

Funds of Knowledge:

A Look at Luis Moll's Research Into Hidden Family Resources

This work was done in collaboration with Norma Gonzalez, James Greenberg, and Carlos Velez. Thanks also to the many teachers who have contributed to the development of this project. How can committed city teachers boost the literacy skills of their poor, minority students? According to some educational researchers, the answer lies in a more "sociocultural" approach to literacy instruction.

One of the leading advocates of this approach is Luis C. Moll, associate professor at the University of Arizona. Moll has been studying bilingual literacy and directing field studies for more than a decade. His findings have made him a strong advocate for minority and bilingual students. One advantage to studying "human beings dynamically, within their social circumstances, in their full complexity," Moll remarks, is that one can gain "a much more complete, and, we believe, a much more valid understanding of them."

A More Positive Approach

Moll contends "that existing classroom practices underestimate and constrain what Latino and other children are able to display intellectually." He believes the secret to literacy instruction is for schools to investigate and tap into the "hidden" home and community resources of their students. And he points out that his research calls

the "deficit model" of student assessment into serious question.

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To test his own contention, Moll began doing research into the lives of working-class Mexican-American students and their families in the barrio schools of Tucson, Arizona. He developed a research model that combined approaches from anthropology, psychology, and linguistics, as well as education.

Then his research team performed what he calls an "ethnographic analysis" of Tucson's Latino community. Interviewers gathered data about the origin, use, and distribution of the knowledge and skills in the community. They also talked with individual family members to learn the personal and labor history of the family. Moll is quick to point out that any teacher or school member can perform this kind of analysis.

Networks of Knowledge

The home investigations revealed that many families had abundant knowledge that the schools did not know about--and therefore did not use in order to teach academic skills. In general, the barrio families knew about agriculture and mining, economics, household management, materials and science, medicine, and religion.

Various families with rural backgrounds knew a great deal about the cultivation of plants, animals, ranch management, mechanics, carpentry, masonry, electrical wiring, and medical folk remedies. They also had some entrepreneurial skills and were familiar with archeology, biology, and mathematics.

More important, the families' shared what they knew. Their knowledge, according to Moll, was "available and accessible through social networks of exchange."

Moll described the potential of these networks as "truly formidable." He noted that once they are uncovered and mobilized for learning, they can become a social and intellectual resource for a school.

Teacher Roles

To complement their findings, the researchers in Moll's study urged participating teachers to abandon the standard, drill-based approach so often used with working-class and poor students. In its place, Moll urged them to help students find meaning rather than learn isolated facts and rules. He also advised them to use activities that "involve students as thoughtful learners in socially meaningful tasks."

Moll explained, "We believe that a meaning-centered model ... allows bilingual students to take full advantage of their first language abilities, and to surpass the limits set by their more limited knowledge of their second language."

Teachers involved in Moll's after-school lab/study group learned about the specific funds of knowledge found among their students. With the help of Moll and his team, they used that information to devise innovative instructional strategies, which they took into their classrooms. They also began to treat the children as "active learners, using and applying literacy as a tool for communication and for thinking." The researchers provided back-up assistance by introducing "more dynamic methods of assessment" to measure comprehension. For example, students generated English and Spanish writing samples and collections of "reading retellings."

One Teacher's Success

All the teachers in Moll's study made an attempt to change their teaching approach. One teacher, "Hilda Angiulo," achieved dramatic results. Hilda was a sixth grade bilingual teacher of 27 students. She had four years of teaching experience. Normally, she relied upon a basal reader, supplemented with novels, newspapers, and magazines. But most of her students were very reluctant learners, especially when it came to writing. In response to the research discoveries about her students, Hilda developed an instructional unit around a topic of interest to them: building and construction. She took a big risk, since construction was a topic she knew almost nothing about. Hilda did know, however, that her students, their families, and many other people in the community knew quite a bit about construction.

First, Hilda asked students to do library research on building, using books and magazines. She also brought into the classroom a series of books on the subject. Then she directed the students to build model buildings for their homework project. They also wrote short essays in either English or Spanish explaining their research, ideas, and conclusions.

Hilda invited parents and other community members who worked in construction to share their expertise with the children. Some parents talked about their tools and explained how they used numbers and measurements in their work. Others spoke about their work methods and told how they solved problems.

Ina called the experience "a total success." She pointed out that her students learned "the vocabulary of construction, names of tools, economic concerns, and the importance of knowing mathematics in construction." Hilda also commented that "it was interesting to see how each student learned something different." Moll asserts that the project "created new instructional routines ... that helped the teacher and students exceed the curriculum, stretch the limits of writing, and expand the knowledge that formed lessons."

Eventually, the students took the models that they had built and used them as the basis for constructing a model community with streets, parks, and other structures. The follow-up project required additional research, which the students undertook enthusiastically.

Students continued to write up their research and give oral reports to the class. Peer editing groups helped the process of English and Spanish writing. By the end of the semester, 20 parents and community people had visited Hilda's class and shared their knowledge with her students. By then, the students had completed extensive reading and writing activities.

"These visits shaped the students' and teacher's perception of the parents and the community," Moll concluded. In this case, Hilda learned that "teaching through the community" could be a valuable part of her classroom approach. In the process, she began to establish a social

network for her classroom. The parents and community members she worked with became what Moll calls "a cognitive resource for the class."

Mobilizing Funds of Knowledge

Moll urges teachers to create their own social networks of assistance to help each other take advantage of community resources. He suggests that as material resources become scarce, the mutual reliance among teachers must grow, just as it does in poor communities and households. Moll's research confirms that the Latino community is an enormous resource for "educational change and improvement." He hopes his demonstration of the funds of knowledge available will help educators and psychologists gain a more positive view of these able, but misjudged youngsters. When teachers and schools seek out and use these funds of knowledge, Moll expects there will be rewards: They will have a better chance of helping bilingual and minority children achieve authentic literacy; they will foster a sense of community; and they will bestow a much richer education than most working-class kids enjoy.

Literacy Development Checklist

1. How well does our school link student learning to families and communities?
2. Do we provide ongoing parent education and training so parents can help their children?
3. Besides sending notes or calling home, how do our teachers involve each family in each student's education?
4. Have all our teachers had training to help them use a student's family, language, and culture as a foundation for learning?
5. How do our teachers tap into each student's "funds of knowledge"?
6. In what ways do we affirm students' informal home language, while linking it to standard English?
7. Do all our teachers know how to use student informal language as a tool for developing student literacy?
8. How well does our school tailor its curriculum to the particular needs, interests, and learning styles of individual students?

9. In what ways do we encourage and teach to the many intelligences and learning styles of students?
10. How does our school encourage students to articulate their dreams and aspirations and link them to their learning?

Resources

The following articles by Luis C. Moll tell more about his approach to literacy:

Bilingual classroom studies and community analysis: Some recent trends. (1992). *Educational Researcher*, 21(2), 20-24.

Change as the goal of education research. (1987). *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 18(4), 300-11.

Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. (1992). *Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 132-41.

Some key issues in teaching Latino students. (1988). *Language Arts*, 65(5), 465-72.

Writing as communication: Creating strategic learning environments for students. (1986). *Theory into Practice*, 25(2), 102-08.