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Connecting to the outside: Cultural resources teachers use when contextualizing instruction

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to examine what resources teachers mobilize when *contextualizing instruction*. In this instructional method, teachers use students' everyday experiences as tools for teaching subject matter at school. Research has documented that contextualizing instruction can support classroom learning. However, we do not know very much about what types of resources teachers view as relevant in this kind of instructional work. In this article, we analyze video data of student-teacher interactions in 43 lessons, which were collected when following four lower secondary teachers over one academic year. The analysis is based on a sociocultural perspective of learning and teaching in which the focus of analysis is on what kind of everyday experiences teachers orient to when supporting students' participation. The findings show that the resources teachers orient to can be grouped into five categories: (1) teachers orienting to characteristics of the local community, (2) teachers orienting to examples from everyday practices, (3) teachers orienting to personal issues, (4) teachers orienting to concrete objects, and (5) teachers orienting to knowledge from travelling abroad. These categories show variation and multiplicity of resources that teachers use when contextualizing instruction, and the implications of this multiplicity are discussed in the article.

1. Introduction

Ideas about the importance of bridging students' experiences at school and from everyday life can be traced back to thinkers such as John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky. Dewey (1959) emphasized that learning in school should build on and extend experiences students gain outside school, and Vygotsky (1987) was preoccupied with how everyday and scientific concepts stand in a mutually constitutive relationship. More recent researchers have argued for the importance of making students' everyday knowledge and experiences relevant in their learning at school (Grossen, Zittoun, & Ros, 2012; Moje et al., 2004; Scott, Mortimer, & Ametller, 2011). In addition, in recent years, policy documents have also reflected the intention of drawing on students' everyday experiences as a way of encouraging motivation and engagement for learning among students and as a way of increasing performance in subject domains and counteracting dropout rates (Erstad & Sefton-Green, 2013).¹

However, an important concern in this regard is how teachers actually orient themselves towards students' out-of-school practices and experiences and treat these as resources in their teaching. Some researchers have investigated how teachers develop strategies for mobilizing students' experiences and knowledge in their instructional trajectories (Dworin, 2006; Moje et al., 2004; Nasir, Hand, & Taylor, 2008). This research shows the potential of using students' "everyday life" as a resource for supporting them in different

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instructional domains. However, we also need more knowledge about how these processes play out in naturally occurring classroom interactions over longer periods of time and about what aspects of students' everyday lives teachers assume will be relevant when guiding students' academic work.

In this article, we will analyze the resources a group of teachers used when *contextualizing instruction* in different lessons over one academic year. This instructional method, as used within science education, refers to “the utilization of particular situations or events that occur outside of science class or are of particular interest to students to motivate and guide the presentation of science ideas and concepts” (Rivet & Krajcik, 2008, p. 80). Contextualizing instruction is about using events or interests that students see as relevant in their everyday life outside school as points of departure or references that enable students to deal with subject matter in school. We will analyze contextualizing instruction as involving both individual and collective processes, and the aim is to identify and analyze the aspects of students' everyday practices that teachers use in interactions with their students for the purpose of guiding their academic work.

In this article, the main purpose is to address the following research question: *What kinds of resources do teachers orient to when contextualizing instruction?* This is an important issue because it can tell us something about what kinds of everyday knowledge resources teachers themselves consider relevant when supporting their students in various task assignments and subject domains. In addition, it can tell us something about the multiplicity of everyday resources that teachers orient to in instructional work. We address this research question by analyzing in detail video data from lessons at a lower secondary school collected over one academic year. For this purpose, we employ a sociocultural approach to learning that emphasizes the dialogic relationship between cultural resources and the social construction of knowledge.

2. Research on contextualizing instruction

Existing research has generated valuable and important knowledge about the complex relationship between learning in school and everyday practices (Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016; Hogg, 2011; Rajala, Kumpulainen, Hilppö, Paananen, & Lipponen, 2016). Many scholars have argued for the potential of using everyday knowledge as a resource for learning (Lee, 2006; Moje et al., 2004; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Rivet & Krajcik, 2008). In general, these studies show the benefits of enabling students to participate in learning communities in schools in which their lives outside school are made relevant for instances of reasoning about academic content. In addition, many of these studies focus on students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Such studies document what it means to be a learner in school cultures that prioritize only some types of identities and knowledge, and they generate important knowledge about alternative ways of designing learning environments in which diverse everyday experiences are made relevant. In this study, we do not address one specific group of students. Since mobilizing prior knowledge when learning and making meaning of content in school is described as important to all students (Bransford, 2000; Sawyer, 2014), we view the practice of contextualizing instruction as relevant on a more general level. By *everyday experiences*, we mean knowledge and experiences that are relevant and to some degree important in the communities and practices that students belong to and participate in outside school. Furthermore, in this article, we take as a particular focus the ways that teachers mobilize and recruit everyday knowledge and experiences in *student-teacher interactions* that are related to academic content. In the following, we will review some of the studies that have looked specifically into teachers and how they engage in attempts to use everyday experiences as a tool to support students' learning.

In an early intervention study, Moll et al. (1992) demonstrated the potential of giving teachers the opportunity to become familiar with the practices that students engage in outside of school, in what has been termed “funds of knowledge.” In this study, a group of teachers followed a group of Hispanic students to their local communities to learn about their everyday lives. The teachers learned about the complexities of the knowledge available to the students in their everyday practices and developed ideas about how they could use these as resources in their own instructional work. This study is interesting because it shows the importance of knowing about the resources of the local community if one is to create learning environments in school that support diverse student groups. In another relevant intervention study, in the context of literacy research, Lee (2006) studied how teachers can engage students in canonical literary texts by talking and reflecting collaboratively upon “cultural data sets,” which are texts and textual practices that students engage with in everyday settings. The analysis illustrates how teachers can use texts from students' everyday lives, such as rap lyrics from popular music, and can practice reasoning using these types of texts as a point of departure for reasoning about canonical literature. In this kind of instructional design, the classical roles of students and teachers are reconfigured. By drawing on literary texts from youth discourses and using these as a point of departure for creating meaning from canonical texts, the teacher positions students as the knowledgeable persons in the learning situation. In another intervention study, Dworin (2006) argues that encouraging bilingual students to write about topics that are relevant in their homes and local communities might foster learning situations in which students “become aware that their lives outside of school have meaning and importance within the classroom” (p. 518). The findings show that giving students the opportunity to write about their home and community life in language lessons at school, as well as being encouraged to use both English and Spanish (the mother tongue) for discussing their writing projects in progress, created a supportive environment for the students. It enabled the students to participate more competently as language learners, and “the children's intellectual development was enhanced because they could use both English and Spanish for their work in this literacy project” (p. 519). Studies by Dworin (2006) and Lee (2006) are interesting in this context because they provide examples of how students can participate in literacy activities in school, such as learning about the classics of literature and learning to write, by working on artefacts that they know from their participation in everyday practices.

In a comprehensive ethnographic study, Moje et al. (2004) studied the occurrence of “third spaces” in students' trajectories of learning science. Third spaces are socially co-constructed spaces in which everyday discourses are mobilized to make meaning of

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