Language and Literacy Education Researcher Luis Moll, NCTE's 2018 Outstanding Elementary Educator in the English Language Arts

Author(s): Kathryn F. Whitmore

Source: *Language Arts*, November 2018, Vol. 96, No. 2, VIEWPOINTS AND VISIONS (November 2018), pp. 91-97

Published by: National Council of Teachers of English

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26779040

REFERENCES
Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:
https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26779040?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents
You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

National Council of Teachers of English is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Language Arts*

This content downloaded from
131.156.224.55 on Thu, 19 Jun 2025 17:16:51 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Language and Literacy Education Researcher Luis Moll, NCTE's 2018 Outstanding Elementary Educator in the English Language Arts

Dr. Luis C. Moll describes his career as an education researcher who builds on the legacy of Vygotsky as he explores how the concept of funds of knowledge disrupts deficit orientations in language arts practices.

The Outstanding Elementary Educator in the English Language Arts Award was established in 1995 to recognize a distinguished national or international educator who has made major contributions to the field of language arts in elementary education. Award winners have dramatically influenced literacy classroom practice, made ongoing contributions to the field of literacy, obtained national and/or international influence in literacy teaching and learning, and contributed a body of work that is compatible with the mission of NCTE. Past winners include Anne Haas Dyson and Celia Genishi, Sonia Nieto, Vivian Gussin Paley, and Brian Cambourne, among many. Find the list of previous winners at http://www2.ncte.org/app/uploads/2017/06/Elementary_Educator_Award_Winners.pdf.

Luis Moll's language and literacy education research offers language arts teachers a framework to conceptualize their practices as social and cultural—and to imagine their practices as disrupting deficit ideas about language and cultural diversity. His coedited volume *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms* (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) was published by Erlbaum Press and received the 2006 Critics' Choice Award of the American Educational Studies Association. He also coedited *The International Handbook of Research on Children's Literacy, Learning, and Culture* (Hall, Cremin, Comber, & Moll, 2013), published by Wiley Blackwell. *L. S. Vygotsky and Education*, published by Routledge Press in 2014, followed his internationally acclaimed edited volume, *Vygotsky and Education: Instructional Implications and Applications of Sociohistorical Psychology* (1990).

Luis was born in Santurce, Puerto Rico. He is Professor Emeritus in the Language, Reading and Culture Program of the Department of Teaching, Learning and Sociocultural Studies, College of Education, University of Arizona. He was awarded his Ph.D. in Educational Psychology/Early Childhood Development from the University of California, Los Angeles. Luis has won too many awards in his stellar career to list, including being inducted into the Reading Hall of Fame in 2014 and honored with the Distinguished Scholar Lifetime Achievement Award by the Literacy Research Association in 2018.

Luis is known for two significant contributions to language arts education, particularly as related

This content downloaded from
131.156.224.55 on Thu, 19 Jun 2025 17:16:51 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

to linguistically diverse settings. First, he helped educators become aware of and understand L.S. Vygotsky's work and its applicability for today's classrooms. Vygotsky's influence in language arts education can be found in widespread use of the concept of *the zone of proximal development*, the value placed on *social conditions of learning*, and the role of *mediation* in learning and teaching.

Second, Luis and his colleagues James Greenberg and Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez brought together the fields of anthropology and education in a seminal study titled The Community Literacy Project. A team of researchers from both fields worked in the Community Literacy Project to identify working class, Spanish-bilingual families' *funds of knowledge* and to develop instructional practices from what they learned. These efforts shifted dynamics for classroom instruction in language arts and across the curriculum in the United States and around the world.

This excerpted conversation was recorded on March 7, 2018, and has been edited for publication.

Kathy: Luis, it's such an honor to talk with you about your evolution as an educator and researcher. What were your experiences with language and culture as a child and adolescent?

Luis: I was born and raised in Puerto Rico. I went to an American prep school there because my mother was concerned about my lack of English development. When they kicked me out of the school in seventh grade for being a good student (I'm being sarcastic, of course), I returned to the public schools to finish my schooling, and there my instruction was in Spanish. At the age of 15, my mother took me to California, so I became an immigrant of sorts—but I was fluent in English, so it wasn't a situation where I didn't know what was going on. I was fluent in English, and so was my mother. I remember an incident in which she took me to the school where I was supposed to enroll; the principal wanted to lower me one grade and my mother said, "Forget that, Charlie, I'm not going to allow that! You place him in tenth grade where he belongs."

Kathy: Wow. That was a powerful demonstration of agency for you, in the context of schooling.

