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Funds of knowledge mentors: Partnering with Latinx youth to incite dispositional shifts in teacher preparation

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ABSTRACT
This article describes how preservice teachers and Latinx students can collaborate to effect change in the way that K–12 educators support students from traditionally marginalized groups. We build on the concept of funds of knowledge to demonstrate how situating traditionally marginalized students in positions of expertise as funds of knowledge mentors can incite profound dispositional shifts that subvert traditional hierarchies of power within schooling contexts and cultivate professional democracy within the field of education.

KEYWORDS
funds of knowledge; teacher preparation; immigrant students

Introduction

While many ethnic groups face challenges in academic contexts, Latinx students have disproportionally experienced extreme difficulties in the U.S. school system and continue to struggle to access a post-secondary education (Aud, Fox, & Kewalramani, 2010; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Kim, 2011). On a national level, the 13% dropout rate for Latinxs remains higher than African American (8%) and White (4%) students (Santiago, Galdeano, & Taylor, 2015). Even more disturbing, the dropout rate for foreign-born Latinxs is an astounding 28% (NCES, 2014). These statistics are especially troubling considering that Latinx immigrants account for the vast majority of U.S. immigration. In 2012, 42.7% of all immigrants came from Latin America, with 28.3% overall originating from Mexico (Migrant Policy Institute, 2014). As a result, Latinx students represent the largest and fastest growing minority group in the U.S.—currently 25% of the nation's students are Latinxs (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017). By 2060, Latinxs are predicted to comprise 38% of students between the ages 5–14, as compared to Whites (33%), African Americans (13%), and Asians (7%) (Santiago et al., 2015). Although these demographic trends illustrate the steadily shifting educational landscape of American schools, K–12 classrooms continue to be structured around mainstream, White norms of communication and interaction (Avineri et al., 2015).

Discussion trajectory

Despite the challenges mentioned earlier, children of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds bring a wealth of knowledge and experience from their homes and communities which teachers can utilize in their instruction (e.g., Au, 1993; Heath, 1983). In this article, our goal is to provide a framework for how teachers and Latinx students can collaborate to effect change in the way that K–12 educators support students from traditionally marginalized groups. Our specific charge is to delineate a process for situating Latinx youth as mentors to help preservice teachers integrate community funds of knowledge into classroom practices. In their work with teacher preparation

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programs, Buck and Sylvester (2005) assert that "[a]ssuming that the ultimate goal is to position preservice teachers to view urban communities and their residents as reservoirs of strength, possibility, and talent, how can teacher education programs guide students in the articulation between their lived, possessed, and claimed privilege and the relative poverty and disadvantage within which urban community members are equally embedded?" (p. 222). Heeding Buck and Sylvester's question, we highlight an alternative approach to teacher preparation that utilizes youth experts from these types of contexts to guide preservice teachers in the process of developing culturally relevant lessons.

We build on the well-founded concept of "funds of knowledge" (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) by demonstrating how teacher preparation programs can collaborate with secondary school students as cultural mentors to deepen teacher candidates' understanding of minority students' life experiences to enhance lesson development. We show how situating students from a predominantly minority school district in positions of authority and expertise can incite profound dispositional shifts that subvert traditional hierarchies of power between educators and students.

Conceptual framework

Funds of knowledge in teaching and learning

The research is replete with the benefits of, and need for, building upon students' "funds of knowledge" (for expanded literature review, see Hogg, 2011; Rodriguez, 2013). In general, the funds of knowledge concept refers to an individual's historically accumulated set of abilities, experiences, and bodies of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). These "funds" can be recognized by observing "the wider set of activities requiring specific strategic bodies of essential information that households need to maintain their well-being" (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992, p. 314). In the context of this discussion, we employ the concept of funds of knowledge to encompass both academic and personal background knowledge, accumulated life experiences, skills used to navigate everyday social contexts, and world view(s) structured by broader historically situated sociocultural forces.

Applying a funds of knowledge approach to understanding students' overall sets of abilities and experiences can help teachers draw on these skills in classrooms to motivate their students during academic activities. In their research on engaging students and families outside of school contexts, Kyle, McIntyre, Miller, and Moore (2005) found that a "deeper understanding of the funds of knowledge held by families became a source [that] teachers drew upon in the immediacy of teaching, making subtle adjustments and connections to help children feel known and a part of the learning taking place" (p. 44). Abundant within funds of knowledge research are examples of integrating students' out-of-school interests into classroom content (e.g., bilingual writing activities (Dworin, 2006); nutrition (Fraser-Abder et al., 2010); goal setting (Ghiaciuc, McIntyre, Kyle, & Sutherland,); bullying (Jones, 2004); social justice (Kurtyka, 2010); immigration (Olmedo, 2004); and science (Upadhyay, 2005)). Additional work has demonstrated the effectiveness of facilitating the learning process by of drawing on students' *scholastic* funds of knowledge—i.e., their "accumulated set of skills, aptitudes, and habits students draw on when faced with accomplishing academic tasks" (Johnson & Johnson, 2016, p. 107). Inspired by this line of culturally informed pedagogical approaches, our study is based on developing a model for training preservice teachers to recognize and integrate students' funds of knowledge in their instruction.

