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## Book Review: Vygotsky and Education: Connecting Theory and Practice in Linguistically Diverse Classrooms

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## ***Book Review***

# **Vygotsky and Education: Connecting Theory and Practice in Linguistically Diverse Classrooms**

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### **Book Reviewed:**

Moll, L. C. (2014). *L.S. Vygotsky and Education*. New York, NY: Routledge, 176 pages, paperback list price \$36.95, ISBN: 978-0-415-89949-9, hardback list price \$135.00, ISBN: 978-0-415-89948-2; Ebook price \$29.16.

*L.S. Vygotsky and Education* integrates the work of two distinguished researchers and scholars: Lev Vygotsky and Luis Moll. Written by Moll, a Professor at the University of Arizona, *L.S. Vygotsky and Education* provides more than an introduction to the work of Vygotsky, a Soviet thinker whose influential research has reverberated across the field of education. It provides a critical look into how a field of study, in this case bilingual education, broadens and expands when researchers cross disciplines and theoretical frameworks related to psychology and anthropology. As Moll's general body of research and publications have illustrated, spanning bodies of knowledge provides researchers the opportunity to see a disciplinary field in a renewed light.

This was exemplified by Moll and his colleagues when they used the foundational work of Vygotsky to rethink the ways in which learning was organized and orchestrated within minority, working-class, or poor families living in disadvantaged communities (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005a; Moll, 1992). Frequently considered as lacking linguistic, cultural, social, and economic capital, these families are positioned and viewed through deficient-oriented perspectives that suggest they lack the necessary knowledge to be successful (Dantas & Manyak, 2010). Moll and his colleagues challenged this perspective with the advent of the term *funds of knowledge* (Moll, 1992). The notion of funds of knowledge is based on the premise that "people are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge" (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005c, pp. ix-x). These researchers combine the fields of psychology with anthropology concluding that, "The underlying rationale for this work stems from an assumption that the educational process can be greatly enhanced when teachers learn about their students' everyday lives" (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005b, p. 6).

In this more recent insightful volume, Moll deliberates on how a Vygotskian school of thought heavily influenced his own scholarship. The book's purpose is mutualistic: to provide explanations of Vygotsky's key ideas in the context of Moll's research. With its clear style and accessible language, *L.S. Vygotsky and Education* is a focused and concise book with an introduction and four chapters. In addition to effectively employing figures to provide visuals for his ideas, Moll absorbs the reader in the book's content through his engaging writing style that weaves research, theory, and practice seamlessly together. These characteristics make this book an excellent resource for educators, undergraduate and graduate students in the field of education, and educational researchers who are not familiar with the works of Vygotsky and Moll.

After providing a general framework that outlines the book in the Introduction, the author provides the reader with a short, but detailed and relevant, biography of Vygotsky's life in Chapter 1. Readers learn about the turbulent times in Soviet Russia during Vygotsky's life in the early 1900s and how that influenced his thinking. While now considered an influential scholar, Vygotsky held little notoriety during his life, which was cut short because of his premature death from tuberculosis at age 37. Moll described how Vygotsky was a trained psychologist who built, along with his colleagues Alexander Luria and Aleksei Leontiev, a bundle of foundational concepts that later became the grounds for sociocultural-historical theory (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007; Wertsch, 1991). It was only at the persistence of his student Luria that Vygotsky's work *Thought and Language* was published and translated into English in 1962. Later, *Mind in Society*, edited by Michael Cole, Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scribner, and Ellen Souberman, was published (1978). We discover how the publication of these two works put Vygotsky on the map for many educational researchers and scholars. From reading the Introduction and Chapter 1, readers learn that Moll is an ideal person to write this book. He is a Vygotskian scholar as well as a postdoctoral student of Cole, who, in turn, was a student of Luria. To find this type of intimate connection is rare among educational theorists and adds another layer of legitimacy to Moll's book.