Luis: Yes, and I have to clean up the language that she used, actually, because she was really upset! The principal said, "Let's make a deal—I'll place him in tenth grade, but then mid-semester we'll have evaluations. If he's doing fine, he can stay in tenth grade. If he's flunking out, I'm going to lower him to ninth grade." My mother said, "Okay, that's a deal. He's going to be doing fine."

Kathy: And you passed?

Luis: I passed.

Kathy: How do you think the intersections of your identities as bilingual, a strong student, and an immigrant led you toward your academic study of psychology and education?

Luis: I haven't previously thought about those connections so explicitly, but I think there actually are threads of connection. When I applied for the doctorate in early childhood development at UCLA, I found myself working as a research assistant to two outstanding psychologists, Luis Laosa and Amado Padilla. In one study, we analyzed cultural differences in mother–child interactions of Mexican American and Anglo-American mothers of kindergarteners, and if you work on mother–child and teacher–child interaction analyses, you get interested in issues of language and learning. We collected a lot of data in households and classrooms, and without going into detail, we went in search of cultural group differences and found instead the powerful effects of schooling on forms of discourse.

Kathy: I hear threads of your mother's interactions with you around language and issues of power as related to school, as well as your experiences as an immigrant who was initially viewed from a deficit perspective, even though you had done fairly well in school in two languages in Puerto Rico.

This content downloaded from 131.156.224.55 on Thu, 19 Jun 2025 17:16:51 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Luis: Yes, and issues of language and education became central to all the child development studies that I was involved in during that time. Once I graduated, all of my research in one way or the other involved two languages or the development of biliteracy in learning.

Kathy: So you might describe your strong, bilingual, immigrant mother as a mediator in your language learning and education, which is a central concept in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. What drew you to Vygotsky's ideas, in particular?

Luis: That's true, although up until 1978, I had no idea who Vygotsky was. It wasn't until I was a graduate student reading Michael Cole's work about language and learning with the Kpelle (a tribal group in Western Africa; see Cole, 1996) that I started getting an inkling for the possibilities of utilizing Vygotsky's theory to develop learning situations. Vygotsky offered a dynamic psychology, one that emphasized human interactions as socially and culturally constructed. His ideas came into my and others' awareness just as a crisis in educational practice was occurring in the United States—as schools became more ethnically and racially heterogeneous and educators began to emphasize cultural diversity and learning. The zone of proximal development in particular emphasized the learning potential of all students.

I was accepted as a predoctoral Fellow to the Institute for Comparative Human Development at Rockefeller University, and all of a sudden, I was on my way to New York to work with Michael Cole, Sylvia Scribner, and Ray McDermott (even though I didn't know what in the world they were talking about at the time). You might recall that Vygotsky's *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes w*as published in 1978, and I hadn't read anything about Vygotsky or by Vygotsky up to then. So I started reading, and slowly understanding it a little bit more—the ideas of culturally mediated activity and the zone of proximal development and all those details. I moved to Arizona in 1986, and around 1988 or so, I started teaching a class on Vygotsky in education. I also edited the book that was published in 1990.

Kathy: What do you think is important for teachers to understand from Vygotsky's theory?

Luis: First is that resources for development are all around us—in our home lives, in our schooling, of course, and in our interactions with others. So, I believe that teachers need to keep in mind that cultural resources that could enhance our learning and development are always available; it's just a matter of us learning how to take advantage of them. And it's also a theory that challenges the deficit perspectives of kids and teachers.

Keep in mind that cultural resources that could enhance our learning and development are always available; it's just a matter of us learning how to take advantage of them.

Kathy: I think that is critical. How does Vygotsky challenge the deficit approach?

Luis: He challenges it by showing us there are plenty of resources available, even in situations that we have come to expect are lacking those resources. This was the premise of the Community Literacy Project funds of knowledge study, in which we emphasized doing household analyses of minority and low-income families in Tucson to understand what resources existed. We knew that the status quo educational expectations for children in these households were often based on limiting misperceptions about their intellectual capabilities. We intended to document the knowledge produced in activities of minority and low-income families and to experiment with how to take advantage of that knowledge in classroom curriculum.

This content downloaded from 131.156.224.55 on Thu, 19 Jun 2025 17:16:51 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Kathy: I remember there were three ethnographic visits to each family and a different type of interview was conducted on each visit: the first asked about the family's occupational history, the second about their recreational history, and in the third, you asked families to walk us through a day in the life of their family.

Luis: That's right, and immediately from these interviews we could tell that there were plenty of funds of knowledge available in these households. The research team collected pages and pages of lists of the types of knowledge families enacted—from home medical remedies, to auto mechanics, to animal husbandry. Any ideas about deficit that may have been assumed because these families were working class or poor were grossly misplaced. Our analysis was a documentation of the households' funds of knowledge, and then we worked with teachers as collaborators to establish a pedagogy that built on those resources for learning rather than dismissing them as uneventful.

