimes opaque. Yet these practices do not emerge from nowhere; they are formed and transformed within sociohistorical circumstances. Practices are also constructed by and through discourses, the ways of knowing that populate our streams of talk. The lives of ordinary people, their everyday activities, and what has led them to the place they find

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\* Portions of this chapter appeared in González, N., & Moll, L. (2002), Cruzando el puente: Building bridges to funds of knowledge. *Journal of Educational Policy*, 16, 623–641; McIntyre, E., Rosebery, A., & González, N. (2001), *Classroom diversity: Connecting curriculum to students' lives*, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

themselves are the bases for our theorizing of practices. It is in the richness of telling these stories that we can find not only evocative human drama, but social analysis that emerges from its organic roots. Because this work has been a collaborative endeavor, we have relied on an interdisciplinary perspective. We have not always operated within a unified paradigm, although there are foundational premises that we have accepted as axiomatic, such as the power of social relationships in the construction of knowledge. The following section describes the emergent nature of jointly negotiating the process. Because we like to think of ourselves as engaged in a conversation, we present here the give-and-take of multiple perspectives, starting with the anthropological view.

### THE ANTHROPOLOGIST'S VIEW (NORMA GONZÁLEZ)

We like to make much of the fact that in this project we are all learners: teachers as learners, researchers as learners, students as learners, communities of learners, and so forth. Actually, when I look back on the years that we carried out this work, the person who most needed to learn was me. I came into this project flush with anthropological theory, convinced that if only educators could appreciate the power of ethnography, the experience of schooling would be radically changed. It took a while for me to realize that what needed to change radically was the implicit ideology that had insidiously crept into my thinking: that to fix teachers was to fix schools. Although I continue to have the deepest respect for the teachers who have struggled through this process, I now wince as I recall my naïveté regarding the burdens under which teachers work. How can collaborative ethnography, where teachers are actively engaged in researching and applying local knowledge, be sustained when institutional constraints mitigate its continuation? An emancipatory social research agenda calls for empowering approaches that encourage and enable participants to change through self-reflection and a deeper understanding of their situations. Yet these empowering approaches must contend with a context that isolates practitioners, mutes autonomy, and pushes for standardization and homogenization.

Rereading some of my writing concerning those initial stages, I realize that I was quite taken with the postmodernist and poststructuralist discourses which, in the parlance of the times, interrogated hegemonic relationships and have done an admirable job of locating asymmetries of power and domination. What is not evident is how practitioners, within the limits of their very real structural constraints, can realistically carry out emancipatory and liberatory pedagogies when they themselves are victims of disempowerment and their circumstances preclude full

professional development. Discourses of critical pedagogy have often become circumscribed within academic circles, peripheral to the very people they purport to affect because of a turgid literary style and an apparent lack of connection to everyday life in classrooms. It is the quintessential instance of being able to talk the talk, but not walk the walk.

How does the funds of knowledge concept differ from other approaches, and how is it useful? What did we do and how did we do it? What have we learned, and what can we claim? What could we have done better?

First of all, it is important to note that this project did not emerge fully formed, but evolved through incremental steps, some more useful than others. Tracing the anthropological trajectory of this project, I look at the early work of Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez in *Bonds of Mutual Trust* (1983), a study of rotating credit associations in central Mexico and the Southwest. Drawing on work by the Mexican anthropologist Larissa Lomnitz, Vélez-Ibáñez developed a fine-grained analysis of networks of exchange and *confianza*. Emphasizing *confianza* as the single most important mediator in social relationships, Vélez-Ibáñez (1983) claimed that *confianza en confianza*, trust in mutual trust, was an overriding cultural intersection for Mexican-origin populations (p. 136).

As director of the Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology (BARA) at the University of Arizona in 1983, Vélez-Ibáñez continued this research interest in relationships of reciprocity. In 1984, he and fellow BARA anthropologist James Greenberg received funding from the National Science Foundation to carry out a study on nonmarket systems of exchange within the Tucson, Arizona, Mexican-origin community. This study ("The Tucson Project") involved extensive ethnographic interviews with households in two segments of the population, roughly falling into working-class and middle-class descriptions. This work clearly demonstrated the extent to which kin and non-kin networks affected families and households (see Vélez-Ibáñez, 1996, pp. 143–181). The ethnographic interviews revealed "core" households, households (usually the mother's) that were central to providing information, goods, mutual help, and support to a whole circle of other households. Because I was an ethnographer on the Tucson Project and a graduate student at the time, I realized firsthand the transformative effect of knowing the community in all of its breadth and depth. I had been born and raised in Tucson and felt that I was quite familiar with the cycles of life here, but the experience of talking firsthand to families, hearing their stories of struggle and hardship, of survival and persistence, magnified hundredfold the puny insights I held. I learned personally of the warmth and respect given to interviewers, and of the responsibility we held as part of *confianza*. In many ways, the



Tucson Project set the groundwork for the methodological and theoretical bases of the Funds of Knowledge project.

