Oral history in a kindergarten classroom

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Abstract
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Oral History
In a Kindergarten Classroom

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Abstract

The most meaningful stories are ones that are passed on by our own families. Oral history is a strategy that works in capturing those special experiences that would otherwise be lost. Oral history is not meant to be a substitute for textbooks but as a supplement to involve students actively in the history process. It presents an intriguing glance into the past and helps to awaken students of all ages to the realization that history is a very personal experience. It is an excellent teaching tool that fosters excitement about heritage, tradition, and family and helps promote respect and appreciation for the older generation.

A wide variety of topics are suitable for elementary students to investigate using the oral history technique: discussion with elderly relatives, construction of family histories, exploration of traditions, and childhood experiences of the past. At the kindergarten level, visits from parents and grandparents were very successful.

Oral history offers elementary teachers an exciting way to get students actively involved. It allows them to deal directly with people and places in the real world. It involves students in the decision-making process and allows them to feel ownership in a part of history. Oral history combines process and product into a real-life experience.
Collecting oral history as part of the elementary school program has many advantages. Children do not consciously recognize the need to examine their past or to question the lifestyles of the present (Olson & Hatcher, 1982). They do not relate past experiences and events to their daily lives and to their own relationship to the world (Chapin & Messick, 1989). The gathering of stories from the past can encourage students to explore and appreciate their cultural heritage.

Oral history is recalling past experiences and events. It is the reproduction of life stories through interviews in which the narrators can speak from first-hand knowledge as they recall and reminisce about their past life (Mehaffy, 1984).

Value of Oral History

The experience of collecting oral history is valuable in many ways. It allows students to become actively involved in learning about the world and their own histories, thereby nurturing their personal-social abilities, such as self-respect, self-confidence, risk taking, flexibility, creativity, and imagination (Olson & Hatcher, 1982). The collection of oral histories can provide an in-depth examination of an event that may not be fully described in a textbook (Nelson, 1992). By using oral history as a supplement to more conventional study, children can learn historical concepts from other people's life stories and how their past experiences
relate to children's more recent ones. Therefore, oral history is a bridge to the past. By collecting oral histories, students can learn to be historians investigating and recording events from the lives of real people (Hickey, 1991).

Collecting oral histories promotes research and writing abilities and encourages a sense of curiosity and excitement about history (Mehaffy, 1984). Such experiences provide children with the opportunity to satisfy their curiosity about the past by interacting, not only with family members, but also with people they would not normally contact. Importantly, oral history experiences provide children with the opportunity to gain a better understanding and appreciation for older generations. Children can learn that each person has a story to tell and, therefore, is a part of history and primary source of historical information (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). As a result, Buchoff (1995) says "A unique bond is fostered between the adult and the child" (p. 203).

Teachers also gain from their students' collection of oral histories; such experiences are a positive way for teachers to connect with their students (Lamme, 1994). The oral history process offers elementary teachers an exciting way to actively involve students in social studies and also to integrate the social studies and language areas. It moves students beyond the classroom, dealing directly with people, places, and events in
the real world. As a result, students will develop new insights into older people’s lives, grow socially, and take pride in their achievements (Mehaffy, 1984).

Ways to Implement Oral History in the Classroom

An oral history project can be small or large, simple or complicated. Life stories in picture books can be offered as models for gathering oral histories. These stories can be read aloud and discussed with students and can be a part of a reading center in the classroom (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

These components can be part of gathering oral history: selecting a topic, practicing interviews, taping or taking notes, and producing the finished project. A topic needs to be selected that is relatively narrow and can be defined clearly. Once the topic has been selected, a list of available people who will be willing to furnish firsthand data needs to be compiled (Machart, 1970). Together with the teacher, students should make up a short list of questions (Chapin & Messick, 1989).

