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Family Stories: A Teaching Tool for Families and Early Childhood Educators

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Abstract

The National Association for the Education of Young Children calls for early childhood practitioners to design learning experiences which are both culturally and individually relevant, all while working with parents in reciprocal ways to help all children learn. One intentional strategy for achieving this is the use of family storytelling. Family stories can be used to perpetuate the family legacy of positive character traits and values. Further, using family stories as a parenting practice has positive outcomes such as giving guidance, establishing a sense of belonging, and bolstering emotional health. Additional evidence indicates that family storytelling can also have a positive impact on young children's literacy skills. Family stories have a long history and can cross socio-cultural, literacy, and language lines to potentially improve all types of families and family bonds worldwide. Strategies for families and teachers that will aid in collecting and sharing family stories are included.

Keywords*:* Family storytelling, parenting, anthropology, literacy, genealogy, emotional development

For many centuries, oral traditions have been passed down from one generation to the next to perpetuate cultural expectations, life lessons, and family legacies. A romantic image of the past may conjure up pictures of wise old people around a fire sharing tales of great hunts or cautionary tales designed to prevent the younger generation from repeating mistakes made by ancestors. In more recent times, the idea of family stories may invoke mental images of funerals where there is a tendency to share stories about the deceased or recall memories of grandparents telling stories to younger people as they did chores together. The authors propose that there is still a time, place, and purpose for oral storytelling even in today's more fast-paced world and that family stories can be an intentional part of the early childhood curriculum and parenting repertoire that builds skills, emotional health, and a family legacy that benefits young children.

1.0 Literature Review

Storytelling is a purposeful, dramatic way to communicate an idea that is usually both entertaining and educational with intents ranging from immortalizing a hero, to explaining the physical world, to teaching life lessons, to preserving traditions and societal standards (Pellowski,1977). Storytelling in one form or another is commonplace in many families, whether it be sharing the day's news over an evening meal or reading a book with a preschooler as part of the bedtime routine. Each of these is a meaningful example of orally sharing a story comprised of a main character and an explanation of the character's actions, which is the basic concept of storytelling (Langellier & Peterson, 2004).

Sharing stories from picture books with preschoolers has long been associated with building important foundational literacy skills that have a long-term impact on reading skills into middle school and beyond (Mol & Bus, 2011). Likewise, oral storytelling without books and pictures is a practice that can also aid in reading skills addressing comprehension, vocabulary, story retelling, story sequencing, imagery, and literacy conventions (Miller & Pennycuff, 2008) as well as phonological awareness (Sparks & Reese, 2012).

Thus, both storybook reading and oral storytelling are strategies that parents and teachers can use to produce positive child outcomes, enhancing young children's emergent literacy skills.

Another form of storytelling that is familiar to many is family storytelling, which is oral storytelling specifically about family members and real events. Recently, researchers have noted that family narratives significantly impact comprehension (Suggate, et al., 2018) and that repeated stories about family members not only enhanced literacy skills, but the children were more likely to recall details from the family stories than they were from either repeated storybooks or non-family storytelling a year after hearing them (Larkina & Bauer, 2012). Family storytelling has many benefits beyond literacy development, such as determining a sense of self (Bohenik, 2006),establishing an identity for the family (Fiese & Marjinsky, 1999; Koenig Kellas, 2005; Thompson, Kellas, Soliz, Thompson, Epp, & Schrodt, 2009), and perpetuating family culture (Bohenik, 2006; Koenig Kellas, 2005). Parents of young leaders report that they use family storytelling to model behavioral expectations and to create a family legacy (Hailey, 2013). Benefits that connect family stories to emotional health and well-being include a sense of belonging in the family (Thompson, et al., 2009) and improved relationships (Moorman, 2012). Family stories are often utilized to pass on and preserve family belief systems, such as having a lifelong desire to learn, determining a commitment to education (Moorman, 2012), esteeming a work ethic (Taylor, Fisackerly, Mauren, & Taylor, 2013), building resilience to adversity (Saltzman, Pynoos, Lester, Layne & Beardslee, 2013; Driessnack, 2017), and valuing family bonds (Driessnack, 2017). Overall, family stories are seen as a catalyst for acting as a guide for change (Moorman, 2012), passing along intergenerational knowledge (Thompson, et al., 2009), and perpetuating an approach to life (Stone, 1988).