### THE EDUCATIONAL RESEARCHER'S VIEW (LUIS MOLL)

Here is where I enter the story. I arrived in Tucson in 1986 after working at the University of California, San Diego. I was not only new to Tucson but considered an outsider both culturally (I am Puerto Rican) and in terms of my academic background, as I am an educational psychologist collaborating with anthropologists. With the help of several colleagues, especially Esteban Díaz, and in collaboration with teachers, I had conducted studies in San Diego that borrowed from ethnographic methods in researching both classroom dynamics and home life, primarily with Mexican children and families. Furthermore, inspired by Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology, which emphasizes how cultural practices and resources mediate the development of thinking, I had been exploring how to combine insights gained from reading Vygotsky (and others) with the cultural emphasis of anthropological approaches. I will say more about this topic later in this chapter.

Two of our studies in San Diego were the immediate precursors of the Funds of Knowledge projects. In one study we used classroom observations and videotapes of lessons to analyze the social organization of bilingual schooling. We were struck by how English-language instruction did not capitalize on the children's Spanish-language abilities, especially their reading competencies. With the teachers' help, we experimented with the organization of reading lessons, creating a new reading arrangement in English that moved away from a sole emphasis on decoding and concentrated instead on developing the students' reading comprehension while providing support in both languages to help them understand what they read. We were able to show that students relegated to low-level reading lessons in English were capable of much more advanced work, once provided with the strategic support of Spanish in making sense of text (see Moll & Díaz, 1987).

A second study, conducted in middle schools and with the assistance of several teachers, focused on the teaching of writing in English to learners of that language. The study also featured home observations and interviews with families to document the nature and extent of family literacy. We formed a study group with the teachers which allowed us to meet regularly in a community setting to discuss what we were learning from the home observations and how it could be used in the classrooms. It was especially important that the teachers agreed to experiment with their instruction by including topics of relevance to broader community life and to keep a reflective journal of their attempts at change, which we would then discuss

in the study group. Their instructional changes included more emphasis on the process of writing and in creating opportunities for the students to talk about what they wrote, which generated more writing by the students and many more opportunities to teach. We also found that the teachers' study group served as an important "pivot." This was a setting where we could turn to what we were learning from the home visits while addressing how to improve the teaching of writing (Moll & Díaz, 1987).

These two studies formed the bases of the design of the first funds of knowledge study in 1988, funded by the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs of the U.S. Department of Education. The idea was as follows: to replicate the three-part design implemented in San Diego—the home observations, the after-school study group, and the classroom work—but to base the household observations on the Tucson findings of Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg regarding funds of knowledge. We called the study the Community Literacy Project (CLP). The central thrust of the work was to document the funds of knowledge and literacy practices of the homes we studied and observe the teaching of literacy in selected classrooms while helping teachers use our household data to generate new forms of literacy instruction in their classrooms (see Moll & Greenberg, 1990).

This project convinced us of the great theoretical utility of the concept of funds of knowledge in developing a systematic approach to households. In particular, we realized that we could visit a wide variety of households, with a range of living arrangements, and collect information reliably that would inform us about how families generated, obtained, and distributed knowledge, among other aspects of household life. We established that these homes and communities should be perceived primarily, as their defining pedagogical characteristic, in terms of the strengths and resources that they possess.

We also confirmed in that first project the importance of creating collaborative working arrangements with teachers. As in the earlier San Diego study, the teachers' study group quickly became the coordinating center for the project's pedagogical activities. Within these groups, teachers were able to think about their classrooms and what they wanted to change, and consider how to use data on funds of knowledge to change their instruction. This first study provided us with the initial case studies of teachers successfully using the study's ideas and data as part of their teaching. It also became clear, however, that just as we were approaching households as learners, we needed to approach classrooms in a similar way to learn from the teachers' work, even as we helped them rethink their classroom practices. So far, the teachers had contributed greatly to the pedagogical thinking and analysis of our research team but had played

no role in the data collection of the household funds of knowledge. We set out to remedy that imbalance by creating the prototype of the funds of knowledge approach.

## HOW DO ANTHROPOLOGY AND EDUCATION FIT TOGETHER? ANTHROPOLOGY AGAIN (NORMA GONZÁLEZ)

We return to the anthropological perspective. Many of the assumptions and methods for a funds of knowledge approach are rooted in participatory ethnography, and in anthropological theory.