Practicing interviews in the classroom can assist students in gathering oral histories successfully. Students can role-play or practice with each other (Chapin & Messick, 1989). In the lower elementary grades, the entire class can work together on one topic, supported by the
teacher. The person to be interviewed can be invited to the classroom for the interviewing process. Upper elementary students can conduct their own interviews outside of the school setting (Machart, 1970).

Before the interview is conducted, the students need to determine if the session will be taped or notes taken. If the interview is taped, good equipment is necessary and should be tested before use. If students take notes, it is helpful to have a form with the questions and a space for answers. An interview should not last longer than one hour. After an interview is taped, it can be transcribed. The assistance of parent volunteers for this task can be helpful. If notes are taken, they need to be redrafted for clarity and completeness. Copies of the taped interviews and written transcripts can be placed in the school library, public library, and possibly the local historical society (Machart, 1970).

Oral History Collection
in a Kindergarten Classroom

In my kindergarten class, oral history collection consists of large group experiences with the teacher taking notes. This activity was successfully integrated into many subject areas. Integrating oral history with social studies was such a natural thing to do in kindergarten. For example, parents sharing experiences from other cultures have enhanced our social studies curriculum much more effectively than reading from a
textbook. Oral histories that were collected by my kindergarten class can be categorized as stories from other cultures, childhood experiences of the past, and life stories in picture books.

**Stories from Other Cultures**

The father of one of my students came to share with us some childhood experiences he had while living in Spain as a member of a military family. A globe was used to locate Spain and the United States so that the children would get an idea of space and location. He asked the children what language they thought was spoken in Spain and received some very interesting responses. The more correct one was “Spain—ish”.

The father explained that even though there was television in Spain, he did not watch it because of the language barriers. Therefore, he found other ways to have fun, such as reading and trading comic books. The children put the comic books in a milk box and carried them around the neighborhood for trading with friends.

Because the elementary schools in Spain had neither screens nor air conditioning, many interesting things came in through the open windows. Flies were abundant, so bad in fact that lessons were stopped every hour and the boys went on “fly patrol.” They used rubber bands fashioned together as slingshots to kill flies. The male students got to kill the flies because, in the Spanish culture, they were the hunters. The girls served...
as tally keepers. The father explained how the shooters were made and how to properly use them to protect wrists and hands. With these shooters, they killed huge numbers of flies.

The students in his school took 12 field trips a year to historic places. My student's father showed postal cards as samples of locations. The trips were lengthy, taking eight hours round trip, in comparison to our field trips which take approximately 15 minutes.

This account of a childhood experience was ended with a short discussion about Columbus. While in Spain, the father had lived in the town from which Columbus left to begin his journey to America.

A new student named Joshua, born in Germany to a German mother and an American military father, had some difficulty in adjusting to the American school system and the other five-year-olds, even though he knew the English language. In conferencing with his mother, I found that the family had a dog named Sheema, who had accompanied them on the plane from Germany to the United States. It was agreed that Joshua's mother and Sheema would visit our classroom. The large dog, part German Shepherd, had the ability to obey commands in both German and English. The animal responded well to the students, allowing every child to pet her. The students were amazed that Joshua was able to speak to
Sheema in German and English. During this experience, the children not only bonded with the dog, but also with Joshua.

After this visit, Joshua’s attitude and behavior improved dramatically, becoming more sociable. The gap between the two cultures was bridged. The visit ended with Joshua’s mother promising to return to tell us about how holidays are celebrated in Germany and how it feels to leave your home and everything you know behind and embark on a new journey to a distant land.

Stories from the Past

For Grandparents’ Day, several grandparents came to our classroom to share stories from their past. One grandmother was invited to tell an interesting story because her grandson, one of the students in my class, told about the wonderful cherry pies his grandmother made and they had something funny to do with his grandfather. As a class, we wrote a note to his grandmother asking her to visit us and share this special story.

