

Virtual School Bag

Against deficit views of students and their families

The *Connecting Lives and Learning Project* has been researching the ways in which teachers are ‘morally and pedagogically responsive’ (Moll & Arnot-Hopffer, 2005, p. 243) to the communities in which they teach, and especially in those communities doing it tough. The project aims to interrupt the ways that schools tend to assume that all students possess the ‘cultural capital’ of families that are middle-class and/or with histories of successful educational experiences. According to Bourdieu (1977), people enter schooling with differing qualities and dispositions that receive greater or lesser value. Thus, the efforts of the individual are tempered by institutions that reward people according to how near their knowledge, behaviour and skills are to the dominant ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1977). The *Connecting Lives and Learning Project* rejects the view that working-class communities are intellectually barren and socially disorganised, claiming instead that such communities contain ample cultural and intellectual resources. The people living in these communities are not simply passive respondents to often difficult circumstances, but ‘active, intelligent agents using multiple, socially distributed funds of knowledge in mediating these constraints and in ‘getting ahead’” (Moll, Tapia et al., 1993, p. 160). As such, the project is working against, what Delpit (2003) refers to as policy stupidity that expects teachers to behave in ‘robotic, mechanistic and scripted ways’ (p. 15) that unfortunately turn classrooms into ‘zones of underdevelopment’ (Moll and Greenberg, 1990) dominated by lessons that rarely extend beyond the classroom or incorporate ideas, interests, activities of the students, and their families, or the existential issues facing their communities.

With these issues in mind, Thomson has coined a term—the virtual school bag—that invokes positive content for the knowledges that all students bring along to school.

The virtual school bag

In her book, *Schooling the Rust Belt Kids*, Thomson (2002) asks teachers to imagine the knowledge that their students ‘have already learned at home, with their friends, and in and from the world in which they live’ (p. 1). With these issues in mind, Thomson has coined a term—the **virtual school bag**—that invokes positive content for the knowledges that all students bring along to school. In her book she provides a case study of two very different children. One is the daughter of a Vietnamese refugee family, the other has university educated parents that has an Irish heritage. What interests Thomson, are the various explanations for why the ‘different social and educational outcomes between children whose families have modest incomes and live in low-income neighbourhoods and those who are more comfortable and live in the wealthier parts of town’ (p. 3). There are some explanations that argue that the problem arises due to some deficits in either the

students themselves or their families. These explanations have given rise to educational policies that aim to compensate for the deficiencies. Another set of explanations highlights the processes of schooling instead.

This line of argument suggests that the ‘problem’ was that the different knowledges and skills that working-class children bring with them to school are not those that are important to school success. It is not the children who are disadvantaged, but rather it is the school that does the disadvantaging. The policy ‘solution’ arising from this analysis was to change the school. (p. 4)

For Thomson, the challenge for teachers is to get beyond deficit views and to learn about their students’ particular configurations of knowledges, narratives and interests’ (p. 8). And on that basis, teachers can work out ways that connect the individual and collective resources that children bring with them to school, to the knowledges that count at school. For Thomson, the challenge for teachers is working with the (in)congruence between the knowledges students bring to school, and the mandated school curriculum. As Moll and González (1997) put it, the challenge is ‘transforming students’ diversities into pedagogical assets’ (p. 89) against a ‘homogenised and standardized prescriptivism’ (p. 89).

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