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### Integrating Funds of Knowledge in the ESOL Practicum: The Missing Element

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## **Integrating Funds of Knowledge in the ESOL Practicum: The Missing Element**

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### **Introduction**

What does it mean to teacher learners and teacher educators to learn to teach English to speakers of other languages (ESOL)? Depending on one's location, such as in a school or in a college of education, automatically, a certain content and subject specific knowledge, behaviors and attitudes might come to mind: the need for professional development, increasing numbers of immigrant children in the state of Georgia, impact of testing and No Child Left Behind, applied linguistics, English language teaching (ELT) methods and approaches, learning about culture, smaller classes, teaching the content area, working with other professionals who support the teaching of English language learners (ELLs) and concerns about parents who cannot speak English and those who do not come to school functions.

Few of us would think of including working with parents as part of the preparation of teachers in our discussion. Our emphasis as teacher learners and teacher educators may well be on the number of courses to be taken and how quickly the add-on program can be completed. Given the brevity of the ESOL endorsement program, most of us are concerned with the product – the end result rather than the process. If we were to stop for a moment and truly consider the full import of the first question, what does it

mean to teacher learners and teacher educators to teach English to speakers of other languages, we might consider how differently our responses might be shaped had we started out with the recipients of our work being given priority over ourselves such as “*what does it really mean to work with children for whom English is not their mother tongue?*” A lot is at stake here. While it is important to address the status of teachers’ content knowledge and skills in working with ELLs, those teaching skills and content knowledge would amount to nothing if we do not give equal attention to our attitudes and mindsets in working with learners whom we might know very little about. Addressing this aspect in a hands-off distant manner as in discussions in a university teacher education classroom about an academic paper one has read is of a very different tenor from participating in a discussion as a result of having worked directly with families that week.

To propel our methods and approaches, applied linguistics and cultural aspects of teaching ELLs along an important sociopolitical and anthropological path in developing empathetic as well as knowledgeable and skilled professionals, the ESOL endorsement program at Georgia State anchors the practicum in working with refugee families in their homes. Working with families is an important element that is missing from the traditional courses of the ESOL endorsement and it is one that yields significant insights to teacher learners and teacher educators as they work together to explore the complexities of our work with ESOL learners in the classroom.

### **Working with Families – The Missing Element**

Ethnographic researchers Norma González, Luis Moll, and Cathy Amanti (2005) are some of the early pioneers of a “funds of knowledge” approach to learning that

advocates linking instruction to students' home lives by drawing upon the rich resources that are available in our communities. The work of their team takes place in the homes of students and changes the role of teacher from director of the learning process to participant in it. This approach is especially salient in public education today, when, as the authors note, that national educational discourses swirl around accountability through testing (González, Moll and Amanti, 2005). While not downplaying the importance of accountability for quality in education, the authors advocate a shift to a more community-centered paradigm for the educational enterprise. The term "funds of knowledge" refers to these "historically developed and accumulated strategies (skills, abilities, ideas, practices) or bodies of knowledge that are essential to a household's functioning and well-being (González, Moll, Floyd Tenery, Rivera, Rendón, Gonzales, Amanti, 2005; p. 91-92).

In her article *Which Way for Family Literacy: Intervention or Empowerment?* Elsa Roberts Auerbach examines current underpinnings of family literacy programs that are seemingly based on common sense and are almost universally accepted by the education community. She calls these assumptions, the combination of which creates what she terms the "transmission of school practices model" (Auerbach, 1989), into question, citing ethnographic research that refutes them. In Auerbach's opinion, this model is the basis for misguided and ineffective approaches in improving the literacy skills of immigrant and refugee children and their families. She challenges the educational community to create a model that is more empowering and considers both the needs and existing strengths of these families.

Auerbach lists five assumptions that underlie the transmission of school practices model and seem to be present in a majority of current family literacy programs. These assumptions are: (1) that language minority students are products of homes that do not value education; (2) that literacy skills are transferred unilaterally from parents to children; (3) that modeling school activities in the home is the only avenue for children to become more literate; (4) that language minority students are limited by their home lives and not by the quality of education they receive in school; (5) that parents' social and economic problems are barriers in the way of children's success in school (Auerbach, 1995). She examines each one of these assumptions, and reviews sound ethnographic research that challenges them. The current task, then, is for literacy program creators to re-evaluate the ideas and pre-conceived notions that guide their work.

