Not just ‘sunny days’: Aboriginal students connect out-of-school literacy resources with school literacy practices

Lynne Wiltse

Abstract

In this paper, I report on a school-university collaborative research project that investigated which practices and knowledges of Canadian Aboriginal students not acknowledged in school may provide these students with access to school literacy practices. The study, which took place in a small city in Western Canada, examined ways to merge the out-of-school literacy resources with school literacy practices for minority language learners who struggle with academic literacies. Drawing on the third space theory, in conjunction with the concept of “funds of knowledge,” I explain how students’ linguistic and cultural resources from home and community networks were utilised to reshape school literacy practices through their involvement in the Heritage Fair programme. I analyse a representative case study of Darius, a 10-year-old boy who explored his familial hunting practices for his Heritage Fair project. This illustrative exemplar, “Not just sunny days,” highlights the ways in which children’s out-of-school lives can be used as a scaffold for literacy learning. In conclusion, I discuss implications for educators and researchers working to improve literacy learning for minority students by connecting school learning to children’s out-of-school learning.

Key words: classroom discourse, linguistic diversity, home/school, teacher education

Introduction

As a classroom teacher who taught in Canadian Aboriginal communities for many years and then as a researcher working with Aboriginal students, I am concerned that Aboriginal students are overrepresented in the statistics of children who under-achieve in school. Although single-factor explanations of school failure among minority children are inadequate, many researchers concur that school requires specific forms of academic language or discourse that potentially disadvantage minority students (Gee, 2004; Valdés, 2004). Various early intervention projects, for example Aboriginal Head Start programmes, have resulted; however, studies show that ‘at-risk’ students who make gains through these early interventions often experience difficulty with academic literacies during the intermediate grades (4–7), and many of these students do not complete high school. Given these circumstances, my research targeted Aboriginal students in the intermediate grades, with a focus on literacy initiatives in the content areas. Rather than the all-too-common remedial approach, this study took a different stance by stepping back from the notion that teaching and learning problems reside in the traits of students or their families to consider ways to merge the out-of-school resources of students with school literacies.

In this paper, I report on one part of a larger 3-year study that investigated which practices and knowledges of Aboriginal students not acknowledged in school may provide these students with access to school literacy practices. I explain the theoretical perspectives informing my research, describe the research methods used to conduct the study, offer a representative case study of a project, which capitalised on one student’s funds of knowledge, and discuss implications for educators and researchers working to lessen the “discontinuities that many children experience between their lives in- and out-of-school” (Comber, 2013, p. 361).

Third spaces and funds of knowledge

This research is based on socio-cultural theories of learning and teaching, which emphasise the inherently social and situated nature of learning, and view the activity of learners as positioned within the context of practice, rather than analysed as if it were context-free (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 2003; Wells, 2000). Within a broad socio-cultural framework, the study utilised third space theory, in conjunction with the concept of “funds of knowledge.” Curry (2007) explains that “(n)otions of funds of knowledge and the third space emerge from sociocultural approaches to education that consider learning as participation in social practices” (p. 127). The recognition that identities are multiple, fragmented and shifting led theorists to posit the notion of hybridity as the ‘third space’ (Bhabha, 1990) that enables the appearance of new and alternative identity...

1 In this paper, I use the term Aboriginal, which is inclusive of the Inuit, First Nations (formerly Indian), and Métis peoples of Canada, in a general sense. At other times, I use the term that is most appropriate for the particular context that I am addressing i.e. First Nations or Indian.
options (Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004). Moje et al. (2004) describe third spaces as hybrid spaces where the knowledges and Discourses (Gee, 1996) from “the first space” of people’s home, community and peer networks merge with the ‘second space’ of the Discourses they encounter in more formalised institutions such as work, school, or church” (p. 41).2 The authors outline three ways in which third spaces tend to be conceptualised in education: as bridge building between Discourses often marginalised in school to the learning of academic knowledges (e.g. Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Alvarez and Chiú, 1999); as a way of crossing boundaries to succeed in different discourse communities (e.g. Luke, 1995; New London Group, 1996); and as a space of cultural and social change where the Discourses from home and school will produce new forms of learning (e.g. Barton, 2001; Moje, 2000).

