26

STORYING AS A SOCIAL CONTEXT FOR LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

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The complexities of using language in social interactions can be learned in social contexts where young children engage in talk as a social action within everyday interactions to construct meaning through narratives. The role of narratives is especially significant in language development because story is a way of knowing, an instrument of mind that is used to constitute as well as represent reality (Bruner, 1990). Research on storying with young children has emphasized the contexts in families and classrooms that encourage the making and telling of stories, particularly building on the work of Vivian Paley (2004). Within the context of previous research, this study focused on curricular engagements that immerse young children in storying processes and provide spaces for authentic engagement in co-constructing stories with peers and adults. These spaces were examined through a narrative inquiry methodology to identify how these engagements invited particular kinds of talk, stories and language use. The analysis provided insights into how the selection and grouping of books can influence children’s storying as well as the ways in which artifacts and play open up spaces for storying and invite the cultural and linguistic practices of families into the classroom in authentic ways.

Elena and her family gather around a family story backpack, pulling out three books on family interactions and a set of finger puppets. *Let’s Eat* by Ana Zamorano (2003), about a busy family trying to find time to eat a meal together, catches their attention. Elena snuggles close as her mother reads the book aloud, both enjoying the code-switching in the talk between family members. When the story ends, Elena disappears, returning with scribbled restaurant menus. She hands the menus to her mother, father and brother, and takes their orders, moving between English and Spanish to talk about food as they co-construct a narrative within Elena’s pretend restaurant.

The stories and play Elena enters into with her family create a social context that encourages language use within meaningful interactions. This use of language in social contexts is termed pragmatics, the ways people produce and comprehend meanings through language and the rules governing social uses of language within a particular context (Yule, 1996). Pragmatics focuses on what is communicated by the utterance of sentences – not what is said explicitly.
but how those utterances are interpreted in situational contexts (Burton-Roberts, 2007). A study of pragmatics thus encompasses fields that identify the complex understandings influencing communicative competence.

The complexities of using language in social interactions is challenging for young children, given their age and, therefore, fewer experiences with language in different social contexts. Bridges et al. (2012) argue pragmatics involves young children learning three types of communicative strategies: ‘using language for different intentions, changing language according to the needs of a communicative partner, and following rules for conversation, storytelling and narration’ (p. 180). They believe these domains should frame language instruction through scaffolding by adults.

Elena’s story demonstrates that these communicative strategies can also be learned in authentic social contexts where young children engage in talk as a social action within everyday interactions to co-construct meaning through narratives (Larson and Peterson, 2013). The ability to generate and comprehend narratives is considered a critical language skill, significant for later academic success, but often underemphasized in early childhood settings (Bridges et al., 2012). Botting (2002) argues narratives form the basis of many childhood speech acts and are one of the most ‘ecologically valid ways to measure communicative competence’ (p. 1), while Paley (2004) believes narrative play is essential to the linguistic, intellectual and social development of children.

This chapter highlights story as a way to make sense of experiences, a role that includes but goes beyond narration as a skill in communicative competence. Within the theoretical and research frame of story as a way of knowing, we position our research on curricular engagements that immerse young children in storying processes and provide space for authentic engagement in co-constructing stories with peers and adults. These spaces are created through books, artifacts and play to offer rich opportunities for young children to explore language use by storying across social contexts.

**Story as a mode of knowing**

Stories are woven so tightly into the fabric of everyday life that it is easy to overlook their significance in framing how we think about ourselves and the world. Rosen (1986) argues our minds engage in storying to make sense of new experiences and move from the chaotic ‘stuff’ of daily life into understanding. Storying imposes order and coherence on the endless stream of daily experiences and allows us to work out significance, providing a means of structuring and reflecting on experience (Bruner, 1990). Storying is a cognitive process that can lead to narratives we share with others to invite them to consider our meanings and to better understand those experiences ourselves. We listen to and play out other’s stories to try on alternative ways of being in the world.

Storying is thus a mode of knowing – one of the primary ways our minds construct meaning to capture the richness and nuances of human life. Bruner (1990) argues story is an instrument of mind that is used to constitute as well as represent reality. A story accommodates the ambiguity and complexity of situations through a multiplicity of meanings (Short, 2012). Our views of the world are thus a web of interconnected stories; a distillation of all the stories we have shared and an interpretive lens to which we connect in order to understand new experiences.

