

Unpacking Artifacts of Instruction

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores limits and possibilities for students' book bags as data sources in educational research. A discussion of the feasibility of book bags as data sources is followed by a brief description of an ethnographic research project focused on literacy and schooling in families of General Education Diploma (GED) students. The larger study explored literacy practices that were present in homes where both children and parents were engaged in literacy learning. Specifically, I explore two related research questions:

1. What items do children and adults carry in their book bags?
2. How well do the contents of book bags represent children's and adults' home and school experiences?

Examination of both children's and adults' book bags revealed insights into the types of literacy activities children and adults were engaged in at school. The role book bags played in crossing borders between home and school and how well the contents of book bags reflected children's home and school lives were explored. The paper concludes by considering insights gleaned from examining book bags and makes recommendations for the future use of book bags as data sources.

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It was David's idea. A couple years ago I interviewed David, one of my former students, during the summer holidays. I asked David about school when he suddenly got up from the couch, ran up the stairs, and promptly returned with his book bag. Anyone who has had direct contact with a fair number of fourth graders will realize that book bags can hold a great deal of stuff. David's backpack was no exception. I spent the next 20 minutes on a guided tour of its contents.

It immediately occurred to me that David was clearly onto something. Most students carry book bags back and forth to school. I suggest that educational researchers have been generally lax in their attention to this rich data source; in fact, I suspect that millions of informative and fascinating book bags remain unexamined each year. A recent search of educational databases revealed no research reports involving book bags as a sources of data.

Herbert and Irene Rubin (1995) would maintain that David had invited me on a “grand tour” in which participants guide researchers through a series of locations related to a phenomenon being studied. At each stop on the tour, the researcher asks “What happens here?” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 179). In my case, I was interested in David's school experiences, particularly his literacy experiences. David provided me with a grand tour as he spoke about the various items in his book bag. David may not have realized the contribution that he made to my life as a researcher, but I knew that after my tour of his book bag, my work as a researcher had been informed.

This paper explores limits and possibilities presented by book bags as data sources for qualitative research. A discussion of research possibilities is followed by a brief description of an extensive research project that focused on literacy and schooling in families of General Education Diploma (GED) students and included a preliminary foray into the book bags of both parents and children. In this paper, I consider issues related to book bags as a possible data source. Specifically, I explore two related research questions:

1. What items do children and adults carry in their book bags?
2. How well do the contents of book bags represent children's and adults' home and school experiences?

The paper concludes by considering insights gleaned from examining the contents of students' book bags and makes recommendations for further uses of book bags as data sources in research studies.

BOOK BAGS AS A DATA SOURCE

While I do not suggest that data from book bags alone will lead to rich understandings of schooling and instruction, I maintain that book bags reveal information that when triangulated with other sources of information can provide

insights about classrooms, literacy teaching, literacy learning, and ways home and school contexts are connected.

Admittedly the items that I discovered in the book bags of my participants reveal only a snapshot of their classroom literacy practices. What I found on a particular day may or may not reflect the overall literacy program in a particular classroom. However, the inability of book bag data to provide a comprehensive view of classroom literacy practices does not negate the potential of this data source. In this paper, I explore the book bags of 10 GED students and their children to reveal information about the students' literacy and learning experiences.

Lev Vygotsky (1978) challenged prevailing stimulus-response theory by suggesting that tools and signs, like those carried in book bags, mediate people's understandings; he argued that the use of artifacts affects the subject as well as the object of the interaction. Specifically, relationships between people and their goals are mediated by the cultural tools and signs that constitute their lived experiences. Thus, the signs, tools, and artifacts that students use in learning situations are significant and have reciprocal effects on actors, outcomes, and learning situations. Engestrom (2004) described how people mediate activity through the use of artifacts; Engestrom created a model of activity systems which included not only the subject (actor), object (goal), and instruments (artifacts or signs) that mediate activities but also the historically and collectively accepted rules that defined participation, the community within which the activity occurs, and the division of labor within that community. Thus, in accordance with Engestrom's model, classroom interactions involve not only a range of signs and tools but also rules for participation.

James Wertsch (1998) explained that the cultural tools that mediate our lives are situated culturally, institutionally, and historically; they exist not only in the here and now but also through their historical roles. While people use these tools to act upon their worlds, the tools also act upon people mediating ways of thinking, being, and acting. Wertsch argued that people use tools to accomplish multiple purposes and that these purposes can conflict. Tools are also imbued with power; the power to dispense or withhold tools positions people relative to each other. Thus, the artifacts found within book bags were not neutral and inanimate; they are mediating artifacts that were created within particular social contexts and have relevance not only in terms of teachers' instructional agendas and students' goals but also have effects on children and teachers.

Ormerod and Ivanic (2000) noted that literacy practices can sometimes be inferred from the characteristics of the texts that students create. They argued that texts have distinct physical features that provide information about the activities that produced them. According to Ormerod and Ivanic, these written documents embody a "whole constellation of decisions, actions, feelings, beliefs, and processes" (2000, p. 92). However, items from book bags must be treated warily, "documents are useful even though they are not always accurate

and may not be lacking in bias. In fact, documents must be carefully used and should not be accepted as literal recordings of events that have taken place” (Yin, 2003, p. 87). As Yin explains, “the most important use of documents is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources (Yin, 2003, p. 87).