Our analysis was a documentation of the households' funds of knowledge, and then we worked with teachers as collaborators to establish a pedagogy that built on those resources for learning rather than dismissing them as uneventful.

Kathy: What were some surprises you experienced in your own learning during the early funds of knowledge work?

Luis: Well, you know, when we started the work, our design did not include the teachers conducting household analyses—it was only professors and graduate students. It wasn't until a little bit later, when Norma González joined us, that we realized the teachers could make excellent observers of household dynamics and funds of knowledge, particularly in social practices that characterize household life. As we expanded the study, we created the conditions for a group of teachers to be able to conduct household analyses along with us, and together we operated as a study group. It stopped being only university types like me collecting data to deliver insights to teachers. Rather, we learned it should be a two-way road, where the teachers were collecting similar data, providing an interpretation of those data, and conceptualizing how they could exploit what they learned pedagogically. When the teachers joined us, the project became more cumbersome in some ways, but it also became much more productive.

We also were very alert to stereotypes. We all fall into a habit of stereotyping others. And the teacher study group became a place where we could challenge each other. For example, one teacher might challenge another's potentially stereotypic analysis by countering, "I'm not sure about the things you're saying, because in the family I studied, this other practice happened." The study group became a place not only for describing what was going on in the households, but also for collaborating on a critical analysis of the resources available and theories about the learning and development that the funds of knowledge could support.

Another key insight was growing in our understanding of *confianza* as an important mediator in social relationships. *Confianza* means mutual trust—in this case, among families, teachers, and students. As the teachers made household visits to gather insights about funds of knowledge, the communication they shared with parents became more reciprocal, and they came to increasingly trust one another. The teachers became peripheral members of the families' social networks, and this made possible new ways for families to engage at school.

Kathy: These were remarkable developments made possible by capitalizing on the strengths that exist in all families and building on teachers as professionals. Were there challenges along the way?

This content downloaded from
131.156.224.55 on Thu, 19 Jun 2025 17:16:51 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Luis: There were many challenges. We learned that conducting a great number of household observations was unreasonable for teachers' schedules, so we curtailed the number of households they visited to four a year, allowing them to concentrate on those as case studies. Also, some teachers were a little bit wary about going into these households alone. One principal said, "What if I go with you?" and volunteered to accompany the teachers so they could participate. The buy-in and support of administrators is key.

Kathy: Once teachers learned from the case studies about the funds of knowledge existing in their students' homes, they developed related curriculum studies.

Luis: That's right, and they had to figure out how to deliver that curriculum in the midst of all the other responsibilities that they had. It was challenging. The study groups provided the supportive environment to brainstorm solutions to these circumstances and, in general, the teachers were able to accommodate this funds-of-knowledge perspective throughout their day in terms of the teaching and learning that was taking place.

Kathy: What is an example of a teacher learning about a family's funds of knowledge and translating that into the funds of knowledge perspective regarding classroom pedagogy?

Luis: Cathy Amanti was a teacher in the original study group (see Amanti, 2005; Moll, 2014). She went for an initial visit to the family of one of the boys in her classroom, and when she drove up to their house, she saw several horses in the backyard. As she visited more families, she learned they, too, had connections to horses in their households in Tucson and in Mexico. Cathy learned many of her students were quite knowledgeable about the care of these animals—how to feed them, how to take them to shows and rodeos, and so on.

Cathy had no idea such experiences were taking place in her students' lives until she did the household visits. But once she became aware, she developed a learning module of curriculum that activated this fund of knowledge. It included studying horse anatomy and behavior, reading relevant children's literature, watching a family's homemade video about horseracing in Mexico, learning horse vocabulary in English and Spanish, and graphing the sizes of various breeds. The children wrote stories, did library research, and engaged in many other learning experiences that were inspired by their questions about horses. In these ways, Cathy validated the children's rich existing knowledge and used it to teach the unknown. She and the other teachers learned that children could far exceed the low-level expectations the typical curriculum held for them due to their home language, socioeconomic status, and neighborhood.

We came to know that all families have rich funds of knowledge that can be tapped as intellectual capital for building curriculum, but teachers can "see the horses all day long," so to speak, and nothing clicks. It is when the funds of knowledge approach is internalized that a teacher will say, "Wait a minute, what are all these horses doing here? Whose are they? How can I teach about horses in my class?"

Kathy: What are some key principles for teachers and schools to take up, especially given the reality of curriculum mandates and pressures today?