### What Did We Do?

The pilot Funds of Knowledge study began in 1990 with 10 teachers and funding from the W.K.Kellogg Foundation. A sister project, with four teachers, was funded in that same academic year by the National Center for Research on Diversity and Second Language Learning at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Although the groups met separately, the methods and format were similar.

The underlying rationale for this work stems from an assumption that the educational process can be greatly enhanced when teachers learn about their students' everyday lives. In our particular version of how this was to be accomplished, ethnographic research methods involved participant observation, interviews, life-history narratives, and reflection on field notes. These helped uncover the multidimensionality of student experience. Teacher-ethnographers ventured into their students' households and communities seeking to understand the ways in which people make sense of their everyday lives. Although the concept of making home visits is not new, entering the households of working-class, Mexican-origin, African American, or American Indian students with an eye toward learning from these households is a departure from traditional school-home visits.

### Who Are the Teachers?

We strongly felt that only teachers who voluntarily participated should be included. Any project that adds to teachers' duties and the demands on their time has to take into account the extra burden that it places on teachers' schedules and lives. There can be little benefit gained from mandating visits where a teacher does not want to be in the household, nor the household members want to receive them. However, when there is sincere interest in both learning about and learning from a household, relationships and *confianza* can flourish.

Teachers participating in the project in its various iterations were primarily elementary school teachers, although middle school teachers from a variety of backgrounds and ranges of teaching experience were recently included. Minority and nonminority teachers said they benefited from the process. Even teachers from the local community said that conducting household visits was “like coming home to my grandmother’s house” and triggered childhood memories for them. One point that I found interesting was that the nonminority teachers who participated in the project seemed to share a background of exposure to other countries and cultures. Some had lived or traveled in Latin America, Africa, or Asia in their formative years. Others had parents in the armed forces, which had given them global experiences in the process. Teachers participating in the project were paid for their extra duty time.

### A TEACHER’S VIEW (CATHY AMANTI)

As Norma points out, those of us who participated in the original Funds of Knowledge project were a diverse group. We represented a multitude of background experiences and became involved for a variety of reasons. We were all practicing teachers, however, and we were all volunteers.

When I became involved in the Funds of Knowledge project, I had recently earned my bilingual education teaching credentials. I was interested in this project because the first time I attended college in the early 1970s I intended to major in anthropology and was now planning to earn a graduate degree in that field. I heard about this project from Luis Moll, who had been one of my undergraduate professors. The school where I began teaching was targeted as one of the schools for involvement in the project.

What originally interested me in this project was the opportunity to combine my interests in education and anthropology. But what kept me involved was the impact it had on my thinking about teaching and the role teachers and parents play in schools. The school where I taught at the time was situated in a predominantly working-class, Latino neighborhood. During my teacher training, I was led to believe that low-income and minority students were more likely to experience failure in school because their home experiences had not provided them with the prerequisite skills for school success in the same way as the home experiences of middle- and upper-class students. The result has been that traditionally low-income and minority students have been offered lessons reduced in complexity to compensate for these perceived deficits.

My teaching experience did not validate the expectations I garnered from my teacher preparation studies. In my daily teaching practice I saw high levels of academic engagement and insight in my students who had typically been labeled “at risk” because of their demographic characteristics. I saw they

were as capable of academic success as students from any other background. Additionally, most were fluent in two languages! Participating in the Funds of Knowledge project allowed me to delve into this seeming paradox.

This points to something else all of us teachers participating in the original Funds of Knowledge project had in common—the desire to improve our teaching practice and a willingness to step out of our comfort zones to achieve that end. The first thing we had to do was step into the world of ethnography and become trained in “participant observation.” This was the catalyst for us to begin looking at our students and the communities surrounding our schools in a new light. Going on ethnographic home visits, then meeting in study groups to process those experiences, allowed us to take advantage of the reflexivity inherent in ethnographic research. We went from viewing our students as one-dimensional to being multidimensional, and at the same time we gained the tools we needed to create the bridge between our students’ knowledge, background experiences, and ways of viewing the world and the academic domain.

I would like to point out, however, that unlike typical ethnographers, we were not detached observers of our school communities. Nor were we engaged in ethnographic research simply to document the home lives of our students or rework social theory. We already had a relationship established with the students whose homes we visited, and our purpose for gathering information on these visits was, again, to improve our teaching practice.