A story is also a theory of something; what we tell and how we tell it reveals what we believe (Carter, 1993). Our human need to story our experiences may be universal but there is no one way to tell stories across cultures (Lindfors, 1991). Each story is always
intertextualized with the stories that exist within a particular culture, both in content and in the style and structure of the telling. While all children come to school with stories, the types of stories and the ways in which they tell those stories may be quite different from school norms (Heath, 1983). The culture of a family or community enters a classroom when that community’s stories, and thus the child’s way of knowing, are valued as a form of meaning-making.

Research on storying with young children emphasizes the contexts in families and classrooms that encourage the making and telling of stories, in contrast to elicitation of narratives in experimental settings. One such context is the family dinner table, which has been studied to understand the conditions under which children naturally tell stories. Research by Beals and Snow (2002) indicates that the demand characteristics and participation structures of dinner table stories provide a better estimate of children’s narrative competence than elicited narratives. Georgakopoulou (2002) studied family stories (events from the past) and child stories (recent events in the child’s life) shared at mealtimes of Greek families, arguing these stories are locally situated as well as embedded in broader cultural frameworks of values and conventions. Children’s pragmatic socialization occurs through nurturing their competence in the narrative performances valued in that community. Quintero (2010) documents the integration of stories based in family knowledge and cultural practices into classrooms to support learning and critical literacy.

A group of studies in early childhood classrooms focuses on the work of Vivian Paley (2004), who invited children to tell fantasy stories, dictated to a teacher and then acted out in collaboration with peers. Nicolopoulou (1996, 2002) and Nicolopoulou et al. (2015) gathered data in early childhood contexts where children follow their own narrative agendas through storytelling and story-acting to document children’s movement toward narrative competence. These studies focus on fantasy narratives, rather than factual narratives of past events, and the influence of peer-group interactions, rather than adult–child interactions. Nicolopoulou (2002) argues children’s narrative development is motivated by the interplay of social-relational concerns about peer-group membership and status with aesthetic concerns about constructing powerful stories. Her research indicates children’s spontaneous stories are a window into their minds, capturing the interplay of mind and culture.

Our research focused on inviting the stories of families into schools through their memories of past and current events, rather than fantasy stories, and on the process of storying by sharing stories, rather than by storytelling and story-acting. We worked to create spaces that encourage young children to engage in storying about their lives and connections to the world, thus enhancing their communicative competence.

**Storying as a context for research**

Our research took place within a large project, Community as Resources in Early Childhood Teacher Education (CREATE), a comprehensive re-design of the early childhood teacher education programme at the University of Arizona that is based in a funds of knowledge perspective (Gonzalez et al., 2005). During their two years in the programme, teacher candidates visit families, participate in community events and engage in classroom field experiences to develop sustained relationships with families, community members and teachers across learning contexts. These relationships support them in closely examining the ways in which individual, community and institutional interactions impact the language and literacy development of culturally and linguistically diverse young children (Iddings, in press).
Curricular engagements to encourage storying

Our role in CREATE was to develop engagements that encourage storying as a means for young children to access family funds of knowledge and explore global understandings. These engagements, family story backpacks and cultural community story boxes create an opportunity space for children to engage in different types of talk with peers and adults and to develop their flexibility in social uses of language. These engagements are simultaneously child-regulated and teacher guided, which Nicolopoulou (2002) argues positively influences children’s enthusiasm, creativity and learning.

The family story backpacks are a transportable curriculum designed to facilitate the sharing of family stories and to build home/school connections. The increasing emphasis on academic skills in primary classrooms has led many teachers of young children to send school-like activities home to families, but rarely to invite families to share their funds of knowledge with the school as a resource for classroom instruction.

Each backpack is created around a theme significant to families, such as bedtime routines, birthday traditions and the origin of a child’s name. The backpacks contain three picture books (one global nonfiction and two fiction stories), a related artifact and a family story journal. Teacher candidates implement the backpacks during their student teaching experience in K-2 classrooms. Four to five families in each classroom receive a backpack each week and are invited to interact with the books and artifacts and to share their family stories. The journals offer a way to record family stories and interactions with the backpacks and to bring these stories back to the classroom. Children are given time to share with peers when returning the backpack to school. The entries stay in the journals so each new family has access to entries from other families.

