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Funds of identity: Applying a Vygotskian perspective on identity to enhance social justice in education

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This paper provides an overview of the funds of identity (Fol) concept, theoretical framework, and applications, with a focus on its theoretical origins and application in education. Funds of identity (Fol) theory aims to complement the funds of knowledge (FoK) conceptual framework that draws attention to knowledge and competencies of minoritised students. Funds of identity theory is distinctive because of its focus on funds that are defined as significant by students themselves. Grounded in Vygotskian perspectives on identity, funds of identity scholarship offers a conceptual framework and concrete methods for the enactment of education that is personally meaningful. The paper concludes by exploring the relevance of Fol theory within the New Zealand setting, especially to support social justice for Māori learners.

Keywords: funds of identity, funds of knowledge, sociocultural theory, identity development, social justice

Introduction

Although the focus of this paper is funds of identity (Fol) scholarship, it begins with discussion of funds of knowledge (FoK) theory. Funds of identity descended from funds of knowledge theory; thus, their history is intertwined.

Thirty years ago, the development of FoK theory by senior FoK scholars Luis Moll and Norma González was a response to anthropological findings of rich strengths and skills and resources held in poor Latino families and communities in the Arizona borderlands. This evidence countered deficit discourse endured by Latino families, who were and continue to be minoritised in the United States of America. The anthropological evidence suggested that valuable forms of capital are held within all sectors of society, because “people are competent and have knowledge, and their life experience has given them that knowledge” (González & Moll, 2002, p. 625). For Moll (a Puerto Rican Vygotskian educational psychologist) and González (a Latina anthropologist), both the anthropological method and findings were inspirational. Reflecting on the relevance for schooling, they developed an approach for teachers to learn about minoritised students’ FoK and make use of these in learning design. Their approach – which focused on conducting and making meaning from a series of ethnographic home visits – enabled teachers to learn about minoritised students’ and their families’ resources and skills and then utilise these in a strength-based approach to teaching and learning.

In the last decade, building on FoK theory and scholarship, Moises Esteban-Guitart, a Spanish psychologist, developed the Fol concept. Two co-authored works by Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014a, 2014b) clarify the relationship between the two concepts.

Importantly, these papers articulate the shared understanding about FoK and FoI of senior scholars in each field, providing readers with clarity about connections and points of difference.

While FoK are defined as “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and wellbeing” (Moll et al., 1992, p. 134), FoI are those FoK which a person uses to define themselves. Therefore, FoI are a subset of FoK, specifically those that are personally meaningful.

Importantly, the FoI concept and methods address flaws in the FoK approach which long concerned Moll (2005). Firstly, ethnographic home visits created a focus on family FoK, unhelpfully conflating the FoK of household members (especially parents) and students. The focus on home also obscured FoK that students developed elsewhere. Finally, conducting ethnographic home visits is time-consuming and relatively unmanageable for teachers.

Vygotskian perspectives on identity and the funds of identity concept

Many people are familiar with Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky’s theoretical work on human mental functioning also provides a perspective on identity (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). His view of identity as constructed in social interaction and participation in one’s local settings conceptualises identity as both a social product and personally experienced. A distinctive feature of this socio-cultural perspective is that identity is informed by broader cultures and narratives from that socio-cultural-historical context; identity is not constructed in a social or cultural vacuum.

Vygotsky’s notion of ‘perezhivanie’ or ‘lived experience’ explains how personal experience and cultural environment are mutually constitutive and inseparable: culture is embedded in identity; identity is embedded in culture. Furthermore, they are both dynamic and influence each other. “Lived experience is a dynamic, fluid, and complex unit of analysis between personality characteristics and environmental characteristics” (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014a, p. 33). Perezhivanie is like a “phenomenological prism” (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014b, p. 75) through which situations are experienced. Therefore, as Vygotsky explained, although individuals in the same setting (such as a family) may share the same situation, each individual’s lived experience of it and how they use it to construct their own identity is unique.

