



Giving and Receiving Stories: Intergenerational Pathways for Survival

Elizabeth P. Quintero

*Professor and Chair of Early Childhood Studies
CSU Channel Islands*

DREAMING TOGETHER

a dream
we dream
alone

reality
we dream
together

(Alarcón, 2005, p. 29)

SOÑANDO JUNTOS

un sueño
los soñamos
solos

la realidad
nos soñamos
juntos

For years I've learned to listen to wisdom and experience that puts my own knowledge in the shadows. Often muses—knowledgeable and informative—come to us in the persona of learners from all ages and all backgrounds. Expertise is seen in the eyes and gestures of a three-year-old (*He be-s [sic] mean to me but I want him to like me*), the cryptic words of a 90-year-old elder from the Anishinabe people in Northern Minnesota (*You're telling a story: is snow still on the ground?*), a Nigerian women who escaped from jail in Libya and swam to the Italian shore when the rubber raft sank (*It's never easy*), and an unaccompanied minor seeking asylum in the UK (*The normal people of Sudan are seeking peace*). And we all participate in the community of educating children. Of course, in the Spanish language and many cultural groups, "educado/a" describes someone who has learned to be polite, respectful, and well-mannered, not only knowledgeable.

Yet in our current collective reality in 2018, we are reeling from terrible political stories of war, displacement, trauma, migration, stories of decades of sexual assault and abuse. In southern California a 4-year-old girl recently told her preschool teacher: "*La migra took my dad. I'm leaving soon to be with my dad. Mom said.*" To be with ones we love is our connection and the synergy of this love may be our main hope for survival.

OBGiving and Receiving Stories: Intergenerational Pathways for Survival

Elizabeth P. Quintero

Truth and lies. How do we raise the next generation in this context? Over the years through the wisdom of generations of learners I've met, there is hope when we listen to each other—often through stories and art.

Giving and Receiving Stories

But aren't stories a distraction, an escape from reality and even almost a sacrilege? No, just like "play" is not a useless pastime for children nor a useless distraction for adults. I've gained perspective and hope from stories in families, stories in young children's play, stories in school and work, and yes, stories for activism in this crazy world. Stories give us hope for our human condition; stories do support our ability to care for each other.

There has been human meaning-making involved in the passion to tell stories and the thirst to receive the stories since the beginning of time. Of course, stories do take many shapes and the intended sharing of meaning in stories is always contingent upon the context in which the stories are shared, the relationships among the story-givers and the story-receivers, and of course, the language used to share the stories. Translation of stories is not always perfect, to be sure, and this is more dire and consequential within contexts of exploitation, colonialism, war, and oppression. Still, there are multiple ways that storying is transformative. And as with most transformations there is a complicated mix of struggle, even trauma, and uncertainty along with the joy.

Gloria Anzaldúa (1999), a long-standing muse for our work in multilingual communities of loved ones from a variety of historical traditions, said:

*To survive the Borderlands
you must live sin fronteras
be a crossroads. (p. 195)*

Stories are alive and in constant fluidity. Through stories we make emergent meaning slowly over time. Through story our brains and hearts have "license" to work together to make sense. This meaning can be associated with social and emotional aspects of life, with cognitive and knowledge-building learning, or can open spaces for art to express things that language cannot. And stories don't require that we categorize and separate the mind from the heart. Stories may be the ultimate in integrated learning.

Children's author, Mac Barnett, quotes Pablo Picasso in a TED Talk entitled "[Why a Good Book Is a Secret Door](#)":

We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth or at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies. (Barnett, 2014)

In terms of relating this thought to his own approach to children's stories, Barnett believes art gives us access to a space between truth and lies that he interprets as wonder. He says, "It's what Coleridge called the willing suspension of disbelief or poetic faith, for those moments where a story, no matter how strange, has some semblance of the truth, and then you're able to believe it" (Barnett, 2014). He believes, and I concur, that it isn't only children who can get there. Adults can too, and we get there when we share stories in a variety of ways. Barnett reminds us that when people go to London and they visit Baker Street to see Sherlock Holmes' apartment, even though 221B is just a number that was

painted on a building, not the actual place in the stories. We all know the characters in the stories aren't real, but our real feelings about them are real and we know them.

