Connecting to Funds of Knowledge through Story: Family Story Backpacks

The oral stories that are shared in families both reflect and build on a family’s funds of knowledge, providing a potential connection for meaningful home/school partnerships. The Family Story Backpack research is part of a larger project to redesign early childhood teacher education called CREATE – Communities as Resources for Early Childhood Teacher Education (www.createarizona.org). CREATE focuses on family, community and classrooms instead of only classrooms as often occurs in elementary education. These strands and key engagements are integrated across courses within a semester and across semesters so that courses share assignments with different aspects of the same assignment being completed in different courses. The family story backpacks are introduced in two courses, a children’s literature course and a course on diversity. The following semester, early childhood preservice teachers bring this transportable curriculum into their student teaching settings to encourage the sharing of stories around themes significant to family storytelling. While most parent involvement programs focus on teaching parents to do school better, our work focuses on inviting the stories and knowledge that matter to families into the classroom.

The theoretical frame of our work is based in funds of knowledge and on story as a way of making meaning from our experiences (Moll, Gonzalez, & Amanti, 2005; Short, 2012). Stories are woven so tightly into the fabric of our everyday lives that it’s easy to overlook their significance in framing how we think about ourselves and the world. They fill every part of our daily lives as we talk about events and people, read books and news reports, gossip, send text messages, listen to music, watch video clips, and catch up on a favorite television show. We live storied lives.

Stories are thus much more than a book or narrative--they are the way our minds make sense of our lives and world (Rosen, 1986). We work at understanding events and people by constructing stories to interpret what is occurring around us. In turn, these stories create our views of the world and the lens through which we construct meaning about ourselves and others. We also tell stories to make connections, form relationships, and create community with others. Story is a mode of knowing--one of the primary ways in which we think and construct meaning from our experiences. Story captures the richness and nuances of human life, accommodating the ambiguity and complexity of situations in the multiplicity of meanings inherent to any story (Carter, 1993).

Our views of the world are a web of interconnected stories; a distillation of all the stories we have shared. We connect to these interconnected past stories in order to understand new experiences. This web of stories becomes our interpretive lens for new experiences so that story is our means of constructing the world, making meaning of our lives, and creating funds of knowledge (Gottschall, 2012). The ways in which we create and tell stories are culturally-based.
Our human need to story our experiences may be universal but there is no one way to tell stories. Our stories are always intertextualized and interwoven with the stories that exist within our own cultures both in content and in the style and structure of the telling.

**Research Methodology**

We are examining a range of research questions within the broader CREATE project, examining funds of knowledge, family literacy, community, professional development, and collaboration across contexts within the broader frame of early childhood teacher education. The three of us are particularly interested in the role of story as a frame for coursework and experiences in early childhood classrooms and the ways in which a focus on story as funds of knowledge transforms how preservice teachers, classrooms teachers, and families think about their role in the lives of young children.

This study is one small piece of a much larger research study. In particular, the data focuses on 25 preservice teachers and their interactions with teachers, children and families in their student teaching classrooms around the family story backpacks. The family story backpacks area transportable curriculum designed to facilitate the sharing of stories within families. Grant funds were used to develop 9 different backpacks around themes significant to families such as bedtime rituals, the origin of names, birthday traditions, etc. and to purchase enough backpacks so that each student teacher could select 6 of the 9 backpacks to take to their student teaching classroom. Each student teacher set up a schedule so that 4-6 backpacks rotated among the families on a weekly basis. The backpacks each contained 3 books (1 informational concept book and 2 picture book stories), a related artifact, and a family story journal. The purpose of the artifact is to encourage families to share oral stories around the theme. They are also encouraged to share their stories and their experiences with the backpack in the family journal. The journals stay with the backpacks so that each family can read the previous family’s journal entries.

Fall 2011 was the first time that we integrated the backpacks into the student teaching experience so our questions focused on the logistics and what was and was not effective as well as how the student teachers and teachers responded to the backpacks. We are interested in how families responded as well but our primary focus was initially on the engagement itself and understanding what was and was not effective.

Our research question was

- What are the perspectives of teachers and preservice teachers on implementing family story backpacks during K-2 student teaching?
We conducted focus group interviews with all of the student teachers that were transcribed and analyzed. Student teachers also completed individual written reflections and we interviewed four classroom teachers in their schools about the backpacks. This data was analyzed using constant comparative analysis to create categories that reflected their perspectives on these experiences. This data is from Fall 2011 but we are currently analyzing the data from Fall 2012 and some interesting patterns are emerging.

**Research Findings**

The first set of categories and examples indicate the teacher and student teacher perspectives on the value of the backpacks. The second set of categories reflects the types of understandings and negotiations needed by student teachers to effectively implement the backpacks in their student teaching classrooms. The final set of categories focus on the commitment and collaboration needed across participants and contexts.

**Value of the backpacks**

- Provide knowledge and understanding for teachers about families and children
  - Learn about the stories that families share
  - Get to know the families and children in a different way
  - Creates a connection between home and school
  - Celebrate children and their families by reading through the journals
  - Learn how families interact at home
  - Useful for the family visit as a way to invite interaction with the family
- Involves the family in the children’s education and literacy
  - Gets books and stories into the homes and provides opportunities for interactions around literacy (deficit view of some families, confusion over purpose of backpacks)
  - Families feel valued by the school
  - Facilitates interaction among family members with child
  - Learned Spanish through reading the bilingual books
- Provides connections for families
  - Told stories that the child did not know
  - Stories allowed them to share about people they miss
  - Some families find certain themes difficult due to family situations, beliefs.
- Provides children with a feeling of being special and valued
  - Excited to be selected to take home the backpack
  - Want to share their family experiences/stories when they return the backpack

**Understandings and Strategies of Student Teachers**
Developing understandings of the purpose and role of the backpacks
  o Not able to respond to teachers; confusion over focus on reading skills
Developing an understanding of the student teaching context
  o Lacked knowledge of the students and the families in order to anticipate possible problems or the best ways to organize the experience for a particular community
Developing strategies for organizing, implementing, and interacting
  o Student teachers felt overwhelmed and unable to cope during full time teaching.
  o Not sure how to encourage children to talk about their experiences
Developing strategies for negotiation with university and with cooperating teacher
  o Student teachers were most successful explored alternatives to accomplish goals (e.g. different ways to brief—interview, special chair, show and tell, parent drop off)
  o Student teachers were not sure how to negotiate with teachers. Most don’t ask questions or make suggestions to initiate negotiation. They were not aware that they could negotiate or were afraid they would offend if they did.
  o Students assumed the engagement could not be modified with instructors.

Requires commitment and collaboration at many different levels

  o Viewed as an assignment that student teachers do on their own by classroom teachers rather than a cooperative project between the teacher and student teacher
    o Teacher left decisions up to the student teacher and student teacher lacked knowledge of school and classroom and families to make decisions
  o Needed support by the university supervisors but they did not understand the project
  o Student teachers did not see the project as integrated into the university coursework and so felt it was not valued. Also needed time to reflect on the journals to understand them.

The analysis of our data led us to identify a range of obstacles that we needed to address in revising this experience to make it more effective for student teachers, teachers, and families. These obstacles included:

  o Teachers and Classroom
    o Teachers did not understand the project and did not provide support. Many thought the project was to teach reading rather than to encourage story.
    o Required the teacher to handle some of the logistics because student teachers were not in school in the afternoons
    o Teachers did not provide time for debriefing and scheduling if did not value engagement
University
  o Was not integrated into the university course so did not see the value, seemed like an extra assignment, felt that they were doing it to gather research data or as busywork, no time to reflect and see what was happening.
  o Need to see how this engagement is relevant to their teacher education program

Student Teachers
  o Overwhelmed by the number of backpacks and the paperwork. Lack of time and ability to support it fully in the classroom
  o Not able to explain the purpose to teachers and families
  o Did not know kids and families well enough to decide who should get a backpack
  o Difficult during fall takeover because so much is new and out of control, very busy
  o Didn’t know how to encourage the kids to tell more about their experiences when said “I don’t know” or “It was fun” but nothing more.

Families
  o Some classrooms had problems getting the backpacks back. Felt there were hassling the parents and creating negative relationships
  o Families not sure what to do with the backpacks and what to put in the journals
  o Not always someone to help the children at home
  o Several artifacts and themes were problematic for families
  o May not have pens, pencils, crayons, markers in home to write in journal
  o A stress for a few families due to time issues in that family

Conclusion

We believe that as teachers learn more about the knowledge that children bring to school, they are able to understand that children and their families are resources for the classroom and to challenge deficit views of children and families. However, this study also taught us that they need to value and attend to this knowledge and that the pressures of “doing school” and teaching children to read can so overwhelm their attention that they do not pay attention to the rich sources of funds of knowledge available in families. The data from this first experience with the family story backpacks led to major changes in the engagement this year, particularly in asking each student teacher to design a way for children to share individually or with the class when they brought back the backpacks. These changes did not resolve all of the issues but did make the experience more effective and successful. One constant tension is the realization of how difficult it is for teachers to shift their view from teaching families to valuing their stories and funds of knowledge. These teachers genuinely care about their students and families but have been socialized into a deficit view of families and literacy due to the pressure to attend to standards and raise test scores.
This experience has also shifted our views about the ways in which student teaching can become more of a co-learning experience for teachers and student teachers. The family story backpacks challenge some of the prevailing views of parent involvement and the role of families in classrooms and schools and have provided a point of dialogue and discussion that has been generative across school, university and home contexts.