In preparation for the grandmother’s visit, the class listed questions that they would like to ask. The most popular question was “What can be funny about a cherry pie?” When the grandmother visited the class, she explained that when she and Grandfather were newlyweds, she was always trying to do things to please him. Grandfather’s mother had told her that there was nothing he liked better than a homemade cherry pie.
One day, as soon as Grandfather left for work, Grandmother, although she had never made a pie in her life, proceeded to make one. By dinnertime, the pie was cooling in the kitchen. Grandmother was very proud as she served Grandfather a warm slice on their best wedding china. She was so disappointed when he told her it was not as good as his mother used to make; she never made another one for him. She ended her story by serving her homemade cherry pie to our entire class.

Another grandparent, who had grown up in New York City, told that when he was nine years old his father lost his job in a factory. The family anticipated that they would not receive presents for Christmas and would have no Christmas tree. Without telling anyone, this grandfather, as a boy, stood outside the train station every night and shined shoes for one cent a shoe. On Christmas Eve, he had enough money to buy a small Christmas tree. He could hardly wait to get home and surprise his family. Although there were no Christmas gifts that year, it proved to be the best Christmas ever as their thoughts returned year after year to the beautiful little Christmas tree gaily decorated with strings of popcorn, paper snowflakes, and melted candle wax decorations. The grandfather ended his story with a demonstration of how to make proper snowflakes. The children made snowflakes. Each child’s snowflake was different from the other children’s. They took them home for next year’s tree.
In the spring, my class was studying the life cycle of the butterfly and had just started a butterfly garden. We had also just completed the picture book, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, by Eric Carle (New York: Collins, 1979). During this study, I told a story about one of my son's experiences as a child with the life cycle of a butterfly. (My students enjoy hearing about my experiences as a child and also my sons' childhood experiences.) My son found a huge green worm in the gutter in front of our house. Using my fingers to demonstrate the length of the creature as three inches, I explained that it was very large and had no fuzz on its body.

My son and I found a very large jar in which to put the worm, along with a long stick and some grass. Todd put the jar in the basement, and we forgot about it until one day several weeks later. Then, we discovered that the worm had spun a large cocoon on the stick. From then on, we carefully watched the jar to see what would happen next. A few days later, we found that the cocoon had opened and inside was a giant white moth. Todd took it to his first-grade classroom. After everyone had a chance to see it, the moth was released.

My students were mesmerized by this story and almost immediately a small hand went up. This little boy proceeded to tell the same story I had told, using the same gestures and patterns of language. When he came to the part where the cocoon had opened, he asked, seriously and
dramatically, "And do you know what was inside?" We were expecting him to say a giant white moth, but his answer was "a bunny rabbit." The amount of learning that took place in that story experience was amazing to me: the rapt attention, the recall, the ability to retell a story, but most of all the creativity in the punch line.

Stories Prompted by Literature Experiences

Many times memories are tucked away in the recesses of our mind until something arouses them. As I read the picture book, *The Song and Dance Man*, by Karen Ackerman (Stephen Gammell, Ill., New York: Knopf, 1988), my thoughts kept wandering to past experiences with my own grandparents. My grandfather was not a song and dance man, but an officer in the Russian army, living with his young wife and baby in a German settlement in Russia. The cultural differences were so great that my grandfather's principles and beliefs would not allow him to continue to serve, necessitating an escape across the border. Crowded, like cattle, into the bulkhead of a freighter, they made the long, dangerous journey to the United States. The conditions were deplorable and their baby fell ill, died, and was buried at sea.

Upon their arrival in America, they found themselves frightened and alone in a strange country. Because lives and circumstances change, my grandfather went from a military officer to a railroad worker. He was a
handsome, capable gentleman with the determination to make a place for his family and adapt to the cultural changes in a new country.

My grandmother, on the other hand, was a small, almost frail woman who was never quite capable of conforming to her new environment. Although she could read and write the English language, she never spoke it but continued to speak her native tongue. She always dressed in the ways of the European culture experienced as a young woman and never entered a church without a babushka tied under her chin. She lived her life as a wife and mother, cooking Sunday dinner for the entire family for as long as I can remember. To this day, I can close my eyes and taste my grandmother's roast and smell the wonderful aroma as we gathered around my grandparents' large kitchen table.

