

St. John's University

**St. John's Scholar**

---

Faculty Publications

Department of Education Specialties

---

1-1-2016

## Rediscovering and Reconnecting Funds of Knowledge of Immigrant Children, Families and Teachers

Seung Eun McDevitt

*St. John's University*, [mcdevits@stjohns.edu](mailto:mcdevits@stjohns.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholar.stjohns.edu/education\\_specialties\\_facpubs](https://scholar.stjohns.edu/education_specialties_facpubs)



Part of the [International and Comparative Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

McDevitt, S. (2016). Rediscovering and Reconnecting Funds of Knowledge of Immigrant Children, Families and Teachers. *Childhood Education*, 92(6), 470-475. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2016.1251796>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Education Specialties at St. John's Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of St. John's Scholar. For more information, please contact [fazzinol@stjohns.edu](mailto:fazzinol@stjohns.edu).

Rediscovering and reconnecting funds of knowledge of  
immigrant children, families and teachers

Seung Eun McDevitt

Teachers College, Columbia University

**Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to my advisor and mentor, Dr. Susan L. Recchia, for her insightful feedback and numerous conversations to reflect on my journey as a teacher and researcher. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Marianna Souto-Manning for her guidance through this process of rediscovering my funds of knowledge to tell the stories of my students, parents as well as mine.

**Author Information**

**Seung Eun McDevitt** is a doctoral student and an instructor at Teachers College, Columbia University in New York with research interests in immigrant children, families and teachers in early childhood/special education and teacher education. She teaches graduate coursework in early childhood/early childhood special education and supervises student teachers in the field.

## **Introduction**

It is not a surprise to hear that no area of the country is untouched by immigrants considering the United States is an immigrant nation (Lukose, 2007; Piedra & Engstrom, 2009; Suárez-Orozco, 2001). In relation to early childhood education, one in four children under the age of six in the United States has at least one immigrant parent and a majority of children enrolled in many public preschool programs are children of recent immigrants (Capps et al., 2005; Tobin, Arzubiaga, & Adair, 2013). New York City particularly is a place with a long history of diversity and immigration, and it continues to be a home for new immigrants (Mercado, 2005; Tobin et al., 2013). During my eight years of teaching in different parts of the city I had opportunities to form relationships with my students and their families from all over the world including Bangladesh, China, Dominican Republic, Egypt, France, Germany, Guiana, Haiti, Hong Kong, India, Iran, Jamaica, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Puerto Rico, and Russia. They brought culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse knowledge and represented many different abilities and needs in my classroom.

Not only was I a teacher of many immigrant children; I was also once an immigrant student growing up in Brooklyn, New York within a Korean immigrant household. Despite the fact that I was an older student when I emigrated to the U.S., I saw a commonality amongst many of the children in my preschool classrooms. It was a unique identity that we all shared as immigrants regardless of our ethnicity or age (Arizpe, Colomer & Martínez-Roldán, 2014). We had stories to tell about living in the U.S. as immigrants; however, few have been heard or paid attention. In this paper, I plan to tell some of those stories of my immigrant students and their families, as well as mine: the uncovered stories of lived experiences. By telling the stories I hope to reconnect the stories of my lived experiences with the stories of my students and their

families. In order to rediscover and reconnect their lived experiences and funds of knowledge, I will first address the intersection of funds of knowledge and immigrant children, families, and teachers. Then, I will apply the autobiographic approach to tell our untold stories and attempt to rediscover and reconnect our funds of knowledge. Lastly, I will conclude with a proposal for implications for teachers.

### **Funds of Knowledge and Immigrant Children, Families and Teachers**

My critical assumption based on my experiences is that immigrant children and immigrant teachers bring their whole selves into our classrooms including their lived experiences. Their funds of knowledge might be subtle and need to be carefully uncovered; however, they are rich, full, and valuable. Many scholars support the idea that children bring in a wealth of knowledge to their classrooms including their background experiences, cultural practices, stories and interests (Kirova, 2001; Moll, 2014; Portes & Fernandez-Kelly, 2008; Souto-Manning, 2013). In attempting to study about immigrant children, families, and teachers, I intend to use a theoretical framework of funds of knowledge referring to bodies of knowledge and skills that are historically and culturally accumulated and developed for functioning of households and individuals (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992). Our lives offer us tremendous knowledge and the more complex our lives are the more we learn. Vygotsky once stated, “Ultimately, only life educates, and the deeper that life, the real world, burros into the school, the more dynamic and the more robust will be the educational process” (as cited in Moll, 2014, p. 121). Knowledge that comes from living experiences provides a new conceptual means for teaching and resources for educational change (Moll, 2014).