The cultural community story boxes are a curricular resource designed to immerse young children in exploring books and artifacts that reflect local and global communities. To counter a portrayal of cultures as either ‘all the same’ or ‘exotic’, children are invited to identify their connections with these communities as they move towards exploring differences. The boxes are integrated into classrooms of three- to five-year-old children through units of study around a community or the integration of books and artifacts into centres. Young children interact with the materials and each other to share ideas and inquiries through play and story.

The story boxes reflect a specific global or local community and are created around a group of people (Mexican American), a country (India), a region (Southwest) or a group of countries (East Africa). Each box contains eight to ten books representing a variety of experiences within a community, two to three artifacts to encourage story and play connected to that community, and a cloth world map.

Data collection and analysis

We collected data over a three-year period on children’s use of language as they engaged with the family story backpacks and cultural community story boxes within the social contexts of school and home. Using narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), we gathered focus group interviews with teacher candidates, field notes by teacher candidates and researchers on home and school interactions, and family story journal entries. School contexts were multiple early learning centres and K-2 classrooms in urban settings, ranging from middle-class to high poverty neighbourhoods. Given our location near the border with Mexico, many of the children were Mexican American and bilingual speakers of Spanish and English.
We worked as a team to analyse this data, using constant comparative analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) to develop categories on types of language use in these social contexts. Once we had identified the types of talk, we closely examined the spaces in which this talk occurred to identify which aspects of engagements seemed to encourage storying. We sorted the examples of children’s talk and play according to these spaces and then selected examples that provide insights into characteristics of those spaces and represented the types of data in a particular space. We wanted to understand how these engagements invited particular kinds of talk, stories and language use.

This analysis provided insights into the constructions of authentic contexts that create space for children to listen to stories and construct stories with family, teachers and children. We wanted to understand the characteristics of these contexts to examine the role of social context in young children’s language development and to more effectively construct these spaces as teachers. This analysis provided insights into how the selection and grouping of books can influence children’s storying as well as the ways artifacts and play open up spaces for storying. These spaces, in turn, supported all three major communication strategies identified by Bridges et al. (2012).

The following sections integrate examples from the data organized around four themes identified as important to opening up space for children’s storying. These themes highlight the significance of literature, play, artifacts and social interactions as ways to invite children’s storying. Because our approach to research involves thinking with theory about data (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012), theory is interwoven with the data and used to both frame and discuss the examples.

**Opening spaces for storying through literature**

The books in the backpacks and story boxes were carefully chosen not only to represent the theme or culture but to invite connections and stories. The books provided opportunities for children to draw from their lives and share stories about social practices within their homes and communities as well as to use those connections to explore new cultural practices and to recognize differences across cultures. Quintero (2010) found that literature provides voices and perspectives of possibility along with connection.

The books in the backpack highlighted connections to family stories based in their funds of knowledge. As a family read *What Can You Do with a Paleta?* (Tafolla, 2014), from the play backpack, they shared stories about experiences with paleta (popsicle [ice-lolly]) wagons during summers in Mexico. This book created a space to relive their story through a connected experience as did *Back to Bed, Ed* (Braun, 2009) about a child who slips into his parents’ bed at night. As a father read the book to his young daughter, Jacelyn’s two older sisters joined the reading, laughing because the ‘story was about us and our nightly challenges. Jacelyn kept smiling from cheek to cheek because she knew Ed does what she does.’ When the book ended, the four storied about their experiences.

Books also created a space for children to co-construct a story with family members. Prompted by a beach picture, Jonah and his mother co-constructed a memory about their ocean experiences in Hawaii:

*Mother:* Oh, look at the waves, Jonah! You liked to kick and punch the waves.
*Jonah:* I liked to get them . . . and win!
*Mother:* But what happened when you didn’t win?
*Jonah:* When I was not looking, the wave came and knocked me down.
Mother: Yes, they did. And what did we learn? What do they always say in Hawaii?
Jonah: Never turn your back on the Ocean.

This joint narrative supported them in recounting a significant event in their family, adding depth to the story.

Wordless books connected to children’s lives were particularly rich in creating space for co-construction of stories. As families looked through *Clementina’s Cactus* (Keats, 1999), in the rain backpack, the absence of a written text invited diverse storying as young children collaborated with adults in drawing from their experiences of living in the desert to co-construct a narrative around the illustrations and to share their experiences with sudden thunderstorms in the desert (Figure 26.1).

