



Making Connections: Creating and Strengthening Community Bonds Through Family History Stories

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Further Information
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Introduction

We all have a story worth telling. What's yours? Someone in our past - an intrepid ancestor - took that first brave step to chart the course of future generations. The story of their journeys has defined our lives and we owe it to them to keep their memories alive.

The literature supports this idea. For example: "Family stories provide a sense of identity through time, and help children understand who they are in the world"(Kim (2016).

It is absolutely essential that we cultivate and care for the act of storytelling. Thus, this action research explored the question, *How does sharing family history stories foster a sense of belonging in Grade 3 boys?*

Research Context and Participants

St. Mark's School of Texas is a nonsectarian, college preparatory independent day school for boys in Grades 1-12. Our participants were the 36 boys in Grade 3.

The Research Action

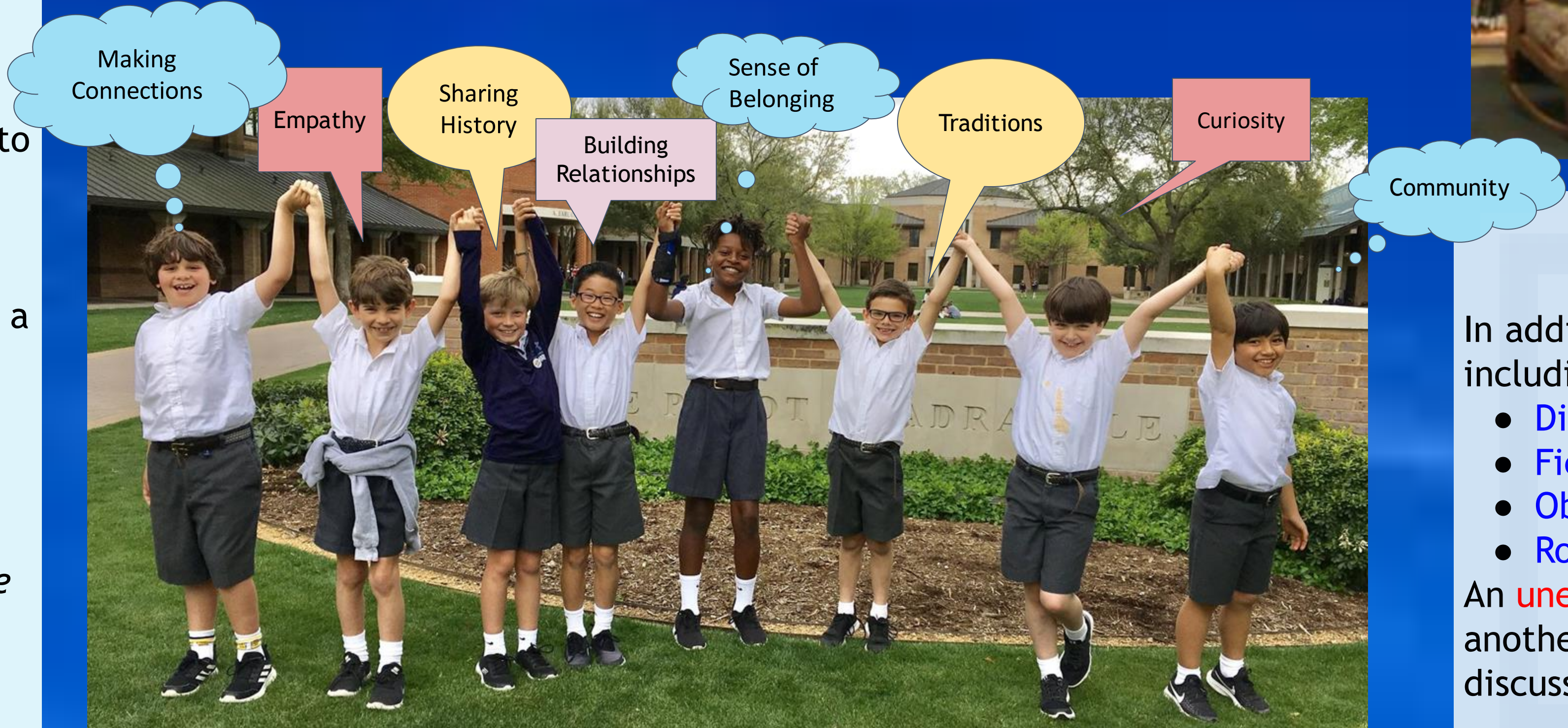
The boys, together with their parents, wrote a story from their ancestral past. Over a period of three weeks, the boys read their stories to the entire 3rd Grade. Following each story, we discussed what we learned from the experiences of each other's family ancestors. We compared and contrasted the stories while looking for common themes, similarities, and differences. After all the stories were shared, we had a final round-table discussion and wrap up.