### **Autobiographical Writing Approach**

I use an autobiographical writing approach as a narrative inquiry to rediscover the funds of knowledge of my immigrant students, families, and myself as an immigrant teacher. In doing so I risk my vulnerability, using my “personal voice” (Behar, 1996, p. 14) to tell my stories as an immigrant teacher and about immigrant children and families with whom I worked (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I also revisit the context of early childhood education by reconnecting my students’ stories to my own stories and I envision what is possible in the field through the processes of problematizing the current practices (Miller, 2005).

I chose to use autobiographical writing because my experiences living as an immigrant in the U.S. have deeply affected my teaching, my ethos, and my path to pursue the field of education. Gay (2010) states that personal stories are powerful resources for teaching and learning. She says, “I use my own stories to show how I came to be, and how I am still in the process of becoming, with respect to competence in teaching for, about, and to cultural and ethnic diversity” (Gay, 2010, p. 233). Likewise, I use my stories to show how I approached my teaching, how my teaching shapes my beliefs in education and how I became the teacher I am now.

Additionally, by telling my stories, I add on to the multiple stories that Chimamanda Adichie (2009) talked about in her TedTalk so that there is not just one single story, rather multiple stories of immigrants. We can also extend our understanding of immigrant children in the U.S more critically through multiple stories and the multiple accounts that would break “the dogmatism of a single tale” (Grumet, 1991, p. 72). Furthermore, I acknowledge that my stories are often “colored and filtered” (Gonzales et al., 2005, p. 10) through my own interests and funds of knowledge. They represent my voice not the voices of the entire population of immigrant

teachers or teachers who have worked with immigrant children and families. Lastly, my stories are never complete because I continuously “re-live,” “retell,” and “rediscover” to imagine a better future (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Miller, 2005).

### **Story One**

#### *Rediscovering Funds of Knowledge*

From the standpoint of the child, the great waste in the school comes from his inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside the school in any complete and free way within the school itself; while, on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning in school. This is the isolation of the school—its isolation from life (Dewey, 1902, p. 75).

Fresh out of college not only was I excited about having my own classroom but I was also ambitious to try out what I learned in college with my own students. Back in Brooklyn where my family and I first landed as immigrants from Korea I began my teaching journey in the heart of South Brooklyn, an area which is heavily populated with immigrants from all over the globe. On a sunny fall day I picked up a book about the season fall and started to do a read-aloud on the carpet in my prekindergarten classroom. I was confident that the children would be interested in the book and in the activity I planned since it was similar to the unit I did in college for a curriculum course. As I turned the pages I saw some children started to become antsy, and later on their eyes were everywhere else but the book. I began to wonder what failed to capture their attention and interests. The book was about a family doing “fall activities” such as raking their backyard, jumping in the leaves, going apple picking, and baking pumpkin pies. To an outsider this might offer a deficit view of these children not understanding and unable to relate to this storybook.

It was not until I did home visits with my students' families that it clicked for me how the story was uninteresting to them because it was far from their lives. At the same time it clicked for me that I myself was also not part of the storybook either. I did not have a backyard in my house with trees and grass, I had never gone apple picking nor had I ever baked pies with my mother. I also grew up as an immigrant student and lived in a rental house where there was no need for raking. My mother did not know how to bake since Korean dishes are rarely prepared baked. My father had long working hours so he never had time to take me apple picking. It turned out the majority of my students were in the same boat as I when growing up. I realized that my experiences mirrored my children's experiences in many ways and there I was in my own classroom reading a storybook that was completely isolated from all of our lives. As I was disengaged in the book, so were my students.

After the home visits and my reflection of the experiences of my students as well as mine, I decided to take the children on a neighborhood walk. We observed the changes in the trees and in people's clothes as we walked. We discussed the cool weather and anticipated the even colder weather that was coming our way. I remembered some parents of my students during my home visits mentioning how it was new to them to have cold weather and they were looking forward to experiencing snow. I knew right then what our next topic would be when winter comes.

