

Making Global Connections with Family Book Bags

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Teachers, students, and families throughout the world have basic needs in their everyday lives. In order to fulfill these needs, people engage in daily activities to make sense of the world and the events surrounding them. The understanding of these human activities is critical in the elementary classroom.¹ Often, K-3 students do not arrive at school with a well-developed understanding of cultural universals such as family, shelter, and transportation.² The primary social studies curriculum in several states focuses on cultural universals,³ but its treatment is often superficial.⁴ To address this problem, our article examines how to use international children's literature and other resources to facilitate students' understanding of cultural universals. We share our experiences with teachers on how to develop and use family book bags to help young learners and their families make global connections. We focus in particular on how family book bags can be used to (i) connect social studies lessons with families in meaningful ways, (ii) empower all families, and (iii) facilitate teachers' and parents' roles as global educators.

Family Book Bags

It is well known that family involvement has a significant, positive impact in all areas of student achievement. Consequently, educators are trying to find innovative ways to encourage and facilitate family involvement through a variety of school and home activities. One strategy that teachers have developed to promote family involvement is the use of family book bags.⁵ In the area of social studies, this strategy actively involves children and families in understanding social studies themes through the use of literature and activities.⁶

A family book bag includes a variety of books and activities related to a theme and to one child's particular interests. It also contains materials and detailed instructions for activities, such as

- a letter to the parent describing the theme and purpose of the bag,
- a checklist of all the materials included in the bag,
- ideas for the parent on additional activities, and
- an evaluation for the parent and child to do once they complete the activities.

The data from these evaluations are used to modify the family book bag for later use and to help the teacher plan extended activities in the classroom.

An International Selection

Book bags can be used to increase the parental involvement of culturally and linguistically diverse families.⁷ Teachers usually try to include in the bags culturally relevant books, bilingual books, or books translated into the language of the family. We believe that although these strategies are useful, a more personalized approach should be used to make a stronger connection with diverse families, particularly, immigrant families. In reexamining the use of book bags as a strategy to facilitate students' understanding of cultural universal themes, we studied the work of Luis Moll and his research colleagues.⁸ Through their ethnographic studies, they found that teachers can capitalize on the families' funds of knowledge and skills when they study the home context of their students.

We believe that family book bags have the potential to facilitate this learning process. Consequently, we reexamine how we can help teachers use this knowledge to select texts and sources from around the world as well as multicultural sources that may be relevant to the experiences of children and their families.

A family book bag with a sample of international books is an innovative way to include the voices of people from around the world. The bag fosters what a leading global educator has described as "perspective consciousness," a child's understanding that multiple views of the world exist and an appreciation that one's worldview is not universally shared.⁹ The bag also provides an opportunity for immigrant families to be primary sources by sharing the experiences and resources of their native countries. The process of developing a family book bag is one that requires the participation of the teacher, child, and family. The development of this resource aligns with the NCSS Thematic Strands for **1 CULTURE** and **6 GLOBAL CONNECTIONS**. Therefore, it can easily be integrated in any social studies unit. In addition, it also provides the opportunity to integrate content using a variety of instructional approaches.

We used the following six steps to guide our teachers in the development of family book bags with a global theme. Through the steps, we provide teaching tips with examples of our experiences in the field with teachers, second graders, and their families.

Step 1. Involve Families

Inform your families about your interest in doing thematic family book bags. You may write a letter to parents, with a translation for parents who do not speak English. You also may seek to identify local community leaders who can assist you in working with families. In your letters and conversations with parents, provide them with a list of possible topics (family, transportation, recreation) that you may want to explore based on your students' backgrounds, interests, and global issues. In addition, ask for possible artifacts that they may possess that represent the themes you seek to explore. For example, parents may have artifacts such as money, menus, newspapers, postcards, photos, or musical instruments from different countries. Start simple by developing one book bag for one family at a time.

Step 2. Gain Background

Gather information about your students' interests and families' fund of knowledge. Develop an interest inventory for the students and a questionnaire for the parents to gather specific background information after your initial letter. Information about languages spoken at home, country of origin, and special traditions is all necessary to assist you in getting to know your students and their families. For example, if you are doing a unit about food (a cultural universal), you may want to obtain information from the parents about this theme and ask them questions about special dishes, celebrations, recipes and special food artifacts such as wooden pestles, mortars (often used in Salvadorian and Puerto Rican families to grind up food) or *tostoneras* to press green plantains for frying.

Get to know your families in the context of their homes and communities as you begin to develop family book bags. Take the time to attend community events and visit your families at their homes. Your observations and discussions with families in different contexts will allow you to develop meaningful family book bags based on their interests and strengths. It is important to gather background information prior to the visit to allow you to gather and prepare other resources you may need in order to communicate with all the families effectively. You can gather more specific information about their experiences through conversations with the families and your own observations.

Many teachers we worked with were reluctant to visit students' homes. However, once they conducted the visits, the teachers realized how powerful it is to learn about families in their home context. For example, when exploring the theme of food, one teacher visited the homes of some of her students. She noticed that some of her families used leaves for cooking in a variety of ways. She learned how Salvadorian families used plantain or husk leaves to wrap their tamales and how Puerto Rican families use the leaves to wrap their "pasteles." She also learned many of the families eat plantains in their

meals. She noticed that the preparation of this vegetable varies across families. The teacher learned much about these dishes, families' traditions, and language. But, more importantly, the teacher learned that the mothers were quite knowledgeable about the foods they prepared and that they were eager to share their knowledge and experiences.

Step 3. Select a Theme

Choose a theme to develop family book bags based on the information collected. Your family book bag should be an extension of your unit of study. Therefore, your unit should include goals that allow you to deeply examine cultural universals and develop a more global perspective.

You may want to start with themes that allow your parents to share their expertise as global educators. As a teacher, this will allow you to make more home-school connections. For example, one of our teachers started with the theme of food and allowed children to explore this theme with their parents. Her initial goal at this point was at a basic level where parents shared experiences and artifacts such as food. Over time, she developed bags that focused on the cultural universals of communication and deeply-held beliefs. As such, your unit should include goals that complement the family book bag and the use of other global and multicultural approaches.¹⁰ One instructional unit on food demonstrates how a unit like this could promote self efficacy in primary grades.¹¹ Learning goals included student understanding of the multiple functions of food and the diversity of food preparation across cultures. Such goals point to the importance of studying unity and diversity to develop a global perspective.¹²

Step 4. Choose Books

Select international books and other resources related to the book bag theme. For example, you may want to explore international books from different countries that explore topics of food in different ways such as *What is Cooking Jamela?* by Nikki Daly. This story provides a sense of how South Africans celebrate Christmas in Cape Town. A book that allows young children to explore shapes and food from other countries is *A Triangle for Adoara: An African Book of Shapes* by Ifeoma Onyefulu, an Igbo author raised in eastern Nigeria. Adoara explores her African village to search for a triangle shape. She encounters different shapes in the food, clothes, and cultural artifacts of her village. Photos in the book show udala (a fruit), the akwukwo ede (leaves used to wrap yam), and plantains. Onyefulu has received numerous awards, including the Notable Children's Trade Book in the Social Studies award for her first book, *A is for Africa*.

Many teachers ask, How do I begin searching for literature written by authors from other countries? We suggest you begin by exploring the following resources (sidebar).

You need not be limited to international books. You can also include multicultural books that are culturally relevant to the

students in your classroom. Multicultural books involve the many cultures in the United States. For example, you may want to include books like *Too Many Tamales* by Gary Soto. In this book, Maria helps her family make tamales for Christmas. The book bag may also contain other forms of print such as international educational magazines like *El Guanaquín* from El Salvador. This magazine is a publication from *El Diario de Hoy*, a Salvadorian newspaper. *El Guanaquín* contains different sections with stories, photos, and activities. (www.guanaquin.com/elclub/index.shtml). You could also include cookbooks and other artifacts such as recipes, photos, and maps from different countries.

Step 5. Design Activities

Develop activities that allow your families to share prior experiences and family stories. Your activities should be based on what you learned about the families, the books and artifacts you selected, and the goals of your unit. For example, one of the goals of your family book bag may be for the students to understand how people around the world and the United States celebrate special occasions. The teacher could explore the cultural universals of recreation and food. Based on the information collected in steps 1 and 2, the teacher could also decide to include materials and activities in different languages if families in her classroom are bilingual. For example, the family book bag could include *What's Cooking Jamela?*, the Spanish version of *Too Many Tamales* (*¿Qué Montón de Tamales!*), and the printed section of the magazine *El Guanaquín* called *Mi País: Usulután*. (www.guanaquin.com/mipais/departamentos.shtml).

The teacher could prepare a parent guide with a brief synopsis of the books, and tips to make connections with prior experiences. The teacher could include possible questions to ask in Spanish before, during, and after the readings such as: *¿Qué comemos en esta ocasión?* (What do we eat for special occasions?) *¿Por qué crees que comemos tamales?* (Why do you think we eat tamales?). Parent and child may discuss what and why they eat certain foods for special occasions. Other activities include:

My Story. After reading the stories, the parent and child complete a Venn diagram comparing how Adoara and Maria celebrated Christmas. They can also use a Venn diagram comparing how they celebrate their special occasion in comparison with one of the characters in the stories. Then, they can create their own story in English or their native language including their experiences in the United States or the native country. They can add their personal photos or drawings.

Materials: Venn diagram, pre-made book of construction and lined paper, markers.

Recipes. Families can explore tamales recipes. Families answer the questions about what a *tamal* is and what are its

ingredients. The teacher can include recipes for making different types of tamales such as Mexican or Salvadorian tamales. The students could examine, compare recipes and explore the different ingredients in each recipe. Again, based on the information gathered through steps 1 and 2, the teacher can design an activity that is more meaningful for the student. For example, if you have families from Mexico or with relative in Mexico, you may want the student to interview a family member who knows how to make tamales as well as the significance of making them for special occasions.

Materials: Recipe paper, pictures of different ingredients from cooking magazines, Mexican tamales recipe.

Exploring a Different Country. The teacher could include materials (books or magazines) that allow students to explore countries in relation to the theme. For example, if the teacher has families from El Salvador, you may want to include in the bag the printed version of the Magazine *El Guanaquín*. Students and their families could explore different cultural universals (recreation, communication) in rela-

Resources About International Books

International Board on Books for Young Children.

Nationally based chapters of IBBYC provide information about activities, events, and notable international books in their country. The website includes a virtual exhibition, "Books for Africa." www.ibby.org/

The U.S. Board on Books for Young People

BBYP provides an extensive annotated bibliography of international books and sponsors a book series, *Bridges to Understanding*. Scarecrow Press publishes these books in the series: *Crossing Boundaries with Children's Books*, *The World through Children's Books*, and *Children's Books from Other Countries*. www.usbby.org

International Digital Libraries

IDL sponsors several programs, including The International Children's Digital Library Foundation www.childrenslibrary.org, Africa Access Review www.africaaccessreview.org, and Passport passport.imaginarylands.org/.

Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People

The annual Notables list has several categories that cover international themes. This year's list is available online, to NCSS members only, in PDF format. Several previous years' lists of "Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People" are available free to all at www.socialstudies.org/resources/notable. The Notable Books list is a joint project of the National Council for the Social Studies and the Children's Book Council. The paper publication of the Notables list is an insert to the May/June issue of *Social Education*.



Nancy Aparicio reads to her sons, Nicholas (left) and Christopher (right).

tion to the theme selected. The students could explore a particular state (*Departamento*) in El Salvador that their family, friends, or relatives are originally from. The teacher can provide a map for them to circle their town in their state and talk about their experiences in relation to the topic. The students and their families may explore their favorite foods from El Salvador that may not be readily available in the United States.

Materials: *El Guanaquín*, map of El Salvador, pictures of Salvadorian food, as well as paper, glue, and markers.

Step 6. Develop an Evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation is not only to help assess the child's learning from the family's perspective, but also to improve the development of the family book bag as an instructional resource for the teacher. Our teachers found it helpful to use "perspective consciousness" as one of the criteria in the evaluation tool. As elementary grade children mature socially and emotionally, they are increasingly able to understand and take perspectives different from their own.¹³ In our experience, some children developed a much deeper level of perspective consciousness than that of others. Still, our teachers believe that it is important to carefully monitor and assess their children's development of a global perspective.

To create your own evaluation, be sure to include open-ended questions for the parents and children. Make the family evaluation interactive. For some questions, allow students to answer with icons or drawings instead of traditional written responses. Also, allow parents to answer questions in their native language as this may be something they prefer to do.

Once you prepare the family book bags remember to provide families with sufficient time to complete the activities in the bag. Families may keep the book bag for a weekend or a whole week. After the bag is returned, provide opportunities for children to share the completed activities. Sharing the

content of the bag complements the unit of study and makes it more meaningful for students. In addition, create a system in your classroom to keep track of the family book bags. You may want to create a calendar to send to the parents and post it in the area where students pick up or drop off the bags.

Conclusion

Family book bags are a powerful tool for integrating a global perspective in the social studies. When asked about her experience with the book bag, one parent explained, "It was more than just homework. The book bag really helped [my son] see how our family relates to the world." Working together, teachers and parents can help children make global connections. Our six-step process outlines how to create a family book bag with an international twist using a variety of resources. Selecting international literature brings voices from around the world into the classroom and the home. When children understand the unity and diversity of the world's people, they begin to view themselves and their families from a more global perspective.

Notes

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