### **Challenging our Mind Sets through Funds of Knowledge Explorations**

The ESOL endorsement program consists of four courses at Georgia State University. The program includes Methods and Approaches, Applied Linguistics, Culture and the Practicum. The Practicum and the Methods and Approaches courses are paired together and taught by the same instructor so that attention can be paid to the application and transfer of skills and knowledge through the design and interrelatedness of the assignments. The pairing of the courses also allows for rich discussions as the course participants work together as a community of learners to complete the required tasks.

The main textbook for the practicum is *Funds of knowledge* edited by González, Moll and Amanti (2005). The chapters are read along with other selected course papers<sup>1</sup>. The course meeting times are divided between the field experience and the university

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<sup>1</sup> For a copy of the course syllabus, please contact the first author.

based meetings. The family literacy program lasts for approximately 1.5 hours a week and the university class meets for debriefing and class discussion on the readings for one hour a week. Teacher learners are assigned to families through the Family Refugee Services. The Family Refugee liaison meets with the entire class before teachers are assigned to discuss the Center's work with refugee families. During the first family home visit, the Refugee Center liaison, a social worker and/or a translator accompany the teacher to assess the family's English literacy goals and to introduce the teacher. A minimum of ten instructional sessions are required for the family literacy program. Indeed, most of the teachers have exceeded this time due to their commitment to the families. The course instructor also visits each family group twice to participate in the family literacy sessions. In addition to the course readings, teachers are required to develop a unit of work that responds to the literacy goals of the family, to develop lesson plans and to keep a journal of their reflections. This paper reports on the work of the two classes that have participated in the Funds of Knowledge family literacy work from Fall 2006 – Fall 2007. Thus far, the teacher learners have worked with families from Bosnia, Ethiopia, Iraq, Somalia, and Sudan. The following sections summarize the main challenges and understandings that have evolved from the teachers' work with the family literacy project.

### **Funds of Knowledge in Action**

#### **Countering our Fears Eduardo's Piece**

*Many of the teacher learners felt fear when they heard about and first experienced the practicum. In this section Eduardo confronts his fears.*

I still remember the first meeting of our class when we were told that we were going to be making home visits. The first thing that crossed my mind was: “this lady is crazy.” What about all the legal issues? What about my security; what about my fears? I did not want to be involved in something like this. Why can’t I work with my own ESOL students in my classroom I thought? It would be easier, more convenient and safe!

However, all my fears were unnecessary. I think sometimes fear is the typical response when you face something new. Today I am glad I crossed that threshold of fear and unnecessary nervousness. Also, the opportunity to read the book edited by González, Moll and Amanti (2005) helped too. Reading this book and learning about funds of knowledge helped to set the stage for approaching home visits positively.

Being able to work with my student in another neighborhood and try to learn a little bit about her life changed my philosophy of teaching in many ways. It helps me to question my own perspectives about inner city urban communities that are different from mine. It challenged me as a white immigrant middle age Chilean man to see different realities and not to panic about all the legal issues. Also, it presented a challenge to see myself working with somebody so different and yet similar in many ways. It was different because of her background and education, but similar in the fact that we are both human beings with many things in common. I think one of the main advantages is that as a teacher you so many times see students as lazy or sometimes you think ...hey so and so did not do the homework. The opportunity to see first hand different communities, of maybe different class, gender and race and how in many ways they are not so different was a plus. It dismantled my own deficit thinking.



As the demographic make up of this country continues changing it is necessary that teachers get trained in order to deal with these changes. Fear of the unknown could be overcome. Through engaging in visits to the homes of immigrants, the teacher can learn about the strength and the expertise the family has. Establishing relationships with the families is not only beneficial for the teacher, but also for the school. There is and always will be a connection between school and home. Building rapport and relationships of trust in both scenarios benefits not only you as a teacher, but also your students and their families; therefore, the social processes of teaching and learning can only be improved.