The book, The Song and Dance Man, revived many memories, and motivated me to read other books about grandparents. Each one brought back special times in my childhood. The Memory Box, by Mary Bahr (David Cunningham, Il., Morton Grove, IL: Whitman, 1992), told about a grandfather who spent every summer teaching his grandson important things, but then he became the student as the onset of Alzheimer's caused a role reversal resulting in the grandson becoming the teacher. This text brought to mind an emergency appendectomy at age three when my grandfather carried me everywhere and taught me how to walk again.
When I was eight, he had a severe stroke leaving him paralyzed on one side. He then became dependent on me as he tried to regain what he had lost.

In *Grandpa’s Magic*, by Tracey E. Dills (Dublin, OH: Pages, 1991), a small boy talks about the magic of Grandpa’s cane, when, in reality, the grandfather depends on the cane for mobility. After my grandfather’s stroke, he had to rely on a cane until his death; however, he always joked that his cane was only for turning up ant hills and discovering fuzzy caterpillars in the tall grass by the railroad tracks that ran by the house.

Instead of a trip up the attic stairs, as in Ackerman’s story, it was pushing aside a curtained doorway into a room dimmed by drawn shades, cool, and smelling of lavender—my grandparents’ bedroom. Oh, what treasures to explore! Here were the few things brought from the old country: a long-legged doll with a porcelain head, perfume bottles, dainty hand-painted dishes with glass lids, and a bone hairbrush and mirror. As I examined the precious articles, my grandmother would answer my many questions about each thing and let me hold them if I was careful. She was always insistent that I put the items back exactly as I had found them. I loved these times with my grandmother; she would look at me and her eyes would smile. Although I was free to investigate her possessions, I
was never allowed to open the mysterious chest that stood at the foot of the bed.

As the grandchildren of the song and dance man were mesmerized by his performance, I was also transported into the past by my grandfather's voice as he told me endless stories of his past in Europe as we sat together on the large front porch of his home. One memory I will never forget is the trip to the hatchery when it was time to restock the chickens. I had the delicious pleasure of choosing a soft yellow chick, all my own, to carry home in a paper bag with holes pierced in it.

I became intrigued with Karen Ackerman but could find no information on the author. I read as many books written by her as I could find, all dealing with family problems, both cultural and personal: the elderly, the homeless, and the loss of a parent. All the experiences she has written about led me to believe that she too had strong family ties and cherished memories of her own past. I am grateful to Karen Ackerman for bringing back memories that I certainly had not forgotten but had not thought of for a long time.

On the last page of The Song and Dance Man, the grandfather's wistful glances up the attic stairs prompted me to realize that my grandparents carried many burdens in their hearts. Shortly before my grandmother's death at 85, she took my hand, led me into the bedroom,
and opened the mysterious chest at the foot of the bed. Inside were a tiny white christening gown, yellowed with age, and a small silver cross on a chain. These, she told me, belonged to the baby buried at sea. The memory of the circumstances of the baby’s death and the loss of her youngest daughter, my mother, haunted her until her own death. My grandfather always represented strength to me, and rightfully so, but I know now that my grandmother’s physical stature belied the semblance of weakness. She possessed an abundance of strength and had the will to shoulder her burdens and provide a loving home for her family in a strange land where cultural familiarity was an ocean away.

Conclusions

Bringing oral history experiences into my kindergarten program was a rich and rewarding experience for the students and their families. Parents and grandparents were thrilled to be included in our classroom projects and enjoyed telling stories from their past. Even at the kindergarten level, my students found happiness and pride in being a part of history. These storytelling experiences opened all of our eyes and hearts to the strong ties and everlasting influences our ancestors and heritage have now and will continue to forever have on our lives.
References