My research extends these views of third space in its consideration of how Aboriginal students’ “funds of knowledge” (Moll et al., 1992) from home and community networks can be utilised to reshape school literacy practices. Funds of knowledge are “the essential cultural practices and bodies of knowledge that households use to survive, to get ahead, or to thrive” (Moll and Greenberg, 1990, p. 321). Marshall and Toohey (2010) note that a funds of knowledge perspective “acknowledges that minority children, like their majority classmates, have participated in social practices in their families and communities, and it urges schools and teachers to connect school learning to children’s out-of-school learning” (pp. 221–222). Given my long-standing interest in the education of language minority students, I was encouraged by these approaches that view diversity as a resource rather than a deficit (Cummins et al., 2006; Schecter and Cummins, 2003), and accordingly, open up literacy pedagogy to a wider range of learning and teaching. The third spaces that I imagined for the research study could be considered ‘hybrid literacies’, the “pedagogical space that is created when children’s languages, literacies and cultural knowledge are included in classroom pedagogies as resources to support and promote collaborative learning” (Smythe and Toohey, 2009, p. 40). In these spaces, “students begin to reconceive who they are and what they might be able to accomplish academically and beyond” (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 148). However, despite the promise of these approaches, the argument has been made that many schools and educators know so little about the out-of-school lives of their students, particularly for minority language learners, that they find it difficult to build on “funds of knowledge” from children’s homes and communities (Cummins, 2000; Gunderson, 2006; Marshall and Toohey, 2010). At the same time, children’s home funds of knowledge may not be “recognized by parents as of value to children’s learning...” (Cook, 2005, p. 89). My study offers an encouraging model to the literature, as it calls attention to a project in which educators were successful in “creating a pedagogical space shared by homes and schools” (Cook, 2005, p. 89).

Research methods and context

In establishing a methodological framework for this study, I drew on the work of educational researchers who have used ethnographic studies to understand children’s language and literacy practices, both in school (Manyak, 2001; Maybin, 2006; Toohey, 2000; Wallace, 2005) and out-of-school (Collins, 2007; Eidman-Aadahl, 2002; Schultz and Hull, 2002). Within a qualitative case study design, the study utilised ethnographic research methods and employed a students-as-ethnographers approach as an innovative way to negotiate the politics of researching “other people’s children” (Delpit, 1995) and to examine the cultural and linguistic practices that are part of students’ lives in their homes and communities (Egan-Robertson and Bloome, 1998; Goldstein, 2003). As “educational ethnographers work within a legacy of racism and colonialism that makes our research suspect” (Goldstein, 2002), community involvement was a crucial aspect of the research. The study was invested in my belief that, for educational research to inform classroom practice, there must be closer partnerships between universities, schools and communities; accordingly, the project was a school-university-community collaboration, involving three interconnected groups of research participants: (1) a teacher researcher study group (six teachers, three Aboriginal and three non-Aboriginal); (2) students, primarily Aboriginal, from the participating teachers’ classes, many of whom struggled with academic literacies; (3) pre-service teachers in my language and literacy methods classes who were partnered with the students in a mentorship capacity. Data sources included field notes from classroom observations, artefacts from the students’ Heritage Fair projects, pre-service teachers’ case study assignments, and transcripts from audio-taped teacher researcher meetings and semi-structured interviews of select students and pre-service teachers. In qualitative research, as the researcher is the primary ‘instrument’ of data collection and analysis, it follows that reflexivity is crucial (Merriam, 1998). As a non-Aboriginal researcher conducting research in the field of Aboriginal education, this was particularly important; my struggle to maintain reflexivity was ongoing, involving constant reflection on my role in the construction of meanings, and in the research relationships.