### **Getting to Know the Family - Beth's Experience**

*The first meetings are important for establishing a foundation for the literacy sessions. In this excerpt Beth describes what took place.*

Today I visited the family and met the children for the first time. There are five children in the family with whom I will be working. Abdullahi is 13, Ali is 10, Adan is 9, Dahir is 7 and Madobe is 5. The children were very excited to meet me and very curious about why I was there. The first thing we did was to straighten out a few scheduling conflicts. Abdullahi helped me to come to an agreement on days and times with Khadija (mother). We decided on 3:30 pm each Friday. I noticed that mom had a hard time following and reading the calendar so I will focus on teaching calendar skills with the family. One of my classmates came up with a great idea about making a message center in the home for the children and mom and dad to communicate. I will include a calendar here. The children asked lots of questions and we talked about how we were all going to

learn new things together. I told the kids that they were going to help each other and mom with English. We sat in a circle and told a story using a picture book. We used the pictures to infer what the story would be if the author had written one. Each family member took a turn describing the pictures. I used this activity to assess the English proficiency level for each of the family members. Our session was a lot of fun and I really enjoyed our time.

Pine and Drachman (2005) state that immigrant families have many challenges to face once they enter the United States. It is important to take into consideration the reasons why Khadija's family is here. I can only speculate that it has to do with the political unrest in Mogadishu, which is where Khadija and her husband lived with Abdullahi before coming to the US. In designing my instructional unit I will work to focus upon the strengths of the family rather than viewing them as having deficits as Capse (2003) writes about in her article on family literacy.

### **Getting to Know the Family's Literacy Needs - Mary Louise's Experiences**

*Teachers needed to evaluate the literacy goals for each family to establish teaching directions and an organizing framework. Mary Louise reports on what she did.*

In reflecting on my previous experiences with refugee families, I viewed their survival here in the United States as a process of assimilation into mainstream American culture. Indeed, their needs have often resulted in a lack of proper services, institutions, and professions available upon their arrival (Pine and Drachman, 2005). However, I have come to realize the importance of family contributions that can be made in society and to the overall learning which takes place through this unique type of interaction. Within the

family literacy framework, the relationship between teacher and family must be one of understanding and openness in order for learning to take place. I hope to achieve this openness and desire to learn from the refugee family with whom I work. This particular family is from Kurdistan (modern day Iraq). It includes a husband, wife, and five children, ages seven, six, four, two, and nine months. The mother and father grew up in Kurdistan (speak Kurdish fluently, the husband can read and write in Arabic) and fled to the United States in their early twenties. All five children were born in the United States.

The oldest two children are in school and speak English and their native Kurdish language fluently, as well as read and write in English only (a little below grade level). As Mandel Morrow (1995) states, “school success begins in the home” (p. 11). These “funds of knowledge,” which are unique to each household, reveal a competence and knowledge that can be used in the mainstream classroom to “generate new forms of literacy instruction in the[ir] classrooms (González, Moll, and Amanti, 2005, p. 5). One of my goals is to identify and utilize these unique funds of knowledge of the family in my teaching so as to enable the school-age children to be successful in school.

Another goal in utilizing the family’s funds of knowledge is to empower the mother with her own established skills that she can use to teach her children. As a non-native English speaker, not able to read and write, she is confined to the home for most of the day and has little practice with English. Instead of viewing this situation as a deficit (see deficit model in Caspe, 2003), I choose to acknowledge her strengths in childrearing, cooking, and budgeting. She has skills in many areas which are “ripe with potential for children’s formation of knowledge” (González, et al., 2005, p. 13). If her children can see her progress and the practical value of her knowledge, they will appreciate her more.

I chose to teach the concept of community and community-building because I believe it to be a relevant topic which will both benefit and empower the lives of this refugee family. Dalton and Tharp (2002) view social collaboration as an effective tool in learning and development. They state that “knowledge emerges through social and cultural activity during community participation” (p. 181). By learning what it means to be a part of a community will not only provide more opportunities to be involved in community affairs but to gain knowledge and specialized terminology helpful for everyday life. Another motivation for choosing the community theme relates to the mother’s desire to take the citizenship test to become a citizen of the United States. In order for her to achieve this goal, she must learn what it means to be a citizen of the United States, in other words a member of a larger community.

By the end of the unit, the family as a whole will complete a community bulletin board which will display their work from various sessions. This goal adheres to Dalton and Tharp’s (2002) first standard for pedagogy; a “joint productive activity (JPA)” whereby instructional activities call for student cooperation in completing a joint product (p. 183). By working in an open social setting within the family network to complete a common goal, a better understanding of community will be identified by all members.

### **Developing Trust – From Mimi’s Journal**

*Teaching is very different from the traditional classroom when it takes place in the homes of families. In this excerpt, Mimi describes how she developed and built trust.*

Although having a good relationship with the family will greatly enhance our work, it is something that takes time and understanding on both sides to develop.