### *Reconnecting Funds of Knowledge*

Literature on school curriculum suggest that more meaningful and relevant learning happens when it is built around the strengths and the needs of immigrant children based on their lived experiences (Adair, 2009; Arizpe et al., 2014; Campano, 2007). Story One is an example of my first few months of teaching when I followed the set curriculum without the ability to rethink

the curriculum until I had the opportunity to visit my students' homes and have interpersonal communications with their families. After understanding where my students were coming from and their funds of knowledge I was able to create a different curriculum for my classroom that was built around my students' lived experiences and was inclusive of diverse voices (Arizpe et al., 2014). I also realized that I had to "dig deeper" (Goodwin, Cheruvu, & Geneshi, 2008, p. 7) to discover the funds of knowledge of my students in order to incorporate them into my curriculum. Once I truly got to know each child in my classroom I was able to open up spaces for their outside of school experiences to permeate through the walls of the classroom and to live and thrive within the classroom. By reconnecting my memory of working with the curriculum and my immigrant students I realize now that the dominant social notion had determined what I thought should be emphasized and excluded (Goodwin, et al., 2008). I had emphasized the "American" customs of living autumn while ignoring what my students knew and what they understood as familiar about the season. Additionally, when my students' lived experiences became a resource for my teaching and learning I saw my students engaged in their learning more meaningfully and in developing relationships with their peers as well as with me (Moll, 2014; Stires & Geneshi, 2008).

## **Story Two**

### *Rediscovering Funds of Knowledge*

A new girl came to my classroom in the middle of the school year. She was a recent immigrant from Mexico. I thought at first she had a quiet and introvert personality because she did not try to play with other children in the classroom nor did she speak much although there were other Spanish speaking children. Every time I encouraged her to play with her peers she



turned away to find a quiet place such as the painting area or writing center. I endeavored to have other children play with her but it did not work out very well.

As I was pondering about why she always played by herself I thought of myself when I first came to this country and my school experience. I clearly remembered the painful feelings of isolation and loneliness and the desire to be accepted into the dominant group in school. There were also days when I did not speak at all in school because not only did I not know the English language well but I was also afraid to speak. Things were different here than in Korea, and I was nervous. One fond memory: although I had no friends, my teachers were there for me. They supported and helped me navigate the culture of school and to adjust to the life here.

By mirroring my experience with the experience of my student from Mexico I was able to empathize with her and become her friend. I played with her in the dramatic play area and communicated through eye contact, body language, and smiles. I wanted to let her know that I empathized with her and cared for her. I never thought that teachers should be friends with their students. However, the relationship we had looked like a typical friendship in a preschool classroom.

### *Reconnecting Funds of Knowledge*

Social-emotional development of young immigrant children has not received much attention as there is little research on their feelings of loneliness and isolation (Kirova, 2001; Rubin & Bhavaagri, 2001). However, it is important to address immigrant children's social-emotional development because it plays a crucial role affecting their emotional wellbeing and adaptation to the new country (Arizpe et al., 2014). A handful of research studies illustrate immigrant children's hardships such as worries, difficulties of living between worlds, strategies to cope with their circumstances as well as their hopes (Adams & Kirova, 2007). Kirova (2001)

emphasizes the important role teachers play in addressing these issues for the immigrant children's social-emotional development. She states,

Only when educators understand how immigrant children's experiences affect their quality of life and learning at school can they take pedagogically sensitive actions to help the children develop higher self-esteem and become successful members of the school community" (p. 205).

One way to apply a sensitive pedagogy with young immigrant children is through play. Although many immigrant children struggle in schools due to challenges in acquiring the language of the host society (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Roer-Strier & Strier, 2007; Tobin et al. 2013), these young children also engage in their immigrant lives non-linguistically in play to understand the world around them and to be understood (Adams & Kirova, 2007). Play is a universal language among all children. As I was able to engage in meaningful play with my students through non-verbal interactions, I realized that play is one way to respond to immigrant children's feelings and to help them become part of the classroom community. Once I became friends with my student who was a recent immigrant from Mexico and was seen playing with her more often, other students also began to approach her more frequently. She eventually made many more friends in the classroom and became an active member of the classroom community. I was able to approach her needs and emotions with sensitivity particularly because I felt a close connection with her due to my own similar experiences and having the same needs when I was once a recent immigrant student (Kirova, 2001).