According to a Vygotskian perspective, diverse cultural resources inform development, including, for instance, language, digital devices, household members and routines. Furthermore, these same cultural resources are tools for construction and expression of identity. Esteban-Guitart (2012) defines FoI as the “box of tools that people use to define themselves” (p. 177). Thus, FoI do not exist solely in minds of individuals, but are distributed amongst persons, artefacts, activities, and settings.

Bearing this in mind, Esteban-Guitart (2012) identified five categories of FoI: social (significant others); geographical (community or area or geographic features); institutional (social institutions such as a church or community group); practical (meaningful activities, including work), and cultural (significant artefacts such as language, digital devices, poster). A further group, invisible FoI, Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014a) consider less easy to detect. Esteban-Guitart does not identify invisible FoI as a sixth category; rather, they represent deeply and unconsciously held values or beliefs which are at the root of each person’s FoI. He defines invisible FoI as “prevailing/canonical practices, discourses, codes, and norms that may underlie the ideas, practices, behaviours, and

meanings that people produce about themselves, even though they may be unaware of them” (2021, p. 9). Recent work by Esteban-Guitart (2021) explores surfacing of invisible FoI as a mechanism for “conscientization” (Freire, 1970, as cited in Esteban-Guitart, 2021) and transformative education.

Apart from the possibilities for transformative education through making invisible FoI explicit (Esteban-Guitart, 2021), Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014b) argue that teacher application of FoI theory has the potential to “put the identity of the learner at the heart of school activity” (p. 78). To Vygotsky, this is crucial because education is only as meaningful to any student as the student’s perception of its real-world relevance. His words highlight that understanding of students is an essential foundation for making learning relevant:

Thought is not begotten by thought; it is engendered by motivation, i.e., by our desires and needs, our interests and emotions. Behind every thought there is an affective-volitional tendency, which holds the answer to the last ‘why’ in the analysis of thinking. A true and full understanding of another’s thought is possible only when we understand its affective-volitional basis. (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 252)

FoI scholarship shows that when teachers learn about students’ FoI, pedagogical possibilities related to how they could build bridges and create continuities to support meaningful academic learning become more visible (e.g., Marsh & Zhulamanova, 2017; Recchia & McDevitt, 2018). Using a FoI approach, teachers can intentionally support students’ identity development because applying FoI theory allows the possibility of working within students’ zone of proximal identity development (Polman, 2010). It provides teachers ways to develop evidence to understand students as culturally located individuals, while simultaneously challenging misconceptions that students in a group are homogenous. Because learning about students’ FoI illuminates their personal distinctiveness, personalised learning design can be informed by knowledge of students’ FoI. (See *Pedagogical Applications of Students’ FoI* for discussion of examples of how FoI theory is applied by teachers).

Defining boundaries between funds of identity and funds of knowledge

In this relatively new area of scholarship, conceptual development is an ongoing feature. Explaining the relationship between FoK and FoI was an important aspect of earlier conceptual development.

Methods used to learn about students has become a focus of attention in discussions about distinguishing FoK from FoI studies. Norma González (1995) defined ethnographic home visits as a crucial component of “the funds of knowledge methodology” (p. 238), but in some FoK studies, other methods were used to learn about students’ FoK, and this divergence in methodology seemed to add to the richness of FoK work (Hogg, 2011). However, Subero et al. (2017, 2018) retrospectively analysed some FoK work that utilised alternative methodologies (other than ethnographic home visits) and recategorised them as FoI studies. One example was Hughes and Greenhough’s study (2006) in which students brought to school shoeboxes which they had decorated and filled with precious items to share and discuss. Therefore, some FoI scholars propose a tighter definition of applying FoK theory, in keeping with González’s statement about the FoK methodology. Consequently, although FoI are a subset of FoK, if this proposed boundary

is agreed, the methods used to detect FoK and FoI are quite distinctive, as discussed in the following section.

