

Teaching with Stories as the Content and Context for Learning

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Abstract

Undergraduate teacher education program students have the opportunity to work with diverse student populations in a local rural school district in the Four Corners Area in the Northwest part of New Mexico. The family oral history practicum is a way to connect theory and practice while recognizing the issue that language is not a neutral landscape. What better way to demonstrate this complementarity than through family stories? The goal is to bring an awareness of respect for oral language in relationship to literate language and explore how to balance both perspectives in school culture as prospective teachers.

Preservice teacher candidates become storytelling coaches and team up with third graders in semester long storytelling projects, collaborating with local elementary school teachers. Students' family stories become the content and context for teaching and learning. With a diverse classroom population of Navajo, Hispanic, Mexican, and White students, family stories are the heart and central theme of the project. Storytelling coaches learn the nuances of diversity when theory is massaged with authentic experiences of students as they share what they have learned beside their young storytellers and authors.

Keywords

Storytelling in education, teacher education, practitioner research, preservice teachers, oral history, rural, New Mexico, family stories, oracy, literacy, diversity/equity, teaching writing

Balancing Story in Teaching

“Narrative knowledge is experiential and cultural knowing. It is the best means available for students to organize their experiences and make meaning for themselves.” (Cooper and Collins in Look What Happened to Frog, 1992, p. 5).

Teacher candidates in a teacher preparation program are learning the nuances of teaching diverse students through the art, craft, and oral tradition of storytelling. In becoming

culturally responsive teachers, stories become a way of building relationships and community in acknowledging, recognizing, and validating students' funds of knowledge. Drawing from students' family experiences, family stories become the content and context for learning and teaching. Relying on the strength of family knowledge as stories, students scaffold their

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literacy competency within the classroom as they are coached by teacher candidates. These young storytellers draw from the rich resources of their family stories for literacy learning.

The balance of oracy (listening and speaking; oral, aural) to literacy (reading and writing) is not as recognized or validated in our school culture, which situates literacy above orality. In this way, we are leaving out valuable perspectives and funds of knowledge that may contribute to and inform educational practice for students to learn through their strengths in the academic setting.

Language is not neutral and writing and reading represent historical, social, critical, and political contexts of a status of power. For example, legally denying certain groups of people the right to read and write and therefore, limiting their equitable access of information, is embedded within the historical fabric of our nation. Forbidding others the right to speak their own language in school reveals how power and privilege have been embedded in our school system. From a critical pedagogical perspective, those who are master manipulators of the written word, gain respect within the dominant society.

The paradigm of literacy is built upon aural and oral background knowledge. These cultural *funds of knowledge* are students' primary knowledge and learning strength. English Language Arts includes, listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking. The efficacy of future reading and writing skills is contingent upon a strong foundation of listening and speaking skills. Literacy refers to typographic, chirographic or hypertext reading and writing communication; while orality or

oracy refers to aural or oral listening and speaking communication. A more balanced approach to oracy and literacy in our school culture may acknowledge the ever changing diversified landscape in our schools.

Kabagarama (1997) predicts the future trend of diversity represented in our demographics. By the year 2050, our nation will be a *majority-minority*, with no one racial or ethnic group predominating (p. 11).

Oracy and Literacy

"Our species thinks in metaphors and learns through stories."(McLellan Wyatt Digital)

Storytelling and reading require two different cognitive processes. Marshal McLuhan (1964) described the power of oral literature as when the eye is subservient to the ear. Ong (1982) compares the two processes to the right and left hemispheres of our brain operating distinctively, yet simultaneously. Storytelling draws from the right hemisphere of holistic, visual, relational processing; whereas, reading and writing draw from the left hemispheric of more linear, logical, segmented, mechanistic (Schlain, 1998). However, both hemispheres of the brain function collectively. Ong (1982) describes this tension and complementarity of both sides of our brain identifying Western (dominant society) and Non-western (non-dominant society) perspectives. The matrix in *Figure 1*, adapted from Ong (1982), describes the basic complementarity and duality coexisting between orality and literacy (Vitali, 2004, p. 55).

Figure 1 <i>Matrix of Orality and Literacy (Adapted by Vitali from Ong, 1982)</i>	
ORALITY Non-Dominant Culture Field-Dependent	LITERACY Dominant Culture Field-Independent
orality is universal	literacy is a recent technology
secondary orality has mediated technologies	text based (chirographic and typographic)
learn by imprinting	learn by studying
knowledge exists within person	knowledge exists within books
situational or contextual thinking centered in human action	abstract thinking centered around impersonal labeling, itemizing, categorizing
oral narratives and organizational structures (mnemonic style, ritual formula, repetition)	literal narratives and organizational structures (linear, logical, sequential, abstract)
sound incorporates (unifying, holistic, harmonizing tendencies)	writing & printing isolates (separate, independent, discrete)
knowledge and thinking referential to human activity	knowledge devoid of human action or content
Analytic tendency to <i>take meaning from</i> the whole by separating into parts; concerned with interrelationships	Synthetic tendency to <i>give meaning to</i> separate elements combining to form a coherent whole; abstract thinking