Unlike previous research on the application of funds of knowledge in classroom contexts, we contribute to the literature by proffering the notion of *funds of knowledge mentors* to describe the benefits of drawing on the experiences of local youth to illuminate the life contexts of community members from traditionally marginalized populations. Our concept of a funds of knowledge mentor builds on Nelson and Guerra's (2011) description of a *cultural liaison* as "someone who has standing within a community group and is willing to serve as a link between the community and the school" (p. 57). Furthering this description, we utilize the notion of funds of knowledge mentors to indicate

individuals with deeply embedded *emic* perspectives of the cultural norms of a given community who can interpret local experiences and funds of knowledge to educators for the purpose of enhancing academic opportunities for minoritized students in school.

Although the importance of bridging students' life experiences to classrooms has been well-documented (e.g., Barton & Tan, 2009; Basu & Barton, 2007; Smythe & Toohey, 2009; Upadhyay, 2005), we extend this by: (1) drawing on middle and high school students' life experiences; and (2) applying those experiences to enhance elementary-level instructional contexts. Whereas other research has been done on the effectiveness of having teachers and students do "community scans" to develop an inventory of cultural knowledge and practices for classroom application purposes (Smythe & Toohey, 2009), we position local Latinx youth as community experts who provide insight into their lifeworld experiences to help educators create more culturally relevant lessons across a variety of grade levels and classrooms, while also strengthening relationships with their students. In this light, funds of knowledge mentors act as both cultural brokers and educational liaisons to help preservice teachers understand the on-the-ground experiences and skills of younger children and families in their particular community.

Shifting habit(u)s

We incorporate Bourdieu's (1994, 2004) concepts of *habitus* and *doxa* to describe how traditional approaches to teacher preparation reflect and reproduce the beliefs and practices inherent in U.S. schools. The *habitus* can be characterized as "principles which generate and organize practices and representations" (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 108). In other words, the habitus describes the (re) production of cultural expectations and the social practices that reinforce them. For educators and students, the habitus propels everyday classroom practices and institutionalizes norms of interaction while simultaneously marginalizing alternatives to these dominant norms.

Bourdieu's concept of *doxa* is reflected in the "structures" (e.g., program policies) that guide the way individuals relate to their social surrounding and rationalize the legitimacy of power relations within and between different groups (see Johnson and Johnson (2015), for a detailed application of doxa within educational language policy contexts). The doxa comprises the "aggregate of choices" which, albeit arbitrary, nevertheless represent "that which is beyond question and which each agent tacitly accords by the mere fact of acting in accord with social convention" (Bourdieu, 2004, pp. 168–169). In this light, dominant groups are inherently invested in perpetuating the viability of the doxa to reinforce their hegemonic influence as the natural order of things (i.e., as orthodoxy).

As applied to teacher preparation programs, partnering with community youth as local experts necessitates a shift in traditional patterns of professional dispositions within education such that teachers and students see each other on equal footing. As Henderson and Zipin (2010) indicate, "[r] eciprocal student-teacher trust develops through practical success, but begins when teachers and students both make courageous moves to unlearn deep habits of accustomed power in roles and relations" (pp. 31–32). Since the notion of habitus describes the generation of cultural expectations and the social practices that reinforce them, it is necessary to look at how such cultural norms are established.

"These practices," notes Bourdieu (2004), "can be accounted for only by relating the objective *structure* defining the social conditions in which this habitus is operating" (p. 78). This "structure" is set into place by the creation and perpetuation of ideologically grounded policies that have been established to maintain the interests of those in positions of power. Applying this to education, we can see how the social norms and power hierarchies that shape teacher preparation perpetuate the same doxic conditions producing the inequitable distribution of resources and consequential academic challenges experienced by minoritized students in U.S. public schools.

Through the embodied experiences of everyday social interactions (in the classroom as well as outside of school), "obvious" notions of right and wrong, social appropriateness, and cultural norms construct a teacher's mental schemata of reality. This point is particularly relevant for looking at the

structures set in place for training educators (i.e., teacher preparation programs) to engage with their students and communities. Fundamental shifts in educators' orientations towards working with minority students can be set in motion when teachers learn to collaborate as equal partners with students and families.

Cremin et al.'s (2012) work highlights that engaging students and families in out-of-school contexts can prompt "dispositional shifts" in teachers' preconceptions about minority students' academic experiences (p. 107). Developing a deeper appreciation for students' life experiences also bolsters teachers' abilities to gauge their students' funds of knowledge that are either difficult to perceive (Sugarman, 2010) or traditionally seen in a negative light (Comer et al., 2001; Henderson & Zipin, 2010; Jones, 2004). Such shifts in professional dispositions are made possible by confronting the doxic ideologies that tend to channel individuals away from these behaviors.