According to Segal and Mayadas (2005), the experiences of immigrants and refugees result in them being suspicious, untrusting of authority and closely guarding their personal information. I did detect a sense of reservation during the first visit when I enquired about their family dynamics. Mildred was not so forthcoming on her responses. Segal and Mayadas (2005) point out that to establish good rapport and gain their trust; we need to prove our expert authority and ability to help. I find that sincerity on our part is equally important if not more important. The family needs to sense our genuine desire to support them and not to perceive them as another number for the statistics in the social register. During subsequent visits, I can sense that Mildred is more comfortable in sharing about the family and even gives me a hug when I arrive and leave each time. Segal and Mayadas (2005) also state that the immigrant does not regard the relationship between the social worker and the immigrant as an equal one. The social worker is regarded as one who has the authority, status and knowledge to help. I find this very evident as Mildred will listen very carefully each time I tell her something about her children Brian and Terese. Whatever I say to her seems to be correct and she will take my advice regarding the children very seriously. An example is the house phone. When I told her that the school might be trying to call her regarding the children, she understood the importance of the matter. When I went back the next time, she had gone to pay the bill and had the line reconnected.

In building trust, we have to be prudent in sharing our personal experiences of struggle and frustration. Episodes that require empathy may lead to jeopardy of the trust and confidence that the family originally has in us. They may thus think that we are not in the best position to help since we are also in a similar position as them. Although I find

this information to be enlightening, I do have a different viewpoint. As a matter of fact, I experience many of the same frustrations as the refugee family I work with. However, I believe that sharing with them the fact that I, like them, also miss my home and my country will not in any way belittle my position as a teacher of their children. On the contrary, I think the sense of a common suffering might bring us closer. If they know that I, like them, also face discrimination at some points, might enable them to feel better that they are not the only ones who are facing such unpleasant situations. Besides sharing my own experiences, more importantly, I need to be able to empower them to overcome this sense of loneliness and any acts of unfair practices. I must be able to help them make constructive decisions and to fight and stand up for their rights. The children were very surprised and curious that I also face unpleasant situations some days of my life. But more importantly, I showed them that we need to use our education to make our stand and not to be marginalized and being trampled upon because we kept quiet.

### **Recognizing the Wealth of Funds of Knowledge in the Home**

*A very important part of our work was ensuring the documentation and discussion of the observed funds of knowledge that were evident in the homes of our refugee families. In this section Mimi describes her observations.*

Each time I step into the house, Brian who gets home earlier than Terese, will either be carrying Maria, the 2 year old girl or sweeping the floor. He said that it was his turn to take care of the baby when he comes home from school. His step father will then go to work. As I worked with the kids, the younger brother, Eric kept coming into the room asking for supplies like pencils, markers or paper. The little girl too will totter her

way into the room. It is very interesting to observe the responses of the older children. Instead of chasing them out of the room, they tried to accommodate whatever the younger siblings wanted. The observation of these behaviors, voluntary or involuntary, the emotions of the family, interpersonal relationships, the thoughts and beliefs; all these factors can be effectively established when we work in the home. The interruptions during my lessons with the children allow me to understand better their personalities and also the dynamics of the family. For instance, as we were working on a piece of writing, the little brother came into the room asking for a pencil. There was no extra pencil but the older girl went to great lengths hunting for one while the older boy offered his pencil and said he could use his pen instead. This little episode speaks volume about the sense of responsibility of the older children and also the type of relationship among the siblings.

Floyd Tenery (2005) writes about the interactional and dependent roles played by different family members in sustaining the household. Children play an important role as well. The children in the family visits performed adult-like roles of cooking, cleaning, babysitting and translating. In the example given previously we can see this truth being displayed. The strategies of survival are present all the time in the lives of these households. The need to sustain the household economically is exhibited in household behaviors such as sharing household chores. More often than not, this may result in the less than desirable behavior in school when these children come to school. Sometimes they appear tired and listless, they fall asleep and for some, homework is not completed. As teachers we are guilty of jumping to erroneous conclusions regarding such children. To better understand their students, teachers need to visit the families and observe what goes on in the homes of these families. They will then realize that the student might be

doing his homework while balancing a baby on his hip, or another student trying to write a composition while she kept having her train of thoughts interrupted by a 3 year old sibling.