Luis: First of all, be observers of the social life that children experience outside of school. I am quite aware that the theoretical understanding I have developed is built on knowledge that I acquired from visiting families and learning about their social lives—who they are and how they interact with one another. This means changing your point of view, asking about what families and children bring to school instead of what they don't have. However, a powerful fund of knowledge can be right in front of you and you don't

This content downloaded from
131.156.224.55 on Thu, 19 Jun 2025 17:16:51 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

notice it. That's why the documentation is so necessary. You have to be open to learning about families, then document what you see and hear, internalize what you've seen from a funds of knowledge perspective, and identify potential sources of action in your classroom or school as a result.

Second, I think in today's school structure, teachers are missing the flexibility to meet regularly to discuss their thinking and their work and what they're trying to accomplish. I think there's great possibility in study groups of teachers being able to initiate discussions on issues of pedagogy, particularly related to challenging deficit views of the children and families in their classrooms.

Kathy: And now it's 30 years later. Since 1990, the term *funds of knowledge* has become commonplace in many English language arts circles. You and your colleagues expanded the idea from a focus on literacy into thinking about the mathematical potential of households, as well. How has the concept of funds of knowledge grown since the early 1990s when you completed the Community Literacy Project?

Luis: One example is the BRIDGE project, in which my colleague Marta Civil helped us uncover and understand the funds of knowledge related to mathematics that are embedded in everyday family life. Her work documented how mathematical practices occur in nondominant communities, how they are perceived in varied settings (like in and out of school), and the roles that multiple languages play in them (see Civil, 2016; González, Andrade, Civil, & Moll, 2005). When we adapted the funds of knowledge household interview process to focus specifically on mathematics, we saw that construction, sewing, and landscaping were rich in mathematical thinking and practice. By observing and interacting with families—and particularly Mexican American mothers—we also learned that students need to be producers of mathematical practices in school just as they are at home. This finding parallels what we learned about language and literacy—that students need to be viewed as capable producers of authentic language arts practices, and when their funds of knowledge are valued and learning is viewed as a cultural practice, the power dynamics and relationships change at school.

Kathy: Collectively, these developments portray the power of—and the need for—the funds of knowledge approach. Your approach to curriculum development has caught fire around the globe, hasn't it?

Luis: Yes, we're just starting a new book that presents the analysis of funds of knowledge in different countries. Funds of knowledge ideas and practices have spread around the world, including Tanzania, England, and New Zealand, among many countries. Teachers and researchers have explored the power of the concept in early childhood, elementary, and secondary classrooms, as well as with adult learners and teacher education students. In many of these places, teachers are under many more constraints than most teachers in the United States.

Kathy: I've always thought that when teachers come to understand and enact a funds of knowledge approach, teaching actually becomes easier, and certainly more enjoyable. It starts out feeling harder for many teachers because the orientation to families and curriculum is new and, as you described, earlier household visits can be intimidating. Soon, though, it gets easier because children quickly engage with curriculum that is meaningful and respectful of who they are.

Luis: Yes, and the kids start taking over part of the pedagogy! Teachers often work under very difficult conditions. And yet, there are always teachers who are willing to go the extra mile. As long as those teachers are around, we should remain optimistic about how we can implement changes to improve schooling for kids.

This content downloaded from
131.156.224.55 on Thu, 19 Jun 2025 17:16:51 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Kathy: Luis, thank you for sharing some of your history as an educator and your knowledge from decades of research that helps us understand the dynamics of families' interactions and their place in language arts classrooms and curriculum. Your ideas speak to educators, and your work is an inspiration to all of us at NCTE.

References

Amanti, C. (2005). Beyond a beads and feathers approach. In N. González, L. C. Moll, & C. Amanti (Eds.), *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms* (pp. 131–142). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Civil, M. (2016). STEM learning research through a funds of knowledge lens. *Cultural Studies of Science Education, 11*, 41–59.

Cole, M. (1996). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

González, N., Andrade, R., Civil, M., & Moll, L. (2005). Funds of distributed knowledge. In N. González, L. C. Moll, & C. Amanti (Eds.), *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms* (pp. 257–274). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

González, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (Eds.). (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Hall, K., Cremin, T., Comber, B., & Moll, L. C. (Eds.). (2013). *International handbook of research on children's literacy, learning, and culture*. Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell.

Moll, L. C. (Ed.). (1990). *Vygotsky and education: Instructional implications and applications of sociohistorical psychology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Moll, L. C. (2014). *L. S. Vygotsky and education*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kathryn F. Whitmore, lifetime NCTE member, is a professor at the University of Louisville, KY, and was a graduate research assistant on the Community Literacy Project at the University of Arizona. She may be contacted at kathryn.whitmore@louisville.edu.

This content downloaded from 131.156.224.55 on Thu, 19 Jun 2025 17:16:51 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms