

Family Literacy

An Authentic Setting for Building Culturally Responsive Teachers

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Introduction

Classrooms continue to become more diverse, while the demographic composition of teachers remains extremely homogeneous, where 80% of teachers identify as White. Consequently, culturally responsive teaching (CRT) can be challenging for teachers whose cultural identities differ from those of their students.

Gay (2001) defined CRT as “using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (p. 106). However, Gay stressed that “many teachers are inadequately prepared to teach ethnically diverse students” (p. 106) because they lack explicit knowledge about their students’ “cultural values, traditions, communication, learning styles, contributions, and relational patterns” (p. 107).

Furthermore, preparing teachers to be culturally responsive requires cultural competence, which Gallavan (2007) referred to as the process by which a person builds an “awareness of and sensitivity to [their] own thoughts, words, actions, and interactions related to culture in both formal and informal settings and expressions from other individuals” (p. 9).

Columbo (2007) warned us that teachers who have not developed cultural competence are likely to view their

students’ diverse cultural backgrounds through mainstream lenses and see deficits rather than strengths. Consequently, for teachers to affirm students’ diversity, they must experience a lifelong journey of transformation, working with students of diverse racial, ethnic, social class, and language backgrounds (Nieto, 2000).

Because the first step toward CRT is learning about students’ cultural backgrounds, providing teacher candidates with experiences for acquiring this critical information requires more attention. Historically, when seeking information about students’ cultural experiences, standard practice is for teachers to ask parents to fill out surveys or questionnaires that lack parent voice and perspective.

This approach is especially true when seeking information about each family’s funds of knowledge, such as language, family values and traditions, friends and family, family outings, household chores, favorite television shows, and family occupations (Moll et al., 1992). Edwards and Pleasants (1997) referred to this approach to learning about home literacy practices as a one-dimensional approach that examines only artifacts and activities and stressed the need “to examine the physical environment, interpersonal interactions and emotional climates which are often just as critical” (p. 27) to understanding students’ cultural backgrounds.

On the other hand, Florio-Ruane (2011) stressed that talk “can bring diverse people together and foster the learning of others’ language codes and literate practices” (p. 90). For example, a family interview is an excellent tool for getting to know families through

discourse (Allen, 2010). Teachers can learn about families’ interests, talents, roles, languages, and literacies in their homes and communities by talking with parents. By doing so, parents are positioned as the providers of their funds of knowledge, leaving them feeling valued and respected (Allen, 2010). Consequently, more authentic approaches to learning about families’ cultural backgrounds where teachers know about the home context, home literacy practices, traditions, language, and family culture are needed.

Hence, when designed correctly, family literacy activities can serve as authentic settings where parents provide teachers critical knowledge about their families’ cultures. As a result, teachers learn to value their students’ backgrounds and reflect on which aspects of their students’ cultures they will integrate within their curriculum. At the same time, teachers develop cultural competence and recognize the cultural influences that they bring to their classrooms and that impact their teaching and students’ learning.

The purpose of this article is to share a family literacy activity geared particularly for the K–6 level in which parents share with teachers valuable knowledge about their children’s cultural backgrounds. This multicultural bookmaking activity, a family literacy approach, builds critical cultural understandings between parents, teachers, and students. These synchronized interactions lead to meaningful parent–teacher relationships that build teacher efficacy for valuing cultural diversity (Gallavan, 2007), which is necessary for creating culturally responsive classroom environments.

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Learning From and Valuing Parent Stories

Family literacy projects that support the merging of school and home environments are the key to building teacher efficacy for valuing diversity. Therefore, family literacy programs should provide equitable opportunities for parents to share valuable information about their children's home literacy experiences.

When parents and teachers work together to understand students' cultural backgrounds, everyone reaps the benefits. First, teachers learn about their students' home literacy practices and cultural knowledge from parents' stories. These stories provide insight for teachers who struggle with how to help their students "master conventional school-valued literacy practices" when they bring "varied literacy resources and identities" (Compton-Lilly, 2006, p. 60) from their home environments to the school setting.

Next, when parents share nontraditional practices from their "diverse resources grounded in childhood culture, media culture, and divergent literacy practices" (Moll et al., 1992, p. 60), teachers learn about their students' families' funds of knowledge, leading to cultural competence. As a result, "teachers can successfully utilize media and cultural resources that lie outside of the traditional walls of schools to create learning experiences that are uniquely responsive to individual students" (Compton-Lilly, 2006, p. 58) by incorporating them into their classroom practices.

This culturally responsive approach to teaching helps teachers shift their perspective of students from a deficit perspective that focuses on what skills students lack or what they cannot do to an asset-based lens that honors family practices and values their integration into classroom practices. Finally, when teachers seek knowledge from parents about their children's early reading development, parents are positioned as partners in their children's learning.

This collaborative approach to family literacy creates a two-way partnership between home and school. Parents become involved in school literacy activities, while teachers learn to value family culture as important background information for culturally responsive teaching practices.

Multicultural Bookmaking Activity

A family literacy bookmaking activity is engaged in to assist teachers in

learning important information about families' cultural backgrounds for creating culturally responsive classroom environments. Because activities are based on several topics related to culture, educators in charge of planning family literacy programs can select the topics and number of sessions to meet the needs of their parent populations.

During each bookmaking activity, mentor texts are presented in shared read-aloud activities which include each parent sharing stories about the book's topic. Following the sharing, each parent writes their story in a personalized book to bring home to illustrate and read with their child.

Each recommended multicultural picture book is then carefully selected and evaluated to serve as a mentor text based on the following topics related to culture: (a) family traditions, holidays, and religion; (b) identity; (c) immigration; (d) family structure; and (e) family role models. Educators can share mentor texts over a series of parent workshops and select books based on family demographics. Examples for each mentor text topic are also shared.

Family Traditions, Holidays, and Religion

Books about family traditions, holidays, and religions offer parents the opportunity to share stories from their own experiences. At the same time, teachers listen to and learn critical knowledge about their students' cultures. For example, *Fry Bread*, written

by Kevin Nobel Maillard, teaches why fry bread is an important symbol for the Native American family tradition with food.

After sharing the book as a read-aloud, parents are invited to tell their own vital stories from their country of origin and cultural background. Parents then create books that tell their stories to take home and share with their children. Table 1 lists a variety of mentor texts that educators could use to launch parent stories about family traditions, holidays, and religion. All the books provide parents the opportunity to share valuable stories about food, language, music, special family customs or holidays, family history, and the region or country from which their family originates.

Identity

Because children's identity develops through language, storytelling, relationships, traditions, and routines in the home literacy environment, picture books about identity allow parents to share stories about growing their children's cultural identities long before entering school. For example, *Alma and How She Got Her Name* by Juana Martinez-Neal shares the family history and story behind how a girl got her name.

After sharing this book as a read-aloud, parents share stories about their children's names and create books to bring home to share with their children. Teachers learn essential information about their students' cultural identities

Table 1
Multicultural Books About Family Traditions, Holidays, and Religion

Mentor text	Author	Key terms and themes
<i>Fry Bread: A Native American Tradition</i>	Kevin Noble Maillard	Native American/Indigenous people; family history and customs; food
<i>Lailah's Lunchbox</i>	Reem Faruqi	Muslim traditions and practices
<i>Binny's Diwali</i>	Thrity Umrigar	Diwali; Hindu
<i>Jalapeno Bagels</i>	Natasha Wing	mixed-heritage family; food
<i>Rice and Rocks</i>	Sandra L. Richards	Jamaican food; various traditions of many cultures
<i>Under My Hijab</i>	Kena Khan	Muslim woman
<i>The Ninth Night of Hannukkah</i>	Erica S. Perl	Hanukkah
<i>Dim Sum for Everyone!</i>	Grace Lin	Chinese American family; traditional food
<i>Dinner at Aunt Connie's House</i>	Faith Ringgold	African American woman; adoption; ancestors; bonding over food

during the process. Table 2 lists a variety of mentor texts that educators could use to launch parent stories about their children's cultural identities.

Immigration

Schools and family programs can provide security and a sense of belonging for immigrant families. Books about immigration offer parents the opportunity to share stories about their families' experiences when coming to a new country and their dreams for the future.

For example, *Areli Is a Dreamer* by Areli Morales, a DACA Dreamer, shares her journey from Mexico to the United States living as an undocumented immigrant. After sharing the book as a read-aloud, parents share their stories about their families' journeys to America and their dreams for the future. Table 3 lists a variety of mentor

texts that educators can use to launch parent stories about immigration. The listed mentor texts are also available in Spanish.

Family Structure

To celebrate that each family is unique and to create a culture in which parents are equal partners in the workshop learning process, educators can present and discuss a mentor text that honors family differences through a read-aloud.

For example, the book *Fred Stays with Me!* by Nancy Coffelt is about a girl whose parents are divorced and who moves between two homes. Her dog Fred travels with her between both homes and provides a sense of stability in her life. See Table 4 for a variety of mentor texts about family structure.

Reading Role Models

When building home-school connections with parents, teachers must understand their role or a family member's role as a role model for their children in their home literacy environment. Educators can share a mentor text that celebrates the power of being a child's role model.