These fundamental shifts in teachers' dispositions involve what Zipin (2013) calls double democracy—of curriculum and of pedagogy. As Zipin (2013) explains:

> Curriculum becomes democratic by including and working with the family- and community-based knowledge of students who inhabit the school. Pedagogy becomes democratic in relationships of power-sharing that support voice and agency among students. In these ways, the community spaces that students inhabit beyond school become curricular within school; and the classrooms in which students do curriculum work become spaces of learning community. (p. 10)

It is from this platform that we challenge traditional approaches for training teachers and advocate for collaborating with local youth as funds of knowledge mentors. As outlined here, our approach to partnering with youth mentors promotes curricular democracy by structuring class topics around local interests and funds of knowledge. This take on teacher preparation also champions pedagogical democracy by leveling power sharing between teachers and community members while overlapping the borders between school and community learning spaces.

Methods

Drawing from a case study approach that "reflects the perspective of the participants" (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 447), we intentionally brought together preservice teachers and students who were part of a social justice youth program. This unique collaboration not only enabled us to examine the experiences of university students as they progressed towards earning their teaching credentials, but it also highlighted the perspectives of local youth who were focused on promoting issues of equity and social justice in public schools. Our participants included 11 elementary preservice teachers pursuing their teaching credentials at a university in the northwestern United States, and 13 Latinx middle and high school students attending two local schools. The preservice teachers were recruited from a cohort of university students simultaneously taking two teacher preparation courses—one focusing on literacy instruction for students in the intermediate grades (grades 4–8) and the other focusing on instructional methods for working with English learners across grades K–12. The university students were in their second of four semesters of the elementary education program.

The middle and high school students were all members of a youth leadership group and lived in a local mobile home community where Eric Johnsonhad been conducting ethnographic research on language education policy and practice for the previous seven years. River Pointe Mobile Home Park is home to approximately 215 families, nearly all of whom are immigrants from Mexico. Nearly all the children in this community are emergent bilinguals who are learning English as an additional language, and all face difficult socioeconomic conditions. Most of the students help their families with a variety of responsibilities, such as taking care of younger siblings or helping with the family economy (e.g., selling items at the local flea market or working in agricultural fields with their parents when not in school).

The school district where this study was conducted is very diverse (~ 70% Latinx), being among the state's leaders in the highest total number of English Language Learners (~ 6000), migrant

students (~ 1200), overall number of Latinx students (~ 12,000), and students participating in the Free and Reduced Priced Lunch program (~ 71%). The district consistently faces academic challenges meeting state and federal standards. Moreover, the need for increased cultural awareness training is further underscored by the disproportionate number of White teachers in the district (76%) as compared to ethnic minority students (75%)—statistics that are also reflected at the state level (90.5% White teachers vs. 42% ethnic minority students) (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2015).

Data collection took place in four phases during the fall semester of 2013. In the first phase, we conducted a voice-recorded focus group interview with the River Pointe students (i.e., without the university preservice teachers) to gauge their perspectives of schools in their community. For the second phase, we brought the two groups of students together at the River Pointe community center. The preservice teachers ate lunch with the students in small groups where we recorded semi-structured conversations focused on school and teaching. After lunch, the River Pointe students took the preservice teachers on a tour of the community. During the tour, the students carried hand-held video cameras in order to record what was said and observed during their walk. Afterward, the groups debriefed and discussed ways to integrate their experiences into their elementary classroom lessons.

In the third phase, the preservice teachers designed activities based on what they learned from the River Pointe students during the community walk, and subsequently taught literacy lessons to K–5 elementary students as part of their classroom internships. All materials for the lessons, as well as written reflections, were submitted as data. Building on the experience of teaching lessons based on the community's funds of knowledge, the fourth phase entailed bringing River Pointe students and the preservice teachers together to discuss the effectiveness of the elementary school lessons. Here, we video-recorded the university students sharing their work and receiving constructive feedback from the River Pointe students.

Analysis

Setting the stage

Before partnering our preservice teachers with the River Pointe students, we organized a focus group discussion with the students to explain the goals of our project. We met on a Friday evening in early fall in the River Pointe community center building. In addition to the students, the local high school principal, vice principal, counselor, and district family outreach director also attended the meeting. We explained to everyone that we were trying to train future teachers in how to collaborate with community members to better understand their backgrounds, skills, and strengths as a way to enhance academic experiences for children in K–12 schools. Before moving forward, we told the students that we wanted to hear about their perspectives of school.

After prompting the group to discuss their experiences in school, the room fell silent. We began to assume that the students, who were normally very talkative, might have been intimidated by the presence of the school administrators. Breaking the silence, the school principal calmly suggested that we start the conversation by having the students use the sentence frame: "I wish my teacher would____." The students agreed and took turns contributing responses, and did not seem to censor their comments due to the presence of the principal. On the contrary, the mood was serious and the students were very sincere. While there were a variety of responses, the following statements represent the overall sentiments of the group: *I wish my teacher would*_______

- understand what I've been through.
- understand every single one of us. Know our lives.
- like me. Get to know me.
- listen to me, not just hear.

- seem interested in helping me.