Figure 1 Matrix of Orality and Literacy

There is complementarity and tension between oracy and literacy, for without literacy, oral stories would be lost. Wilson (1997) defines oral tradition, including oral history, as "the way in which information is passed on rather than the length of time something has been told" (p. 103). Storyteller Judy Hooks (personal communication, October 13, 1992) said that when you read a story, students connect to the pictures; when you tell a story, students connect with you. Denise Hinson (personal communication, May 28, 2010) recognizes the significance storytelling plays in building personal connections of trust and respect among

students and teachers, and the effect it has on classroom management. Oral communication can be balanced with recognizable equity alongside written literacies understanding the linguistic, personal, and cultural spectrum in teaching of English Language Arts (L.A.). Stories are an integral part of what defines us as human beings and the art of *linguaging*.

Story as Technology

"When a day passes it is no longer there. What remains of it? Nothing more than a story."

*If stories weren't told or books weren't written,
man would live
Like beasts-only for a day.
Today, we live, but tomorrow today will be a
story.
The whole world, all human life, is one long
story.”*
(I.B. Singer in Cooper and Collins in *Look What
Happened to Frog*, 1992, p. 8)

Stories are aural, oral, literary human expressions; human extensions and human technologies designed to explain who we are, how we *come to know*, how we negotiate meaning, and how we communicate. Language is the earliest human technology and stories are a natural extension of who we are as human beings; giving meaning to and extracting meaning from our world. Durnin explains elementally, “Story is our DNA. We are myth incarnate” (personal communication, June 3, 2015). Rietz (1988) refers to stories as “a human invention” and “learning ‘story’ and learning to ‘story’ involves learning a way of thinking, a way of organizing events and information, a way of knowing” (p. 164). King (2003) truthfully declares that stories are all we are (p. 2). “We live by stories and we live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted – knowingly or unknowingly – in ourselves” (Okri, as cited in King, p. 153).

Frank Smith (1990) validates that our “thought flows in terms of stories—stories about events, stories about people, and stories about intentions and achievements. The best teachers are the best storytellers. We learn in the form of stories. We construct stories to make sense of events. Our prevailing propensity is to impose story structures on all experience, real or imagined....The brain is a story-seeking, story creating instrument” (pp. 62-63). Burke and Orenstein (1995) document, just as the axe was a tool that changed civilization, so too, the

alphabet and the printing press became the most powerful tools for change thus far (p. 75). The ensuing literacies negotiated with computer and digital technologies continue to change, and perhaps, challenge, our cognitive synapses to new levels.

“Narrative knowledge is experiential and cultural knowing. It is the best means available for students to organize their experiences and make meaning for themselves” (Cooper and Collins in Look What Happened to Frog, 1992, p. 5).

Thompson (2007), Deschenie (2007), and Epstein (2010) prompt our thinking about multiperspectives within the learning environment by reminding us to ask *whose voices are we leaving out?* In differentiating instruction, learning styles, and multiple intelligences, although common professional knowledge, we fail to realize that orality and literacy, two distinct, yet interwoven communication styles, are very much related. Gardner (1993) refers to first knowledge that children learn at home as *primary* knowledge. When children come to school, they learn *secondary* knowledge, which could be scaffolded or connected to their primary knowledge. In this way, we tap prior knowledge for learning. As educators how can we better integrate children’s first knowledge or cultural knowledge in the learning process within the context of school? Grant and Sleeter (2007) reference a “cultural split” when students’ school life is disconnected from their real world (p. 46). Stories children bring to school represent who they are and where they come from, while also allowing them to interpret and understand their world. Their stories seem to be valuable tools for learning and teaching in the school setting.

Dual Perspectives

“People often are powerless, alone, afraid; this is because someone else is telling their story for

them: 'You are stupid. You are ugly. You are undesirable. You are useless.' Through storytelling, you recognize your real story." (Joe Bruchac, *Abenaki*)

Some indigenous students come from a storied place of *coming to know* their identity, culture, and language through the oracy of language as their first knowledge. According to Deschenie (2007): "As No Child Left Behind seeks to shape a more literate society, we must remember that we come from cultures rooted in the power and beauty of oral tradition and face-to-face storytelling" (para. 24).

Thompson (2007) understands these contrasting views as dual perspectives:

The Western view: "A gifted individual, such as a Shakespeare, out of his own imagination uses the many complex techniques of rhetoric and composition to create a work of art, which we lesser mortals struggle to fully appreciate through a complicated process we call literary analysis."

In the Indigenous view, the oral tradition represents "the other side of the miracle of language" as described by Momaday in *The Man Made of Words*: "the telling of stories, the recitation of epic poems, the singing of songs, the making of prayers, the chanting of magic and mystery, the exertion of the human voice upon the unknown—in short, the spoken word." To paraphrase a familiar document, this sounds to me very much like a literature "of the people, by the people, and for the people." (p. 13)

Wampanoag storyteller gkisedtanamoogk (pronounced geh kis eh tan' eh mook with *eh* as schwa) explains the complementarity of stories and writing during the Writers Project summer camp in Maine:

"Storytelling is always an integral part of how indigenous people live their culture so we intended to cultivate cultural norms, to create community as members of the Wabanaki Confederacy, and thus promote writing as a form of storytelling" (Epstein, 2010, para. 20).

A Diné high school teacher admitted during our summer writing project that cultural knowledge fosters a deeper understanding of writing and pondered if she could use students' cultural learning to teach writing (LaVelda Charley, personal communication, June 16, 2010). I pondered why this was even a question to consider for its obvious emphatic *yes, of course* response, but understood the historical context of recognizing the need to ask such a question posed by this teacher. This teacher's funds of knowledge were never validated in *her* school experience.

Moayeri and Smith (2010) identify literacy as a cultural practice with different literacies influenced by culture, communities, and its role in communicating those stories and community values. Oral tradition is a worldview, a way of knowing as a "distinctive intellectual tradition, not simply as myths and legends" (Moayeri and Smith, p. 414), and in comparing traditional knowledge with scientific knowledge, it is often viewed as illegitimate. A disconnect between home/community literacies and school literacy occurs where "literacy is most often taught in schools as decontextualized, technical skills" resulting in "holding back literacy development for children, particularly those whose home literacies are undervalued and ignored by the schools" (Dyson, 2003, as cited in Moayeri and Smith, 2010, p. 409). Hanamuxw (in Moayeri and Smith, 2010, p. 414) acknowledges ways of knowing for First Nation Peoples as: scientific knowledge as represented in the dominant society; lifeways as experienced in everyday life; and narrative ways of learning through stories.

In honoring multiple ways of knowing, as culturally competent teachers, we can recognize “whose stories are being privileged and whose stories are being marginalized in the representations of the other” (p. 415). Thompson and Smith (2009) acknowledge the responsibility of teacher education programs in mitigating Native American stereotypes and inaccuracies within K-12 curriculum and teaching practices by engaging teacher candidates in educational and cultural opportunities for their professional learning, as well as doing their homework through background reading.

For those who were denied and punished for speaking their mother-tongue language are now using the English language as their alternate language of power, as an instrument of social justice. Anzaldua (2007) explains: “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language” (p. 81). The irony is not lost when children were punished for speaking their Diné language in boarding schools. However, Diné and other Native languages became strategic and technological intelligence during WWII with the success of Code Talkers.

Literacy enhancements of multimodal and multigenre contexts, supported by current technology, are resulting in a blending and bending of the two, creating a more holistic communication landscape for understanding and relating to the world. The efficacy of future reading and writing skills is contingent upon a strong foundation of listening and speaking skills. As educators, we can support a more balanced approach to oracy and literacy in our school culture. Oral storytelling is natural and is an important precursor to writing stories. It follows the developmental way we learn language by listening and speaking first, which leads to developing writing literacy.

Family Storytelling Project

No one has to tell us, or teach a child, to perceive life in terms of stories; it is what everyone does. The total of facts and figures that we all collect—a few statistics, telephone numbers, birthdays, addresses—is miniscule compared with all the complex stories contained within the brain. (Smith, 1990, p. 64)

White-Kaulaity (2007) reminds teachers that “oral tradition is much more valued in Native communities. In fact, the culture is embedded in the language...However, schools and mainstream society often do not accept or consider the value of orality” (p. 561). White-Kaulaity encourages the balance of both literacies, for “both types of literacy can work together to educate children to be lifelong learners” (p. 566).

Storytelling Project-Stories as Content and Context for Learning Rationale

Smith (1990) affirms that “Our stories are the vantage points from which we perceive the world and the people in it” (pp. 64-65). Christensen (2000) explains: “As teachers, we have daily opportunities to affirm that our students’ lives and languages are unique and important. We do that in the selections of literature we read, in the history we choose to teach, and we do it by giving legitimacy to our student’s lives as a content worthy of study” (p. 103). Christensen engages her students in “sweet learnings” (pp. 23-26) to acknowledge that family experiences and family teachers are valuable assets that they bring to school. For Christensen, this is an important message to convey to students: “Because I live in a society that honors the wealthy and tends to hold in greatest esteem ‘high status’ formal knowledge, I must find ways to honor the intelligence, common sense, and love that beats in the hearts of my students’ families” (p. 25).

The richness of personal stories our children bring to school is the focus of this oral history project. As teachers, we recognize that students who walk through our school doors are *walking stories*, connected to family members who may be *walking encyclopedias* of knowledge. Recognizing the meaningful and relevant connections of students' own lives as valid content and rationale for learning, our family storytelling project honors both oral and literate ways of communicating and sharing knowledge. Students seeking out their own family stories validated their own sense of belonging and self-identity, and were able to learn the skills necessary for communicating, orally and literary. Student family stories become the content and context for learning, which recognizes and validates their own cultural history as Christensen (2000) confirms and our practicum experience honors this significant learning and teaching insight.

Scaffolding teacher candidates in becoming culturally competent educators presents an understanding of the complexity involved in discerning our own biases and cultural perceptions (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Ladson-Billings (2001) emphasizes that teachers can be the conduits in connecting "student culture as a basis for learning" (p. 99).

Backstory

In providing our undergraduate preservice teacher candidates with practicum experiences, teaching diverse students, and becoming culturally relevant teachers themselves, the Oral Family History project started in a fourth grade classroom in a rural school district in Northwestern New Mexico in 2007, as a university and local school literacy /storytelling collaboration. This project has continued into the present, where we now work with third graders in one classroom within the same school district. Each semester teacher candidates, prior to their full time student teaching experiences,

are invited to participate in the family history practicum project. Participating classroom teachers are graduates of the university teaching education program. All, with the exception of one, were past teacher candidates with the university instructor in the Oral Family History or Storytelling project.

During our Oral Family History Practicum project, we focus on the storytelling arts throughout the year. The project begins with the Chautauqua oral form of storytelling, following natural language development. Chautauqua refers to the adult educational and entertainment movement originating at Chautauqua Lake, New York, in the late 19th century. Chautauqua gatherings became popular throughout rural America throughout the 1920s, whereby the lives of significant individuals were told as first person character accounts (Chautauqua: Bringing History to Life, 2015). Children choose a family character to tell the story *as that character*, which is performed at the culminating storytelling night for family and friends (Chautauqua Family Storytelling, 2010). The following semester mentees scaffold in the storytelling process and write a finished narrative draft about a family hero. Their final narratives are bound in books which they read at the culminating Author's Chair performance for family and friends. Third and fourth graders have written about their cars, pets, siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents, some of whom were deceased.

Preservice teacher candidates connect theory from their methods courses with the practice of coaching in the classroom where students' family stories become the content and context for writing and reading. Preservice teachers become storytelling coaches for their young storytellers (mentees) through the process. Their stories become the bridge for negotiating the complexities of cultural competence, cultural relevancy, and cultural

sensitivity *in situ* in the classroom, as storytelling is humanized orally through Chautauqua performances (semester 1), and later on through writing their own book about a family hero (semester 2). New Mexico Entry Level Competencies for *Diversity* and *Family & Community* are identified in APPENDIX A.

Each storytelling coach worked with three to five mentees and each semester's project was six to eight weeks in duration. Sessions ranged from 45 minutes to one hour and fifteen minutes, depending on the teacher's classroom schedule. Storytelling coaches and instructor debriefed following each session; all reflected weekly and planned for each subsequent session.

Methodology

Data collected evolved from weekly lesson plans that each storytelling coach presented to their third grade mentees. Lessons were designed by the instructor as a guiding framework for coaches, which they could customize and adapt to their respective teaching styles. Coaches reflected weekly on a class online blog and/or on their individual web page. Coaches also wrote a research narrative about their own storytelling experiences and their perspective about stories in teaching. Anecdotal notes were also collected during coaches' debriefing following storytelling sessions each week. Storytelling coaches and the instructor were participant observers during the project. The storytelling project was considered part of students' curricular English Language Arts writing standards. As emergent design, themes surfaced while analyzing coaches' reflections, research narratives, anecdotal notes, and student artifacts (Chautauqua characters, written stories, illustrations, family performances, and author's chair).

The project is aligned with writing and oral delivery connected to Common Core State

Standards, which is coordinated with the classroom teachers' curriculum. In establishing common vocabulary in which to talk about story throughout the project, the following story elements are introduced and are used as assessment during the project:

- Dialogue-Character's voice and language
- Character Description
- Setting & blocking-place of story and how movement unfolds
- Monologue & Dialogue – what character thinks and feels & what character says to others
- Experiences-smells, tastes, sounds as if the listener were there
- Figurative language-descriptive language in telling your story
- Flashbacks –remembering the past

Writing workshop processes (Zainuddin, Morales-Jones, Yahya, and Ariza, 2011) supported the communicative and language experience approaches, where students' prior knowledge and experience is brought into the classroom through their family stories. Working with their stories provided authentic language opportunities, connecting classroom learning with their lived experiences. The writing workshop includes:

- a. Prewriting (Brainstorming)
- b. Story Drafts
- c. Revising, Editing, Conferencing
- d. Conference with storytelling coach & peers
- e. Written Final story
- f. Culminating Performance - Chautauqua or Author's Chair

Emerging Themes

"The stories we tell not only explain things to others, they explain them to ourselves." (Donald Norman)

Coaching Role

Storytelling coaches were able to explore beyond the traditional teacher role. Coaches recognized their roles as director, facilitator, motivator, as well as learner, alongside their mentees (Papert, 2001). Building a trusting relationship with students was our primary focus when first introducing the project. Introducing ourselves with *I Am (from) Poems* helped establish this connection. Storytelling coaches introduced themselves with sharing their *I Am Poems* and then assisted their mentees in creating their own *I Am (from) poems*. In this way, storytelling coaches learned about their mentees. Their mentees shared personal events and stories through conversations during each subsequent session. The relationships formed were strong, trusting, and solid. One of the storytelling coaches, Chelsea Begay, used her own *I Am Poem* as a teaching and learning strategy:

Once the students started their Chautauqua story, I fed them ideas on what they could write and reminded them of my *I Am* poem and the key points they identified. I often used that to help them develop their story as well as using the storytelling elements (character description, dialogue, etc.). Furthermore, I often took their pencil and wrote for them as they fed me their ideas. I jotted everything they said. I thought this little tactic was effective because I took into account how much more ideas they threw out there. I figured if they are writing themselves, they worry too much about spelling and grammar. But that seemed the least of their problems when I took the pen. (December 12, 2014)

Listening Role

Listening to students became an important part of the writing process each week as coaches

explored how to make connections and build trust with their new storytellers. Graves (1985) asserts: “The hardest thing for teachers, and administrators, to realize the importance of listening to children. When the teacher listens, the children are finding out what they know, learning how to say it, and discovering that another human being really wants to hear it” (p. 128). As teachers the best way to learn is by practice, as Graves reminds us.

Epstein (2010) asks how do we teach strategies for writing by embedding them in oral language? Moayeri and Smith (2010) suggest: “Familiarizing ourselves and valuing the diverse and multiple literacies that students of different cultures bring with them enhances the learning potential of those students and that of the entire class” (p. 415). Ladson-Billings (2001) describes the responsibility of culturally relevant teachers as those who “learn about the students’ cultures and their communities” by bridging “the divide between the school and the students’ homes... They understand that the interest they show in students’ backgrounds and lives has an important payoff in the classroom” (p. 99).

Zainuddin, Yahya, Morales-Jones and Ariza (2011) explain that the complexities of teaching extend beyond merely understanding learning styles, but more significantly by implementing different learning styles with students that effectively meet their learning needs. Storytelling coaches recognized students’ preferred learning styles by working with them and getting to know them through observations and conversations. There were many coaching conversations that supported scribing for students, if the act of writing interfered with the flow of their thoughts.

Remaining focused on the learning objective of telling a story changed the way storytelling coaches supported their mentees during the process. Ryan (Niehaus, 2010) reflected on specific strategies he used during the project:

Since I have begun the process of the practicum I have been adapting to my students. I have learned some new strategies in dealing with the students. One strategy I learned was to focus on what is wanted from the student and not to muddle it up with irrelevant tasks. I learned this from getting the students to begin their Chautauquas. I would have never thought of having them tell me their stories while I scribed. It is obvious now that the telling of their stories was the objective and to have them write it themselves may have led to students being more concentrated on correct spelling or grammar. (Niehaus, 2010)

Additionally, coaches became aware of how their own cultural values, beliefs, and biases coexist and may sometimes “clash” with the students they mentor (Zainuddin, Yahya, Morales-Jones and Ariza, 2011, p. 45). Accepting multiplicities of cultural, family, and school paradigms are attributes of culturally relevant teaching. Understanding which students are field dependent learners and which are field-independent learners informs us of how we should proceed. Coaches became aware of differentiating for each of their mentees in their coaching sessions. Their stories were more than just fulfilling an assignment; their stories were tied to their identities, language, culture, and academic learning.

One coach shared her discovery through collegial dialogue among her peers and with the instructor during debriefing. “I began to steer him away from choosing his brother because his brother is so young and suggested that maybe he choose someone else on his brainstorm list. Then he kept coming back to his brother and I realized that I was imposing my own ideas on the student.” It was an insightful moment to connect how our own biases will emerge and interfere in our coaching. This storytelling coach

was able to put her own biases aside as she continued to let her mentee *own* his family hero story.

Storytelling coach Nathan Holmes reflected about overriding his concerns with one of his mentees:

As they write their Chautauqua stories, the students have been deeply mindful of the perspective of the character. This surprised me a little. I learned in the previous workshop not to underestimate the students’ skills, but perspective is a hard concept to grasp, especially for third graders. I can’t help but admire their attention to detail and their focus on getting it right. One student in particular shocked me with his story. He approached me with the idea of doing his Chautauqua on his dad’s old Mustang convertible. At first I was hesitant to allow this because I thought it may be too difficult for him. I decided to allow it rather than obstruct the storytelling process. I must admit I had my concerns. This particular student has trouble paying attention and following instructions. I soon had my concerns quieted when he presented me with his story. The way he used figurative language and brought the car to life was masterful. I feel his story could be mistaken for one of a student twice his age. (December 11, 2014)

Learning Beside Students

Storytelling coach Hanson Begay celebrates opportunities to learn about his students during the project:

When my students would go on what seemed like tangents, those were the times that I seemed to learn the most about their backgrounds, home life, and cultures. Tangents are a form of openness and comfort; and it was during these times

that my students demonstrated our trusting relationship. (December 10, 2014)

Patricia Hill (Hill, 2010) reflects about aspects of the mutual learning relationship with her mentees:

Midway through the project, I have grown in my ability to see past the discomfort of growing. I see further - to the benefit. When I am placed in an unfamiliar situation, I can appreciate the fact that I may not know exactly what I will come out with...but I am up for the journey....

