



**The Family Story Quilt**  
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The quilt project uses images of family stories to nurture relationships among students. The quilt is a literacy-based integrated art experience that builds community using art and oral history. For homework students learn important family history, such as births, weddings, and travel. Each student creates a paper collage about his or her family stories. The outcome is a paper collage of identity portraits that include cultural words and phrases and paragraphs written about each person in the group. This initiates the information gathering about the family *funds of knowledge*. It is a visual reminder, something kids can see, of how they are connected to each other. The family quilt enhances the panorama of a new classroom with the familiar images of home.

Joanna, a third grader in the mainstream classroom, created a paper collage with splashes of ocean blue, framed in patterns of colorful flowers. She portrayed herself in the ocean in the Dominican Republic, swimming with her cousin. Tamika, an African American child,

interviewed Joanna about her collage and created a riddle to describe her partner Joanna. “Brown, and bright, a lover of colors, math and ocean waves. Who is she?” Riddles, poetry and rhyme are commonly used in both Spanish-speaking Caribbean and African American traditions. Including the riddle in the linguistic collage encourages children to listen for unique and shared cultural expressions.

Family and second language use is encouraged with the inclusion of a key word from the family story. For example, Jerome told a story about visits to his grandmother’s house on Saturdays. Much of the story revolved around the tree in her back yard. The word tree was central to the call and response that accompanied the presentation of the stories. Adelina, a child from Cabo Verde, knew the word tree in Cape Verdean Creole. In the oral retelling of Jerome’s story, as the child said the word tree the class responded with the word, *árví*. The sounds of words from children’s family stories in many languages are a powerful affirmation that this classroom includes every one.

Allowing the children who are learning English to become the resource persons for their language enables monolingual mainstream teachers to recognize her students’ expertise. This turns the idea of language as a deficit on its head. The teacher acknowledges the value of speaking more than one language. The classroom community develops a common vocabulary of family cultures and languages. This experience provides an opportunity for members of a group to get to know one another and begin to get a sense of the group landscape that includes the languages of each child in the classroom community.

Listening to children tell their stories about the family pictures revealed a variety of communication styles. While some children told their family stories in a sequential order, others engaged the group by exposing their topic in associative ways with a conversational call and response. Teaching and learning are creative acts. I wanted to find ways to create sequential stories with the associative retellings. Students could sort out important events in their family quilt and create an accordion book timeline about the family stories. In this way students experience both a rich storytelling tradition and gain a sequential literary style predominant in academic English.

The quilt project challenges students to express themselves effectively, both in art and language, in order to communicate their family story. The use of oral narrative breaks down stereotypes and encourages communication across cultural barriers. The new discoveries about cultural learning and communication styles were adding to my repertoire as a teacher of diverse students. Listening to students and their responses to learning experiences was helping me come up with new ways of teaching.