2.0 Theoretical Framework

The interactions that occur between a storyteller and young listener during family storytelling are consistent with Vygotsky's socio-cultural approach to understanding child development and cognition (Vygotsky, 1978). When older relatives reminisce and tell family stories, children interact with a more knowledgeable *other* while thinking and communicating about the past. Concurrently, the child also develops a framework for organizing and understanding ancestors' lifeways and experiences so that he, too, can share family stories with other people (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). The transmission of family stories from one generation to another in a narrative form is a shared social and cultural practice that can potentially develop literacy skills and change beliefs and practices; thus,child development occurs as the result of linking culture, context, and history, the basis for Vygotsky's theory (1978).

3.0 Perspectives from Two Different Disciplines

From an educational perspective, family storytelling is important primarily for the purposes of child development and family bonding. There are elements of interesting storytelling that are recommended in order to both keep a young child's attention and to promote literacy skills. On the other hand, there is an anthropological perspective of family storytelling that is more fact-based, where family stories are retold with the hopes that the information passed down from generation to generation is historically accurate. Both perspectives will be explained.

3.1 Early Childhood Education Perspective

3.1.A. Early Childhood Professional Standards

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) outlines standards for professional early childhood educators in the forms of a professional code of ethics, guidelines for Developmentally Appropriate Practices, and standards for teacher preparation. The most applicable portions of each of these documents will be briefly discussed.

The *NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment* (2011) is a document rooted in the United States, but it is accepted at the international level as indicated by an endorsement from the Association for Childhood Education International. Two overarching core values of this document lend strong support for the practice and encouragement of intergenerational family storytelling. First, educators of young children are encouraged to "appreciate and support the bond between child and family" (NAEYC, 2011, p.1). As early childhood educators recognize the importance of family stories and promote school-related activities that support family storytelling at home and school, they are teaching parents one way of bonding with their children while also showing the value they place on the home environment as a collaborative force in educating the child. Second, NAEYC asserts that early childhood educators should "recognize that children are best understood and supported in the context of family, culture, community, and society" (NAEYC, 2011, p. 1). As explained previously, family storytelling is a cultural event. First, family stories occur within the family structure and context of individual past and present family spaces within communities and the broader society.

Second, family stories are often connected with ethnicity, economic level, language, geographic location, belief systems, and/or historical events, all of which are cultural concepts that "profoundly influence each child's development and relationship to the world" (NAEYC, 2011, p. 1).

Another essential document for early childhood practitioners is the NAEYC position statement on *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth to Age 8* (NAEYC, 2009a). Although family storytelling meets many of young children's needs across social, emotional, and cognitive domains of development, the most applicable guideline for Developmentally Appropriate Practice to this body of research is Guideline 5, "Establishing Reciprocal Relationships with Families" (NAEYC, 2009a, p. 22). Guideline 5 outlines the importance of teachers working with parents/guardians to develop relationships built on mutual respect for each other's roles in teaching and building a connection with the child. These include respect for parenting practices, cultural practices, family values, family configurations, and each family's expectations and goals. Strategies that promote two-way communication between school and home such that family opinions are woven into the curriculum are important facets of this guideline (NAEYC, 2009a). This indicates that families should be a part of the decision-making process, selecting whether they want to share family stories and having options for different kinds of presentations such as pictorial, material object, written, and in-person demonstrations that reflect their family stories.

The third early childhood guiding document is the *NAEYC Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation* (NAEYC, 2009b). Table 1 outlines the standards from this document that are most applicable to the encouragement and practice of family storytelling. First, believing that early childhood educators can best meet their students' needs when they understand their students' socio-cultural backgrounds, NAEYC created *Standard 2a: Knowing about and understanding diverse family and community characteristics.* To achieve this, early childhood educators can use family storytelling as a tool to intentionally learn about each of the families they serve. Second, early childhood educators can address *Standard 2b: Supporting and engaging families and communities through respectful, reciprocal relationships* not only by having families share their stories and culture, but also by designing developmentally appropriate learning experiences for each child based on their individual familial, cultural, and developmental needs. Third, educators can address *Standard 2c: Involving families and communities in young children's development and learning* not only by inviting families into the classroom to share their stories and expertise, but also by using knowledge gained from family storytelling experiences to design individualized learning experiences for families to complete at home which are based on each child's developmental needs. Finally, early childhood educators can address *Standard 4b: Knowing and understanding effective strategies and tools for early education, including appropriate uses of technology* as they use family storytelling experiences in the classroom to showcase storytelling as an age-old, tried and true, effective strategy for teaching. In addition, adults can learn to help children practice and refine emerging literacy and social skills, including technology skills as they utilize cameras, microphones, smart phones, or tablets to capture family narratives and shareable experiences.