My confidence and independence have been bolstered by my involvement with the Chautauqua series. The kids I work with push me and I push back and we get on down the road with spring in our step. This surprises me because, yes, I am asking them to do things they do not necessarily want to do. We respect each other and we work for each other. I believe they trust their instincts even when they are aware of entering uncharted territory. They are trusting me that this IS fun and it WILL work out and it WILL be GREAT! As a teacher in training, that means so much, to see the relationship develop and the learning taking place on so many levels.

Mary Durfey (Durfey, 2010) reflects on connecting with her mentees:

Sharing stories with the children has helped them see connections in stories and give definition to family traditions. It's also helped them experience the art of a good story and the value of details and descriptions that help the reader 'see' what the author sees. Another valuable strategy we've used in the practicum is building webs and pulling out the details of our

stories. Even more importantly is the aspect of connecting and learning from the children, their stories, their experiences as we have discussions.

Another coach talked about her mentee's dad who died in a car accident when he was born. He was asked if he listens to stories about his dad who was a Marine. When he replied *no*, he was encouraged to ask the questions that he was curious to know about his father and list those for his interview questions to ask his mother, uncles, and grandparents. The grandparents of this young author thanked the storytelling coach, after the Author's Chair, for working with their grandson in telling this story.

Storytelling coach Amber Gibson reflected on her overall experience in the project:

Stories helped students to connect with each other and to build relationships with each other and myself. Giving students the chance to share personal ideas and memories helps us as educators to affirm that their experiences and their life has value. Storytelling offers a profound way for us to be connected with each other and it is a valuable asset to my future classroom. (December 9, 2014)

Chelsea Akins reflected on the bond of stories with her three mentees:

After our time together in the classroom, my trio has come to see me as a source of validation. I have listened to the stories they have told me, whether that had anything to do with their Chautauqua characters or not... I absorbed their information, and pinned it to memory. Every time I recite back their own memories, they feel a little more confident than they had before and they inevitably decide to share more. Their stories are about Disneyland, and camping, and how many prairie dogs their dog ate over the

summer, and the details themselves are almost less important than the connections they are making when they tell those stories. Just because they are children does not mean they are any less vulnerable than adults: they need the bonds that come from human interaction just as much as we do. These bonds help validate the ideas and opinions that children have been growing within themselves. We have our own Chautauqua stories to share, and we use these to model for our students. Not only is the initial connection important, but so is the delivery....When we tell stories, we not only want the kinship that comes with sharing information, but we want a positive connection. Working with these students, we not only form natural emotional attachment, but we are also teaching with our stories. (November 21, 2014)

Storytelling coach Hanson Begay made connections between his oral traditions and working with his young mentees:

As weeks progressed, I learned that my students learned to appreciate the art of storytelling. My students started to engage with each other as they wrote about their character. This reminded me of how my paternal grandmother spoke to me during my adolescence years. My paternal grandmother was a Navajo woman who had strong beliefs in the oral tradition. Day after day, she would remind me that the worth of what she spoke of could not be found in entertainment or in mere objects such as money, but through her oral message. The beliefs of my grandmother were echoed in the words of Barry Lopez: "Sometimes you need a story more than food to stay alive." This quote also applied to when I told my students

that their stories of their characters mattered and would show their parents and teachers that they can be viewed as students who truly have a story to tell or a treasure to share. Nichiren Daishonin said: "Treasures of the heart are the most valuable of all." (December 10, 2014)

Hanson Begay further reflected on what he learned from his students:

The students I coached pushed me and questioned me, in turn teaching me more than I instructed them. I never knew that students half my age would inspire me to talk freely without judging me....Even though I began with modeling, sharing my own personal story through my brainstorm and drawings, my students knew exactly who they would choose for their family Chautauqua character. For myself, I was indecisive of the character I wanted to become. My mentees helped me define who I would choose as their inspiration and enthusiasm gave me comfort to express myself beyond this shell of indecisiveness....If the teacher is reluctant to share and tell stories, the students will also display this behavior. Storytelling is very personal and therefore there has to be a level of respect in order to allow for this comfort. (December 10, 2014)

Storytelling coach Rachael Charleston expressed what she learned from her students about respect for story.