During the first term of the study, the teacher researcher group, consisting of teachers who taught at the intermediate grade level (4–7), met on a monthly basis to explore pertinent socio-cultural literature and to discuss related classroom practice. Three of the teachers taught at the band-operated school on the nearby First Nations reserve, whereas the other three

---

2 Gee distinguishes between discourse, language-in-use and Discourse, which involves language in conjunction with other social practices.
taught at ‘inner city’ public schools with significant numbers of Aboriginal students. The literacy partnerships between our respective students began in the second term. As I taught two classes of pre-service teachers, my intention was that the students of two of the teachers would be involved in the first year of the study. A grade 5 teacher, Eleanor, who taught for the local school district, requested support for the science fair projects her students would be undertaking in the winter term (names of people and places are pseudonyms). Another grade 5 teacher, Gayle, from the band-operated school, wanted the mentorship to centre on her students’ Heritage Fair projects. As both these projects were grounded in content area literacy, I proceeded with plans to match my classes with either Eleanor or Gayle’s students. Because of its success, this paper will focus in particular on the Heritage Fair collaboration, although I include brief mention of the science fair projects for contrastive purposes.

### The Heritage Fair projects

The partnerships between the students and pre-service teachers took shape around the Heritage Fair Programme (also known as Historica), a multimedia educational programme developed to increase awareness and interest in Canadian history, unique community events and/or family culture. Students undertake research in developing their projects and present their completed displays at school, regional and/or provincial fairs. The students who participated in this programme attended Wolfwood School, operated by the local First Nations band. Just a few years old at the time of the study, the school followed the provincial Ministry of Education curriculum, in addition to offering programming in Aboriginal language, history and culture.3 The school was situated next to the former residential school, which now houses band offices and a museum on the history of residential schooling; many of the students had relatives who had attended the residential school. The pre-service teachers involved in the study were education students at a small primarily undergraduate university. Looking out from our classroom window, we could see both buildings across the river that wound its way through the valley; that the mother tongue and traditional culture were taught at Wolfwood School, rather than forbidden, made for a striking contrast. My students were paired with the children as part of a case study assignment “that places the teacher-education student in the role of researcher, investigating pedagogically relevant questions” (Sleeter, 2005, xii). Visits were made to the school during course time for partners to meet; through the one-to-one mentorship, the children received support with research, data collection, writing and visual representation, and my students had the opportunity to learn about children’s language and literacy practices in a situated approach.

Goldstein (2002) cautions ethnographers who undertake research in linguistically and culturally diverse communities to think carefully about how they represent the experiences of their research participants. As this caution applied to my students as well as to me, I discussed the challenges as well as the benefits of doing ethnographic research with my class. I informed them of the criticism that ethnography in educational research has received, at the same time made the argument that “approaches to research that characterise the rich complexity and particularity of human experience deserve all the exposure they can get especially in a world where reigning scientific approaches typically accomplish their goals at the direct expense of such knowledge” (Ramanathan and Atkinson, 1999, p. 65). My experience is that with Aboriginal students, this is all too often the case.

### Study findings

Study results were consistent with previous research of particular classroom practices, which show that teaching characterised by ‘hybridity’ facilitates minority language students’ literacy learning (Davis et al., 2005; Gebhard, 2005; Smythe and Toohey, 2009; Taylor, 2008; Wiltse, 2005, 2006). As the Historica Fair projects encouraged student participants to examine and document linguistic and cultural practices in their local communities, they were able to draw on out-of-school resources and literacy practices to create third spaces of enhanced literacy learning. As some students explored interests such as hockey or figure skating, the majority of students drew on their “funds of knowledge” to investigate aspects of their cultural heritage. For example, Larry, a grade 5 student, researched a local group of drummers who perform at powwows. In her case study assignment, his university mentor explains the significance of his choice: “I want to note the importance of personal choice in selecting and carrying out reading and writing activities... Larry had a topic all picked out for the heritage fair—the Desert Mountain Drummers. They are local First Nations Powwow drummers, who have put out 2 CDs. He knows two current members, and his father was in the group, so he was personally motivated, too.” Another example can be found with Karina, who completed her project on Jingle Dress dancing. Characterised by rows of metal cones that make a jingling sound, the Jingle Dress is the regalia worn for the Jingle Dress Dance, a women’s powwow dance. Karina explains why she made this choice: “I picked this topic because I myself am a Jingle Dress dancer. I’ve been dancing at powwows since I was five, so I wanted to find more information on the Jingle Dress with this project.” For these students, being able to inquire into subjects of personal interest with familial and cultural connections made for rich learning.