Social interactions around books sometimes created new experiences. The bilingual book *My Tata’s Guitar* (Brammer, 2002), in the grandparents’ backpack, led to meaningful interactions between Sofia, an English-speaker, and her grandfather, who only spoke Spanish, as they read the book over and over in two languages. This intergenerational connection resulted in a new story about Sofia and her grandfather that she was eager to share with classmates.

Children also used connection to go beyond viewing a global community as ‘strange’. Alex selected *Deron Goes to Nursery School* (Onyefulu, 2009), about a young boy’s first day of school in Ghana, to read with his teacher. He was unsure initially about the unfamiliar cultural setting but noticed Deron had a sister and dad like he did and recited the rhyme

![Figure 26.1 Gerardo’s response to *Clementina’s Cactus*](image-url)
‘1, 2, Buckle My Shoe’ from the wall of Deron’s school. He thought it strange that the children in Deron’s school wore similar clothing, until his teacher asked him to look at his pants and the clothing of his classmates, leading Alex to realize he also wore a uniform to school. The differences in Deron’s school became interesting to explore once Alex made these connections, instead of separating him from Deron’s community.

The connections children made to books also enriched their play. One group of children transformed their casita into a healthcare facility with doctors and patients. As ‘doctors’ attended to a sick teacher, Matias handed the teacher a make-believe cup of blueberry tea, saying, ‘Actually, I think this will work instead’. Several children sang to help the teacher feel better, drawing from My Nana’s Remedies (Rivera-Ashford, 2002), about a grandmother’s traditional remedies. The children requested multiple rereadings of this book from the Mexican American story box and used play to connect doctor visits with the remedies offered by elders in their communities.

Lindfors (1991) argues children’s early development in oral language is based in holistic experiences at home and in the community. As children, families and teachers interact with books that provide significant points of connection to children’s lives, a holistic experience is created, opening up multiple opportunities for continued storying through play and talk that go beyond the initial read aloud of the book. Play also provides a way for children to explore the content of books in order to comprehend, express response and experience the story in affective and kinesthetic ways (Rowe, 1998).

**Opening spaces for storying through artifacts**

Wohlwend (2009) argues that play around artifacts can open new spaces and lead to rich and diverse literacy and language practices. Pahl and Roswell’s (2013) research on artifactual literacies detail how artifacts invite story and serve as a resource for meaning making. Building on this research, the artifacts within the story boxes and backpacks were integrated into children’s play to construct spaces from which narratives could be enacted, promoting meaningful interactions and eliciting authentic oral language.

Pahl and Roswell (2013) found artifacts can connect worlds because they travel across different spaces and provide new experiences, thus encouraging children to respect diversity and find points of commonality across communities. Several children used chopsticks from the South Korea story box, exploring how to pick up food items. Marisol situated the chopsticks in her hand to pick up felt dumplings, saying, ‘Mmm, I’m going to eat all of these empanadas’. Kylie quickly wove the chopsticks through her fingers, ‘Look here’s a dumpling; the dumpling is hard to eat because it is fake. If it were real, I would poke the dumpling with one chopstick, and that would be much easier.’

Not only did the artifacts create a space for children to share an inquiry around a new tool, the chopsticks and dumplings encouraged the girls to go beyond interrogative forms of language often associated with school. Talking about artifacts during play provided an entryway into cultural narratives, making them accessible to all involved in the drama. These narratives often connected children’s familiar worlds to new cultural practices, such as when children used sari cloth from India for dress-up, which they connected to dressing up in their parents’ clothing.

Children used the same artifact in imaginative ways, such as when the sari became a parachute or a tent. Research by Glaubman et al. (2001) indicates that when children free themselves from the constraints of the actual object and move into free and imaginative use of artifacts, the narrative quality of their play increases.
Hurdley (2006) found the same objects can lead to different stories at different times. The cloth world map, an artifact in every story box, elicited a great deal of attention. The map led Armando to ask where New Mexico was because ‘my dad lives there’. Several pointed to Tucson, saying ‘That’s where my house is’, and others pointed to places asking what they were. Children were interested in Madagascar because of a recent movie, commenting on the distance from Arizona and wondering how to get there. Diego believed he could go by boat because of the ocean. Gabriela wondered if people there spoke English or Spanish. Locating Mexico on the map led to stories about family members and swimming in oceans.