My experience with my students has been profound. When they say that storytelling is giving a gift of a story it truly is a gift. These students have learned what it means to put together their thoughts into words and they have learned literary terms about a story... I think that they were the ones that taught me the

most. I have learned that all students are different in how they approach story telling. I have also learned that it takes a lot of thinking and deep introspection in order to see things from someone else's perspective especially when you are trying to tell a story from that point of view.

They were hesitant at first to tell the story as the character but then I shared my character with them and I became my five year old daughter. Well they really got a kick out of that and then they began to think like their character. They continued to think like them and learn to see from another person's perspective. These students trusted us with a very important gift of their story. I think it changed my attitude towards storytelling as well because I figured out how important it can be to students and their writing skills. (December 8, 2014)

Stories Are Who We Are

Students became *actors* (Freire and Macedo, 1987), literally and figuratively, in the Chautauqua storytelling process. They were able to "name their world" as they became empowered in giving voice and agency to their own experiences (p. 159). Their family stories confirmed and validated that their families and experiences are valuable, as they were integrated and connected, as content and context for learning in school (Christensen, 2000; Moayeri and Smith, 2010). Their family stories became counterparts to stories they read in academic books in their classrooms and school library. Copies of bound anthologies of their stories were given to the school librarian for circulation in the school library.

Eventually during the process, these stories become more than completing an assignment. These stories are technological extensions of each student. Learning the art and

craft of drafting our stories to include: voice, style, organization, figurative language, punctuation, and peer conferences, is the academic goal. How do teacher coaches build trust and invite, wrestle, knead, coerce, lull, entice, conjure, levitate, ameliorate, and humor the space with their young storytellers and authors in eliciting the best possible stories?

This is an emotional enterprise where teacher candidates learn more about themselves, in the process of coaching linguistically diverse students, because they have grappled with the messiness, the elegance, and the human propensity that grounds us all - our stories. Story becomes essential in learning as we rely on children's prior knowledge, honor their funds of knowledge, and teach in more culturally relevant ways. Recognizing normalcy that multiple perspectives exist, with the teacher's perspective being only one of many, invites opportunities of learning alongside our students on a daily basis. Stories are a natural way to enter and sustain the process of teaching and learning in balanced and natural ways.

Storytelling coach Debbie Griffith's reflection about her students and story:

Between last semester when we did the hero stories and this semester with storytelling, I learned just how much students are capable of. Even if they are shy or think they don't have personal stories, they really do. Once they get started they begin to enjoy it and really get into the process. I learned that storytelling is an effective teaching method for ELA standards and I would like to think that once I am in the classroom I will remember this experience and incorporate storytelling into my teaching. (December 5, 2014)

Storytelling coach Amber Gibson reflected on the power of her mentees' performance:

It was great hearing students' hero stories about the family members that they loved and cared so much about but seeing them perform and act out the character of the family member they love is such a bigger gift than just writing a hero story. (December 9, 2014)

Storytelling coach Hanson Begay's words capture the essence of story in teaching and learning:

As I have worked in the schools through tutoring and practicum experiences this semester, I have seen a pattern of what seems to be that learning needs to be focused on assessments. There doesn't seem to be time allotted or an appreciation that there should be time made for such things as storytelling. A tradition that at one time was the only way to transfer information and knowledge, storytelling has now become a novelty and is slowly making its way back into the schools with the realization of how important storytelling is and how it benefits and enriches all subject areas. As stated in *Telling Tales in School in Teaching and Learning* (Koepke, 1990): "Children are motivated to work hard because their stories have personal meaning" (p. 32). A standardized test does not hold personal meaning to them, as many assignments I think that are given do not, and therefore students struggle and have a hard time feeling successful. Allowing students the opportunity to share of themselves, they are able to find their own connections in their learning and it shows in their growth and progress. (December 10, 2014)

Rural Teaching Implications

The Oral Family Storytelling project has significant implications in a rural community,

where storytelling coaches will become future teachers in the communities where they grew up and maintain family connections. Some teacher candidates will teach in the same schools where they were once students. In some cases, teacher candidates will student teach with teachers who once taught them. Teacher candidates in our rural school districts tend to be place-based, as a result. Therefore, this sense of community is close-knit, familiar and predictable, whereby teachers know parents and their families and may teach multiple generations within one family, over the course of their professional career.

On the other hand, experiences may be limited within a rural community, requiring more opportunities to challenge, extend, and be receptive in meeting diverse needs of students who are different culturally, linguistically, ideologically. Pedagogically, as teachers, they understand the inherent complexity of stories and appreciation of the writing process, requiring them to write alongside their students as teachers who write and writers who teach. Diversity courses are now integrated in teaching preparation programs. The Oral Family Storytelling Project is one way to marry theory with authentic practice. Teacher candidates are guided and supported within various aspects of teaching the writing process, the value of stories, and how stories are a natural way to build trust and relationships with students, while validating and honoring them as individuals. This practicum project provides teacher candidates with relevant opportunities during their professional teaching program to work with students in authentic ways connecting real life contextual learning. Through such a practicum project more preservice teachers validate this career choice as they gain confidence and familiarity in engaging students pedagogically, cognitively, culturally, and linguistically.