As I was about to leave the house, Terese took some food and walked to the neighbor's house. I asked her why and she answered that the microwave in the house was not working and they had not had it fixed for a while. She was going to warm up dinner for the family. "They don't mind you doing that?" I asked. "No, they (the neighbors) come over to use our washing machine," she answered.

Such patterns of interaction within immigrant communities are commonplace (González, Moll and Amanti, 2005). The families depend heavily on their social networks, extended families and communities to cope with the consequences of unemployment, economic difficulties and even discrimination. Children are exposed to this intricate network at a young age and learn to relate at a variety of levels with adults as well as children in their lives. Sometimes, this social network also provides moral support especially when the parents are out working for long periods of time.

Instead of my going to help the family and teach the children, I learn something new with each visit. These visits are precious lessons which I will never be able to learn had I stayed in the classroom. As I make my visits, I am a teacher and a learner, an insider and outsider. Only by experiencing the same living conditions and constraints of these families can a teacher truly understand the daily struggles faced by our students and their families. In this learning process, I hope to be able to transfer what I learned to the classroom, as a teacher who does not perceive my students with prejudiced social and cultural perspectives, but one who is empathetic, resourceful and truly effective.



## **Connections to the Classroom – Excerpts from Christina’s Journal**

*Because our work took us into the homes of the refugee families, our debriefing sessions constantly drew us to discussions about relevance and practical applications to the classroom. In the next sections, Christina and Sara dwell on classroom connections.*

In my last journal entry I wrote about my enlightenment on teaching literacy in the appropriate context for learners. This is something that my classmates and I have discussed at great length during our EDCI 7660 classroom discussions. We also have read several articles about the significance of the interaction between the teacher and learner. It is clear to see how this type of instruction comprises good teaching practices to use in the family literacy sessions. But it is important to me, as an ELL educator in a public school, to transfer this knowledge to my regular teaching activities. Currently I am not teaching students, but I am reflecting on my teaching practices for the past few years. It is rare that I have shifted my instruction from the curriculum model that our school has in place, to meet the needs of my students individually. I can see the challenge and the effort that would take place to do this on a consistent basis. This is why I am thankful for the experience that I have had with this family literacy project. I believe that if I had read these articles and participated in EDCI 7660 discussions without being truly engaged in this type of work, I may have been skeptical of the results. I believe my experience with the Vandas family helped contribute to my understanding of Dalton and Tharp's (2002) article, *Standards for Pedagogy: Research, Theory, and Practice*. The teaching and learning principles that are explained in the five standards are very helpful in designing instruction to meet the needs of all learners.

As I planned my "Shopping" lesson for Mildred, I can see the influence of the principles explained by Dalton and Tharp. During this shopping activity, Mildred was to look through grocery store sales papers and circle the pictures of the items that she would like to buy. In this activity Mildred was pretending that she had a limitless amount of money to spend. After she identified the items, Mildred was to read the word or name the item, and write the item on her shopping list.

This activity was designed to teach literacy in a familiar context for Mildred. As the mother and manager of the household, she does most of the shopping for the family. This activity follows Standard 2: Developing Language and Literacy across the Curriculum and the indicators for this standard. Throughout the lesson, Mildred was able to use vocabulary that she recognized and she used this vocabulary both in oral and written form. The activity also followed Standard 3: Making Meaning: Connection School to Students' Lives. This lesson very practical and real life for Mildred. Even though she shops weekly, she has much vocabulary to build in the context of grocery shopping. Mildred was very motivated to participate in this activity, for it was designed for her specific needs.

Dalton and Tharp (2002) explain, "When teachers draw on the real-life experiences of their students, the explicit connections between students' experiences and language, literacy and academic knowledge are made clear" (p. 186). The shopping lesson is an example of this teaching principle and has direct applications for our work in the school classroom.

**From Sara's Journal**

As I read this article by Quintero (1994), I am reminded again of the importance of using students' culture and home values as a foundation for teaching in an ESOL classroom. Students, especially ESOL students, come from backgrounds very different from our own. When we do not have knowledge of a family's culture it is hard to accommodate to the needs of or be sensitive to different values and ways of learning. As I've progressed through my first semester in the ESOL program I have become increasingly aware of my need to become more familiar with and aware of each of my individual students' cultures and families.