---

3 Although specificity is of significance here, to ensure anonymity, the particular Aboriginal language, history and culture taught will remain unnamed.
Other students ventured beyond their local communities to research prominent Canadian Aboriginal persons, for instance Phil Fontaine, who at the time was the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, and Dorothy Grant, an internationally renowned Aboriginal fashion designer. Researching such topics provided students with opportunities to feel proud of their Aboriginal heritage. In light of Canadian research that continues to report on the negative schooling experiences of Aboriginal students, including racism and the exclusion of Aboriginal content (Dion, 2007; Madden et al., 2013; Schick and St. Denis, 2005), the significance cannot be overstated. Negative views of Aboriginal students and their families are not restricted to school contexts; in this regard, a parallel can be made to the seminal study of household and community living in Arizona (Moll et al., 1992). The authors note that a funds of knowledge perspective “contrasts sharply with prevailing and accepted perceptions of working-class families as somehow disorganised socially and deficient intellectually…” (p. 134). The example in the following section provides a powerful illustration of an Aboriginal family who, counter to existing perceptions, has rich funds of knowledge, “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills” from which they draw “for household or individual functioning and well-being” (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133).

Not just ‘sunny days’

At the time of the study, Darius, a 10-year-old boy who had recently moved from a small and isolated Aboriginal community in the northern corner of the province, was in his first year at Wolfwood School. This written text, prominently featured on the poster board for his Heritage Fair project alongside photos of a gun and a hunter displaying his mule deer, describes a topic not only of personal interest but also of family and community tradition.

Places to Hunt by Darius

I am from Fort Wilson, and our traditional hunting places are located at Seven Mile Lake Creek and Waskat Lake. Fort Wilson is located north of Jackpines. My people are from the Klinchuk Nation. I am the third generation of hunters.

When I hunt with my Grandpa and Uncle It makes me feel really cool. They teach me how to kill a beaver and elk, they show me how to skin the animals. These two places are where we do most of our hunting and kill animals. We hunt so we can feed our family with the meat. We make dried meat with the moose we kill. We also hunt black bear for the hide, fat and claws; the elders like to eat them. There are a lot of hunters in the Klinchuk Nation. Men do the hunting while women do the cleaning and cut up the meat.

In the following interview excerpt, Darius explains his reasons for choice of topic and expands upon the role of hunting in his family:

I picked my project on hunting Fort Wilson because it’s part of my tradition. It’s one of the things I mostly love to do. You can hunt moose, elk, black bear and white tailed deer. I love it ‘cause, like, you learn how to aim and shoot and like when you’re older you could teach your kids. My grandfather and my uncle taught me. And, you can make coats, gloves and stuff with their hide. My great-grandma likes to do it. She makes jackets. Well, now she’s a little bit too old to make them.

When describing the children in their study, Moll et al. (1992) note that, in their households, they “were not passive bystanders, as they seem in the classrooms, but active participants in a broad range of activities mediated by these social relationships” (p. 134). It is clear that Darius participates actively in his family’s hunting practices; in some respects, the opportunity to research and write about hunting positioned him as less of a passive bystander in the classroom. For a boy who, according to his teacher, was rarely engaged in school literacies during the first year at his new school, this was significant. Kandy, his university mentor, concurs:

My partner actually got to explore this aspect of his life in school so he was pretty excited about doing his Heritage Fair project on hunting. Darius told me that he doesn’t really like writing or reading, so it was good that he could see that there are ways for him to write and read and enjoy it. He really learned a lot about writing by going through that process. This made me realize that I will need to find a way for kids to be able to learn their own way, whether it’s about hunting or going fishing with dad, while still learning the same skills.

Kandy’s comment suggests that she has begun to understand that funds of knowledge represent a “positive (and we argue, realistic) view of households as containing ample cultural and cognitive resources with great, potential utility for classroom instruction” (Moll et al., 1992, p. 134). Darius had never before completed a large project that required him to do research as well as writing in expository, narrative, expressive and poetic forms. He described the work as “very hard to do all the details” but that he “liked it very much, ‘cause I got to do it in my own traditional way.” The import of this cannot be overemphasised, as exemplified in the following account.