Application of the funds of identity concept

Empirical research of applications of FoI theory are mainly quite recent, and this is a growing area of work (see Hogg & Volman, 2020). Studies describe methods for learning about students' FoI and pedagogical applications.

Methods to detect students' funds of identity

FoI research provides detailed descriptions of methods to detect students' FoI. Initially, there was a strong focus on arts-based methods, such as self-portraits, which were used successfully with people from diverse age groups and linguistic backgrounds. Interviews have consistently been used alongside art-based methods because they provide valuable insight about the artwork, clarifying meaning, avoiding misinterpretation, and allowing questions that generate additional information.

Over recent years, methods for detecting students' FoI have expanded to include audio-visual and written methods, and methods that can reveal FoI that are shared within a class group. Some newer methods reflect the changing nature of cultural resources available to express identity. For example, digital tools are increasingly suitable as technological devices become ubiquitous. A trend towards the use of classroom-based methods to detect students' FoI has occurred alongside a shift away from collecting data in students' homes. This development is significant because it potentially makes applying this approach more do-able for teachers, and it addresses teachers' desire to learn about all students whom they teach, rather than just some. Poole (2017) described multimodal identity texts produced by Chinese students when they were asked to create word clouds and avatars of their current and aspirational selves, together with a verbal or written reflection. Poole (2017) argued that this activity simultaneously revealed students' FoI (including digital FoI) and positioned them as knowledge creators. Students utilised a wide range of inherent opportunities to express their identities, such as through word cloud shape (e.g., nuclear mushroom cloud, skull), forms and types of avatar (e.g., how realistic the avatar looked, human or animal form), ways to make decisions (e.g., alone or in consultation with peers), and through describing ways that their "identity play(s) across temporal, physical and social contexts" (p. 10). The use of diverse approaches suggests that this identity text activity design effectively opened up space for students to be able to express themselves in ways that suited them as individuals. As classroom and school demographics reflect increasing societal superdiversity, this expansion of methods to detect students' FoI, including a shift towards classroom methods that teachers can apply, is a promising progression.

Pedagogical applications of students' funds of identity

Analysis of ways that FoK were applied pedagogically reveals two broad categories: drawing on students' FoK and drawing out students' FoK (Hogg, 2015). These two approaches are also evident in FoI studies, which appears to suggest that key distinctions between FoK and FoI relate to the concept itself and methods of detection. However, both categories have the potential to personalise learning and highlight its real-world relevance.

Drawing out students' Fol: Drawing out students' Fol involves using activities or questions, perhaps a dialogic approach that invites students' Fol into discussion or reflection. For instance, teacher educators Recchia and McDevitt (2018) asked student teachers to reflect on their Fol related to childcare, and to identify connections and dissonance between their own Fol and the philosophy of childcare in their early childhood education (ECE) practice setting. This activity enabled student teachers to reflect on ways that they could resolve any conflict between their personal Fol and centre policy and practice.

Drawing on students' Fol: Drawing on students' Fol involves firstly learning about the Fol held by a target student or group, and then using this in the learning design. Marsh and Zhulamanova (2017) provide an interesting example because participating teachers initially had the view that some Fol should not be welcomed.

In Marsh and Zhulamanova's (2017) study, in the first stage of a drawing on Fol approach, teachers at an ECE center learned about all children's Fol through photos that they chose to share and discuss. Teachers were especially interested to learn about the Fol of disengaged children, including Noor (an Arabic girl who interacted very little and was often crying) and Ananda (an African American girl who usually arrived after others were already engaged and remained on the periphery of activities). Princesses, household tasks, and physical beauty dominated Noor's and Ananda's Fol, but artefacts and experiences that these girls valued were missing from the centre; in fact, Disney princesses were banned from the curriculum because they perpetuate racial and gender stereotypes.