Items found in students’ book bags are examples of extant texts (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). These artifacts were not created as part of the current study and were produced for reasons outside of the study. This is one of the strengths of this data source; the artifacts have not been crafted or constructed in response to a researcher’s request and they are not subject to the Hawthorne effect in which the researcher’s presence affects instructional products.

Furthermore, data from book bags meet some criteria for evaluating the quality of documentary data (Hendrick, Bickman, & Rog, 1993; May, 1997) such as

- being generated for actual purposes within the research context,
- being relevant to issues related to schooling and teaching,
- having been created by participants, and
- being primary sources of information.

However, book bag data does not present a perfect data source. Data from book bags are not complete records of students’ literacy experiences; some children accumulate large numbers of papers, while other children regularly purge their bags; in addition, children may selectively remove certain items from book bags and leave others. Little can be done to address missing information. When investigating book bags the researcher is subject to the idiosyncratic tendencies of individual students in terms of what is and what is not available. Thus, while data from book bags can be collected systematically, the data set is always potentially incomplete, artifacts are often not dated, and the situations that produce documents are known only to students.

While acknowledging the imperfections of book bags as a data source, it is important to recognize that the guided tours of book bags elicited more than the contents of the bags; they also elicited talk about children’s experiences at school as students described the various items in their book bags. At times students stumbled across items that reminded them of particular activities that they might not have mentioned. At other times, the items they shared elicited questions from me. As we looked through the book bags, I made a conscious effort to verbally describe the items we encountered.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

I could see the GED center where I completed this research project from my classroom window. I was an elementary reading teacher in the school district that operated the GED center. Both the GED center and my school were located in a low-income area of a mid-sized city. Many families of my elementary students struggled to raise their children in this underserved and

underresourced community that was generally avoided by residents of the surrounding suburban communities. I had taught in this community for 15 years and was very familiar with the neighborhood, the community's resources, and many of the families that resided in the community. In earlier studies with my own first-grade students and their parents, I discovered that most of my students' parents had returned to school after leaving high school to pursue various certifications and training programs. I became interested in the effects these educational experiences might have on children's home literacy experiences and commenced this GED family study. On several occasions, students at the GED center recognized me as their former first or second grade teacher.

This study focuses on the literacy learning of 10 adult students pursuing their GED and their children. For the study, I visited four GED classrooms; two of these classrooms served students who were pursuing their certificates in Certified Nursing Assistance (CNA) in addition to their GEDs. I explained my study to each class and asked for volunteers who would allow me to interview them and their children four times over the course of the school year and would allow me to tutor them once a week for as long as they were enrolled in the GED program. I accepted the first 11 students who volunteered; 9 of these students were in the CNA program. I commenced the interviews and tutoring sessions immediately. Ten GED students completed the research project; one non-CNA student left the GED program and moved to an unknown residence shortly after the first interview. I interviewed teachers, a counselor, and an administrator at the adult learning center. I also visited each child's classroom and interviewed each child's teacher. In addition to interview data, I videotaped children and adults participating in literacy activities, assessed children and parents as readers, collected writing samples from children and parents, and toured both children's and parents' book bags.

The parents ranged from 22 to 57 years of age and their children spanned pre-school through seventh grade (See Table 1). Half of the families shared a Puerto Rican heritage while the other half were of African American heritage. Nine of the children attended public schools in the same district that administered the GED center; the remaining child attended a Catholic school with the financial support of her grandparents. Most of the families rented parts of houses that had been converted into apartments.

Table 1. Participants

Parents	Children	Grade Level
Analeah	Jimmy	Preschool
Ira	Angel	Kindergarten
Suzette	Vessy	Kindergarten
Verasol	Tyrone	Kindergarten
Tyrone	Jermaine	Grade 1
Marisa	Jasmine	Grade 2
Clairette	Jayla	Grade 2
Colleen	Walter	Grade 5
Sarah	Tashara	Grade 6
Deena	Jatara	Grade 7

In this paper, I focus on a portion of the larger study. The full study involved detailed case studies of 10 families and documented the literacy practices in these families in which both children and adults were enrolled in school. In this article, I explore the contents of adult and children's book bags and considered how the contents relate to students' and parents' home and school lives. Each adult student and his child was asked to show me the contents of his/her book bag; all were willing to participate in this aspect of the project. As they opened the book bags and displayed their contents, I inquired about the various items we encountered. In some cases the extensive contents of these book bags precluded examining every item. In these cases, I invited the bag's owner to guide me through the contents as he/she saw fit.

Some of the parents and children explained that their book bags were not available; this generally occurred when I interviewed participants at locations other than their home (i.e., fast-food restaurant) or when their book bag was in a different location (i.e., "[It's] in my sister's car"). In these cases we resorted to what Spradley (1979) calls a "verbal grand tour;" I asked participants to describe the items that they believed were in their book bag at that time. Book bags were defined broadly as whatever container students brought back and forth to and from school. Two of the older children indicated that they did not have a book bag, and they shared the contents of their school notebook or folder.

Most of the interviews occurred in participants' homes, although some parents chose to meet at local fast food restaurants or the local library. The semistructured interviews were audiotaped and the tapes were transcribed in full including parent/child and researcher/child video segments; grand tours of book bags were part of the second interview conducted with each family. Data from interviews were coded based on a vast array of topics which were then clustered into larger categories, and the interview themes were identified. Writing samples, reading assessments, and field notes from children's classrooms were analyzed separately and then in conjunction with the categories of data identified from the interviews. Finally, the researcher viewed the videotape segments supplementing the video transcripts with information from the videos; video data was analyzed in conjunction with previously analyzed data. Lesson records for GED students and field notes were consulted as needed to confirm or clarify particular situations and events.

All data for the larger study was analyzed and coded in accordance with grounded theory procedures prior to reanalysis of the data in relation to the students' book bags. Findings from the full study focused on literacy learning as a family practice that was affected and informed by what was happening for parents and children at home and school. Specifically, it illustrated how school expectations, school definitions of literacy competence, and the local context worked together to position children and parents in particular ways in relation

to school and school literacy practices. These positionings often conflicted with the school expectations and criteria for success (Compton-Lilly, 2007; Compton-Lilly, in press) The primary focus of this secondary analysis focused on interview transcripts that captured the grand tours of book bags, field notes from the book bag interviews, and field notes from visits to the participants' classrooms.

On the following pages, I present data that addresses what the participants carried in their book bags and to what extent the contents of book bags represent children's and adults' home and school experiences. First, I examine the contents of students' book bags in conjunction with observational data and student comments to learn about children's school literacy lives. Issues of authenticity in both adults' and children's literacy classrooms are explored. Second, I examine the book bag as an artifact that crosses the boundary between home and school and consider how adults and children use this mobile space to reference and reflect their academic and personal identities.

LEARNING FROM BOOK BAGS

The first question explored in this paper involves the actual contents of the adult book bags. What did I find and what might this snapshot of artifacts indicate about the school experiences of students?

Artifacts of Instruction: Considerations and Complexities

In their work with adult students, Victoria Purcell-Gates and her colleagues (2004) distinguished between authentic and inauthentic literacy instruction. They describe authenticity as involving students in reading and writing real-life texts for real-life purposes. An authentic text is "identical or very similar to those texts that occur in people's lives outside of an instructional setting designed to teach reading and writing skills" (Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, & Degener, 2004, p. 13). Purcell and her colleagues did not describe authenticity as intrinsic to any particular type of activity; instead, authenticity relates to the purposes activities play in people's lives. Authentic tasks were not completed to achieve school-only purposes, they are "read and written by people in their lives to accomplish communicative purposes" (Purcell-Gates et al., p. 140). Purcell-Gates and her colleagues also explained that authentic literacy learning situations are collaborative; they involved decisions about what to study, how to study, and how to assess learning.

As Purcell-Gates et al. (2004) explained, it is easy to identify authentic literacy practices in everyday life. When we see people reading newspapers, signs, and coupons as they carry out their daily activities, these are authentic literacy activities for particular people. Activities such as completing worksheets and

answering questions about a short story generally occur only in formal educational contexts and have purposes specifically related to teaching and learning. However, ascertaining the purposes for literacy events that occur in school can be complicated. Purcell-Gates et al. suggest that Halliday's functional theory of language can be a tool in determining the authenticity of particular literacy practices. Halliday (1978) identified a range of linguistic functions that can be accomplished with language and text — these included instrumental, regulatory, interactional, personal, heuristic, imaginative, and informative functions. Purcell-Gates and her colleagues maintained that if a text fulfills any of these functions, the practices surrounding that text could be described as authentic.

Carole Edelsky (1991) distinguished between reading tasks that involved compliance and/or the demonstration of competence; if either of these purposes surround a task it is considered an “exercise” which is a valid literacy practice only within the classroom. As Jim Cummins (1994) explained, this emphasis on demonstrating competence requires students to appropriate meanings that are “predefined” and “sanitized:”

. . .the public focus and apparent political commitment to improving the ability of students (and adults) to “read the word” represents a facade that obscures underlying structure dedicated to preventing students from “reading the world.”
(Cummins, 1994, p. 296)

This conceptualization of literacy as something that is produced independent of social and cultural contexts reflects an autonomous model of literacy (Street, 1995) that focuses on the technical aspects of literacy separate from the social contexts in which literacy is produced and used.

Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, and Rodríguez (2003) explained that literacy instruction in urban schools often emphasized low-level literacy skills and that worksheets and passive learning activities tended to characterize urban classrooms. As they reported, instructional practices associated with higher-level thinking are infrequent even in the best urban classrooms. These distinctions became significant as I examined the various types of artifacts that were represented within the book bags of GED students and their children.

The Artifacts in Adults' Book Bags

What was lurking in the adult GED students' book bags? What did these artifacts reveal about the educational experiences of the GED students? Of the 10 adults in the study the instructional materials listed in Table 2 were discovered in the book bags.

At first glance, this list was alarming. Packets of papers are at the top of the list; in fact some GED students had as many as 25 nursing packets in their

folders. The nursing packets focused on various physiological systems including the circulatory system, the respiratory system, and human sexuality; other packets presented information that would prepare the students for their GED exam. The high number of packets might indicate that students are filling their days completing stapled packets of papers. However, only some of these packets required students to match words to their definitions, label diagrams, complete short-answer questions, or fill in circles beside correct answers. The bulk of the packets were photocopied chapters from the official textbook.

These packets were their nightly readings as well as resources they used to prepare for their weekly tests. The GED center did not own a set of nursing textbooks. Over time, the CNA teachers had collected a mismatched set of nursing texts; many were originally publishing company samples. The teachers loaned these books to students to help them complete their homework and so that they could do additional readings at home. These textbooks were collected at the end of the training program and redistributed to incoming students. Some of these books have lost their front covers after several semesters of wear; others are missing their back covers. At least one book had lost its back cover and several pages of its glossary that made it difficult for that student to locate the definitions of words beyond the letter “n.”

In addition to these textbook chapters, the students often carried additional packets that they used to prepare for tests. Practice tests and study sheets were observed in four of the book bags. This was not surprising since both the GED program and the CNA program are exam driven. Passing the GED test and the State Nursing Assistant Certification test were the criteria for successful completion of the programs. In their book bags, students also had many photocopied papers relating to their GED subjects including math, science, and social studies. Many of these papers reflected the content and the formats that students would encounter on the GED test. All of the work that I observed in adult book bags appeared to have been carefully completed. While packets of photocopied papers may often be considered inauthentic literacy tasks, these packets fulfill authentic purposes for the adults in this study — they help participants prepare for their CNA and GED exams. In addition, some adult students were pleased that their teachers gave them extra papers and packets so

Table 2. Instructional Artifacts Found in GED/CNA Students’ Book Bags

Instructional Materials in Book Bags	Number Carrying Each Item
Nursing packets	8
Office supplies	7
GED materials	6
Books	5
Testing materials	4
Nursing diagrams	3
Assigned writing	0
Reports or inquiry materials	0

Table 3. Books Found in GED/CNA Students' Book Bags

Name	Adult's Program	Book Type
Analeah	CNA/GED	Nursing book and medical dictionary
Ira	CNA/GED	Nursing book
Suzette	CNA/GED	Nursing and math books, medical dictionary, children's book
Verasol	CNA/GED	Nursing book
Tyrone	CNA/GED	No books
Marisa	CNA/GED	No books
Clairette	CNA/GED	No books
Colleen	GED	Math books
Sarah	CNA/GED	No books
Deena	CNA/GED	No books

that they could review problematic material and better prepare for their weekly tests. Purcell-Gates, Degener, & Jacobson, (2001) reported this same finding from their work with adult students; their students would request extra worksheets believing that completing these instructional activities would lead them closer to their literacy goals.

Table 3 indicates that books were found in half of the adults' book bags. Most of the books that the adults carried were directly related to their studies at the GED center, and these included nursing textbooks and medical dictionaries. Only Suzette, who chose to be interviewed at the public library, carried a child's book that she had borrowed from the library that evening for her daughter and son. None of the books reflected the students' personal reading interests.

The instructional materials in the adult book bags conveyed a sense of commitment, seriousness, and diligence related to the work. Papers were generally well-organized with different folders or notebook sections for various subject areas. Errors on papers had been marked by the GED teachers and then corrected by the adult students. While the book bags did not contain examples of student writing assignments, personally selected books, or inquiry project materials, the work that was in the book bags was purposeful and relevant to the students.

The Artifacts in Children's Book Bags

So what did the children have in their book bags? As might be expected, a range of materials was found. As one mother commented about her son's par-

ticularly overstuffed book bag, “It’s a second world in that book bag.” Table 4 describes the various instructional artifacts discovered in children’s book bags.

A quick glance at this list leaves many of us relieved; books are at the top of the list. In contrast to many of the other items encountered that generally consist of photocopied tests and assignments in various subject areas, books suggest more-authentic learning experiences. Books were found or described in 7 out of the 10 book bags. However, Table 5 reveals that the presence of books in the children’s book bags was not as reassuring as might be expected.

Many of the younger children had either a storybook, leveled book, or Accelerated Reader book (Renaissance Learning, 2006). The leveled books I found were simple texts that are generally written for children who were in the emergent stages of reading. Accelerated Reader books are trade books; the children read these books and then answered multiple choice comprehension questions on the computer. Children were often awarded prizes based on the number of books they read or

Table 4. Instructional Artifacts Found in Children’s Book Bags

Instructional Materials in Book Bags	Number Carrying Each Item
Books	7
Math papers	6
Tests	5
Spelling papers	4
Holiday papers	3
Vocabulary papers	3
Phonics papers	3
Packets of papers	2
Following directions papers	1
Art projects	1
Hands-on learning activities	1
Student writing	0
Reports or inquiry materials	0

Table 5. Books Found in Children’s Book Bags

Name	Grade	Book Type
Jimmy	Preschool	Story book
Angel	Kindergarten	Leveled books
Vessy	Kindergarten	Leveled books
Tyrone	Kindergarten	No books
Jermaine	Grade 1	No books
Jasmine	Grade 2	Accelerated Reader book
Jayla	Grade 2	Story book
Walter	Grade 5	Dictionary
Tashara	Grade 6	No books
Jatara	Grade 7	Social studies, science, and math books

the number of points they accumulated. While children often get to choose the leveled texts and the Accelerated Reader books that they read, these texts were directly linked to the instructional programs at the children's schools. Notably, only two children possessed storybooks that were separate from their instructional programs, and beyond Grade 2 the children had only textbooks and a dictionary. While the sample of older children was extremely small, the absence of any sort of literature was troubling. In addition, three of the children had no books at all in their book bags.

If we consider all the different types of materials found in children's book bags (see Table 4), 8 out of 11 are what teachers of my age generally refer to as "dittos;" these include math papers, tests, spelling papers, holiday worksheets, vocabulary exercises, phonics practice sheets, and worksheets to practice following directions. The abundance of photocopied work found in book bags may have simply reflected the nature of book bags and the disposable nature of these photocopied papers that children transport home from school, yet the lack of alternative types of assignments—particularly student writing or evidence of hands-on learning—remained troublesome.

The most commonly found papers in children's book bags were math papers followed by tests. Two out of the three older students carried packets of papers their teachers had assembled. These packets focused on topics such as space, plants, works of literature, American history, or math concepts. When children showed me these packets, I noticed that large portions of the packets remained incomplete. Both Walter and Tashara showed me three different packets, none of which were completed by the student nor corrected by their teachers. In general, I was struck by the amount of incomplete work in book bags. When I asked the children about the incomplete papers, they provided a range of answers:

Tashara (Grade 6): Oh we don't have to do the whole thing.

Walter (Grade 5): I didn't get to finish the back because I had messed up [the front of the paper].

Jasmine (Grade 2): That is not homework.

As Engestrom's description of activity systems suggests, these packets are tools that mediate the goals of participants in the classroom context. Thus to understand the role these packets of papers played in classrooms, it was necessary to consider the possible goals that these packets were designed to address from the perspectives of teachers and students. Packets of papers could conceivably play the following roles for teachers:

- Provide a format that helps children to process and understand information.
- Assess whether children learn previously taught information.
- Provide practice in skills and understandings that are partially established.

- Provide practice with various “pencil and paper” formats (i.e, short answer questions, matching answers, true and false questions, multiple choice formats, labeling diagrams).
- Support children in processing and responding to tasks in ways that are valued by schools.
- Keep children occupied and engaged during class time.
- Enable the enactment of roles and routines that are expected in classrooms.

Because so many of the papers were incomplete and uncorrected, it appeared that the first five items on this list were not relevant. If the purpose of these papers was to teach concepts, assess learning, practice skills and understandings, master various “pencil and paper” formats, or support children in processing and responding to school-valued tasks, an observer would expect these tasks to be completed and monitored. Perhaps these papers were distributed and assigned in an effort to enact the procedures and practices that are associated with schooling with no ends beyond enacting the process.

If the teacher’s goals were unclear and at worst involved surface enactments of schooling practices, what did the students’ goals entail? Several possibilities are suggested. By completing the first few pages of assigned work, did the student enact their intention to do their work? Is their goal to exhibit compliance at least for the short term? Were they enacting the student role without the stamina or purpose for maintaining that role through its completion? What messages did these incomplete papers convey to students? Just as the students acted on and through the papers and packets, the papers and packets acted upon the students affecting their immediate actions as well as the ways they understood activities and their role in those activities.

In line with Engestrom’s model, it must be noted that the artifacts, or papers, mediated activity within a particular social context that involved rules (i.e., classroom rules, school expectations, parental expectations), the classroom community, and enacted roles — teacher, student, peers, parents). Schools are enmeshed with the histories of schooling and the biographies of students, teachers, and parents as well as larger sets of historical practices that reflect learned practices and shared models of what teaching and learning entail. In this lived context and within student’s school histories, based on students’ comments, incomplete work was sometimes acceptable.

Tashara, a sixth grader, expressed her frustration with math papers. She was taking math papers out of her book bags as she spoke:

Tashara: Math, math, math, math.

CL: [They are incomplete] Blank papers.

Teshara: You know sometimes I been thinking that math is laughing at me.

We continued looking through the papers in her book bag. I recorded in my notes that the only papers in the book bag that appeared complete were tests. Teshara commented, “I hate papers.” This tendency to leave work incomplete suggests a general distancing of students from school alongside low expectations of teachers.

What was missing from the book bags was also important; children neither showed nor mentioned pieces of writing. None of the book bags contained research reports or inquiry projects and very few contained evidence of hands-on activities. Only one child mentioned art projects. There was the possibility that work that was personally significant to children (i.e., students’ writing, artwork, or inquiry projects) was removed from the children’s book bags, particularly if children shared these projects with their parents. However, the vast quantity of mass produced assignments suggested that paper and packet activities play a major role in the educational experiences of children.

THE BOOK BAG AS A MEDIATOR BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL

Despite recent attention on the home/school connection, researchers have generally failed to examine the one possession that routinely crosses the borders that separate home and school. In this section, I explore how well the contents of book bags represent children’s and adults’ home and school experiences. Henry Giroux (1992) wrote extensively about borders and about *border pedagogies*. Border pedagogies involve inviting students to access and interrogate multiple cultural codes including their own experiences and to recognize both the strengths and weaknesses of official and cultural knowledge. Book bags are not static items, they cross boundaries in and out of home and school moving between the personal and the academic.

Theoretically, book bags could contain evidence of the intersection of students’ home and school literacy lives. Gutierrez and her colleagues (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejada, 1999) refer to a *third space* where home and school interests merge in dynamic ways to create new meaningful and personally relevant learning opportunities. Third spaces are never stagnate, they are continuously constructed and reconstructed as people interact with each other. Third spaces are characterized by the existence of “alternative and competing discourses and positionings [that] transform conflict and difference into rich zones of collaboration and learning” (Gutierrez, et al., 1999, p. 287). Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, and Turner (2001) explain that an instructional third space is “. . . best characterized as respectful in that it utilizes the rich potential of the students. . .” (p. 165). Constructing a third space in classrooms involves utilizing students’ and teachers’ home and classroom language and literacy practices. Always dialogic, third spaces draw upon the various community and school knowledges that students and teachers possess.

While book bags are physical spaces, the artifacts found within book bags have the potential to represent both home and school cultural knowledges. Within the various zippered compartments of book bags we might expect to find artifacts that point to a merging of home and school contexts (i.e., a family story written at school, a drawing done at home that reflects a topic being studied at school) and/or evidence of the multiple cultural understandings that students possess (Gutierrez et al., 1999) as well as artifacts that reflect various dimensions of identity.

Connecting Home and School: Adult Book Bags

Perhaps the most-intriguing finding from the adult book bags was the remarkable number of personal items that the adults carried. Some of the GED students carried family photographs:

Ira: . . . pictures of my ex-husband.

Suzette: The children's picture(s).

Other GED students carried small gifts from teachers at the GED center.

These gifts were often bestowed on students when they were experiencing some sort of difficulty in their academic or personal life and often featured inspirational writing.

Suzette: Miss Roberts [the nursing teacher] gave me this. (Suzette shows me a little calendar with a poem entitled "Footprints" on it.) I was showing [it] to Mr. Madison [her GED teacher] earlier, to comfort me some more.

Sarah carried her own inspirational messages that she read to soothe herself.

Sarah: Oh, this is my spiritual and healing stuff that I have to, I don't do anything unless I read THIS. . . I read it every single day before I do anything because that's something that soothes me. Especially when I have a test, I read it maybe a couple times. That's the 23rd Psalm. And this one here is (Sarah shows me a poem), it's just, it's the way I feel.

GED students also carried personal items for either themselves or family members.

Deena: My lipstick and my eyeliner.

Suzette: And my lotion, you know to do my hands

Ira: I have a little pair of scissors. Yeah, cause sometimes, that's when I go to my sister's house she asks me to trim her hair. So I got to carry with them. I never know when she's gonna tell me to [trim her hair].

Other students carried items related to work or daily life.

Ira: Oh, I got um lipstick, um examples [samples]. (Ira is an Avon salesperson.)

Marisa: [When] I take my notes, I be thinking about something I have to stop and grab [I jot down grocery lists], like that. (Marisa shows me a short grocery list in her notebook.)

Food and drink are carried by approximately a third of the sample.

Deena: Um pens, pencils, um, a PopTart.

Colleen: Usually I have my water bottle in there.

Suzette: Oreo cookies and bottled water for hydration.

Seven of the ten students in this sample carried personal office supplies in their book bags.

Tyrone: Um my textbook, folder, blue pen. It have to be a blue pen.

Colleen: I have my pencil case, with some pencils and pens, ruler, uh book mark. Then I have another pocket I have my uh calculator, my uh, stapler, paper clips.

Ira carried a great variety of items in her book bag; most were related to her family. As a woman who has lived in many places and had rarely settled in a residence for an extended period of time (she lived in three apartments during the 10 months that I knew her), Ira felt the need to carry personal papers for herself and her adult children.

Ira: All my personal things like my Social Security [card], my birth certificate. . . Oh, and I got um all my daughters' baby shot records [in] there and my son's.

Some Puerto Rican students recorded class notes in their notebooks in both English and Spanish. Marisa explained, "Yeah, sometimes I start the note in Spanish. If I don't understand too much in the English part, I just write it in Spanish and I can remember it."

The contents of the GED students' book bags were firmly intertwined with their personal lives. People, relationships, and personal effects were all present in the GED students' book bags. This was not the case for the children in this study.

Connecting Home and School: Children's Book Bags

Perhaps the most-troubling aspect of students' book bags concerns what was absent. Unlike their parents who stowed personal items in their book bags, children's book bags were remarkably banal and impersonal. Children did not carry personal items that might bring them comfort or support. Even school supplies were generally limited to a pencils and paper; a few children had notebooks, pens, glue, and crayons. Attempts to bring personally meaningful items to school were discouraged by both parents and teachers. Even I, the researcher, found myself siding with parents as we spoke to children about bringing things from home to school. Jermaine told his mother and me about taking Buzz Lightyear, a character from the movie *Toy Story*, to school. Apparently

his mother was unaware that he had taken Buzz to school that day; Jermaine assured us that his indiscretion had not resulted in problems at school.

Jermaine: I took it right home [after school] but my mommy don't let me take him out at school.

Jermaine's mother: Really? You just telled on yourself, honey.

While Jermaine was assuring me that he had no other toys in his book bag his mother mused over Jermaine's antic:

Jermaine's mother: You got Buzz, Buzz Lightyear's in the book bag. I'm wondering why it's so heavy today. I'm like what is this?

Similarly, although he has just turned 3, Jimmy also took an item to preschool without his mother knowing:

Analeah: One day he brung, he found an old dirty shoe that he used to wear and put it in there.

CL: (laughs) He took it to school?

Analeah: Yes. I got home and was "Eeww." I go, "Where did you get that from?" I go "That couldn't be the same shoe at the house." And I get home and lo and behold; he took that shoe and put it in his backpack and brung it to school with him. I go "Jimmy, why on earth would you do something like that?" (Analeah imitates Jimmy's voice) "I like it mommy. I like."

CL: (laughs)

Analeah: Honest to god, Jim do you take your shoes to school?

Jimmy: (says nothing)

CL: No.

Analeah: Do you take dirty shoes to school?

Jimmy: (says nothing)

CL: Especially not one. Shoes need to stay together with two because you got two feet.

Analeah: And then I'm thinking. What if them teachers saw it. They's go "What [is this]?"

In both cases the parent, with my support, let the child know that bringing these things to school was inappropriate. Interestingly after Grade 1, the children in this study no longer had nonacademic items in their book bags. While teachers have good reasons for discouraging children from bringing toys and old sneakers to school, a question is clearly raised about the messages these policies convey about home and school boundaries. While attempts by parents and teachers to prevent children from bringing personal items to school are understandable, they also reinforce the strict divisions that children often construct between their home and school worlds.

Although the children appeared to conform to rules about bringing things from home to school, the girls found resourceful ways to personalize the con-

tents of their book bags. Four out of the five girls had personal writing and drawing in their school notebooks. Jayla's notebook was the most extensively illustrated; Jayla was in second grade. I commented aloud on the notations and pictures Jayla included in her book bag.

CL: (Pointing to a picture in Jayla's notebook) There's your mom again huh?

(CL, Jayla, and Jayla's mother laugh)

CL: (Reading from the notebook) "One plus one equals. . . two."
Wow, "I like pizza. I like pizza." More numbers. More numbers.
Oh here's some great pictures.

(Clairette and Jayla laugh)

CL: Oh my. There's Jayla. "This is Jayla." (I am reading from the notebook and then examining the next picture.) That's not mom. A Power Girl?

Jayla: A Power Puff girl.

CL: Oh, Power Puff Girl. Yeah. Did you draw that?

Jayla: (nods)

CL: That's pretty good. That's very good. More adding, stars, a picture of Jayla. Wow, look at that hair. Just like your hair. You've got that beautiful curly hair. All right. That's pretty too. Nice details on your pictures. You got eyebrows and all the little fingers and everything. (I turn the page and find scribbling from her little brother.) Ut, brother again huh.

Clairette: (chuckles)

The complete conversation about Jayla's notebook illustrations and writing lasted over 70 turns. Her notebook was filled with pictures of her family, drawings of favorite characters, pictures of friends, attempts to write in cursive, her brother's scribbles, notes from one of her mother's homework assignments, and notations from playing school with her little brother.

Jasmine, a second-grade student, traced a picture of a frog from one of her spelling papers, decorating it her own style. She presented it to me as an impromptu gift.

Jasmine: Oh, I brung you a surprise.

CL: Let's see.

(Jasmine showed me a paper from her book bag; it was a traced picture of a frog on the back of a reused paper piece of computer paper.)

CL: Oh, my gosh Jasmine. That is a gorgeous frog.

Jasmine: And a other one! (She pulls out the original Xeroxed copy of the same frog; this one has her spelling words on it.)

CL: And another one. Well, this one's for you to keep. This one's got the words on it you need.

Jasmine: Mm-hmm.

CL: (pointing to the first frog) This is the one I'd like. It looks like you traced it. But you added your special design on his tummy didn't you? (The tummy of the frog features a large heart). Wow. Thank you Jasmine.

Tashara was in sixth grade. Her notebook reflected her favorite music artists.

Tashara: Oh that's my song, "I Don't Mind Tough."

CL: Songs?

Tashara: Well yeah.

CL: You write songs?

Tashara: How do you know?

CL: Well, I, you just said it's your song. You write songs?

Tashara: Actually I get it off the TV.

(Later in the interview, Tashara finds another copy of her song.)

Tashara: Now this is the song right here that I was telling you about.

CL: Oh, cool.

Tashara: She's my favorite, um artist.