## HOW DO WE FIND OUT ABOUT THE KNOWLEDGE IN THE COMMUNITY? (NORMA GONZÁLEZ)

In recent years, building on what students bring to school and their strengths has been shown to be an incredibly effective teaching strategy. The Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE) at the University of California, Santa Cruz has developed five research-based standards for effective pedagogy (<http://www.crede.ucsc.edu>). One of these standards, *contextualization*, is concerned with making meaning and connecting school to students’ lives. What better way to engage students than to draw them in with knowledge that is already familiar to them and to use that as a basis for pushing their learning? But here is the challenge and dilemma: How do we know about the knowledge they bring without falling into tired stereotypes about different cultures? How do we deal with the dynamic processes of the life experiences of students? How can we get away from static categorizations of assumptions about what goes on in households? How can we build relationships of *confianza* with students’ households?

Our answer to these questions focuses on the talk born of ethnography: respectful talk between people who are mutually engaged in a constructive conversation.

## What Are the Methods for Doing This?

As the Funds of Knowledge project evolved, the approach to ethnographic training shifted as we learned more about what works and what does not. Not surprisingly, what works is exactly our basic assumption: The more that participants can engage and identify with the topic matter, the more interest and motivation they will have. What does not work is a top-down classroom style approach in which participants can learn methodological technique, but that strips away the multidimensionality of a personal ethnographic encounter. In other words, we learn ethnography by doing ethnography.

It is difficult to reduce a complex process to formulaic terms because anything called ethnography is always in jeopardy of reductionistic misuse. However, there are certain important points that are key in adopting an anthropological lens. The first step was reading ethnographic literature. Teachers were provided with a reader that contained numerous examples of ethnographic work relating to educational settings. Secondly, we roleplayed and discussed a nonevaluative, nonjudgmental stance to the fieldwork the teachers will be conducting. We may not always agree with what we hear, but our role is to understand how others make sense of their lives. Sense-making processes may be contradictory or ambiguous, but in one way or another, understanding what makes sense to others is what we are about. The third step is to be a good observer and pay attention to detail.

The household visit begins long before the actual entrance into the home. As we drive down the street, we observe the neighborhood, the surrounding area, and the external markers of what identifies this as a neighborhood. We look for material clues to possible funds of knowledge in gardens (botanical knowledge?), patio walls (perhaps someone is a mason?), restored automobiles (mechanical knowledge?), or ornaments displayed (made by whom?).

During our initial training session (I hesitate to call it training because ethnography is not something one can be trained in, but must experience), we would show a video that contained two short segments of ordinary community scenes and ask participants to discuss what they noticed. This kind of preparation for participant observation allowed teacher-researchers the opportunity to hone their observational skills as well as focus on paying attention to the details of household life.

The first video contained a family yard sale with a great deal of activity going on at once. We stressed that this is usually what happens on a household visit. Life doesn't stand still in these homes just so we can observe it. The vignette usually elicited comments on what is being sold, such as wooden doll furniture, which might indicate carpentry skills. Others noticed the interactions where older siblings were caring for the

younger babies, indicating cross-age care-taking. Many teachers noticed the use of language and commented on the code-switching between Spanish and English evident throughout. It was fascinating to notice how our own interests and our own funds of knowledge often colored and filtered what we observe. One teacher commented that he noticed a fountain in the backyard because he was installing one himself.

The second video segment that we used is particularly rich for tapping into potential curricular applications. It showed a nine-year-old boy in a backyard workshop, working with his father to build a barbecue grill. The scene is replete with measurement, estimation, geometry, and a range of other household mathematical practices. Because we do not often think of routine household activities as containing mathematics, this slice of life helped to conceptualize the academic potential of community knowledge.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we asked respectful questions and learned to listen to answers. The dialogue that comes about in the faceto-face interaction of the ethnographic interview is key to building bridges between community and school and between parent and teacher. Asking questions with the intent to learn more about others is a powerful method for establishing the validation of community-based knowledge.

### What About Culture?

Because the term *culture* is loaded with expectations of group norms and often-static ideas of how people view the world and behave in it, we purposely avoided reference to ideas of culture. The term presumes coherence within groups, which may not exist. Instead, we focused on practice—what households actually do and how they think about what they do. In this way, we opened up a panorama of the interculturality of households, that is, how households draw from multiple cultural systems and use these systems as strategic resources. Because of the problematic nature of the term culture, the term has been used less in anthropology. The question then becomes how do we conceptualize difference? How do we replace the contribution made by culture while minimizing its limitations? We chose to focus on the practices, the strategies and adaptations that households have developed over time, and the multiple dimensions of the lived experiences of students. The question of culture is further explored in the next chapter.

