

MIGRANT STUDENTS' "FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE": HISPANIC TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES IN THE UNITED STATES

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The paper reports on the Hispanic teachers' perspectives concerning migrant children's funds of knowledge and the use of this knowledge in school to facilitate children's school experiences and enhance their academic performance. The study employed semi-structured open-ended questions in interviews, focus group discussions and participant observations to document Hispanic teachers' perspectives on migrant children's cultural capital. The study was conducted in an agricultural migrant community in the United States. The findings revealed the nature and the depth of cultural capital that migrant children bring into school as perceived by teachers who share the children's cultural backgrounds. In addition, the findings shed light on practices which utilize these funds of knowledge to strengthen children's academic accomplishments. The paper also suggests recommendations for educators and administrators in the USA and worldwide on how to utilize migrant students' background knowledge and experience to increase the children's academic success, and ultimately reduce the achievement gap.

Keywords: Hispanic teachers, migrant children, funds of knowledge

Anthropologists were the first to recognize that households in various cultures hold bodies of knowledge, “funds of knowledge”, (Moll, et. al., González, 2001) that support survival and can be used to inform classroom instruction (Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 1992). When educators tap into such background knowledge, they are likely to recognize rich and abundant sources of information known to children, along with skills and values held by children (Moll, et. al, 2001). Students are disadvantaged when their prior knowledge, first language, and cultural backgrounds are viewed from a deficit model as opposed to being perceived as bringing added value to the classroom from their “funds of knowledge” (González, 2005). When teachers are able to provide culturally responsive pedagogy, they are likely to foster students’ achievement. When teachers are in synch with the children’s home and community culture, practices emerging from the culture are likely to support learning (Gilliard, Moore, & Lemmieux, 2007). In their study, one teacher with migrant background commented on how her culture has influenced her teaching: “...because I was a migrant child and I know how it feels as a child to go from one place to another---I think that has

influenced me to be able to talk to the children in our migrant program and to be able to comfort them. I am able to get down on their level and really understand what they are feeling or are afraid of" (Gilliard, Moore, & Lemmieux, 2007, para. 41).

The life of two to three million migrant farm workers in the United States is hard and uncertain (McLaughlin, Rodriguez, & Madden, 2008). The workers must be ready every day if the crops are ready to be harvested. If the rains come, the workers are not harvesting, and they are not producing income for their families. As reported "tomato pickers in Florida are paid around 40 cents per bucket. Pickers need to fill up 125 buckets weighing 32 pounds each, or two tons, to earn \$50 daily" (Conde, 2007:7). Injuries are frequent, health care is negligible, and the life expectancy of a migrant farm worker is reported to be 49 years of age. Regarding other life conditions of migrant workers, Estabrook (2011) updates the seriousness of human trafficking by detailing violence and human slavery inflicted on migrant farm workers. Meanwhile, the migrant families are striving to carry on with their lives, raising the children, attending church and social events, and keeping the traditions alive.

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the perspectives of four Hispanic teachers on migrant children's cultural knowledge and how that could be used to enhance school experiences and academic performance. The uniqueness of the study is to focus on teachers who were raised in migrant farm worker families in the United States, and to examine their views on the shared cultural capital and on the ways of how they build academic support on the students' existing background knowledge.

Methodology

This study was conducted in the paradigm of narrative inquiry. It employed participant observations, semi-structured interviewing and focus group discussions to document Hispanic teachers' perspectives concerning migrant children's funds of knowledge and the use of this knowledge in school to facilitate children's school experiences. Unlike in quantitative research studies, in qualitative research, the goal is to gain an in-depth understanding about the examined topic, e.g. Hispanic teachers' perspectives on children's funds of knowledge (Gay & Airasian, 2000; Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtler, 2006). In narrative inquiry, the depth of the interviews and the data from diverse sources, e.g. focus group discussions and observations ensure that the findings, which are not expected to be generalizable to all settings, offer lessons useful for others (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtler, 2006). The transferability is guaranteed with the richness of the description in the study as well as the amount of details provided regarding the context in which the study occurred. In addition, dependability, a criterion for qualitative research, is ensured with the detailed explanation of how the data are collected and analyzed (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtler, 2006). Further, the validity is enhanced by several strategies, such as extending the interviews with focus group discussions, and triangulating the data by using field observation notes and related documents such as lesson plans (Gay & Airasian, 2000).