The Journey to America
When I was a six-year-old boy living in a small mountain town in Southern Italy, the United States Congress implemented the Refugee Act of 1954. This law allowed people from Europe after World War II the opportunity to migrate to the United States due to the massive destruction of the war. One morning, after a year and a half of my Uncle trying to get approval for my family, we received a letter. My Uncle, who was a survivor of Pearl Harbor, wrote to my parents. My parents called us all into the small kitchen and read the letter to us. We were all so happy because my Uncle said he was successful in getting us approval to come to the United States. We could not believe our good fortune! Growing up in Italy, everyone heard so many positive stories about how great America is. The belief is that America has gold paved streets!



"As I look around our class, I am so grateful to have an opportunity to learn from my classmates who have families with different backgrounds."



"His pinky and ring finger got chopped off but he didn't let it impact his life." "Some people would have given up. He had courage and determination to keep going."

A quote from one of the stories that brought out the boy's emotions and led them to show empathy toward the others:
"Even though my grandmother was very happy and thankful that her mother and grandfather returned home safely, her heart was still broken because those families that remained in the prison all perished in the fire."



Data Collection and Analysis

In addition to the pre-and post-questionnaires, we garnered qualitative data from other sources, including:

- Discussions during classes
- Field notes during the actual story sharing
- Observation (all sessions were recorded)
- Round-table discussion

An unexpected source of data collection came from the boys' conversations in the hallways. This added another layer to the authenticity and consistency of the overall data collection. These informal discussions provided additional detail that we used to measure the engagement between the boys.

Upon receiving the 36 family history stories, we organized them around contrasts and commonalities. The order in which the stories were read, for the most part, was purposeful. This was key in observing the effect the stories had on how the boys related to one another. In an effort to draw out our conclusions, we transcribed all the video sessions and then coded them by themes. Comparing and coding the video transcriptions and the notes provided insight into emerging themes.

Key Findings and Discussion

From the very first storytelling session with the boys, we realized that there were three common themes that led to the development of a sense of belonging.

- Shared Family Experiences
- Appreciation for Others' Stories
- Relationship Building

Conclusions

- The task of writing and sharing family history stories created a forum to allow the boys to listen, learn and appreciate each other.
- By sharing stories, we all gain a bit of someone else's perspective.
- We believe the stories that the boys read instilled a sense of community and a desire to know more information about their peers, their own families, backgrounds, and history.
- It was stimulating to observe the interest the boys displayed when listening to their classmates.
- What children learn when they hear about their past is that they belong to something bigger than themselves. They are only one little part of an evolving world.
- The data indicated that this project did increase their sense of belonging as a group. We realized that this was an ideal "getting to know each other" activity for the beginning of the school year. We hope to make this project a tradition within the grade three class and for the new boys.

Key Readings

- Albers, P. (2016, January 5). Why stories matter for children's learning. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/why-stories-matter-for-childrens-learning-52135>
- Kim, Y. (2016, July). *Family stories and the benefits for children*. Retrieved from University of Nevada Cooperative Extension website: <https://www.unce.unr.edu/publications/files/cy/2016/fs1607.pdf>
- Reese, E. (2013, December 9). What kids learn from hearing family stories. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/12/what-kids-learn-from-hearing-family-stories/282075>



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