The dialog of the ethnographic interviews provided a rich source of discourse, which encapsulates how people were thinking about these experiences. Together, discourse and practice form the basis for our approach to viewing households (see Abu-Lughod, 1991).



## What Kinds of Questions Do We Ask?

It is important to remember that the interviews emerged as a type of conversation rather than a survey or research protocol. We asked permission of the households first, careful to explain that pseudonyms would always be used and confidentiality maintained. We also asked for permission to audio record the interview, if the family was willing, and permission forms were signed. We also explained why we were doing the interviews, with a focus on enhancing the educational experiences of students. We have found that the vast majority of parents are willing to participate, especially if it will help their children or other people's children. In fact, one comment that has circulated among us is that our problem has never been getting into the household. It has been getting out. That is to say that once parents are convinced that there is true and genuine interest in the everyday routines of their lives, we found that deep relationships of sharing took place. Still, it is important to explain to the family that the household is under no obligation to participate and may withdraw at any time.

On the basis of our previous experience in household interviews, we distilled critical topics into three basic areas. These areas correspond to three questionnaires that were generally covered in three visits. Using questionnaires as a tool was useful for teachers, as ethnographers, to signal a shift in approaching the households as learners. Entering the household with questions, rather than answers, provided the context for an inquiry-based visit. Questionnaires were used as a guide, suggesting possible areas to explore, and used previous information as a platform for formulating new questions. However, precisely because of this scaffolding, rather than providing protocols in this book for the home visits, we instead suggest broad topics that can be explored in a mutually educative manner.

The first interview was based on a family history and labor history. The questions were open-ended and we invited stories about families. We began by asking how and when the family happened to be here, which in our case, was Tucson, Arizona. This generally led to a conversation of family roots, tracing the movements of the family from locale to locale. We also asked about other households in the city and the region with whom they have regular contact. This helped us to conceptualize the networks within which the family operates. For example, we heard many stories of families who followed other family members to Tucson. They were then able to tap into knowledge about the area and job market that others had accumulated, establishing a form of social capital upon their arrival. The narratives that emerged from these household histories are incredibly powerful and often are testimonies to the resiliency and resources of people whose lives are often lived at the economic margins. We found that we would often ask only one or two questions about family history before we were swept away with sagas of migration, resiliency, and survival.



These histories often had a deep impact on the teacher-researchers because of the obstacles that had to be overcome, as well as the current challenges of household members. One teacher was deeply impressed with a household she visited, an immigrant home in which 15 people lived, with each adult member working in labor-intensive jobs in order to contribute to the pool of resources. Teachers regularly encountered households that could only survive because of the networks of exchange that surrounded them. These networks are important sources for the diversity of funds of knowledge to which children are exposed.

The knowledge of grandparents, aunts and uncles, and extended family relations are also resources that go beyond the nuclear family. We have found that the very experience of relating a family history, rich in its own complexity, often evinced a historical consciousness in parents of their origins and where life has taken them. As parents related stories of their own mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, life histories came tumbling out in a fashion that is not often elucidated. Mexican-origin households told evocative stories of crossing into the United States on foot, of working in territorial mines and railroads, and of kinship networks that pulled them to their location in Tucson. African American households told stories of relocations and settlements, of grand matriarchs of extended families, and of their own views of community. American Indian households related to teacher-researchers the importance of participating in local traditional ritual Easter ceremonies and the impact that those rituals can have on a child's identity. Embedded within the experience of narrating one's own particular life trajectory is the extraction of deeper meanings from our own experiences. As family members narrated the stories of how they got to be where they are, everyday experiences came to be imbued with insights and coherence that led to alternate forms of learning.

The foundation of a family history often served as a platform for asking about the labor history of the household. We have found that labor histories are very rich sources for the funds of knowledge that a household possesses. The jobs that people work often provide them with a varied and extensive wealth of information. However, the types of jobs and labor histories that are common within a particular location are linked to regional patterns of political economy. In the Southwest, we found funds of knowledge consolidated in the ecologically pertinent arenas of mining and metallurgy, ranching and animal husbandry, ethnobotany, and transborder transactions. One interesting finding within household labor histories was that many families had approached a jack-of-all-trades strategy as a viable and necessary option in dealing with the fluctuations of the soft economy of Tucson, Arizona. For non-white-collar workers, survival is often a matter of strategic shifts in employment trajectories

when a particular marketable skill bottoms out. This strategy was articulated by one father who stated, “If you want to stay in Tucson and survive, you have to be able to do everything: construction, carpentry, roofing, mechanics, or whatever. Otherwise, you’ll starve.”