For some children, the map invited inquiries and for others the map prompted sharing stories. While young children may not fully understand geographic concepts such as countries and distances between places, the map encouraged questions about places and oral sharing of family stories.

Elena, in the opening vignette, used written language inspired by books and artifacts to create a new artifact. These menus opened a space for Elena and her family to co-construct new narratives. Similarly, the dry erase board in the school backpack provided new spaces to story, such as when Melody used the white board and markers as a tool to write family names. Within this action, she created a space to share memories of events she associated with each person.

Research by Pahl and Roswell (2013) indicates that artifacts connected to children’s lives bring collective and social memories into new spaces, providing a way into stories that move from the home into classrooms. Artifacts provide connection to lived lives and everyday experiences, while also creating the possibility of new worlds of experiences and common points of connection and diversity across communities.

Opening spaces for storying through play

Through play, children negotiate meaning and co-produce and co-play within live-action spaces to share, reflect and interpret stories. Our understandings of play are based in Wohlwend’s (2013) definition of play as a ‘social and semiotic practice that facilitates pivots to imagined contexts by recontextualizing classroom realities and maintaining a not-real frame’ (p. 80). Her research shows the ‘not-real’ frame of play creates a safe space for children to explore their own cultural contexts along with unfamiliar cultural communities.

Play provides countless opportunities for language use and inquiry as children make personal connections, talk in role, discuss procedures and ask questions. A play space was created as families independently engaged with artifacts from the backpacks. Sometimes families used the artifacts to story about their social practices as occurred when one family acted out their family shopping trips with the finger puppets. Lotería, a Mexican bingo game from the play backpack, brought strong cultural memories when parents shared stories of playing the game in Mexico as a child. For other families, the game created a new narrative about an unfamiliar cultural practice through playing the game for the first time as depicted in the child’s drawing (Figure 26.2).

Teachers created invitations for play from the artifacts, books and map to integrate into play areas, especially the casita and block centres, so children could explore individual and collective inquiries. When allowed to explore freely, children often took artifacts from story boxes in one centre and incorporated them into places where they saw connections, such as bringing chopsticks from the Korea box into the casita or incorporating artifacts from the desert box into their outdoor play. At other times, children brought materials from other
Playing Lotería

Lotería is a fun Mexico game. You can play them at fairs parties and for fun. My mom is from Mexico. She knows a lot about that. I won two times and my brother won 1 time. My brother is not very good.

(a)

(b)

Figures 26.2a and 26.2b  Family journal entries on playing lotería
centres to integrate with story-box artifacts and books. This playful transaction with artifacts and texts supported children in making meaning within a range of social interactions.

One way children made sense of global contexts was to integrate new language into their play, referencing an artifact or book. Sometimes they revisited family stories as when Sofía commented, ‘Teacher, you know my mom makes chapati.’ The physical similarities between tortillas and chapati, bread from India, encouraged Sofía to story about familiar practices in her home. Other times, children used new vocabulary to consider new practices. Emilia, an expert on the role of a mother in the dramatic play centre, integrated the name of an artifact, commenting ‘This is a kanga blanket, where you wrap up your babies’ after a read-aloud of a book set in Tanzania. She also stated the purpose of the artifact as she carefully placed a doll on a piece of fabric, wrapping it around her shoulder and back to try out a new way of carrying a baby. The integration of language from global contexts enabled children to make local and global connections as they pursued their inquiries.

Children drew from their knowledge of social discourses in their play. A book set in Ethiopia, New Shoes for Helen (Onyefulu, 2011), led to explorations of the different places children buy shoes and the creation of a shoe store. While playing in the store, Sebastian saw Jordan taking four boxes without permission and accused him of stealing. He called the police, saying ‘Someone is stealing our shoes’, and then asked Nydia to call 911. When another child took on the role of the police officer, Sebastian pointed, ‘There he is, get him’. Their familiarity with this emergency protocol and how to ask for assistance created a live-action space to explore each other’s perspectives.