Working with the Assadis family has been an eye opening experience. I will admittedly confess to being guilty of criticizing families for not "being involved" in their child's education as indicated by failure to turn in homework, read at home, or come to school functions. But what I've realized, is how complex these processes can be for families of ESOL students. The Assadis family lacks many resources needed to facilitate school involvement as defined by many teachers in the classroom setting. When parents are not able to read homework or fill out forms, don't have a car to transport them to their child's school, and don't have resources readily available to help students to read on a daily basis certain expectations can not be met. Even as an educator fluent in English, it was difficult for me to ensure that the needs of all five of the Assadis children were met every night I visited. Children many times were not well prepared in the classroom to complete homework without lots of support from me. Letters from school piled up in the children's bookbags knowing that the mother Sofia could not understand what was said. In addition, both the mother and father are not familiar with the idea of continuing the educational process at home through homework and additional reading. They had

assumed for years that all of these things were taken care of either during the school day or within the after school program. As a result the students' needs slipped through the cracks and nothing was addressed until I came to the house and gained a better understanding of what was happening in the home.

The Assadis family have needed many things outside of simple literacy and language instruction. They have needed transportation assistance, help finding jobs, help understanding bills and other letters in the mail, and many other types of advocacy that requires that I go beyond the expectations of this class in order to ensure that all the family members are taken care of. Until educators can have experiences that help them understand all these needs, they cannot be optimally effective in the classroom.

Understanding a family, their culture, and their funds of knowledge can be a long process. When a teacher has a classroom of 18 or more students, it can take days and days to make a complete round of home visits. This becomes increasingly difficult knowing that such visits aren't always accommodated by the school itself. Sometimes it becomes the responsibility of each individual teacher to make the decision to do so. Until it becomes public knowledge that cultural differences dramatically affect student learning, and major steps are made to understand these things that affect the learning, a wave of change cannot happen. Although I plan to take many more steps to help make this happen, I am glad that I have had the opportunity to improve the education of one family through awareness and understanding.

### **Post Practicum Reflections – Applications in the Classroom**

*One of our teachers was being interviewed for a job and was questioned about her practicum work. The teacher was advised to engage in something that had more direct applications to the classroom if she wanted to be hired in the field of ESOL. The comments of the teachers that follow elucidate the important applications of our work to their current teaching contexts one year after they had completed their practicum.*

Beth

It has been about a year since our Funds of Knowledge Project was completed. Since then I have had the opportunity to use my research in various and unexpected ways. My teaching style, planning style, and overall approach to teaching have changed. I have had the opportunity to offer my professional expertise in staff development and peer settings as well as help a friend who has been working with a refugee family.

The most important aspect of the Funds of Knowledge project is the impact on learning. In most cases as teacher researchers we are looking for an impact on learning within the family unit. In this case the impact was not only measurable in the family with whom I worked, but also there was a tremendous impact on me. I have learned that every person brings with them a wealth of knowledge into the learning environment. As teachers we must tap into that knowledge in order to personalize the learning experience as well as provide motivation. In my classroom my teaching perspective has changed from one in which I planned lessons according to GPS standards based on what my children *need* to master to one that builds on the GPS standards they have already mastered. My efforts have proven to be successful. My students are able to approach a task with a sense of know how rather than a ‘What are we supposed to be doing?’ stance.

I have also had the opportunity to share the Funds of Knowledge research with my peers and it has truly been an empowering experience for me. People are interested in what I know, and they respect my Funds of Knowledge. This experience has solidified the positive influence that Funds of Knowledge pedagogy has on a learner. When learners feel validated they are able to participate in the learning environment freely and without fear.

### **Sara**

I've always believed myself to be a compassionate and understanding individual. But no matter how empathetic I wanted to be toward the families I worked with, I never truly understood. I come from a middle class home. My mother was a middle school teacher and my father was a business owner. Although I was never the smartest in my class, school certainly wasn't a huge challenge for me. My parents went to every conference night, checked our report cards each time they came home, helped us with homework, and escorted us to sports and music practices every week. So as much as I wanted to understand why my students' parents weren't as involved as I wanted them to be, I didn't. Because each time I would encounter these situations I would become frustrated, wonder why *they* were making things so difficult for *me*, and then go about my routine without a change.