The timing of the Heritage Fair school visits coincided with my students reading an article, ‘Revisiting children’s images of literacy’ (Kendrick and McKay, 2003). I had assigned the reading, which reports on the authors’ research into children’s images of literacy, to complement the material in our course text about teaching children to write. Over a period of years, Kendrick and McKay collected a large number of drawings that represented children’s constructions of literacy from various contexts of their lives. The drawings had been analysed according to a categorization scheme that included primary, secondary and unknown images of literacy. The authors examine in
depth one boy’s ‘unknown’ image of literacy (a graphic drawing of a recently killed buck) to “illustrate how a closer examination of the drawing from the child’s perspective illuminated a more expansive and inclusive view of literacy” (para. 2). The story of Dustin, also a 10-year-old boy who loved to hunt with his family, makes for a powerful contrast to that of Darius. Beneath a coloured drawing of a bloody buck, Dustin had written:

I shot my first buck with a doble barel shotgun. It is at my granernts farm. My dad Helped me. (Dustin, Grade 5)

It is worth noting that Dustin did not begin his two drawings for the study (his first was of a gopher being shot) until he was reassured that he could draw anything he wanted about reading and writing and that his teacher would not get to see the drawings. When asked if he found it hard to write about topics assigned by the teacher, his response was, “Yeah, she just wants us to write about sunny days and stuff like that” (para. 14). Clearly, this did not correspond to Dustin’s writing preference, as can be seen in the following: “Like, …say she writes, ‘What did you do on the weekend?’ I wanna write like I was shooting gophers or something like that. We’re not allowed to write about anything with violence” (para. 14). At the time, the contrast to Darius made a strong impression on my students; there had been no question that hunting would be an unsuitable topic for his Heritage Fair project. I pursued this issue with Kandy:

The boy in the article, Dustin, and my partner, Darius, both come from families that hunt a lot. Darius definitely said that he usually doesn’t like writing very much in school but that he was excited about this project because he could find out about hunting and he got to call and talk to his uncle for the interview. So, it does help that he actually got to explore this aspect of his life in school. The boy in the article says that he thinks he’d like writing more if he was able to write about what he wanted to write about, like hunting, rather than “sunny days and stuff like that” which is what he feels he’s supposed to write about.

That Darius had the freedom to explore hunting, something he loved from his out-of-school life, made a dramatic difference to the way in which he invested himself in the research and writing required for his project. As Amanti (2005) explains, incorporating funds of knowledge is not about “replicating what students have learned at home, but about using students’ knowledge and prior experiences as a scaffold for new learning” (p. 135). An example of this can be seen in the way Darius was able to draw on his hunting background to compose interview questions (he interviewed his mother in person as well as his uncle by phone):

I know about hunting lots, so I wrote all this down and then asked her if she could tell me what she did in hunting. I asked her questions from what I know, like, “tell me what is special about your gun”. I said, “Please describe the area you hunt. When did you first start hunting?”

He then used the interview data to write the report required for the project; both expectations comprised new literacy skills, academic competencies that will serve Darius well beyond the confines of the Heritage Fair. Close to two decades have passed since Calkins (1994) advised teachers to “invite children to bring their lives into the classroom” (p. 17) in order to “nurture the intangible spirit” (p. 21). According to Schneider (2001), “Writing is often viewed as the ideal classroom activity within which students may take risks and think freely...However, when students actually bring their lives into writing, they are often met with resistance” (p. 414). I understand that teachers may face tough decisions regarding appropriateness in children’s writing (as a practising teacher, I certainly did); at the same time, I am concerned about the number of students, like Dustin, whose out-of-school interests appear to be off-limits in the classroom. Engel (2011) notes that children’s “impulse to explore and inquire is subject to subtle cues from adults about what is appropriate” (p. 634). Or, in the case of Dustin, the cues may not be subtle. I hate to think what school may have been like for Darius had he experienced what Marshall and Toohey (2010) describe as “the institutional violence of schooling in the form of literacy and language practices that often ignore, attempt to remediate, or devalue the lives and experiences of children and their families” (p. 222).