We hypothesized that Hispanic teachers who share the children's cultural background have significant insights into the nature of cultural capital that migrant children gain in a migrant community. In addition, we hypothesized teachers would utilize the migrant children's cultural specific knowledge in lesson delivery, communication and assessments. Therefore, the following research questions were posed:

1. What are the Hispanic teachers' perspectives on children's "funds of knowledge" that they gain in the sociocultural context of a migrant community in which they grew up?
2. To what extent and how is the children's cultural capital utilized in the school to facilitate children's school experiences and to enhance their academic performance?

Setting and Participants

A small agricultural town of nearly 30,000 residents that may swell to 40,000 during the height of the growing seasons was selected as the site for this study. Approximately a third of the town's school population comes from migrant families. The population is unique with a combination of Mexican, Guatemalan, and Haitian cultural traditions and heritages, speaking languages other than English. Comparing two reports five years apart (Pemberton, Dow, & Foege, 2010), slight improvements in social conditions and poverty indices reflect the following figures:

- Children living in poverty: from 15% to 14.1%
- Grades 6-12 alcohol use: from 36% to 31.5%
- Grades 6-12 marijuana use: from 13% to 11.1%

On the other hand, the reports indicate that children lacking health insurance increased from 17% to 34.3% over the five year period. Academically, the students struggle to reach acceptable performance levels on state assessments. For example, 29% of third graders, 44% of eighth graders and 60% of tenth graders scored below grade level in reading (Pemberton, Dow, & Foege, 2010).

Four participants were selected based on the following criteria: 1) growing up in a migrant community, 2) having been elementary classroom teachers in the given migrant community for at least 5 years; and 3) being identified as bilingual Hispanic. A relatively small sample is satisfactory in qualitative studies examining the participants' perspectives on the given topic, since including additional people to the sample is likely to have no effect on the existence of the viewpoints, and not to alter the underlying structure of a given viewpoint (Ernest, 1999; Sexton, et al., 1998). The four participants are bilingual Hispanic teachers with roots in Mexico. Anita (58), Carmen (41), Roberto (49), and Marta (28) are certified and have been teaching in elementary grades - 1st, 3rd, 4th, and 5th respectively - for a range of 6 to 25 years. As children, they experienced the migrant farm worker lifestyle and have a life history with this migrant community. Their elementary school serves 600 students - 75% Hispanic, 22% Black including African-American and Haitian and around 1% White and American Indian - of whom 41% qualify as migrants, 96% are economically needy, 79% from non-English speakers. The students in the four teachers' classrooms are 6 to 11 years old speaking Spanish and Haitian Creole at home and approximately one third migrate with families to other states during specific seasons.

Data Collection and Analysis

Before the data collection started, the researchers gained the participants' signature on the IRB Consent form. First, the researchers simultaneously completed classroom observations, and took independent notes with a semi-structured observation chart focusing on physical environment, language use, and pedagogical and curriculum decisions. Each observation lasted three

hours. Then, with each teacher they conducted a structured interview addressing areas related to the migrant community; participants' backgrounds; the values of migrant culture and children's "funds of knowledge" as well as family and school practices (Appendix 1). Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Afterwards, the researchers reviewed the interviews for emerging themes, and for the focus group interviews they developed questions that were to further elicit examples for the diverse knowledge, skills and attitudes that children gained in the migrant community. Three and four weeks later two focus group interviews were held. Each session was approximately 45 minutes. All interviews and focus group discussions took place at their school after the school day had ended.

For data analysis, all observation notes were entered in the structured charts, and all audiotaped interviews were transcribed. The process of qualitative data analysis followed the "data analysis spiral" through completing the sequence of steps: (1) data management; (2) initial reading and memoing; (3) coding, describing and interpreting data; (4) data presentation and interpretation (Creswell, 1998; 2003). According to Creswell's model, data analysis first involved organizing and preparing the data, which included transcribing the tape-recorded interviews. The data were then coded keeping the research question in mind. This process led to emerging themes related to Hispanic teachers' perceptions about migrant children's knowledge, skills and attitude. The findings and discussion are organized based on the categories that emerged through our data analysis.

Teachers' Perception of Students' Cultural Capital and Its Use in Classrooms

The observations and interviews with teachers of migrant children indicated two distinguishable groups of knowledge, skills and attitudes perceived as migrant children's cultural capital. Specifically, the theme of cognition and language cultural capital included the ability to speak two languages, specific knowledge about math and economics, and nature and environmental concepts; while the theme of affective and moral cultural capital included respect for others, education and perseverance toward goals, and meeting responsibilities.

Cognitive and Language Cultural Capital

The ability to speak two languages. All four teachers agreed that their students' ability to speak two languages is valuable. Most of their students come from a home where Spanish, Haitian-Creole or other languages were the primary language for communication, therefore from a young age children learn the heritage language in the family. The school, however, uses English as the language of instruction which ultimately contributes to the children's fluency in both languages. The teachers shared stories about how children translate when their monolingual parents need to communicate with the English-speaking community, e.g. school, banks, and offices. Marta found that her fifth graders have a richer vocabulary cumulatively in Spanish and English as a result of their various exposures; for example watching news and telenovellas with parents in Spanish. Furthermore, in order to promote academic learning in English these teachers found it essential to incorporate the students' background knowledge in Spanish. As Anita noted, it is critical to give directions and explanations for new concepts in Spanish to children with emerging English proficiency. In older grades, both Roberto

and Marta discussed scenarios of building upon the children's knowledge in Spanish, e.g. naming and talking about food in Spanish, or using Spanish words while learning about snakes. They felt that this code-switching allowed children to access their prior knowledge and enabled them to add new information to the existing knowledge base. However, they expressed their concern about some children's attitude toward their heritage language. Marta sensed that often children felt embarrassed about their Spanish-speaking background. It only changed when they realized that the teacher was bilingual too. Similar embarrassment was observed by Anita who had a first grader who spoke only Spanish at home; however she refused to respond in Spanish to Anita's Spanish questions.

Specific knowledge about math and economics concepts. Teachers found that their students' socioeconomic status and experiential backgrounds contributed to their increased knowledge about math and economics concepts. Teachers recognized that students from Mexico and Haiti were familiar with the metric system. As Carmen stated "When teaching about measurement, I tell children, 'I am sure in Haiti and Mexico you see kilometers...'", and I want them to make the link between these academic concepts and their experiences." Roberto added that because most parents are unfamiliar with the American system of measurement, children often help parents convert kilos to pounds and kilometers to miles, which ultimately fosters the internalization of different measurements. Furthermore, the participating teachers used children's background knowledge as a reference point when teaching new concepts. For example, Carmen mentioned that when teaching economics concepts such as saving, being a good consumer, or conservation, she often referred to the children's experience at home, as she stated "...they see it at home because money is very tight." Marta reinforced that the migrant children know the value of money because they see how hard their parents work. She remembered that she always related everything to money as a migrant child. Now when children learn about an abstract math concept, she encourages them to consider it through the example of money, and as a result students can better handle the division or other mathematical operations. Not only did the teachers use the children's experiences as a reference point but they also acknowledged the parents' expertise regardless of the differences. For example, Marta encouraged the parents to practice division with children; notwithstanding they learned division in Mexico in a different way. Thus she validated the parents' cultural capital.

Knowledge about nature and environment. Migrant children's experiences during travels from state to state, and/or their occasional helping out in the fields and markets introduce them to concepts and knowledge that are related to nature and the environment. Teachers discussed that children were aware of the different weather patterns, plants and trees that they observed while traveling from Florida to the north and back. Marta mentioned that in social studies class some children recalled their visits to historical/national landmarks during their travels. Further, she felt that in science, it was natural to build on children's experiences gained during travelling, e.g. children had observed "smoke in the field", and in school they used this observation for scientific reasoning about the water cycle. Both Carmen and Anita agreed children develop a solid understanding about growing and handling fruits and vegetables during the time they sell vegetables and fruits at market. This knowledge is valuable in science and social studies classes. Further, Marta offered another example. When discussing human bodies, they addressed the effect of pesticides and DNA mutations, and the students referred to a child in their community who was

born without legs and arms. Roberto and Marta emphasized that it was important to help students link their experiences and prior knowledge gained in the migrant community with the new academic concepts.

Affective and Moral Cultural Capital

Respect for others. Perhaps the strongest value mentioned by the four teachers was that of respect. They returned to this subject many times as the core of what migrant parents transfer to their children and pass on as cultural capital. Roberto spoke of how parents initially teach respect for others and how they, as Hispanic teachers, are expected to nurture the value of respect among the students. Respect includes following rules and speaking respectfully in English and Spanish. In his classroom, when children are disrespectful, they discuss the event, apologize, and understand the need for politeness. Anita also shared episodes to emphasize that children were being taught to respect the pickers in the fields even as they set their own goals beyond the farms. She said, "They should never belittle them, because they are valued for what they do." In addition to the great respect that Hispanic families afford elders in their homes, Marta noted that respecting teachers is an important value children bring into class. Families teach their children that teachers are always right. Carmen agreed: "This culture expects that you do what you are told to do and don't question it."

Education and perseverance toward goal. One strong notion from Marta revealed that parents teach children the value of education. "If you want to have a better life, education is the right way." Students see the effects of not having education and are reminded that while they are in an air-conditioned school room, their parents are sweating in the fields. Carmen iterates that children see parents coming home late from packing houses take on the responsibility to do homework on their own and not wait for parents to make them do it. The children are aware that parents are tired from working hard and they also realize that there is an alternative to work in the fields if they get an education. They understand the value of hard work, planning, and perseverance. Roberto mentioned the high value students place on the honor roll and how they will work to make the list. To emphasize the children's planning skills, Carmen commented on how the students see the parents plan for what they want to buy; they know how much money they have and how much they need, so they will work and save for what they want.

Meeting responsibilities. Much of the acceptance of duty and responsibility comes from the family need for childcare. Many children have siblings in their care afterschool and they accept this responsibility seriously. Carmen and Marta each commented on how some children cannot attend afterschool programs due to responsibilities for watching siblings and assisting with their homework. Marta noted that a fifth grader asked if reading to her sister at night would satisfy her home reading requirement. Marta said, "Yes." However, there is a large afterschool program and many children are able to attend. Marta spoke of how children in afterschool sport activities learn to be more organized and responsible for homework and soccer practice. "In sports, they learn self-control and they transfer the same concept to school and to academic life." Responsibility with the family chores is also an instilled value. Carmen noted one of her students told of her afterschool work: "I helped my mom because she was tired when she came home. I washed dishes." The students are aware of their role and responsibility within the family activities.

Teachers as Channels between the Community and School: Discussions and Practical Applications

Some may generalize that teachers are natural channels connecting the child and family to school and academics. However, Carmen and Anita both noted that teachers need to make conscious steps to make the connection between students' experiences and academic concepts. Understanding the fog in the watermelon fields as it relates to condensation in the water cycle was again presented as a concrete example of the need for a bridge between family and school. The children who have been in the fields early in the morning call the fog "smoke"; the teacher can clarify the weather event in terms of an academic concept and connect it to the scientific understanding. When students learn about trade and commerce in the outside world, the teacher can connect the activities in the local produce market and the fields that produced the goods and add value to students' families' work. Marta feels that she is laying a foundation and that the students will eventually recognize the value of their experiences. Even so, Marta believes that the cultural capital of migrant families is not highly valued, despite the concentrations of migrant students in the schools. She notes that the funds of knowledge espoused and practiced in her family were not valued when she was a child, so she is deliberate and frequently asks children, "How does your mother do certain things?" She makes every effort to highlight the areas where parents have expertise so students can take pride in their parents' skills.