Aside from a few comments on instructional challenges facing students in the classroom, the majority of the comments reflected a distinct affective disconnect between teachers and students. The students described how difficult it is to learn when teachers do not care about them or their experiences. This was often couched in terms of teachers not answering their questions, not asking them about their interests, not allowing them to make up assignments if they missed school for personal reasons, and not making time to meet with them outside of class time for help.

During the discussion, multiple students mentioned racial differences as a primary factor causing teachers to be apathetic towards their academic progress. At one point, three students enacted an impromptu skit. This involved two students enthusiastically raising their hands with questions (as if they were in class) and the third posing as a teacher walking around the classroom. One of the students represented this particular group of Latinxs and the other was assumed to be White. The acting teacher overtly looked at the Latinx student and gestured as if he didn't care, only to look at the "White" student with his hand up and, overly happy and smiling, walked over to help him. When he finished answering the mock question, the teacher looked at the Latinx student and sternly said, "I don't have time for your question. Come back later."

Although the group as a whole enjoyed the skit, giggling and jesting affirmations, the underlying sense of shared experience with racial tension demonstrates the gravity of their perspective. This example resonates with what Rodriguez (2013) calls "counter-story telling." These types of first-person accounts reframe "the educational 'failure' of marginalized students to more explicitly implicate the practices and processes of schooling and other social institutions shaped by a variety of oppressive biases" (Rodriguez, 2013, p. 113). The poignant nature of this particular theme eventually helped us establish a platform of topics for discussion points with our preservice teachers.

When the jovial emotion of the skit subsided, we resumed the conversation by asking them to describe their thoughts on why teachers might act like that. A couple of students mentioned that teachers "just need to put in more effort" and "need to motivate students," and another student stated, "If the teachers give up on students, they should get a new job." Directly echoing this last comment, someone else contributed, "If teachers don't like students or their job, they should get a new job." This statement was met with consensus, evident in nodding heads. At that point, one of the students looked at us and asked, "Why do teachers have that job if they don't like it, or like the students?" After admitting that we did not have an answer to that question, we took advantage of that moment to explain that we wanted to collaborate with them to help change this trend.

Regardless of how the teachers in these situations might perceive/justify their classroom interactions (e.g., calling on students in the order they raised their hands, etc.), it is obvious that these students feel a distinct sense of teacher bias. Although the current environment in education is fraught with professional accountability demands that might influence instruction (e.g., teaching to specific standards, prepping students for high-stakes assessments), it is equally necessary to be mindful of both *what* is taught and *how*. How a lesson is taught "involves supporting different ways of being in the classroom, including different social interaction styles" (Hogg, 2011, p. 674). Acknowledging the importance of prioritizing the students' classroom experiences to counter cultural deficit assumptions, we honored their critiques of teachers and asked if we could use them to prompt the subsequent dialogue with our preservice teachers. The students were very encouraged when we described that we wanted them to work with our university preservice teachers and educate them about their lives, families, and community so that they could be better teachers. Building on the momentum from that discussion, we established a plan for conducting a community walk in the upcoming weeks.

Sharing life experiences

Recognizing that previous work on bridging students' funds of knowledge to classroom instruction has shown the importance of exposing educators to their students' life experiences (Barton & Tan, 2009; Basu & Barton, 2007; Smythe & Toohey, 2009; Upadhyay, 2005), our goal was to position the River Pointe students as funds of knowledge mentors who could help our teachers design more culturally responsive lessons for their ESL internships during the semester. To accomplish this, we arranged for our preservice teachers to meet with the students in the River Pointe community center situated in the middle of the large mobile home neighborhood.

It was a warm fall day in early October when our preservice teachers had their first meeting with the River Pointe students. Everyone gathered in the River Pointe community center and made cursory small talk before we assigned them to specific groups. They sat in small groups consisting of two preservice teachers and two or three River Pointe students, eating pizza and talking. To initiate the group conversations, we provided a list of prompts that allowed both sides to ask questions and respond to discussion frames (e.g., "Why do you want to be a teacher?" and "I like it when my teacher____"). It did not take long for the groups to be engaged in meaningful conversations around education and life in general.

Ten minutes into the initial conversation session, we noticed that two of the River Pointe students seemed emotionally distraught. With tears in their eyes, Belinda and her older sister, Marta, had opened up to our university students, Andrea and Albert, by sharing a deeply personal story of why they left Mexico and how they came to live in the U.S. The girls explained that they came to the U.S. at eight and nine years old. While waiting to cross the border and rejoin their father, they had to stay in a chicken coop that had been turned into a makeshift bedroom for three weeks. This soon led to the story of why they moved—a local drug cartel was looking for their dad. Marta explained, "Yeah, they wanted my dad in it and they were saying [to my mom] that if we find out that your husband's there, and you're lying to us, we're going to kill you and we're going to take you with us." Belinda added, "My dad didn't want us to cross the border because it's illegal…. But he said if you guys stay in Mexico you won't be safe." They confided that, right after they left, their godfather, a close friend of the family, was murdered by that same cartel.