### Story Three

#### *Rediscovering Funds of Knowledge*

It was often a daunting task for me to plan parent-teacher conferences several times a year because I was nervous that none of the parents would show up. I knew that it was impossible for many of my students' parents to take a day off from work. My own parents never attended parent-teacher conferences because their only day off from work was Sunday. I understood this common circumstance for the immigrant families. Another reason I was concerned about parent conferences was language barrier. I knew that many of the parents did not speak English and I had to figure out ways to communicate with them in case they attended. One of the things I purposefully shared with my students' parents was the pictures of their children in the classroom. This visual aid became a connecting vehicle for our conversations. We talked, laughed, and cried together as we continued our conversations about the strengths and needs of the children. Although we spoke different languages, came from different countries, and had different skin colors, we shared common interests and experiences: the children and living in the U.S. as immigrants. I realized then when hearts communicate there are no barriers and it is possible to have productive and meaningful conferences with parents of all backgrounds.

#### *Reconnecting Funds of Knowledge*

Story three is a sensitive one because it is not only about my students' parents and families but also it is about my parents. While conferencing with the parents, I saw my own parents in them and that is when my attitude towards my students' parents changed completely. Although we did not speak the same language we knew that we had trust in each other. I understood where they were coming from. No matter what languages they spoke, what economic status they were positioned in or what country they had emigrated from, I knew that they all

wanted the best for their children and wanted their children to get the best education in the school through me. I valued and respected them because of their bravery being my students' parents and surviving in a foreign country. I understood, not all but some of their suffering and life as immigrants and acknowledged that they have rich funds of knowledge they could offer to their children's education.

Immigrant children bring to the classroom these rich funds of knowledge that come from their households in which they live and by that which is influenced on a daily basis (Adair, 2009; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Tobin et al., 2013). Learning occurs not only in school but also at home and in the community. As Tobin et al. (2013) argued, "We need to avoid conceptualizing immigrant parents' perspectives as a form of ignorance while viewing the beliefs of teachers, policymakers, and experts as knowledge" (p. 9). This is especially important when working with immigrant parents. When teachers and schools conceptualize immigrant parents' knowledge as a valuable resource parents' participation in their children's education increases. Also, embracing the knowledge of immigrant parents and making space for their voices help school personnel to position themselves as learners as well as co-constructors of knowledge (González et al., 2005). I learned that when I opened up spaces for the parents to offer their knowledge through honest conversations and communication during parent teacher conferences and home visits, I was able to understand my students even deeper than before. Building partnerships with my students' parents and families began with mutual respect and interpersonal communication between us (Moll, 2014). Ultimately, their knowledge played a critical role in bridging my students' home life to school life and to my funds of knowledge.

### **Implications for Teachers**

By revisiting the stories above I rediscovered the funds of knowledge that my students and families brought into the classroom and how they mirrored so much of my stories. Then by reconnecting my funds of knowledge in telling the stories I was able to see how the stories were situated in broader social and educational contexts. I hope that my accounts challenge the dominant social notion of valuing certain knowledge over others and encourage teachers to begin considering the funds of knowledge of immigrant children and families as “precious resources” (Niyubahwe, Mukamurera & Jutras, 2013, p. 291). Through this process, I was also able to be more cognizant of my own funds of knowledge as an immigrant teacher and how teachers like me could play a critical role in integrating immigrant children and their families into school (Niyubahwe et al., 2013). Valuing teachers’ funds of knowledge, beliefs and personal experiences with diverse backgrounds would bring important insights in enhancing the field of education (Gupta, 2006). Hiring more immigrant teachers would bring their own lived experiences to better understanding those of immigrant children and families can increase awareness and understanding of the educational and social emotional needs of children with diverse backgrounds. In terms of working with immigrant parents, teachers should remember that preschool is many of the immigrant parents’ first site where they have close contact with their host society (Adair & Tobin, 2008). Thus, being available to have interpersonal communications with immigrant parents as their children’s teacher is key to building trusting partnerships (Moll, 2014). Lastly, teachers should position themselves as learners. Sensitive and critical pedagogy can happen only when we humble ourselves to listen carefully to and learn from our children and their families.