Some cognitive-related cultural capital acknowledged by these teachers is an understanding of math from a connection to money. Children who are sometimes at market with parents see the exchange of money and the importance of related math skills. Although Lucero (2010) mentioned using migrant parents as experts in math games, little focus has been given to the advantages of migrant children in math gained in experiences at the market. Practically speaking, if teachers recognize areas of strength, such as children's early involvement with the exchange of money and goods, students can build on and further their skills in that area. Similarly, their map and geography skills, described by the upper grade teachers, have received little recognition in the literature on migrant children's funds of knowledge, but can be used by teachers to increase confidence and strengthen interest and motivation in the field of study. Green (2003) discussed the mobility of a migrant child's life and the varied travels, but the uncertainty of crop success, weather conditions, and available work dictated the length of stay in any area. The hardships were more evident than the reality of any science or social studies growth according to Green. Conversely, the teachers in this study appeared aware and appreciative of children's knowledge of weather factors, seasonal changes, and agricultural products across the states.

From a socio-cultural perspective, it is evident that teachers, who share the students' culture and navigate their academic world, can be more than a mentor or role model. When they have lived in both worlds, teachers can steer their students toward acquisition of valued cultural capital. The close-knit family ties and social networking that unite Hispanic subcultures and define the migrant lifestyle (Salinas, 2007) are part of teachers' perceptions of their culture, but there is not a clear awareness/verbalization of how "funds of knowledge" pass from one generation to another to sustain and support school performance. For example, the participating teachers' classrooms are typical as other classrooms in the school and except for a poster regarding Hispanic week and some books with diverse characters; there was little reference to the teachers' and children's migrant backgrounds. On the other hand, the language use clearly identified each of

these teachers as bilingual and underlined their natural response to scaffold language. It is not clear how strongly the teachers feel about the cultural capital of bilingualism. Although they use their heritage language to scaffold students' needs, there was only mild enthusiasm about how the heritage language would promote the second language acquisition and cognition. The lack of advocacy for bilingual instruction, however, is not surprising when English is the sole language of instruction. These four teachers clearly view children's needs as the impetus for switching to another language. Overall, pedagogical and curricular decisions were also indicative of culturally responsive teachers, but without evidence of specific activities tied to Hispanic or migrant cultures. These teachers could make a greater impact on migrant children who come through their classes if they were also given confidence to believe in the strength of the funds of knowledge that the migrant community generates. It is easy for teachers of all cultures to get caught up in test scores and strategies for achievement gains and forget about the importance of differentiation among individual students. It is also likely that when teachers are part of a school culture that is distinctively different from their own culture, they are less prone to advocate taking advantage of the incoming funds of knowledge.

The interviews focused on the overlap between the students' and teachers' childhood experiences and how such knowledge supports the students' academic performance. Lucero (2010) reported on an unusual case of a paraeducator who, in spite of marginalization and devalued cultural capital in the school setting, deliberately supported the connection between the Hispanic students and the school culture. For example, she explained context with unfamiliar words, bridged Spanish to English, and supported literacy strategies presented by the teacher. These four teachers reflected on the same purposeful connections, particularly with cognates, such as "chocolate" or with explanation of terms in reading texts, such as "mesa verde". When the teachers recognized a need for additional explanation, for vocabulary to be presented in Spanish, or a tradition such as Mexican Flag Day to be offered, the practice became an authentic component of the curriculum, representative of culturally responsive pedagogy (Brooks & Karathanos, 2009). Even though they grew up in migrant families, these teachers were not marginalized in the same way as many of the children's families. Additionally, although these teachers began life as migrant children, they have successfully moved into different strata of society. They have a different sense of cultural capital now, based on their lives as teachers, and the role of teacher is much stronger in their own perception now than the role as a member of a migrant family.