After the story, our preservice teacher, Albert, commented to the girls, "Man, it's crazy how old you guys are and how much stuff you've been through…. Pretty amazing. Like, that's why I'm sitting over here, like, silent." Although we had discussed the funds of knowledge concept with our preservice teachers in terms of both positive and challenging situations, Albert's comments reflect a reaction of genuine awe and illustrate the process of dispositional shifting described by Cremin et al. (2012). When educators engage students who have had adverse life experiences, as Henderson and Zipin (2010) point out, "[i]t is thus crucial that invitations to tell life-based stories include ways to work with difficult dimensions of local experience" (p. 25). Although Albert was captivated in a reality that he could not imagine, his reaction validated Belinda and Marta's experiences and helped him situate his teaching practices within the larger social structures that influence interactions between teachers and students.

Belinda's subsequent comments reflect an overall perception of teacher apathy in her schooling experiences. As she explained, "And that's why it's like, it's more up to teachers to look to us to know what we've been through, like if we're not doing good or something those days, it's because there's something up with us." Her sister added, "Yeah, they're mostly like, 'oh, you're just slacking…. You're not putting any effort into it anymore,' instead of just asking, 'What's wrong?'" We highlight this particular conversation because it underscores the need for teachers to learn more about their students so that they have a better understanding of their lives and experiences. Such efforts can increase their capacity to relate their own professional habitus to "the objective *structure* defining the social conditions in which this habitus is operating" (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 78). Valuing a student's entire range of experiences as forms of cultural capital allows educators to peer beyond the

mainstream doxa of education norms within which they have been raised and trained to perpetuate, and wedges open spaces to view student strengths from a more culturally relevant vantage point.

Belinda and Marta's contribution as funds of knowledge mentors evoked life experiences that are often seen in a negative light. While we do not promote having teachers interrogate their students to reveal difficult chapters in their lives, we do promote embracing the moments when students confide such stories. This is especially important when students disclose chapters in their lives that reflect certain "politicized funds of knowledge" that provide teachers with insight into the ethos of political uncertainty that shrouds students in these situations (Gallo & Link, 2015). While the types of funds of knowledge approaches to classroom instruction mentioned earlier tend to focus on skills-based knowledge, stories like Belinda and Marta's are examples of what Zipin (2009) calls "dark funds of knowledge." As Zipin (2009) contends, such "lifeworld knowledge can indeed fund lifeworld-vitalised curricula to engage learners" (p. 323). As outlined in the description that follows, Andrea and Albert drew from Belinda and Marta's experience to make meaningful curricular connections for their lessons.

Community walk experience

The objective of the community walk activity simultaneously emphasized relationship building and exposing our preservice teachers to the "power of place" by tapping into local knowledge systems, values, symbols, and practices (Coles-Ritchie & Charles, 2011, p. 39). Over the course of our project, a great deal of personal sharing took place between both sides, opening up new understandings for our preservice teachers and providing them with insight into the wealth of knowledge, experience, and understandings that their future students bring to school with them—what one of the university students called "life stories." We found that such life stories, similar to what Watson (2007) refers to as "small stories," were especially prevalent during the community walk activity that was conducted after lunch.

In general, the community walks were characterized by a great deal of talking, laughter, and playfulness. As the River Pointe students guided the preservice teachers around their neighborhood, pointing out community spaces such as playgrounds, the soccer field, and the laundromat, they talked about a wide range of topics, including school, books, college life, language study, TV shows, earning their driver's license, hair styles, and so forth. Most of the topics discussed by the students were communicated through richly detailed, place-based stories. For example, Oscar and Kenny recounted stories about creating a clubhouse out of old mattresses they had salvaged in a cluster of trees, and star gazing from the tops of semi-truck trailers that had been left in a vacant agricultural field. Carlos narrated another story about a time the group had taken turns wheeling each other down a hill in giant truck tires.

The stories spanned multiple topics, spaces, and characters—all of which involved great nuance into pinnacle moments experienced by the River Pointe youth in their neighborhood. Adichie's (2009) explanation of personal stories is especially relevant to this context. She explains that "[s] tories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize" (Adichie, 2009, see min. 17:35). This perspective claims that without knowing the many stories of each other's lives, we fall into the danger of believing a "single story" about one another. Such single stories of students might be relegated to *English learner, immigrant*, or *failing in school*, rather than *survivor, friend*, or *committed family member*. These "single stories" are akin to the dichotomous "us/them" thinking that can happen, especially when those in power (e.g., policymakers, educators, researchers) tell the stories of those who are not (e.g., students, parents, immigrants).

In addition to the rich stories that were exchanged, many of the groups stopped and talked to local community members as they walked the neighborhood. On one occasion, Belinda introduced two of our university students, Andrea and Albert, to a woman spending time with her children at the park. During their discussion of school, Andrea asked the woman if she ever receives letters home from the schools in Spanish. The woman reported that all of the papers come home in

Spanish, and she has a special pile where she places all of the documents. However, with four children, she explained that she receives so many papers weekly that sometimes she doesn't have time to read them all, and that it's hard to keep up with so many permission slips and documents that she has to sign.