Marshall and Toohey (2010) raise the question of appropriateness in their research with Punjabi Sikh students in a Canadian elementary school; students created multimodal, multilingual picture books about their grandparents’ life stories in India. Although these projects necessitated incorporating students’ funds of knowledge from their families and communities into classroom literacy practices, the authors explain that there were instances when the funds of knowledge that students brought to school contradicted “normative, Western understandings of what is appropriate for children…” (p. 221). Examples included school expectations of “appropriate conflict resolution, security, gender equity, cultural authenticity and sunny childhoods” (p. 237). It seems that students are interested in more than sunny days or sunny childhoods! For example, for her Heritage Fair project, aptly entitled Locked up Indians, one of my participants interviewed her paternal and maternal grandmothers about their experiences in two different residential schools. Another student researched the Echo mask that had been in her grandfather’s family before being confiscated in 1921 during a Potlatch, a gift-giving ceremony practised by Aboriginal peoples of the northwest coast and banned by the Canadian government from 1884 to 1951, and subsequently exhibited at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. A third student explored the question of the appropriation of her First Nations band’s land by the provincial hydro company, as she wanted to know “more about why my band was relocated and why we aren’t living where we were anymore”. In their discussion, Marshall and Toohey draw on Pitt and Britzman’s (2006) work on ‘difficult
knowledge’, which might include “narratives of historical trauma...and questions of equity, democracy and human rights” (p. 379), and ask what teachers can do when the “funds of knowledge of a community include difficult knowledge that...is unfamiliar to teachers...” (p. 237). In the current Canadian political climate, with Aboriginal issues in the news on a regular basis, these students’ projects have the potential to be considered ‘difficult knowledge’. For example, in addition to the physical and sexual abuse that occurred at residential school, recent historical research reports that Aboriginal children were deliberately starved as unwitting subjects in nutritional experiments by the Canadian government. Aboriginal journalist Wab Kinew (White, 2013) contends that “reconciliation with Native People is still the most pressing social justice issue Canada faces.” Although it would be unfair of me to suggest that these topics would be considered off-limits in most schools, I can report that, because of the sensitive nature of reconciliation and repatriation as well as concerns of political correctness, many teachers hesitate or avoid raising these issues with their students. At Wolfwood School, these topics were welcomed, supported and, for the most part, familiar knowledge. The implications of this will be explored in the following section.

Discussion and pedagogical implications

The Heritage Fair project collaboration was so successful during the first year of the study that in the second year of the study, both of my classes were paired with the students of the participating teachers at Wolfwood School. As I reflect on the ways in which the Heritage Fair partnerships met my objective to improve literacy learning for Aboriginal students by merging the out-of-school resources of students with school literacies, I realise that I attribute its success, by and large, to two interrelated factors: the nature of the Heritage Fair project itself and the school that the student participants attended. Third spaces of enhanced literacy learning, or ‘hybrid literacies’, were created with relative ease within this aspect of my study. Because these projects invited students to explore cultural practices of their families and community, for many of the participants, the distance between out-of-school lives and in-school literacies was relatively narrow. That the students who were involved in the Heritage Fair programme attended a small community school cannot be overlooked. The school was committed to supporting all students in the intermediate grades with their projects; support was provided in various ways, from purchasing the material all children bring to school and its importance of curiosity, arguing that greater attention to children’s interests and explorations will inspire authentic learning by providing “children with the opportunity to learn how to satisfy their curiosity with sustained and thoughtful efforts” (p. 642). And, although the purpose of the Heritage Fair projects proved to be an apt fit for maximising Aboriginal students’ funds of knowledge, as was the case with the Mexican-American participants in Moll and his colleagues’ study, this approach need not be limited to minority students. Kendrick and McKay (2003) make the point that adopting the concept of funds of knowledge, which “recognizes the value of the cultural material all children bring to school and its importance in the development of literacy, provides a highly useful way in which to rethink the sanctioning of certain reading and writing topics over others” (para. 22). If more teachers embraced this way of teaching, perhaps students like Dustin would not feel the need to produce furtive third spaces in secrecy.