Despite initial concerns about whether these Fol should be welcomed, the teacher developed a curriculum based on Noor's and Ananda's Fol. Princess stories were introduced, as were materials for children to make princess clothing and props, and a housekeeping area. The researchers noted that, in their dramatic play, children enacted being princesses in ways that extended beyond Western notions. As princesses, they slayed a dragon, drove the carriage home, and did housework. One princess had beaded hair, and two boys (who also sometimes took on male roles) roleplayed being princesses in costume.

Issues of race, beauty and gender emerged and were addressed in play, in dialogue, and with use of other materials (for example, a storybook about a princess boy). Children accessed familiar storylines, but also created new ones based on their own identities and resources they engaged with. Target children happily participated and interacted with others when their Fol were welcomed and affirmed. Marsh and Zhulamanova (2017) found that the revised curriculum "gave the children opportunities to articulate their thoughts and ideas about issues, and they refused to have their social identities limited by stereotypes" (p. 1012). This study provides an example of welcoming in Fol that teachers initially found problematic, in a way that was respectful towards and affirming of children, and which also provided transformative opportunities.

Conclusion

We argue that Fol theory is an important theoretical development because limited use is made in schools of knowledge and experience that students develop outside school and that they define as fundamental to their identity. Fol theory and scholarship offers teachers tools to learn about students and ideas for how they may design learning which students see as meaningful to their lives, in accordance with Vygotsky's (1986) argument

about the importance of “our desires and needs, our interests and emotions” (p. 252) as authentic motivation for learning.

A recent review of literature found that most impacts of schooling on students’ identity development are unintentional and negative; for some students, school practices constrain possibilities, cause the abandonment of dreams, and make certain identity positions unavailable (Verhoeven et al., 2018). Application of FoI theory could potentially play a role in disrupting factors that threaten positive identity development and its concerning impacts, by illuminating ways that teachers could engage with students’ developing identities both intentionally and positively.

Although this is an emerging body of work, FoI scholars have already made significant contributions to knowledge (Hogg & Volman, 2020). The wide and growing range of methods to learn about students’ FoI and pedagogical applications provide varied practical illustrations of how FoI theory can be enacted. Scholars’ detailed descriptions of methods and pedagogical applications could support teacher’ efforts to centralise students’ identity in teaching and learning, opening new possibilities for greater personalisation of learning.

The development of multiple methods to identify students’ FoI is very helpful, and methods for learning about and building on students’ FoI can be expected to expand as technology and culture continue to evolve. Future studies to develop knowledge about methods that are effective in specific cultural settings or with specific students could make valuable contributions to the knowledge base. Other questions for exploration in future research relate to factors that affect the success of ways that this approach is applied.

What is the potential relevance of FoI theory for New Zealand educators as they work to uphold the Treaty of Waitangi? In settler-colonial New Zealand, historical imposition of assimilationist and racist government policies mean that assaults to positive identity development have been part of the colonisation experience for indigenous Māori (Bishop et al., 2009). More recently, New Zealand education policy has called for approaches to teaching and learning which affirm, centralise, and respect the language and cultural identity of Māori learners (e.g., Ministry of Education, 2013), and Māori scholars stress the need for relational pedagogy to effectively support Māori learners (e.g., Berryman et al., 2018). How might FoI theory support efforts to achieve this? For New Zealand Māori, the making of connections is crucial to establish new relationships and special cultural value is assigned to two FoI categories: social (as shared through the recitation of whakapapa – genealogical links – in a mihimihi), and geographical (as expressed in pepeha) (Duncan & Rewi, 2018). First and foremost, FoI scholars invite us to open up space, to create opportunities to hear the voices of students, to learn about them. It is about building relationships through growing understanding of exactly who students are. FoI work demonstrates that these first steps can lead to the design of more meaningful learning opportunities. Arguably, FoI theory offers a fresh perspective on relational pedagogy. Therefore, we call for research to explore how an FoI approach might benefit Māori students by illuminating, validating, and centralising in learning what they define as central to their identity, to disrupt their continued experience of marginalisation in mainstream school settings.

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