Albert also inquired about attending parent-teacher conferences. The woman smiled and replied that her children go to three different schools, so it is hard to attend the conferences for all of them, since they are all during the same week, and often on the same days. These types of comments are extremely important for educators to hear, especially since minority parents are often assumed to be "uninvolved" in their children's education if they don't attend school events like teacher conferences (Auerbach, 2011; Johnson, 2014). This firsthand experience with a community member provides context for educators before making conclusions about parents' interest in their children's education.

Some of the groups also took the preservice teachers to their homes to introduce them to their families. For example, Alice and Cristina accompanied their funds of knowledge mentor, Sam, to his house to meet his mom. There, they talked with her about her job harvesting apples and working in the orchards. Our student, Cristina, had also helped her parents with harvesting apples and was able to exchange stories of this type of work with the mom. They discussed the long days, the number of boxes picked per day, and the hard work. Cristina and Sam's mom made a connection, as Cristina remarked, "*Pero es una, una bonita…*" [But it's a, a beautiful…], and Sam's mom added, "*experiencia*" [experience]. Cristina finished by saying, "*…experiencia porque aprende uno que hay que echarle ganas en la escuela porque es difícil trabajar así*" […experience because you learn that it's important to do your best at school because it's difficult to work like that]. This example demonstrates that learning about, and from, students' parents can play an integral part in understanding community patterns and sets of knowledge (Hughes & Pollard, 2006).

While this was a meaningful experience for Cristina, her preservice teacher partner, Amy, also benefitted from this description of life as an agricultural worker—something that she did not even know about her peer, Cristina. Being exposed to stories ranging from mattress forts and family celebrations to immigration challenges and agricultural work provided the preservice teachers with a window into the life experiences of this community. As Henderson and Zipin (2010) explain, the "first step is to treat such stories not as 'deficit' knowledge to be banished from classrooms, but as dimensions of lived identity to be respected…. By accepting, not judging, such stories, teachers foster a learning environment that feels safer for honest, critical and creative storytelling" (p. 25).

These types of "small stories" serve to both empower and humanize students and teachers to one another (Watson, 2007). In this case, the funds of knowledge mentors provided a deeper perspective of their daily lives that expands on the traditional experiences that teachers are often encouraged to identify (Olmedo, 2004). The next step for our preservice teachers was to debrief with the River Pointe students in order to design culturally relevant lessons for teaching elementary students from the same area.

Integrating experiences into the classroom

The community walk experience provided the preservice teachers with greater insight into the lives of these local students. Based on what they learned through their conversations with the students throughout the process, the preservice teachers designed literacy-based lessons for elementary students in their teaching internship classrooms in the same school district. During the process of developing lesson plans, the preservice teachers articulated a number of priorities for their lessons, including: (1) providing opportunities for teachers and students to get to know each other; (2) selecting topics/themes that the students could connect to and thus find more meaningful; (3) providing time and space for the students to share their thoughts, feelings, and areas of expertise; and (4) engaging students through cooperative activities. Here, we describe a lesson exemplifying how our preservice teachers integrated these points into practice.

For their third grade bilingual class, Andrea and Albert designed a lesson focused on symbolism to recontextualize concepts in order to reflect local practices (cf. Coles-Ritchie & Walkie, 2011). They began by presenting familiar images to the students, including a heart, a totem pole, a picture of a local park, a classroom, a Christmas tree, an apple, the school mascot (a longhorn steer), and a picture of a flag that comprised both American and Mexican flags spliced together as one. As Albert commented, "We really wanted to hear student voice and let them tell us what they thought was meaningful about each picture…. These are things most students could relate to, and a lot of students talked about family, or being the best at school, school pride, and unwrapping presents."

Their lesson objectives involved having the students interpret the images by using their own experiences to make connections and express their thoughts in writing or drawing. They divided the students into small groups and had them walk around the classroom to visit each symbol at a different "station," where they would observe the picture and write down what it made them think of on a sticky note. Students were told that they could use either Spanish or English, or even just draw a picture to express their thoughts. As Andrea wrote, "We didn't want the students who cannot write in English or Spanish to feel like they couldn't participate. With the drawings, they could at least put an idea on paper and later explain if prompted to." At the lesson's end, Andrea and Albert invited the students into a circle and read various student interpretations aloud.

In their reflections on the lesson, Andrea and Albert pointed to their conversations with the youth at River Pointe about wishing teachers would engage them more on a personal level and be concerned with their feelings and experiences. For example, Andrea wrote, "After the meeting with students, we knew we had to incorporate students' feelings into the lesson. This tied in perfect with finding symbolism in the pictures. The pictures we chose were specifically chosen in order to make connections with the students." Albert explained, "The River Pointe students said the teachers never really care what we think, they just stand in front and [the students] are supposed to listen. We wanted to make it a point that we do care what the students think and have to say. That was really the main thing we tried to get across from our River Pointe experience."