To focus the book, Moll specifically addresses the Vygotskian concept of cultural mediation. In Chapter 1, Moll provides a thorough discussion of cultural mediation. Through interweaving the research of other Vygotskian scholars (Rogoff, 2003; Wertsch, 1991), he outlines five general categories of mediators: social mediation, instrumental/tool mediation, semiotic mediation, anatomical mediation, and individual mediation. The argument is made that Vygotsky was mostly concerned with semiotic mediation through his concept of *psychological tools*, which are mediators that facilitate thinking and problem solving. Integrating the notions of language as a semiotic mediator and social mediation, or the ways in which individuals interact with each other or in social groups, Moll presents a well-organized discussion to provide readers new to Vygotskian ideas a foundation for the rest of the book.

In Chapters 2-4, Moll moves into his own research that incorporates Vygotsky's idea of cultural mediation into the study of bilingualism and biliteracy, which has historically been dominated by cognitive psychology and Second Language Acquisition Theory (Faltis, 2013). The result of Moll's scholarship is not only a sociocultural, historical examination of learning to read in two languages, but also the development of

educational practices. In Chapter 2, Moll introduces a teaching-learning experiment conducted in Spanish and English bilingual classrooms. Through presentation of oral data, Moll provides a rich context of language usages in the classrooms. By describing how reading is taught differently between the English and Spanish classroom settings, Moll argues that what counted as reading differed in each setting, causing bilingual children to fall into, what he termed as, the *phonics trap*. Applying the Vygotskian concept of the zone of proximal development, Moll discusses how he, in close collaboration with teachers, develops the bilingual zone of proximal development to create instructional language equality.

Chapter 3 takes a broader picture of biliteracy learning by situating it in larger sociocultural, historical contexts and is an insightful chapter as to how researchers take theory and expand on it to create new ways of discussing and studying bilingualism and biliteracy. Moll incorporates theoretical terms, such as subjectivity, ideology, and identity, to discuss the social development and situatedness of biliteracy. He writes, "I seek to clarify the why and how of biliteracy, when it becomes a resource, and the role of social situations in facilitating (or constraining) that development" (p. 68). In this chapter, the focus is on bilingual writing and the relationships to identities and ideologies. The author raises an important issue of how ideologies, or unexamined assumptions about language beliefs in relation to power and status, provide a mediating tool into why or how bilingual children develop biliteracy. Moll's discussion exemplifies the ways in which researchers generate contemporary theories of bilingualism and biliteracy by building on the thinking of past scholars, such as Vygotsky.

In Chapter 4, Moll returns to his seminal work on the funds of knowledge. This chapter illustrates how university-based study groups composed of teachers act as a mediating structure in the development of teacher knowledge and classroom practices. Moll skillfully outlines how the study groups focused on the investigation of theory and methodology for data collection, the development of findings, and the creation of classroom practices that connect theory and findings. Explaining the function of study groups, Moll provides a schematic diagram that outlines the mediating path that the study groups holds between the analysis of household knowledge and the development of classroom activities that build upon the families' funds of knowledge. He exemplifies how teachers integrate household funds of knowledge into their classroom instruction and concludes that, "Household funds of knowledge become cultural resources for teachers not only through documentation but also through the teacher's actions when they bring these resources to bear in the classroom" (p. 129). To provide more contemporary discussions of the funds of knowledge framework, the chapter concludes with recent research studies that outline alternative models of the funds of knowledge.

To conclude, *L.S. Vygotsky and Education* takes readers on an important intellectual journey, starting from Soviet Russia in the early 1900s and moves to the next century with the work of Moll and others. The author successfully applies the Vygotskian concept of cultural mediation to the study of bilingualism and biliteracy in an artful and skillful manner. In this process, Moll contributes to the fields of bilingualism and biliteracy by expanding its knowledge base.

For readers who want an in-depth review or discussion of Vygotsky's general body of work, the book does not discuss other common Vygotskian concepts, such as spontaneous and scientific concepts, inner speech, mental functions, and internalization. The book, however, effectively tackles how cultural, social, and individualistic factors mediate learning to speak, read, and write in two languages, and how theory can inform the development of classroom practices. Additionally, it raises important questions concerning the equality of language and literacy learning and how particular languages are positioned differently within a teaching and learning context.

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