For many households who do not see relocation as an option, the economic climate of the region drives households into a wide breadth of marketable skills in a multiplicity of areas. Children are not only exposed to the funds of knowledge that these shifts engender, but also to the strategic shifts in employment goals. This ability to shift strategies in mid-stream is a skill that the successful and productive citizen of the future must embody. These children are keenly aware that survival is often a matter of making the most of scarce resources and adapting to a situation in innovative and resourceful ways.

We found family members engaged in diverse occupations that gave them skills in many areas. For example, carpenters and seamstresses both engage in mathematical practices, which are often intuitive, based on common sense, and not based on academics. Yet these practices yield efficient and precise results, because errors are costly and can affect their livelihood. One important point to remember is that a labor history does not necessarily mean a job in the formal labor market. For that reason, we asked about informal labor history. Many women, for example, sell items out of their homes, such as tortillas and tamales, or sell cosmetics, or have a regular stand at the local swap meet (flea market). These are not often counted as jobs, but they are ripe with potential for children’s formation of knowledge. One student was able to negotiate a barter system with a fellow swap-market vendor, which enabled him to purchase some particular clothes he wanted.

The second interview was based on regular household activities, in an attempt to capture the routine “practices” of the household. Children are often involved in ongoing household activities that can incorporate car repair, gardening, home improvement, child-care, or working in a family business or hobby. One child participated in bicycle repairs and was able to acquire a high level of competency in this area. We asked about music practices, sports, shopping with coupons, and other aspects of a child’s life, which helped us develop a composite and multidimensional image of the range of possible funds of knowledge. We asked about any daily, weekly and/or monthly routines in which the family participated, and who they interacted with in these activities. We also asked about the kinds of literacy and mathematical activities that might be embedded in these practices, making the leap from informal out-of-school knowledge to formal academic knowledge.

The third interview was the most complex, and teacher-researchers reported that it was often the most revealing and lengthy. This area of

understanding processes of sense-making involved how parents view and construct their roles as parents and caretakers. This interview asked questions about parenthood, raising children, and the experience of being a parent. Parents were asked about their own school experiences, and asked how it contrasted with their children's school experiences. Immigrant parents were asked about school experiences in their home country, and to contrast it with the educational system in this country. There were also questions about language use for bilingual families, including when a particular language is spoken, and under what circumstances.

It is important to remember that questions were not asked in an intrusive way, and any question that seemed inappropriate was simply not asked. Teacher-researchers developed a set of skills in asking questions within a conversation in a way everyone found comfortable. None of the questions were prescriptive, and there was wide latitude in how the interview was conducted. For anyone wishing to conduct this type of home visit, we suggest that these topics form the basis for the interviews. However, because the strength of this approach is local context, the questions that can give us these insights will vary from locale to locale. We suggest a careful appraisal of the questions that can be asked respectfully within local circumstances.

## **A TEACHER'S VIEW OF THE QUESTIONNAIRES** **(CATHY AMANTI)**

The interview questionnaires we used were instrumental in creating the positive focus for the visits we made to our students' homes. The types of information we gathered prompted us to change our perspective of our students' homes and communities from, at best, being irrelevant to the educational process and, at worst, being the cause of our students' lack of educational progress, to being rich resources for teaching and learning. This change in perspective was not limited to the students whose homes we visited. After going through the process of getting to know a few students on a deeper level by visiting them in their homes and seeing how little we really knew about them just from our classroom interactions, we began to realize that even those students whose homes we had not visited were bringing multiple resources to school. From our experience with the questionnaires we learned how to ask the right questions, even in the classroom, to get at what funds of knowledge these other students possessed.

## **HOW IS THE HOUSEHOLD SELECTED?** **(NORMA GONZÁLEZ)**

There was wide latitude involved in the selection of households. Teacher-researchers had full flexibility to choose any student. Some adopted a lottery system, picking a name at random, and others identified particular

households because they had previous contact with them, or had an interest in getting to know the family better. It was important that the family be willing to participate, that they be informed that they could withdraw at any time, and that they be aware that it involved a time commitment. Children often clamored to have their homes visited, and teachers were invariably welcomed as honored guests and with the utmost respect and courtesy. Conversations about family histories often brought out picture albums, yellowed newspaper clippings, and elaborate genealogies. Topics about work and hobbies often produced handcrafted items or tours of home improvement projects. Talk about schools generated diplomas and awards. Teachers were often invited back informally to participate in family gatherings or church and community functions. Telling their story became an important and valued experience for parents, when there was a truly engaged and interested listener and learner.

### **How Many Households Are Interviewed?**

It goes without saying that it is impossible to interview the household of every student in a classroom. In fact, teachers typically conducted complete interviews with three students and their families. This may seem like a small number, but it actually represents a great deal of investment in time on the part of the teacher. Hectic schedules of both teachers and household members preclude frequent visits. Most visits were spaced out over a period of several months. Even when teachers were able to conduct only one indepth series of interviews with a household, they still found it to be a powerful process. As we might expect, the more households were interviewed across a number of school years, the greater the insights into the community. However, we cannot underestimate the power of engaging in a longterm sustained relationship with only a few families.

### **What About Language?**

As we have mentioned, the teachers we have worked with represent a diversity of background and experience. Although some of the teachers have been bilingual, others were not. Still, bilingualism has played an important role in our work. Bilingual teachers have, for the most part, carried out the interviews by themselves. However, we did recommend that teachers consider going in pairs to interviews, and this strategy worked well with nonbilingual teachers. These teachers were often accompanied by classroom paraprofessionals, who are almost always bilingual and who generally have a good sense of community context. In these cases, the bilingual paraprofessional was able to facilitate the connection to the household. However, this also means that paraprofessionals should be a part of the

ethnographic training and participate in other professional development activities (see Rueda & Monzó, 2002). In one case, a monolingual teacher was accompanied by her bilingual principal, and they engaged in a rich, dual-language interview. Because the aim of the household interviews is to come to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of community practices, it is important that the formation of relationships be the guiding principle. The interview is not only meant to gather information, but to create new linkages between parents and teachers. The language of the interview becomes an important context for these relationships, and a great deal of thought should precede how communication will take place.

In addition, the study group discussion most often occurred in both English and Spanish, depending on the topic and the discussants. All of the questions used in the interviews are available in both languages because many of the interviews are conducted not only in one language or another, but in a combination of both. The writing of field notes also reflects bilingual language practices, prominent features of the households and communities we have studied. This bilingualism has been part of the texture of the interviews, so much so that in many ways we could not imagine conducting the research monolingually. Thus, this code-switching, this interplay of codes, often censored in schools, has become the language of research and yet another cultural resource as we attempt to represent and understand the communities within which we work.

### **What Happened After the Interview?**

The field notes were important in reflecting on the interviews and visits. We asked the families' permission to tape-record the interview, since this helped to reconstruct the experience. The field notes documented the findings and details of the visit in a way that helped to further process the experience. The writing of field notes can be time-consuming, but the written expression helped to collectively share the insights gained from the visit in the study group. Following their forays into the field, teacher-researchers were asked to write field notes, as all field workers do, based on each interview, and these field notes became the basis for the study group discussions. Teachers overwhelmingly remarked on the time-consuming nature of this process. After a hectic school day, taking the time to conduct interviews which often stretched into two or three hours, and then to later invest four to five hours in writing field notes was an exacting price to pay for a connection to the household. They cited this one factor as precluding wholesale teacher participation in this project. Yet, in spite of the strain of the task, the teachers felt that the effort was worth it. It was in the reflexive process involved in transcribing that teachers were able to obtain elusive insights that could have easily

been overlooked. As they replayed the audiotapes and referred to notes, connections and hunches began to emerge. The household began to take on a complex reality that had taken root in the interview and reached its fruition in reflexive writing. Writing gave form and substance to the connection forged between the household and the teacher.

## THE STUDY GROUP SETTINGS (LUIS MOLL)

I want to underscore the importance of developing study-group settings with teachers. These settings, mentioned in several chapters in this volume, are deliberately created to facilitate interactions between teachers and researchers about the work at hand. It is difficult to underestimate the importance of such settings for a funds of knowledge approach. We have come to call them the “center of gravity” of the project. These are the places where we conduct all project business. It is where we discuss the background readings, introduce observations and note-taking, revise interview procedures, review findings from each visit, and discuss classroom practices and implications. It is also the place where we initially get to know each other and create relationships among participants through the discussions about the work.

The study group is also the place where we examine ethical considerations in the study. Any project involving multiple participants visiting various households has the potential to encounter ethical dilemmas. One such issue, for example, is whether teachers are being unnecessarily intrusive in visiting households. Although this is a concern of some teachers at the beginning of each study, this is a topic that to our knowledge has never been raised by the families themselves. This may be because we carefully negotiate entry into the households, usually by working with the teachers in contacting parents and explaining the work and our request to visit. Although we have not kept statistics, in the great majority of cases the families accede readily to the visits. Once we start the visits, we reiterate the purpose of the study as often as necessary, and assure the respondents of confidentiality, that they need not answer any question they do not like, and we offer to give them copies of the interview tapes or of the transcripts. In our experience, the families have never refused to answer any question. On the contrary, our experience has been that the families engage us in an extended dialog during each of the visits.