Table 1
NAEYC Standards for Early Childhood Professional Practices that are Most Applicable to Family Storytelling

Standard	Key elements
Standard 2-Building Family and community relationships	2a: Knowing about and understanding diverse family and community characteristics
Standard 2-Building Family and community relationships	2b: Supporting and engaging families and communities through respectful, reciprocal relationships
Standard 2-Building Family and community relationships	2c: Involving families and communities in young children's development and learning
Standard 4-Using developmentally effective approaches to connect with children and families	4b: Knowing and understanding effective strategies and tools for early education, including appropriate uses of technology

3.1.B. Purposeful and Artistic Telling of Family Stories

Early Childhood researchers and practitioners have specific recommendations for family storytelling activities to increase the likelihood that the stories positively influence children's (and families') literacy skills and can be recalled with such familiarity that they become a part of a child's self-image. The dimensions of literacy skills described here include comprehension, writing, and phonological skills gained during family storytelling.

In order to promote *comprehension*, Miller & Pennycuff (2008) recommend that adult storytellers involve audience members to help them develop a sense of story, predict what will happen next, increase understanding of cause and effect, and sequence events. In addition, the researchers recommend that children practice retelling a family story in a partner dyad, get feedback from the partner before additional practice, and finally tell the family story to a larger group.

By first practicing and revising the oral version of the story, a child is better prepared to *write* the tale. The oral story has already been organized and structured, so many of the typical obstacles for reluctant writers have been removed. Creating an outline or a thinking map of the oral story helps the writer determine how she wants to focus her story. The two main elements the writer can focus on are use of language and recognizing the class as her intended audience. When completed, the writer can read her story to the class to see if the audience responds as planned (Miller & Pennycuff, 2008).

To increase *phonological skills*, Leyva, Sparks,and Reese (2012) recommend that parents/guardians use high quality talk during episodes of reminiscing about past events. High quality talk includes listening to the child, clarifying meaning by repeating what they said and adding additional details, using complex sentences, asking frequent open-ended questions, and talking about language. Leyva, Sparks, and Reese (2012) found in their research study that using this same type of high quality talk with storybooks or current events did not influence phonological awareness as profoundly as talking about past events that occurred within the family.

To increase recall and attentiveness, the storyteller should include use of body movement, gestures, facial expressions, and voice intonation to add dramatic flair. The inclusion of heightened awareness of emotions is a good tactic to increase both recall and attention, as is descriptive oral language (Eder, 2007). According to one study, repetitive movements, gestures, or facial expressions used to represent a specific action, feeling, or character response over and over again support predictability (Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, & Lowrance, 2004) and a greater likelihood that the audience will notice patterns and begin to participate in the storytelling. Donald Davis (1993) makes further recommendations for making the family narrative more appealing to listeners. He proposes that the storyteller always identify the character, time, and space of the story and fill the listener’s senses with the sights, sounds, and smells of the scene. Furthermore, he suggests that storytellers carefully select speech patterns and word usage to help listeners see that a crisis is coming in a story. In addition, he recommends that the storyteller respond to the audience members’ expressions as noted while making eye contact with the audience for much of the story.

In practice, family storytelling can be flexible and artistic. Rather than retelling a story word-for-word as one would read a storybook, family stories can be slightly recreated with each retelling, constantly shifting and evolving to match the style and intention of the storyteller. Sometimes two or more different people can be telling a story together and suddenly realize that they disagree about how the story should be told or the exact events. In this situation, it is recommended that the storytellers enjoy the differences, recognizing that everyone has a different perspective (Langellier & Peterson, 2004). Davis (1993) likens this scenario to different people taking a picture from different points in the same room. Each is correct and catches different details, but they all have a photograph of the same room at the same point in time.