Play also provided a space for children to explore philosophical issues. Children’s curiosity about a photograph of the Great Wall in a book about China quickly spilled over into building the wall in the block area and talking about the role of the wall in protecting people from ‘the bad guys’. Alejandro’s question ‘What happens to bad guys?’ led to an inquiry. Mario replied, ‘They go away and get shot in the heart and die and go to heaven and God tells them to be a good person and puts a new heart in them and sends them back.’ ‘What happens once they are sent back?’ Alejandro asked. ‘Then they are good people.’ Later the children took dolls and animals to determine rooms where each would stay and who would be outside to protect the others, realizing not all of them could sleep in order to watch out for bad guys. Mario’s description is a complicated transformation process rooted in his understandings of actions, consequences and punishment along with religious beliefs of God as forgiving. Their play explored the consequences of being a bad guy and the global nature of these consequences.

Children’s interactions in the shoe store and block centre reflect Sawyer’s (1993) research on young children learning to negotiate multiple interpretations through co-created play frames as well as constantly changing individual play frames. In order to successfully play together, these frames must intersect through children’s ability to use implicit and explicit metacommunication.

Children talked frequently about their play, describing what they were doing and planning what to do next. As children examined the Chinese characters in The Pet Dragon (Niemann, 2008) and a dragon artifact, they drew their own dragons, saying, ‘I am making a cookie Dragon, because I like cookies’, ‘I need white for the boat’, ‘It’s going to look like that even when it has white. I’m drawing the houses, my water turned green. Now I have to wash it.’ Their descriptions and planning moved into storytelling: ‘This is the symbol for mountain and this is a Scorpion Dragon and it got hurt. His name is Orange-y. He swims and he gets bubbles in his mouth, and then he gets fired at school and then he goes on a pirate ship and meets new pirates and then he got eaten up!’
Although some story boxes contained books and artifacts that highlighted fantasy, we rarely saw fantasy play such as this dragon story, a reflection of the cultural nature of play. Goncu et al. (1999) argue play is a cultural construction that must be contextualized, instead of considered a universal activity. Kirova (2010) found children enact and acquire knowledge of culturally specific ways of being in the world, with some children using play to try on the roles of adults in their communities and others moving into imaginary characters from mass media, a more Western middle-class stance. The majority of children in our study came from Mexican-American families who were struggling economically, and with strong extended family contexts within which children spent their time. Their play seemed to emphasize interpreting reality and internalizing cultural meanings, rather than inventive self-expression, a distinction noted by Gaskins (2014) in her review of differences in play as cultural activity.

Children often used play as a way to access and deepen their understandings of familiar cultural contexts and stories, but they also played to investigate what was new within a global community. Research by Butler and Weatherall (2009) indicates play provides ways for children to use cultural resources to learn about the world as well as to play with ideas already known about the world. In addition, the children’s play provided further evidence of Wohlwend’s (2013) findings that pretending opens access to familiar cultural contexts, resources and ways of knowing for young children, while letting them imagine communities to which they hope to belong as they make sense of increasingly complex cultural spaces.

**Storying as an invitation for social interaction**

The spaces created for children to story also functioned as invitations to develop other communicative skills, including using language for different intentions and changing language according to the needs of a communicative partner. The backpack engagement involved children in first storying with family members and then taking that experience into school contexts to share with teachers and classmates. They moved from a context of co-constructing stories and sharing memories with insiders with whom they shared a cultural context to retelling stories and describing experiences to an outside audience who were not familiar with the events or stories and sometimes did not share cultural contexts. Both purpose and audience shifted in moving from home to school. Nicolopoulou (2002) points out this kind of decontextualized language use has greater demands and is essential to later school success in literacy.

This shift from informal conversation with family to sharing with others moved children to more formal talk to describe their home experiences and family stories. They responded to questions and comments from peers and teachers and used oral language to clarify and expand their thoughts so others could understand and connect to their stories. Jahir and his family used the backpack on family activities to recall their difficult journey from Iraq to Tucson, co-constructing that narrative as Jahir’s mother drew pictures in a detailed four-page journal entry. Jahir’s recounting of that journey to his classmates was a different and difficult communicative task since children did not know the story nor were they familiar with Iraqi culture.

The name backpack was significant for families in sharing stories about their child’s name, often eliciting stories about other family members. Sharing these stories with classmates who did not know the family was a different communicative task and many children chose to only tell the story of their own name, not other family members, recognizing their new audience was most interested in a classmate. In one classroom, this sharing led children to
assert their agency as they discussed the names they prefer to be called, rather than the ones used by teachers.