For example, the book *Mr. George Baker* by Amy Hest tells the story of an intergenerational bond between a boy and a 100-year-old musician who both learn to read while sitting on the boy's porch while waiting for the school bus to come. Table 5 lists stories in both English and Spanish that share various examples of reading role models in families.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, educators are aware of the importance of CRT for today's diverse student population; however, approaches to learning about students' cultural backgrounds are often overlooked. Without question, a prerequisite to implementing CRT is to acquire critical information about students' cultural experiences to create culturally responsive classroom environments. Family literacy activities can provide authentic settings for parents to share valuable cultural background information with teachers by listening to what families share in discovering their set of home literacy practices (Compton-Lilly et al., 2019).

Throughout the family literacy bookmaking activity, parents shared "the stories of [their] children's lives outside the classroom into our everyday work with children" (Keene, 2018, p. x), while teachers listened to parents' stories about their children's home literacy experiences, cultures, and languages. In return, teachers gained critical information about students' cultural backgrounds.

In addition, educators positioned themselves as learners while listening to parents' stories about their children's home literacy experiences and practices, cultures, and languages. Home literacy practices were honored as valuable literacy experiences even if they did not resemble traditional, at-school experiences. Additionally, by drawing on students' funds of knowledge, educators can challenge the deficit notions of language and literacy and honor their students' home literacy practices by strategically connecting them with school literacy learning.

The bookmaking activity and mentor texts based on the different topics of

Table 2
Multicultural Books About Identity

Mentor text (Spanish version)	Author	Key terms and themes
<i>Alma and How She Got Her Name</i> (<i>Alma y cómo obtuvo su nombre</i>)	Juana Martinez-Neal	importance of names; family history and ancestors; Peruvian culture
<i>The Name Jar</i>	Yangsook Choi	importance of names; family; Korean culture
<i>Where Are You From?</i> (<i>¿De dónde eres?</i>)	Yamile Saied Mendez	mixed racial makeup; Argentinean and Puerto Rican culture
<i>What I Am</i>	Divya Srinivasan	Indian American culture
<i>Sulwe</i>	Lupita Nyong'o	race; family; self-esteem; colorism
<i>Your Name Is a Song</i>	Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow	African American culture; music; history of names

Table 3
Multicultural Books About Immigration

Mentor text (Spanish version)	Author	Key terms and themes
<i>Areli Is a Dreamer</i> (<i>Areli es una dreamer: una historia real</i>)	Areli Morales	dreamers; native language; belonging
<i>Dreamers (Soñadores)</i>	Yuyi Morales	dreamers; family; libraries
<i>Carmella Full of Wishes</i> (<i>Los deseos de Carmela</i>)	Matt de la Peña	neighborhood; dreamers; hope
<i>A Map into the World</i> (<i>Un mapa hacia el mundo</i>)	Kalia Yang	Hmong culture; neighbors; love and loss; friendship

culture are recommended for educators to share with parents based on their school demographic needs. These book topics represent only a small number of possibilities for using multicultural literature as an avenue for parents to share stories about their family cultures. This collaborative approach to family literacy creates a two-way partnership between home and school.

When educators utilize these approaches, parents become aware of school literacy activities and learn to support their children's literacy development at home. This family literacy activity builds a partnership where teachers develop a cultural understanding of how home and school literacy experiences can build culturally responsive classroom environments.

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Table 4
Multicultural Books About Family Structure

<i>Mentor text</i>	<i>Author</i>	<i>Key terms and themes</i>
<i>Fred Stays with Me!</i>	Nancy Coffelt	divorce; coparenting and joint custody; moving between two homes
<i>Real Pretend Sisters</i>	Megan Dowd Lambert	adoption; multiracial; two mothers
<i>A Family Is a Family Is a Family</i>	Sara O'Leary	foster care; two moms and two dads; blended family; single parents
<i>When Aidan Became a Brother</i>	Kyle Lukoff	transgender boy; supportive parents; new sibling
<i>Stella Brings the Family</i>	Miriam B. Schiffer	two fathers

Table 5
Mentor Texts About Reading Role Models

<i>Mentor text</i> <i>(Spanish version)</i>	<i>Author</i>	<i>Reading role model</i>
<i>Mr. George Baker</i>	Amy Hest	intergenerational role model
<i>The Wednesday Surprise</i>	Eve Bunting	grandparent
<i>Lola Loves Stories</i> <i>(A Lola le encantan los cuentos)</i>	Anna McQuinn	parent
<i>Lola Reads to Leo</i> <i>(Lola le lee al pequeño Leo)</i>	Anna McQuinn	sibling
<i>The Whisper</i>	Pamela Zagarenski	teacher
<i>Saturday (Sábado)</i>	Oge Mora	mother