3.3 Anthropological Perspective

3.3.A. Different Classifications and Purposes of Storytelling

Anthropological interest in storytelling encompasses a variety of traditions, including those associated with belief systems, folklore, and oral history. The stories within these traditions have a common basis in shared meanings within a culturally specific group. The concept of shared meanings is an important consideration, since the meaning of a particular story to one culture or subculture may be vastly different from that of another. For example, when anthropologist Laura Bohannon shared Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* with the Tiv of Nigeria during her time in West Africa, the Tiv elders reinterpreted the “true” meaning of the story for her from their own cultural perspective, and, at least in their eyes, they were able to “correct” the traditional Western interpretation (Bohannon, 1966). While there can be overlap between the functions of stories told within the traditions of belief systems, folklore, and oral history, each will be considered separately, leading to a discussion of family stories from an anthropological perspective.

Storytelling is used within the *belief system* of a particular culture or subculture to construct meaning for the members of the group by defining the beliefs and values important to them, such as the meaning of life, the nature of human beings and their place in the universe, and their relationships with supernatural powers, with other humans, and with nature (Eder, 2007). Storytelling within a shared belief system reinforces cultural identity and group solidarity, thereby serving an essential role in cultural preservation and in social control, since the stories associated with belief systems typically incorporate ethical guidelines and behavioral expectations, describing positive sanctions for those who follow them as well as cautionary tales of the misfortunes that befall those who choose to ignore them.

Anthropologists also have an interest in stories told within the context of *folklore*. The storytellers of these folktales are what sociolinguist William Labov (1997, p. 397) describes as the "classic image of the story-teller…someone who can make something out of nothing, who can engage our attention with a fascinating elaboration of detail that is entertaining, amusing and emotionally rewarding." The stories may or may not be true, but in this genre, as Labov points out, "credibility is rarely an issue…Tall tales, myths and outright lies carry the day, and we normally do not know or care whether the events as told were the personal experience of the story-teller or anyone else." However, this does not mean that classic storytelling is simply or solely a form of entertainment. Even when the literal truth of the story being told is undemonstrated or unnecessary, quite often the reasons for telling the story are to impart important social commentary about cultural values and morality, whether to reinforce the status quo or to criticize it in a relatively safe and culturally acceptable fashion, and thereby to influence opinion and behavior (Fischer, 1963; Jirata, 2010).

A third area of interest for anthropologists who study storytelling is *oral history*. The primary thrust of anthropological oral history research is to record information that is overlooked by and underrepresented in formal academic historical studies. This information can include historical perspectives that diverge from "official" recorded histories and knowledge of lifeways, language, and geographical place names, thus providing a new source of cultural information while also empowering the individuals and cultures whose oral histories are recorded by giving a voice to those who otherwise would not be heard (Cocq, 2012).

Family storytelling is ensconced within oral history research, but it is a very distinctive in its requirements. Before continuing, it is useful to clarify that the definition of family can vary widely cross-culturally and even between members of the same culture (Gillis, 2001). As considered here, the term "family" includes any person identified as a family member by the storyteller and the audience.

Within the traditions of belief systems and folklore, and in much of oral history, family kinship among the participants is not a necessary component of the stories being told, provided that they are of some direct relevance to the storyteller and the audience. In contrast, kinship to the protagonist(s) is a requisite in family stories. While generalized cultural stories can be relevant and, therefore, of importance to the cultural identity of the family, the direct connection to relatives in family storytelling adds a heightened sense of importance, sense of belonging, and immediacy for the participants. In addition to the requirement that the events related must have been experienced by a family member, either as a participant or as a witness, it is also essential that family stories are historically accurate (or at least that the family members believe them to be) and, since the meaning and significance of stories can change with time and circumstance, they must be meaningful to the family members at the time they are told (Langellier & Peterson, 2004).

Within these guidelines, family stories may be used to entertain, instruct, provide specific genealogical and geographical information, fit the family into the broader sweep of historical events, provide moral guidance by informing the listeners of a conflict or crisis faced by a family member, and describing the choices made as well as the outcome of those choices (Amato, 2007/2008). As with other forms of cultural storytelling, our family stories reinforce group solidarity and identity by describing where we have been, what we have done, what we believe, and what we value. In short, the importance of family stories is that they define who we are, and who we are not, thus reinforcing the importance of the family legacy to younger generations. Family stories are, as Joseph Amato (2007/2008, p. 333) states, "the wells from which we drink most deeply [and] at the same time, the golden threads that hold and bind – Ariadne's precious string that leads us through the labyrinth that connects the living present with the living past."

3.3.B.Verifying Historical Accuracy

There has a been a recent surge of interest in the general population to determine one's biological ancestors as is evident from the number of people purchasing DNA kits and those attempting to trace their family's history through the use of on-line genealogical services. A level of desired verification is obvious. With that in mind, an offering of sources for determining or verifying historical accuracy for family stories is provided:

- Genealogical libraries
- Genealogy websites
- Newspaper accounts
- Courthouse records
- Books on local history
- Books on the history or genealogy of specific families
- Archived family papers such as bills of sale, recipes, deeds, and more
- Family photographs
- Family Bibles that often verify birthdates and marriage dates
- Cemeteries, specifically the headstones of family members

- State and national archives

Though this list is not exhaustive, it does give a starting point for individuals interested in verifying family stories.

3.4 Two Sample Stories

Having shared two different perspectives on family storytelling, it seems fitting to share some examples from each perspective, though some overlap will be evident. For example, the story that is told with historical accuracy is not just sharing a piece of history, but it uses descriptive language (which is a vehicle for literacy skills) and passes along some life wisdom (which promotes emotional development). For those who have a familial connection to the story, there are added dimensions such as family identity, character development, and a building of the family legacy. Thus, it not only meets the criteria of being historically accurate from the anthropological perspective, but it also meets some of the educational criteria from the early childhood perspective.

3.4.A. Story Example with Artistic License

When I (first author) was a little girl, maybe four or five years old, my family made our annual trip to Arkansas to visit relatives. I loved those trips! The mountains, the friendly people who planned long spans of time just for “visiting,” and the doting attention that I got from retired grandparents and great-grandparents who apparently had nothing better to do than to cater to my whims and include me in whatever activities they had planned. I enjoyed the ritual of choosing and putting on one of my grandmother’s many wide-brimmed straw hats that were decorated with colorful embroidered flowers, then wearing the chosen one while basking in the warm sunshine of the garden, turning lush green leaves in search of ripe vegetables—green peppers, squash, peas, tomatoes, and best of all, sweet, juicy watermelons. One morning, my grandmother invited me to choose from her colorful array of hats that hung on the wall and join her in a fishing expedition. Who could resist? I selected my hat carefully, deciding on the one with the widest brim to help prevent sunburn. My brother, five years my elder, wanted to join us, so after my grandmother loaded her ancient 1957 aqua and white Chevrolet sedan, the three of us headed to a relative’s pond for the big adventure. I had been fishing once before from the banks of a little pond back home, but this was different. The pond was enormous, surrounded by reddish-brown mountains and, best of all, we rowed a boat into the water to fish. The fishing did not turn out to be quite as fun as I expected though, simply because no one had forewarned me that fish are not drawn to chatty little girls, but instead prefer quiet serenity. I only saw my grandmother once a year, and I had a lot to say! My brother was not as talkative and did not seem to be listening or having a good time. My grandmother repeatedly told him how to bait his hook and to throw the line for the best success, yet she and I caught a few fish and my brother did not catch any! On the way back to her house, my brother was lamenting the fact that he had not caught any fish, and I remarked, “she told you, and she told you!” referring to my grandmother’s many tutorials. My grandmother went back and recounted the day’s adventure to my parents, ending with an imitation of my exact intonation and southern drawl, saying “she told you, and she told you!” That trip and the retelling of the day has been preserved in our family history. Anytime relatives are given instructions they choose not to heed and have disappointing results, the response is an imitation of a little girl returning from a fishing trip, “she told you, and she told you!”

3.4.B. Story Example with Historical Accuracy

In LaSalle Parish, Louisiana, a family story is told by the descendants of James Albert Davis of the importance of honesty and integrity (Woods, 1972). James Albert Davis (1869-1925) was a subsistence farmer, and like many other subsistence farmers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, he would hire out for small jobs to earn extra money. On one occasion, two strangers approached Mr. Davis and asked that he bring a wagonload of pine knots down to the railroad tracks near his home, where the pine knots would later be loaded onto the train to be used as fuel. James secured the services of another local man, and the two set about gathering the pine knots. The two farmers delivered the pine knots to the railroad tracks as requested, unloaded them, and were paid by the strangers, after which they went on about their business. Unbeknownst to the two local men, after they departed, the strangers piled the pine knots on the tracks and waited for the train. As the train approached, the strangers set the pine knots ablaze, which forced the engineer to bring the train to a halt. As soon as it stopped, the two strangers and several companions boarded the train and robbed it. The bandits escaped into the night, and by the time the U.S. Marshals arrived to investigate, the only people in the vicinity who had any involvement in the escapade were James Albert Davis and his companion. The marshals promptly arrested the two men and had them transported to the city jail in the nearby town of Olla. When the mayor of Olla learned of this, he immediately demanded that the men be released. The mayor argued that Mr. Davis was an honest man, a man of integrity, and an upstanding member of the community, beyond reproach, and it was absurd to believe that he would ever willingly participate in such a crime. At length, the marshals yielded and set the two men free.

The real perpetrators were never apprehended, nor were they identified, although there was some suspicion that a gang guided by the famous outlaw Cole Younger may have been involved (Woods, 1972), but this seems unlikely, as Cole Younger was serving a sentence in the Minnesota State Prison in Stillwater, Minnesota and was not paroled until the following year (Younger, 2000). The precise factual details of the event may never be known, as there are some discrepancies between the family account and the information from historical sources (Woods, 1972; *The Daily Picayune* 1900, June 23; *The Daily Picayune* 1900, June 24). Two particulars of the account are undeniable – the Iron Mountain train was robbed and James Albert Davis was arrested and then released. An important third belief holds true for the family, even if historically unsubstantiated – James Albert Davis was cleared of any wrongdoing, without trial or further suspicion, despite his association with the event and his subsequent arrest, due solely to his impeccable personal character. That, to the family, means everything.

4.0 Applying the Research

The major step in applying this body of research is to do an inventory of resources. What is needed to have the ability to tell meaningful family stories? Money, electricity, travel, high literacy abilities, and physical tools or instruments are not needed. Even in a time or set of circumstances when resources are limited, most people have their memories and their voices. The biggest resource needed is probably time. With that in mind, some suggestions for fitting family stories into busy schedules will be discussed.

4.1 Family Stories in Busy Families

With many families' busy lifestyles, it is sometimes difficult to find time even to simply sit down as a family together to eat a meal, so thinking of ways to add one more activity to an already full schedule may seem daunting. Whether telling a simple story of the differences between a parent's first grade experience and her child's first grade experience or a more complex, well-researched oral history of the family ancestors' participation in founding a town, one of the beauties of family storytelling is that once the story is learned, it can be retold many times over the course of years. This means that tired parents do not have to call on creativity to retell a family story and, over time, the children will be happy to fill in the blanks of some of their favorite family stories. Storytelling can fit into the family schedule almost anywhere that story time from a book might fit in and, conveniently, into time slots when reading a book is not possible because the parent or guardian needs his hands for other tasks. Another convenience of oral storytelling as compared to book reading is that oral stories can be told while very active children engage with the world around them as opposed to being expected to sit still, a difficult task for some young children. While waiting in the doctor's office, standing in the grocery story line, bathing your child, preparing a meal, enjoying a meal together as a family, driving across town, or sitting in a traffic jam can all provide opportunities to tell or retell a favorite family story. Any age child is a captive audience in a moving vehicle!

I (first author) have been successful at telling family stories to a room full of cousins ranging in age from 4-13 years old who were all camped out on grandma's living room floor for a holiday sleep-over. I recognize that for them, listening was partly a ploy to buy time so that they could stay awake longer, but the end result was the same as it would have been if they had been there purely by choice. They heard stories about people they were all related to and whose blood coursed through their veins. So, the ancestors' wise or heroic or smart choices were all positive attributes that each of them felt that they were capable of because they shared the heroes' or heroines' genetic material.

Ideas for family stories can come from a variety of sources and have a variety of intentions, but some themes seem to be fairly universal. For instance, most parents have a story to accompany the birth of a child or, if anyone in a room tells of being unexpectedly visited by a wild animal in an unusual place, almost everyone will have a story of the same theme to share. When thinking of possible family stories, Davis (1993) suggests that people "try for our earliest memories and then come forward. Our whole life is our library where personal memories are the books we are looking for" (p. 11). Some family story starters include telling about a time when your attempt at cooking did not turn out as expected, you lost something of importance and eventually found it, your family moved to a new house, or you got lost (Davis, 1993). Stories about ancestors may simply be an opportunity to tell about a beloved uncle with a mischievous bent or an ancestral story may have more of a moral slant such as the resilience of great grandparents as they worked to save the family land during a financial crisis. Stories can be funny, tell about a particular time and place that is different from the listeners' context, describe a learning experience, give guidance for behaviors and expectations, or provide comfort in knowing that ancestors survived trials and tribulations, thus providing assurance that the descendants are also capable of the same kind of fortitude, resilience, cleverness, or bravery.