Connecting the home, community culture, and language to the school was a vital discussion among the teachers. Some having lived in the community for up to 40 years, they spoke with confidence about the migrant culture and the links between home and school. They were especially sympathetic to the hard work and long hours of the parents and spoke gently of the parents' desires for their children as well as the complete trust the parents have in the school system. One aspect of the respect that parents have for the schools relates to their expectations to children to do whatever the teacher tells them to do. Green (2003) calls attention to possible cultural conflicts between some school philosophies and migrant stances. For example, Green noted that when migrant students were taught to peacefully and verbally negotiate differences, they were likely to feel conflict with their family's mandate to preserve their honor, to defend each other, and to fight when necessary. These conflicts were not mentioned by the teachers in this study.

These four teachers were complimentary to parents of migrant children who want a better life for their children through education. They spoke extensively of the hard work and perseverance of the migrant families as they set goals and worked toward them. Green (2003) again was either pessimistic or realistic as indicated that the migrant lifestyle and the prevailing poverty impeded educational opportunities. According to these teachers, family needs are at the center of children's lives and they meet responsibilities and chores with a strong work ethic. These teachers might be more optimistic because of their own life story which proves that migrant children can become teachers or professionals.

This study suggests that there are specific conceptual and learning advantages from the household funds of knowledge among the transient migrant farm families. If the migrant families' funds of knowledge can be recognized within the school culture and built upon, not only by the teachers who have migrant background, but with all teachers who interact with the migrant students, the value of the cultural capital will increase, migrant teachers' and students' self worth and efficacy may also rise. Additional research to identify sources of strengths in migrant students' academic performance would serve the migrant communities well with additional and valuable cultural capital gains.

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Appendix

Individual Interview questions

About the Migrant community & Participant's Background:

1. Describe the community of Immokalee today. How is it different or similar to the community in which you were growing up?
2. Describe your family and everyday routines of your family when you were a child. How was it different from the everyday routine that your children in your class experience in general?
3. What values were considered important in your families? Describe them.
4. What knowledge, skills and attitudes did you learn in the family?
5. To what extent do you feel that those values (knowledge, skills and attitudes learned in your family) were respected and utilized during your schooling? Discuss them with examples.

About Current Family Practices & Children's Funds of Knowledge:

1. What academic concepts, skills, and values/attitudes are children learning through the community culture of Immokalee:
 - from adults in their *everyday practices in work-related activities* (e.g., being around adults in the kitchen, laboring in the fields, selling fruits and vegetables in the market, travelling extensively with family, completing chores in the household, running errands, translating the language)?
 - from *conversations and communications* (oral, written, singing, visual media and technology, etc.) among peers, and/or with adults in the family?
 - in typical indoor and outdoor play activities with peer/siblings/adults within the community?
 - in religious and cultural activities such as prayer rituals, family gatherings, weddings, celebration of festivals?
 - in activities offered by social services, and/or special institutions, such as library or afterschool programs in Immokalee?
2. How do the concepts, skills and values/attitudes learned in such activities facilitate children's intellectual and social-emotional growth? Provide examples.

About School Practices

1. How are culture-specific prior knowledge, skills and attitudes that migrant children bring into the classroom being utilized when you introduce and teach them new concepts, or when children are engaged in problem solving?
2. To what degree do you individualize instruction for these children? What is the effect of individualized instruction on their academic performance in different content areas?
3. To what extent, how and why do you utilize the children's home language or culture during the school day? Provide examples.
4. How does your personal migrant family background help you better understand children's background/values/strengths & needs in comparison with teachers from non-migrant backgrounds? Provide examples.