CL: Is she? (I read the title that Tashara has put on the page) "Ashanti's Song."

Tashara: And this is my favorite rapper. (She points to a picture from a magazine.) Nellie is my favorite rapper.

CL: Ashanti is a singer?

Tashara: (nods)

CL: Ok, so Ashanti's a singer.

Tashara: (Tashara pulls out a picture of Ashanti from the pile of papers). She's very pretty.

These girls found a way to personalize the official notebooks that reside within their book bags. By recording their interests and drawing pictures of their families and friends in their notebooks, these girls have found acceptable ways to merge their home and school worlds. None of the boys in this sample displayed personal drawings or writing, although some of them did carry Transformers, Power Rangers, or other media figure book bags.

Book Bags as a Reflection of Third Spaces

In an article exploring third space literacies in prisons, Anita Wilson (2000) described prisons as places where official rules and procedures, dehumanizing practices, and the explicit labeling of individuals characterize life. I suggest that for many students this was also the case. The parents in this study appeared to have accepted the work requirements of the adult educational facility in exchange for their CNA certificates and the desirable employment opportunities that they believed would accompany those certifications. The adult learning

center was viewed by the CNA/GED students as a means to obtaining their own personal/economic goals and the teachers were described as caring, concerned, and supportive by the students in this study.

However, the children in this study did not describe their teachers as warmly as their parents described the GED teachers. Based on the lack of personal items in book bags, an abundance of low-level literacy activities and worksheets suggesting passivity, children appeared to have little personal investment in school. Furthermore, the presence of only textbooks, the packets of incomplete work, and the lack of personal possessions in the book bags of older children suggested that the children's investment in school waned as they moved through school. As we toured the book bags the children generally referred to their teachers as "the teacher" or "my teacher;" only Jayla wrote about liking her teacher on a page of her writing journal. While parents and teachers discouraged overt attempts to bring the home items to school, furtive attempts in the forms of drawings, personal writing, and song lyrics survived for some girls hidden within the pages of official school documents.

BOOK BAG CONCLUSIONS

Despite the photocopied, textbook-driven tasks completed by adult students the adults expressed strong feelings about their teachers at the GED center. For example, Marisa was asked to leave the CNA program when it became evident that her felony conviction would prevent her from obtaining a job as a nursing assistant:

Miss McKenzie had gave me this (a little notebook of encouraging proverbs). And then they had kicked me out of the CNA class. Yeah she gave me this so I could study. That's my favorite teacher. . . And also she will give me like problems everyday. I have to go by there and pick it up. . . So I would just stay catching up with the class even though I got kicked down.

Marisa's remarks echoed comments presented earlier by Suzette and throughout the interviews by other GED students. The teachers at the GED center were clearly perceived by the students as supportive in helping them to achieve their dual goals of obtaining a GED and gaining their CNA. The GED students understood the system and had purposes for participating in the bargain that was offered by the educational institution. Brouillette (1999) describes a similar finding in her work with GED students. She reported that the test-driven nature of GED programs freed teachers from their role as evaluators since success in the GED program was not contingent on the teachers' evaluation but on students' successes on anonymous tests. This freed teachers to become partners with students as they prepared to take the tests. Perhaps it was

this combination of clearly defined, shared goals, and the strong relationships that GED student shared with their teachers that mediated the borders that separated home and school knowledge. Adult GED students are willing to “buy into” the state’s testing programs and the school’s program in order to achieve their personal goals.

Significantly, there are instructional techniques that literacy educators have traditionally used to connect home and school. Some teachers establish home school journals that teachers and parents use to communicate with each other. Other classrooms have stuffed animals that accompany notebooks that children take turns bringing home. The children wrote about the animal’s visit to their home, returned the animal and notebook back to school, and shared their writing and adventures with their peers. Other teachers invite children of all ages to bring items to school to supplement the learning programs in classrooms. Still other teachers allow children to bring personal items, small toys, book-marks, or photographs to school to decorate their workspaces or lockers. These approaches were apparent for the children in this study.

While these preliminary findings are compelling, my foray into book bags represents an exploration of this potentially lucrative data source. Having explored 20 book bags, either literally or virtually, I have concluded that my methodological procedures could be strengthened, thus revealing much more about the school experiences of children. In future book bag investigations, I will consider the following possibilities:

- Ask students about how they got their book bags and if there is any significance to their decorations, colors, or logos.
- Ask students to select and “donate” a certain number of items from their book bags that they feel would help me in understanding them as students or understanding their school experiences.
- Take photographs of each child’s book bag both when it is closed and after it has been opened with its contents displayed.
- Ask students directly whether there is anything from home in their book bags.
- Ask students directly if they have drawings, artwork, or writing in their book bags.
- Ask students about what they are allowed to put in their book bags and what is not allowed.
- Ask students what things they would like to keep in their book bags and why they do not.

Book bags can provide researchers with valuable insight that when viewed in conjunction with other data sources can provide information about students’ school experiences. As changing and developing spaces, book bags are not static;

they are dynamic and changing. The items found in these book bags can elicit rich conversations and provide artifacts to inform various studies of schooling. I invite other researchers to explore book bags with children and adults.

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