4.2 Family Stories in the School Curriculum

Family storytelling can meet many standards across the curriculum, especially in language arts and social studies. Combining two curricular areas is an efficient use of instructional time and ties together concepts and content so that learning is more memorable. Family storytelling often evokes emotion, which is also connected to better recall (Larkina & Bauer, 2012).

The following are some brief descriptions of activities that early childhood teachers can use to encourage family storytelling, at school or at home. As teachers consider using these activity ideas, they need to be aware of the families they serve and show respect for different cultures and abilities. For instance, many schools have an automated phone calling system that allows the teacher to record messages to families and call each family. This method of communication may be more successful than notes or e-mails for families with low literacy abilities. It is important to offer options to families, not just expect everyone to participate and create a product. Instead, give families options for different ways to participate throughout the school term, making use of the family strengths within your program.

- **Classroom Scrapbook of Families** – Invite families to send three or four action pictures of their child engaged with other family members. Encourage families to write a brief caption under each picture telling where the picture was taken and what was happening. Allow a few children per day to present their photos and tell about them. Compile all pages into a scrapbook and place in the classroom library.
- **Grandparent Visits** – Invite grandparents to visit school. Ask them to relate a story about what a typical day of school looked like for them when they were children. Technology could be used to connect with grandparents who could not come to school in person.
- **Birthday Stories** – Encourage parents to tell their child about the day they were born.
- **How You Were Named** – Read the story *Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes. Discuss your own name and how your parents chose it. Encourage children to go home and ask their parents how they chose the child's name.
- **Treasure Box** – Provide children with a box and materials for decorating it. Send it home with a note encouraging families to send an item that will help a child to recall a family event. As children bring treasure boxes back to school, give them the opportunity to tell about their treasure and why it is special.
- **Class quilt** – Read the story *The Keeping Quilt* by Patricia Polacco. Provide construction paper squares for each child and encourage the children to go home and get their family to help them draw a picture of a family event or family memory, possibly with a few written words of description. Encourage parents to practice with their child what they will say about the picture. Children present quilt squares and their family story to the class before adding it to the displayed paper classroom quilt.
- **Family Recipe Book –** Ask families to share a recipe that has a family story attached to it. Create a class book and/or ask families to bring a sample to share. Families could opt to video a demonstration of the recipe being made or do an in-person demonstration.

5.0 Summary

Family storytelling experiences are congruent with research on Developmentally Appropriate Practices for teaching young children. First, family storytelling lends itself to Vygotsky's socio-cultural learning theory, a theory which advocates the need for young children to learn through verbal exchanges with learned others (Vygotsky, 1978). Second, family storytelling learning experiences align with NAEYC's calls for practitioners to collaborate with parents to enhance their child's learning and to design learning experiences with families that are both culturally and individually relevant (NAEYC, 2009b).

Family stories benefit children regardless of their age, but the early childhood years are an especially impressionable time. During that phase of life, storytelling goes beyond social and emotional development to improve literacy skills and holistic brain development. Sharing family stories is preceded by an understanding of self. When a family story is shared, it also aids the listener in making sense of his world and life experiences. This process of self-understanding and its effect on the listener is formally referred to as *neural coupling* (Hasson, Ghazanfar, Galantucci, Garrod, & Keysers, 2012). Neural coupling is an important process in this context because when families share their narratives, the young children in those families make connections that require the use of their whole brain (Driessnack, 2017). Through these connections, young children learn about those who lived before them, their family values and expectations, and various life lessons.

Regardless of whether the storyteller is more comfortable with artistic storytelling that changes over time or prefers historical accuracy, there is a place, time, and support for intentionally sharing the family narrative. As Driessnack (2017) points out, "It has been said that children are the living message we send to a time we will not see. What message(s) are you/we sending?"(p. 446).

Considering that every family has stories, that those stories are shown to be beneficial in many ways, and that they are free, it seems plausible that most children could be, and should be, the recipient of the gift of often retold family stories.

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