## References

- Adair, J. (2009) Teaching Children of Immigrants: a multi-sited ethnographic study of preschool teachers in five US cities. Unpublished PhD dissertation, Arizona State University.
- Adair, J., & Tobin, J. (2008). Listening to the voices of immigrant parents. In Genishi, C., & Goodwin, L. (Eds.), *Diversities in early childhood education: Rethinking and doing* (pp.137-150). New York, NY:Routledge.
- Adams, L. D., & Kirova, A. (2007). Introduction: Global migration and the education of children. In Adams, L. D., & Kirova, A. (Eds.), *Global migration and education: Schools, children and families* (pp. 1-12). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Arizpe, E., Coloer, T., & Martínez-Roldán, C. (2014). *Visual Journeys through Wordless Narratives: An International Inquiry with Immigrant Children and The Arrival*. New York, NY: Bloomsburry .
- Behar, R. (1996). The vulnerable observer: Anthropology that breaks your heart. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Campano, G. (2007). *Immigrant students and literacy*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Capps, R., Fix, M. E., Murray, J., Ost, J., Passel, J. S., & Hernandez, S. (2005). *The new demography of America's schools: Immigration and the No Child Left Behind Act*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute.
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J.<sup>[1]</sup><sub>SEP</sub> (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, 19(5), 2-14.
- Dewey, J. (1902). *The child and the curriculum including, the school and society*. New York, NY: Cosimo, Inc.

- Garcia, O., & Kleifgen, J. A. (2010). *Educating emergent bilinguals: Policies, programs, and practice for English Language Learners*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- González, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (2005). Introduction: Theorizing practices. In González, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (Eds.), *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities and classrooms* (pp. 29-46). Mahwah, N.J: L. Erlbaum Associates.
- Goodwin, A. L., Cheruvu, R., & Genishi, C. (2008). Responding to multiple diversities in early childhood education: How far have we come? In Genishi, C., & Goodwin, L. (Eds.), *Diversities in early childhood education: Rethinking and doing* (pp.3-10). New York, NY:Routledge.
- Grumet, M. R. (1991). The politics of personal knowledge. In C. Witherell & N. Noddings (Eds.), *Stories lives tell: Narrative and dialogue in education* (pp. 67-77). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gupta, A. (2006). Early experiences and personal funds of knowledge and beliefs of immigrant and minority teacher candidates dialog with theories of child development in a teacher education classroom. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 27(1), 3-18.
- Kirova, A. (2001). Loneliness in immigrant children: Implications for classroom practice. *Childhood Educaiton*, 77(5), 260-267.
- Lukose, R. A. (2007). The difference that diaspora makes. Thinking through the anthropology of immigrant education in the United States. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 38, 405-413.

- Marcado, C. I. (2005). Reflections on the study of households in New York City and Long Island: A different route, a common destination. In González, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (Eds), *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities and classrooms* (pp. 233-255). Mahwah, N.J. : L. Erlbaum Associates.
- Miller, J. L. (2005). Autobiography and the necessary incompleteness of teachers' stories. In Janet L. Miller, *Sounds of silence breaking: Women, autobiography, curriculum*, (pp. 45-56). New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Moll, L. C. (2014). *L. S. Vygotsky and education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 132-141.
- Niyubahwe, A., Mukamurera, J., & Jutras, F. (2013). Professional integration of immigrant teachers in the school system: A literature review. *McGill Journal of Education*, 48(2), 279-296.
- Piedra, L. M., & Engstrom, D. W. (2009). Segmented assimilation theory and the life model: An integrated approach to understanding immigrants and their children. *Social Work*, 54(3), 270-276.
- Portes, A., & Fernandez-Kelly, P. (2008). No margin for error: Educational and occupational achievement among disadvantaged children of immigrants. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 620(1), 12-36.
- Rubin, L., & Bhavnagri, N. P. (2001). Voices of recent Chaldean adolescent immigrants. *Childhood Education*, 77(5), 308-312.



Souto-Manning, M. (2013). Teaching young children from immigrant and diverse families.

*Young Children*, 68(4). 72-80.

Suárez-Orozco, M. M. (2001). Globalization, immigration, and education: The research agenda.

*Harvard Educational Review*, 71(3), 345-365.

Stires, S., & Genishi, C. (2008). Learning English in school: Rethinking curriculum,

relationships, and time. In Genishi, C., & Goodwin, L. (Eds.), *Diversities in early*

*childhood education: Rethinking and doing* (pp.49-66). New York, NY:Routledge.

Tobin, J., Arzubiaga, A. E., & Adair, J. K. (2013). *Children crossing borders: Immigrant parent*

*and teacher perspectives on preschool*. New York: Russel Sage Foundation.

Roer-Strier, D., & Strier, R. (2007). The role of home and school in the socialization of

immigrant children in Israel: Fathers' views. In Adams, L. D., & Kirova, A. (Eds.),

*Global migration and education: Schools, children and families* (pp. 103-120). Mahwah,

NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

#### Web-Based References

Adichie, C. N. (2009, July). The danger of a single story. *TedGlobal 2009*. TedTalk retrieved

from [http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en)

[\\_story?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en)