Such an Oral Family History project provides our rural teachers exposure and

practice of grappling with issues of diversity, teaching, guiding, and supporting students, who may be different linguistically, culturally, and/or ethnically. This context provides learning intersections and dynamics for reflecting on their practice, their teaching, their thinking, and their biases, with stories as the backdrop for such reflective practice. Grant and Sleeter (2007) suggests that teachers “take into account their students’ world forces” of inequity related to ethnicity, gender, socio-economic class, ability, language, sexuality when considering the school curriculum (p. 44). How does the L.A. curriculum interface with students’ lives outside of school, Grant and Sleeter ask? The Oral Family History project is a way to bridge this apparent disconnect in students’ lives outside of school with curricular goals within school, thus validating and recognizing their knowledge, experiences, skills, which comprise their stories, as valuable content for learning within the school context. This opens the opportunity for teacher candidates to extend their own learning in the process. (see APPENDIX A.)

Epilogue

Treasures of the heart are the most valuable of all.” (Nichiren Daishonin)

How could we have imagined that such an innocent writing project could become so intense and complex, and be such an emotional experience for students, storytelling coaches, and instructors? This represents the relational side of learning grounded in the personal, storied experiences of these children.

Following the most recent Chautauqua Family Night in Fall 2014, I visited the third grade classroom and spontaneously asked students what they thought about their evening performances. I grabbed a dry erase marker in one hand extending it to young storytellers who

were interested in talking into the pretend microphone and recorded them with a digital camera in the other hand. I was surprised when each one shared their experience, eventually speaking with tears about what it meant to them and their families. In processing their heartfelt and unpredictable responses, I shared some of the video excerpts with our New Mexico Bisti Writing Project (affiliate of the National Writing Project) colleagues. Through a writing prompt, their insight confirmed the efficacy of story and the depth of sharing story with others. They generously gave me permission to include their sage thoughts below:

Stephen Winterstein (June 17, 2014):

People expect third graders to write about birthday presents and toys and playgrounds. But when they’ve got a chance to write about real things, and have support to do it, they are every bit as authentic, sincere, and true as any memoir ever published. What if these kids never had an audience for this stuff? I’m certain they meant what they wrote, but without seeing adults’ reactions, would they have ever understood the power of their own words? I doubt it. They need to see grownups’ faces, and remember their own quite obviously flowing emotions. That’s when there’s no arguing about the necessity of good writing. When Trace declared his story “excellent,” was there really any doubt about it? Had he ever felt that before? And when the bilingual child gave himself an A minus for his spontaneous translation for his mother, was there any question about what kind of standard he had set for himself? They internalized a sense of quality and power, and their families got a glimpse of what can happen.

Michael Thompson (June 17, 2014):

Wow, clearly our family stories, among the most personal of all stories, do matter. I begin to matter at a very young age. I'm glad to see these young writers learn to experience the deep emotions that their writings and their readings have the power to cause. In these videos we see the difficult first stage of learning what kind of unpredictable humanness occurs when we share our stories with the rest of the world. Not that our stories do much to change the world. Sharing our stories *changes us*. It makes us feel aware of what we actually care most about in our lives. It reminds us that our depth of feeling parallels the depth of feeling which our fellow human beings must also feel.

Kristine Ashworth (June 17, 2014):

Writing is so powerful, and not just the act or process of writing. It is the actual verbal expression of a piece that has the most power. Time after time after time, adults and children of all ages are so moved by hearing their words spoken and read by their mouths with their inflections that come from inside their heads. When a person writes, it is TOTALLY internal until that person reads it and hears what it IS, not what they thought it was.

"We are chords to other chords to other chords, if we are lucky, to melody." (Joy Harjo)

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APPENDIX A

New Mexico Competencies for entry level elementary teachers (excerpt)

F. Diversity:

(1) The teacher understands how students differ in their approaches to learning and creates instructional opportunities

that are adapted to diverse learners.

(2) The teacher organizes and manages varied learning groups as appropriate in each of the disciplines as appropriate to

the needs and/or interests of students and the goals of the lesson.

(6) The teacher identifies and develops appropriate responses to differences among language learners.

(7) The teacher demonstrates sensitivity to New Mexico's unique linguistic and cultural diversity.

G. Family and community:

(1) The teacher is aware of the culture, history, and values of the community in which he or she teaches.

(2) The teacher understands, respects, and values the central role that community and family play in the learning

process of a child and will be able to utilize these experiences to enhance learning.

(3) The teacher understands that there must be a reciprocal relationship between the school and the community.

(4) The teacher values and utilizes the knowledge that all community members have something to contribute to the

classroom to assist in the educational process.

(5) The teacher recognizes that families and community can be used as teaching resources to enhance learning and

children's self-value.

(NMAC Entry Level Competencies for Teachers)