

Singing the Praises of Funds of Knowledge

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Abstract

The lyric of Bruce Springsteen's signature anthem "Born to Run" was rewritten by the author to offer an efficient gateway to inspire teachers in a professional setting to learn (more) about and implement the transformative students' funds of knowledge pedagogy of Dr. Louis C. Moll. This manuscript includes the rewritten lyric, intention/context, references, and DARE questions.

Discussion And Reflection Enhancement (DARE) Pre-Reading Questions

1. What are some affordances of song in building community and efficiently communicating a message in a memorable way? If you have used or experienced educational song in a professional development or classroom context, describe the experience
2. How might/should your teaching be informed by the history and culture of the community where you teach?
3. Were you aware of Moll's work on students' funds of knowledge? If so, where and how did you learn about it? Do most teachers at your school seem to be aware of this approach? Explain.
4. NCES (National Center for Education Statistics) data show that about $\frac{3}{4}$ of public schoolteachers are White/non-Hispanic, which is less diverse than the students they teach. What are your thoughts about the causes, challenges, opportunities, and implications of this dynamic?

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Context and Intention

Before moving to El Paso, I taught full-time at a pluralistic Jewish high school where virtually the whole student body shared a minority culture (Jewish). I used an adapted “funds of knowledge” approach by sitting in on their Judaics classes and having informal conversations with them in settings (advisory periods, assemblies, club meetings, field trips, study away trips) beyond mathematics classes. This sustained broader contact helped me envision how their experiences and cultural/religious identities could connect to learning mathematics (Lesser, 2006). When I began working at UTEP, it felt natural for me to learn about the dominant culture (Latinx/Hispanic) of the student body and to create lessons accordingly, such as my award-winning lesson connecting the teaching of probability to the beloved games *Toma Todo* and *La Lotería*: <https://www.CAUSEweb.org/cause/ecots/ecots22/activity-contest/winners>. It was also natural for me to reflect on how what I had learned about linguistic resources, struggle, and privilege from my experiences in the Jewish world helped me better appreciate the linguistic resources many of my El Paso students have (Lesser, 2015).

The upcoming *TEEM* special issue on Moll’s work inspired me to write a lyric that can be energetically sung to the tune of (the first half of) Bruce Springsteen’s iconic signature anthem from his same-titled album (Springsteen 1975) that has been played for 5+ decades on rock and classic rock stations, performed in a Super Bowl halftime show, landed on “all-time greatest songs” lists (by *Rolling Stone*, NPR, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, etc.), and declared by *Billboard* as “simply one of the best rock anthems to individual freedom ever created” (Carlin, 2025). His song captures passionate pursuit of liberation (in the face of adversity, mediocrity, or indifference) which is not unlike what is needed in many classrooms. His overall body of work reflects a commitment to singing about matters of injustice and the struggles of the working class and marginalized, in songs such as “Born in the USA,” “American Skin (41 Shots),” “Lost in the Flood,” “The Ghost of Tom Joad,” “Jack of All Trades,” “We Take Care of Our Own,” and (most recently) “Streets of Minneapolis.”

With my lyric, I intend to inspire teachers (by reading or singing the lyric on their own, in a faculty/department meeting, or in a professional development setting) to feel part of a supportive peer community and have increased motivation to learn (more) about and implement Dr. Louis Carlos Moll’s profound pedagogical approach of students’ funds of knowledge (see Moll 2015 to hear him speak) to help students better connect with mathematics content as well as build a more reciprocal, engaging classroom culture where everyone belongs and contributes. Most public schoolteachers likely did not have the opportunity to be taught this way, so it can help to tap artistic as well as scholarly resources to help bring about still-needed transformation and liberation. I hope this lyric efficiently conveys (it can be sung in under two minutes) enough information to inspire teachers to want to learn (more) about Moll’s work (see References and papers in the upcoming *TEEM* special issue) and I’ll be even happier if teachers are inspired to collaborate with their students to write their own poem or song on this theme, using whatever genre or style honors their own funds of knowledge. But for now, enjoy singing the lyrics alone or with colleagues.

The Lyric: “Students’ Funds (of Knowledge)”

Some teachers teach like they’re just banks that fill up empty heads,
But we know students come to us with knowledge that they live:
How they garden and how they heal,
What they sing and build and play that’s real.
Oh, the history of life in the home
Or community where no one’s alone:
Gotta let their song be sung
Teachers like us need to honor students’ funds!

So why are funds of knowledge so empowering to use?
Confianza with our students makes our lessons true!
Context makes our students care
And helps us teachers be more aware.
Oh, so much life beyond these walls,
So many assets in us all:
Leave the books that leave us numb!
Teachers like us need to honor students’ funds!

It’s fund-amental: we need to honor students’ funds!
It’s fund-amental: we need to honor students’ funds!

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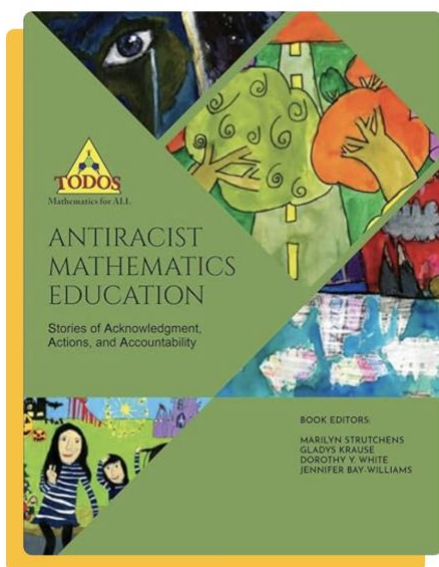
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Discussion And Reflection Enhancement (DARE) Post-Reading Questions

1. Based on what you know about Moll's work, constructivist learning theories, and Paulo Freire's banking model of education, discuss the meaning of the lyric's opening two lines.
2. The first verse goes on to give examples of realms of a student's home or community life where they have important knowledge and experiences that can enrich the learning within your classroom. Which of these realms (or possibly other realms not listed in the lyric) have helped you connect with your students? How and when do you make room for this in your time with them?
3. The second verse of the lyric mentions *confianza*. What does this word mean to you and how does it affect your lessons and interactions with your students?
4. Near the end, the lyric exhorts, "leave the books that leave us numb." Describe a time you were inspired (perhaps by your students) to go beyond an uninspiring piece of curriculum and make a more authentic connection in your class.
5. If you were not already familiar with Moll's ideas, does this lyric inspire you to want to learn more about them (e.g., see the upcoming *TEEM* special issue)? If you were already familiar with Moll's ideas, do you feel this lyric aligns and summarizes them well? Why or why not?
6. What characteristic of "Born to Run" do you think most affects its level of effectiveness for this purpose? Is it its genre? Is it that it is an uptempo song in a major key? Is it its fame or critical acclaim? Is it some characteristic of Springsteen himself (his ethnicity, his work ethic, his writing about working class American life, his social critiques of American society, etc.)? How might you choose a song that would be of even greater interest than "Born to Run" in your school community? Could you imagine joining forces with teacher or student collaborators to rewrite the lyrics of your chosen song to further share and celebrate Moll's ideas? Why or why not?

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