What I should have been asking myself was why *I* was making things so difficult for *them*. The Bosnian refugee family I worked with came home from school around 5:00. The mother was ill and had a difficult time taking care of herself, let alone her 5 children. She could read very little English and relied heavily upon her children for

support. We would spend hours trying to resolve problems with bills, rent, or medical appointments. All the while trying to make sure the children were fed and completed their homework- which quite often I struggled to understand. There were a couple instances during my time with the family when one of the children didn't come home on the bus because they went to an after school activity that the mother had signed for her to do- but didn't remember or understand exactly what or when it was happening. These parents loved their children. They did all they could to protect them and keep them safe. The mother often expressed fear and concern about allowing her teenage daughter to attend school functions. Her only connection to the outside world was often news reports which displayed violence and crime throughout the city. All of these issues were things that got in the way of the traditional culture of school that I'd been accustomed to for so long, and never thought twice about. However, I myself, who did know exactly what each school letter meant, and could help the children with their homework, felt overwhelmed many times when I walked into their home for my weekly visits.

I'd find myself getting frustrated with the children's teachers, wondering why they couldn't give the family more support and understanding. How could s/he go through half a year and not go out of the way to contact the parents? Then I'd go back to my own classroom, collect homework early in the morning, notice again that the same little girl hadn't completed hers, and realize I had yet to meet her parents. So the question then was no longer what the family can do for me, but what I can do for the family.

This year, after I'd gotten my class roster, I spent time making sure that my welcome letter was translated so that all parents could read and understand the classroom procedures. I also had generic behavior and homework notices translated and made sure

every parent scheduled a conference with me- even if that meant my coming into school at 6:30 a.m. or staying until 6:00 p.m. Children are now allowed to check out books from my classroom on a nightly basis, each have a CD with a collection of stories, and CD players they can check out as well. This year, 2 months into school, I can guarantee that I have not only met every parent, but have done so at least 3 times, and was sure that at least one of those meetings was 30 minutes or longer. I am sure to let my parents know that I am there for them and that I need them and their expertise as parents to help their children. I receive letters or get visits from at least one child's parent almost daily asking a question or explaining a situation. The letters are not usually written in English and I have to work to figure out what it says, but it feels so good to know that a trust has been built that allows the parents to feel comfortable enough to reach out. We learn from each other, and I truly believe that the families I work with have a lot to teach me and I think that attitude makes all the difference.

### **Mimi**

Instead of trying to educate the family to fulfill the requirements of the school, I have learnt that I ought to influence the school to better understand and respond to the needs of the family. My role as a teacher will be to connect what happens inside the classroom to what happens in the home. Instead of trying to “fix” the family, I need to strengthen the “fit” between home and school.

I tutor some inner city kids, most of whom come from impoverished or broken homes. Work with the refugee family had given me the courage to venture into these neighborhoods I once never imagined stepping into. Secondly, I have learnt to look out



for any signs of the “funds of knowledge” that the families may have. To capitalize on the knowledge and resources that the student and the family already have, allows me to help them achieve literacy success. A simple task like picking the appropriate books to read to them and making meaningful connections from the stories to their life help them focus better and maintain their interest in the program. To be able to make the connection to their lives beyond the classroom makes these children want to come back week after week.

Participation in the family literacy project helped me make powerful connections between my academic readings and the harsh realities of the lives of refugee families. My first lesson was the unlearning of my stereotypical prejudices of minority groups like refugees and immigrants. I learned not to view the language minority students I work with as deficient or in need of “fixing”. My physical presence in the home opened my eyes to the abundance of the “funds of knowledge” that I should capitalize to achieve literacy success in a multiracial classroom. The twelve weeks that I worked with the children reaffirmed the fact that literacy teaching and social politics are not and never could be mutually exclusive (Pennycook, 1999).

### **Concluding Remarks**

Working in homes is a very different setting from teaching in the classroom where we are the leaders. At home the family is in control and the parents are the authorities, we are guests. As educators, we had to learn how to traverse this new terrain where the rules are different from the classroom. The family life and family needs take precedence over the lesson. The curriculum is not necessarily based on standards that all

must attain but is derived from the families' identified goals. We often have to sit while family events take over from a lesson. We learn to be humble as we sit on the floor to teach, help with the baby, entertain a toddler or participate in the family meal. We learn to respect families for what they are and who they are. We learn to value them as people. In return, we grow as people and as educators as we understand that the children who sit in front of us every day, come from homes like these. These homes are after all, very much like ours.

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