Children also asked and responded to questions from parents during the backpack engagement. As Yaron’s mother read aloud a book from the backpack, she asked him to predict what was going to happen and to point to each character as she read. She asked questions such as ‘What is happening here?’ and ‘What kind of things do you see?’ which kept Yaron actively engaged.

Classroom sharing often involved questioning as peers asked for more details or clarification out of interest or confusion. When Ana showed a picture of her extended family and talked about what her family meant to her, Michael asked many questions such as ‘How old are they? What are their names? What are their jobs?’

In a review of research on talk and social competence, Hutchby (2005) found most research has been restricted to children interacting with adults and interactions in which adults manage or regulate a child’s behaviour. In contrast, the sharing around backpacks put children, not the teacher, in the position of authority about their family, and the story boxes encouraged talk during play within children’s own imagined social worlds as they built and shared knowledge with peers.

Children offered their knowledge to peers, as when Cameron, who rarely talked due to a speech impediment, told classmates about his favourite place after a read aloud. Children also shared knowledge about how to interact with artifacts, as when Maya exclaimed, ‘Look, it is easier to pick up the food with the salad pinchers than with the chopsticks’. In addition, children shared knowledge in responding to questions. Sometimes their answers were based on noticing similarities as when a teacher asked children why they were using a Chinese hand fan to keep cool and they replied, ‘It is hot in Tucson like China’. Other times children’s answers led to identifying and exploring differences among cultural communities as when children tried to figure out how the foods eaten with chopsticks by Chinese families differed from the foods they eat and which of their foods would work with chopsticks.

Children also shared new knowledge gained from classroom experiences, such as when they learned about islands while exploring the Caribbean story box. Later in a conversation about islands, Maya tried out her new knowledge, describing an island as: ‘You can live on it. The island stands on the water and the water stands the island up’.

Creating invitations for children to story adds depth and meaning to their experiences and develops communicative competence through sharing in different social contexts. Siegal and Surlan (2009) found when young children are immersed in conversations they develop the ability to figure out what to attend to in order to distinguish between the literal meaning of a statement and the speaker’s intended meaning, an understanding previously considered conceptual rather than attentional in development.

**Final reflections**

Although this chapter separates the spaces created by books, artifacts and play, our observations of children indicate their intersectionality creates a rich social context for children’s storying. The sharing of *Carry Me* (Star Bright, 2010), a global book showing methods of carrying babies, led Emelia to inquiries within her role as a mother in the casita. She first used a long piece of African fabric to tie a doll on her back. Then, because she could not find a basket, she put her arms through the handles of a large purse and wore it like a backpack with the doll inside, saying, ‘Look, a basket for the baby’. Drina used the kanga cloth to wrap a doll saying, ‘I smushed it around her like a burrito, but I don’t want to walk around with
her ‘cause she’ll fall out’. Javier grabbed a rebozo from the Mexican story box and wrapped a baby doll inside, standing in front of a mirror to adjust the baby until he was satisfied. He later explored other uses, tying the rebozo around his neck, saying, ‘Hey, about we put it like a scarf?’ and then wrapping it around his head, commenting, ‘I tied it but it’s hurting here a little’. He called out, ‘Hey, teacher, I use my imagination’, a direct connection to What Can You Do with a Rebozo? (Tafolla, 2008).

Dewey (1938) argues the role of the teacher is to create learning environments that have the most potential for tension and inquiry for children. In our case, we selected books, artifacts, and play invitations we thought might engage young children in Tucson in storying. The inquiries within that environment were child-driven, not predetermined by adults. The goal was to draw on children’s everyday practices and invite them into the official curriculum in authentic ways – not to simply colonize children’s practices for school purposes (Larson and Peterson, 2013).

Storying across home and school provides a space for teachers to invite children’s cultural and linguistic practices into classrooms and to engage young children in the fluid construction of meaning from their local communities. At the same time, children’s talk in authentic interactions provides them with the opportunity to engage in and examine the situated production of their cultural and social worlds through story. Children story their way into communicative competence to powerfully and effectively navigate these worlds.

Note

The Helios Foundation supported the research described in this chapter. A list of the backpacks and story boxes and their contents and related forms can be found online at www.createarizona.org/curricular-experiences/story-interactions.

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**Children’s literature cited**