A question we get often during presentations about the work is whether we encounter many dysfunctional families, whatever the definition of this term. The answer is no. This may be because of the way we sample families, usually based on the suggestions of teachers, with an eye toward gaining access to the household. It could also be that if a family is having extreme difficulties, it would not become a candidate for a visit or consent to it if

asked. But more than likely, it is that the perception of dysfunctionality in working-class neighborhoods is misleading and exaggerated. As we have pointed out often, the families we visit represent the status quo in their communities. In other words, they are working folks; these are not families that form part of any “underclass,” a term that has unfortunately come to characterize low-income families in general (see Vélez-Ibáñez, 1983). We do not mean to suggest, however, that low-income communities do not have problems, especially as produced by structural factors; of course they do (see Vélez-Ibáñez, 1996, ch. 5). The perspective that we reject is that these problems characterize entire communities, removing from consideration the ample and positive resources families possess.

Another important aspect of study-group settings is their mobility. We usually meet after school and at the school, as a matter of convenience. However, we have also met at our homes, at restaurants, libraries, and other locations. We have also used university courses as study-group settings of sorts. The course routines ensure weekly meetings, which gives a study continuity. However, the course structure places the university-based teacher in the position of authority, given the requirements of assignments, assessments, and grades, a contradiction to the symmetry we call for in our collaborations.

In any case, regardless of location, the study-group settings serve similar “mediating” functions between the household visits and the classroom work. The term mediation has a special meaning in our studies, one that we borrow from the writings of Vygotsky (1978). A major point in his theory is how culture provides human beings with tools and other resources to mediate their thinking. In a nutshell, from birth one is socialized by others into particular cultural practices, including ways of using language(s) and ways of using artifacts that become the “tools for thinking” through which we interact with our social worlds. Thus, from a Vygotskian perspective, human thinking has a sociocultural character from the very beginning, because all human actions, from the mundane to the exotic, involve “mediation” through such objects, symbols, and practices. Put another way, these cultural tools and practices—some which are stable, and some which change across generations—are always implicated in how one thinks and develops.

There are three main ways that these Vygotskian ideas are found in our work. First, notice how these ideas relate to the analysis of household funds of knowledge (see Moll & Greenberg, 1990). As emphasized throughout this book, funds of knowledge are generated through the social and labor history of families and communicated to others through the activities that constitute household life, including through the formation of social networks that are central to any household’s functioning within its particular environments. From this perspective, then, funds of knowledge



represent one of the household's most useful cultural resources, an essential tool kit that households need to maintain (mediate) their well-being.

A second way is that funds of knowledge become cultural resources for teachers as they document their existence and bring them to bear on their work. But to carry out these tasks, teachers must themselves acquire, or appropriate, certain specialized tools to conduct research that come to mediate their thinking about these matters. It is this idea of "appropriating," of taking over, certain procedures, artifacts, discourses and reasoning, that applies so well to how the study groups function in our approach.

To elaborate on this, I want to highlight two aspects of these study groups that have to do with the production of theoretical (re) presentations. A major role of the study group has been to help facilitate the participants' comprehension of social life in the households they study. The process by which these understandings are created varies, but it starts with the preparations to conduct the household visits. As explained earlier, entering the households with questions is essential in developing such an inquirybased approach. Equally important is for teachers to gain an understanding of funds of knowledge as a "fluid" concept, and that its content and meaning are negotiated through discussions among participants. Also, it is through the process of writing field notes and discussing them that one gives theoretical form and substance to the connections forged empirically between the households and the teachers.

Our approach to understanding families and their cultural resources also includes raising possibilities for changes in classroom practice. This is the third way that the Vygotskian formulations have played a role in our work, especially as combined with an anthropological perspective, in understanding classrooms as cultural settings. During the course of our studies we made the decision to take a more ethnographic stance toward the teachers' classroom practices. Our task shifted from stimulating changes in practice, especially as related to literacy instruction, to understanding how teachers made use of their experiences and resources within classroom contexts. The teacher-authored chapters included in this book reveal the multiple conditions and strategies followed in transporting experiences from their research into their practice. To be sure, this process of transportation is not to be thought of as a simple transfer of skills from one setting to the next. As the reader will appreciate, it involves a much more complicated process of recontextualizing not only the knowledge obtained through the research, but the perspectives and methods of inquiry that led to that knowledge.

Perhaps the connecting thread among the teachers who participated in our studies is a renewed emphasis on an inquiry model of teaching, one in which the students are actively involved in developing their knowledge. It is through an inquiry process, conceptualized in several ways, given