The picture of the spliced Mexican and American flag turned out to be an image that evoked a range of personal connections for Andrea and Albert's students. While the flag represented the U.S. and Mexico soccer teams to one student, another shared that the flag made her think of her mom and sister, who had been deported when she was younger—both of whom she had not seen for a long time. The reaction of this particular student supports Olmedo's (2004) emphasis on integrating authentic lesson topics like crossing the border as a way to tap into students' real-life experiences. In her reflection on this experience, Andrea wrote, "I did not know that Alicia's mom and sister had been deported and that she has a stepmother. She also explained that she missed them a lot after the lesson was over. It helped her open up and talk about a tragic event."

Applying an authentic funds of knowledge approach in the classroom means moving beyond a "heroes and holidays" perspective of multicultural curriculum (Olmedo, 2004, p. 250). Moreover, Andrea and Albert's lesson exemplifies how "[d]ifficult lifeworld knowledge can indeed fund lifeworld-vitalised curricula to engage learners" (Zipin, 2009, p. 323). Creating spaces for students to discuss topics like the deportation of family members not only validates the students' experiences within classroom contexts, it helps students make affective connections to academic content. More importantly, these opportunities simultaneously strengthen teacher-student relationships while interrupting the "usual institutional denial mechanisms that sustain boundaries between dark knowledge and school curriculum" (Zipin, 2009, p. 321).

Implications for praxis

Partnering our preservice teachers with local funds of knowledge mentors had an indelible effect on our university students as future educators. In the final meeting between the two groups, our preservice teachers reviewed their lessons with the River Pointe students and debriefed on the entire process. We concluded with a large group discussion of everyone's perceptions on the

implications of this type of approach to classroom practice. While the platform for engaging the two groups in this project focused on producing classroom lessons based on community funds of knowledge, the most salient impact emerged in the way our university students described their philosophical reorientation towards the crucial nature of teachers getting to know their students. The comments of one of our preservice teachers, Sandy, proved representative of the entire group:

> …the next time we do it, we really enjoyed the community walk, and that was just one of the most fun things we've done. Basically we just got a whole hour or hour and a half to just talk to them about their lives, and not about school even, just about their lives and what they do, and that's what we're really trying to find out, not just the classes they're taking but what they're doing in their lives. That's what's best for the teachers…. I'm not even teaching them but we wanted to know even more about what's important to them, and that's what's important.

Not only were the preservice teachers able to utilize what they learned to make their lesson plans more representative of the students' funds of knowledge, the dispositional shifts prompted by this experience resulted in a greater appreciation for engaging marginalized students on a personal level, which truly is, as Sandy exclaimed, "what's important." This echoes Henderson and Zipin's (2010) claim that "[s]uch openness enables teachers to recognise life-world based themes that are not peripheral or casual but touch on vital registers of lived cultural meaning and identity" (p. 27).

In addition to causing a dispositional shift in our preservice teachers' perceptions of how to use their students' funds of knowledge in the classroom context, we also contend that this project enhanced their own personal funds of knowledge. Building on Hughes and Pollard's (2006) description of "the knowledge, skills and strategies, both implicit and explicit, which teachers draw on in their classroom practice" (p. 389), it is evident that the experiences of our preservice teachers here have made a profound contribution to their accumulated life experiences from which they will draw as they progress through their careers. Although Hogg (2011) cautions against emphasizing teachers' funds of knowledge to avoid shifting the power balance away from students, we argue that acknowledging this type of influence on teachers' funds of knowledge has the potential to further deconstruct power hierarchies within education by equipping educators with a more refined lens to appreciate their students' funds of knowledge.

The consistent shift in our preservice teachers' professional dispositions demonstrates how teacher preparation programs can impact the broader habitus that regulates teachers' notion of culturally appropriate actions within K–12 contexts. We argue that institutionalizing strategies that prioritize local community members as funds of knowledge mentors can restructure the doxic conditions traditionally reproduced by teacher preparation programs and prompt wide-scale shifts in the professional habitus of educators. Countering the hegemony of adverse dominant class norms within education (Avineri et al., 2015; Johnson, 2015) requires creating spaces where the social and cultural capital of minoritized groups is recognized, valued, and scaffolded in culturally relevant and sustaining ways (Paris & Alim, 2014). As a result, Zipin (2013) points out that "[r]ather than spaces that select for the success of the privileged few at the expense of many, they become socially just spaces" (p. 10). In this discussion, we have attempted to demonstrate that integrating funds of knowledge mentors into teacher preparation efforts indeed creates "spaces of productive knowledge work that sustains cultural diversities within a commitment to equalise power and agency" (Zipin, 2013, p. 10).