My second consideration is the reality that many Aboriginal students do not attend small, band-operated schools, nor will they be likely to have a teacher from their community. To maximise the effectiveness of a funds of knowledge approach, it is helpful for teachers to know the communities in which they work, as did Gayle. Naturally, “(s)ome teachers find themselves teaching in neighbourhoods where they themselves are strangers” (Comber, 2013, p. 361). This was the case for the other two Wolfwood teachers involved in the study, one Aboriginal and the other non-Aboriginal; however, at the time of the study, they were no longer strangers. This could be attributed, at least to a considerable degree, to the community nature of the school; that family and other community members felt comfortable and welcome, no doubt facilitated this process. Their participation in the projects, which ranged from suggesting topics, being interviewed by students, giving workshops, providing artefacts and viewing completed projects when they were displayed, was one of the most
promising aspects of the study, echoing the work of Rodriguez-Brown (2009) as to the vital role of parental involvement in culturally and linguistically diverse schools. Tragically, because of the legacy of residential schooling, many Aboriginal parents are reluctant to come into other schools, for example, the schools in which the other teachers in my study taught. For these teachers, limited knowledge of their students’ out-of-school lives made it difficult to build on their funds of knowledge, providing evidence that there is “much teachers do not know about their students or families that could be immediately helpful in the classroom” (Moll et al., 1992, p. 36). For example, this applied to the science fair projects, wherein aspects of students’ out-of-school lives were seldom incorporated into their projects and accordingly, the productive third spaces created were fewer. Fortunately, my study showed that involvement in the project was instrumental for these teachers. The following interview excerpt shows that Eleanor is beginning to understand what it means to teach from a “diversity as a resource” perspective:

For me, this project has really been about how to acknowledge that my students, the First Nations kids… who are often from a very low socioeconomic class, are bringing something a little different to school—their reading style and their way of thought—and I’m becoming more aware of how middle class and white schools tend to be. I’m trying to figure out how much to let them be who they are, and how much I need to teach them ways to work within that white middle class world so they can meet the expectations.

Awareness of the differences students bring to school is an important step; the next would be to recognise that these differences are not deficiencies, but funds of knowledge that can be utilised in teaching, in order for students to meet expectations. In this regard, a parallel can be made to the teachers involved in the study conducted by Moll et al. (1992): “An important aspect of the teachers’ participation in the household research became the more sophisticated understanding they developed about the children and their experiences” (p. 136). Although teachers in my study did not go into students’ homes as part of the research, they did become more cognisant of the educational value in “using students’ knowledge and prior experiences as a scaffold for new learning” (Amanti, 2005, p. 135). This observation holds promise for the many teachers who teach students from communities with which they are not familiar.

Conclusion

Although Canadian classrooms are increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse spaces, with the Aboriginal populations in particular on the rise, pre-service and in-service teachers remain predominantly white, monolingual and middle class (Carson and Johnston, 2000; Mujawamariya and Mahrouse, 2004; Ryan et al., 2009). This reality necessitates a call for “culturally responsive pedagogy, a pedagogy that integrates children’s home literacies and cultures into the school curriculum” (Smythe and Toohey, 2009). Many researchers have investigated culturally responsive pedagogy (for example, Kanu, 2011; Lee, 2007; Moje, 2000; Purcell-Gates, 2007; Xu, 2005); my study did so by “grounding the theoretical perspectives of third spaces and funds of knowledge in ethnographic research” (Curry, 2007, p. 127). The project explored the potential of these concepts as promising theoretical constructs in educational research, adding an important model to the “funds of knowledge” research by focusing on minority students who do not fit the typical profile found in this educational literature. Much of the recent research examining minority language learning has been conducted with urban immigrant students who are English language learners or with speakers of non-standard English language varieties, in particular African American Vernacular English. The needs of other minority language students, in particular Canadian Aboriginal students, have not been adequately represented in this research. Although certain issues relate solely to Aboriginal students, study findings speak more broadly to minority students in general. By providing “an example of what is possible when educators and educational researchers arrange educational environments in ways that incite, support, and extend students’ repertoires of practice…” (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 160), this article provides hope for the many culturally and linguistically diverse students in Canadian schools, and beyond.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) for their support of this research.

References


CONTACT THE AUTHOR
Lynne Wiltse, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta, 11210-87 Avenue, Edmonton, T6G 2G5, Canada.
e-mail: wiltse@ualberta.ca