Cultivating praxis

Not only did departing the school environment and visiting the students' home community help the preservice teachers to better understand the River Pointe students, it served as a mechanism to subvert traditional teacher-student roles by repositioning students as authority figures with valued social and cultural capital. A pleasantly unexpected consequence of this process was revealed through

the comments of the River Pointe students. Our initial expectation that they would embrace their roles as funds of knowledge mentors was surpassed by their own dispositional shift towards teachers and education during this process. As we were concluding our final meeting, one of the River Pointe students, Oscar, poignantly commented on how he was personally impacted by this project:

> So when I think back on what we did here, I learned what I want to do for the rest of my life. I didn't really know what I want to do, but I want to help people… help kids and make a difference in their life. Because I feel like, well sorry for how I'm wording this, but I feel like most people, like White parents, they're on the West side [of town] and you'd be amazed on how many of them are scared to even come over here… they don't even know where the East side is at. So I feel like there are teachers that have never even been over here, so they don't really understand the life of kids who live over here. Like what Eduardo was saying, our life doesn't revolve just around school… we have lives too. We got problems at home, we got problems with families, so you have to think of more than what you are just doing. So… I just thank you guys for coming because I [now] know that there's teachers out there who care and are actually making a difference.

Oscar subsequently followed up by explaining that what he wanted to do to "help kids and make a difference in their life" was to be a teacher.

On the project's outset, Oscar was one of the leaders in renouncing teachers for their lack of compassion and professionalism. The River Pointe students' initial comments exemplify how historically reproduced social conditions affect the way that different groups perceive and react to each other (Zipin, 2013). Oscar's testimony demonstrates a significant reorientation towards the profession of teaching. Together, Sandy's and Oscar's sentiments evince Henderson and Zipin's (2010) argument that sincere trust between students and their teachers "begins when teachers and students both make courageous moves to unlearn deep habits of accustomed power in roles and relations" (pp. 31–32).

Recruiting more ethnic minorities into the field of teaching is crucial to closing what Cowan (2010) calls the "culture gap" between minority students and the overrepresentation of White teachers in K–12 schools. Considering that approximately 84% of teachers in the U.S. are White (Feistritzer, 2011), having more ethnically diverse teachers can help mitigate some of the racial tensions described by the River Pointe students. An overwhelmingly White teaching force suggests that career aspirations in teaching have traditionally been "selective for those from privileged social positions, putting them in the order of fantasy for most others" (Zipin, Sellar, Brennan, & Gale, 2015, p. 233).

Oscar's comments also reflect a shift in what Zipin et al. (2015) call ideologically structured "doxic aspirations" to foreground teaching as a potential career track. From a Bourdieuian (2004) perspective, marginalized groups "misrecognize" careers like teaching as reserved for dominant group members such that the experienced racial tensions described by the River Pointe students are normalized as part of what it means to be a minority student. Oscar's realization of his potential to be a teacher sheds light on the doxa of teacher norms, "implying awareness and recognition of the possibility of different or antagonistic beliefs" (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 164). Although our original objective involved empowering the River Pointe students as community experts to challenge the doxic conditions in teacher preparation and incite a shift in the professional habitus of our preservice teachers, Oscar's case shows how these types of efforts also have the potential to impact the field of teaching by realigning minority students' "doxic aspirations" towards career paths in education.

Conclusion

This study is significant because it addresses a gap in the current funds of knowledge literature by outlining how teacher preparation programs can collaborate with local community members as mentors for supporting preservice teachers' philosophical and professional development. By exploring a model of collaborative partnership between preservice teachers and middle and high school students, this study depicts an innovative model for applying the funds of knowledge theory to

practice. As González (2005) suggests, "[i]t is only through face-to-face interaction and one-to-one encounters with persons, a mutually respectful dialog, that we can cross the construction of difference" (p. 44). Founded on a premise of engaging preservice teachers with local youth through such "face to face interactions," our attempt at bridging community experiences to K–12 classrooms contributes to a greater understanding of how teacher preparation programs can build upon community strengths and cater to the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students.

Returning to Zipin's (2013) notion of "double democracy," we have demonstrated that collaborating with local youth as funds of knowledge mentors promotes curricular democracy by structuring class topics around local interests and funds of knowledge. This method also supports pedagogical democracy and levels power sharing between teachers and community members by blending home and school contexts to enrich the educational experience of traditionally marginalized students. We also contend that our model for teacher preparation promotes a third democracy: *professional democracy*. In addition to our preservice teachers experiencing dispositional shifts toward teaching, the minority youth mentors demonstrated a heightened appreciation for teaching as a profession, and in the case of Oscar, even a desire to pursue teaching as a career.

Although espousing a funds of knowledge framework within teacher preparation programs is a critical step towards modifying professional orientations mired in standardization and accountability measures, this philosophy remains on the margins of professional concerns and "may be problematic for teachers positioned within accountability cultures that pay negligible attention to children's and families' knowledge and practices" (Cremin et al., 2012, p. 112). Our strategy of positioning students as funds of knowledge mentors not only provides teachers with opportunities to learn about their students' strengths, develops sincere relationships with families, and cultivates an appreciation for the experiences of students from minority backgrounds, it also disrupts predominant hierarchies of standardization that tend to preclude teachers from effectively tailoring their classroom practices in culturally meaningful ways. Equally important, empowering local community youth as funds of knowledge mentors has the potential to counter racial tensions between teachers and students by highlighting the positive aspects of teaching and drawing more minority students into the profession—which could eventually result in an increase in the representation of minority teachers (and their voices) in U.S. schools and recalibrate cultural differences between students and educators.

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