Children Combining Fantasy, Reality, People, and Other-than-humans in Stories

Barnett strives for this wonder as he creates stories for children. In his first book (Barnett, 2009) he tells a story about a boy who gets a blue whale as a pet, but it sort of ruins his life. The story is fun and is augmented by an ad that offers a free 30-day risk-free trial for a blue whale. The ad says you can just send in a self-addressed stamped envelope and they'll send you a whale. And kids do write in.

One letter said, "Dear people, I bet you 10 bucks you won't send me a blue whale. Eliot Gannon (age 6)." What Eliot and the other kids who send these in get back is a letter in very small print from a Norwegian law firm that says that due to a change in customs laws, their whale has been held up in Norway, but finishes by saying that the whale would love to hear from you. The whale has a phone number and the children are invited to call and leave the whale a message. And when they call and leave a message, on the outgoing message, it's just whale sounds and then a beep, which actually sounds a lot like a whale sound. And the children receive a picture of their whale, too.

In the talk, Barnett shows a picture of Randolph the Whale who belongs to a boy named Nico, one of the first children to ever call in. He played some of Nico's actual voice messages. The first message from Nico said,

Hello, Randolph, this is Nico. I haven't talked to you for a long time, but I talked to you on Saturday or Sunday, yeah, Saturday or Sunday, so now I'm calling you again to say hello and I wonder what you're doing right now, and I'm going to probably call you again tomorrow or today, so I'll talk to you later. Bye.

Mac reported that Nico called back that day again. And by the time of the TED talk, Nico had left over 25 messages for Randolph over four years. He played one more message from Nico during the TED Talk. This is the Christmas message from Nico.

Hi, Randolph, sorry I haven't talked to you in a long time. It's just that I've been so busy because school started, as you might not know, probably, since you're a whale, you don't know, and I'm calling you to just say, to wish you a merry Christmas. So have a nice Christmas, and bye-bye, Randolph. Goodbye. (Barnett, 2014)

Even though Nico knows Randolph isn't a real whale, he wants him to know that whales (real or imaginary) wouldn't know that school had started. He wanted his whale not to be hurt that Nico had been busy and he wanted Randolph to know he wished him a Merry Christmas. Nico is making a social/emotional connection and practicing being human as a part of an imaginary friendship.

Children combine pretend, imagination, and learning as a part of their schooling. A student teacher wrote about 4-year-old Fernando,¹ highlighting complex issues of traditional ideas about child development, home language, pedagogy and imagination. Fernando was in a state-funded preschool in

¹ All names have been changed to protect privacy.

OBGiving and Receiving Stories: Intergenerational Pathways for Survival

Elizabeth P. Quintero

Southern California. While a large percentage of the children are Spanish-speaking and learning English for the first time, the school did not promote support of home language except in emergencies or when speaking with parents. Pam, herself a bilingual California native, was in a sensitive position of trying to subversively support the 4-year-old's use of his home language. She wrote a journal report about Fernando, the situation, and his potential. The vignette is repeated here as it points to a child who is developing in complex ways using his imagination, involving pretend play, in spite of the misconceptions of many of his teachers. She wrote:

I am assigned to sit with 4-year-old Fernando who is unable to sit still on the rug during literacy time. Since he is unable to control his behavior, and sit quietly crossing his legs (that all children are requested to do) Fernando is told to sit in a chair. Fernando shows interest in my notebook as soon as he notices I am writing notes. He wants to write his name. I said, "Fernando, you may write your name as soon as we go out and play. Let's listen to Teacher right now." "Yo escribo mi nombre?" (I write my name?), he asks me in Spanish. "Si, despues que salgamos a jugar afuera" (Yes, after we go to play outside), I answer him back in Spanish. "Ok, Teacher. Gracias." He turns to listen to his other teacher.

As soon as we are outside during playtime, Fernando runs up to me, "Teacher Pam, yo hago homework" (Teacher Pam, I do homework). "You do your homework?" I ask. "No! Tu homework!" (No, your homework!). He wants to do my homework? I give him my notepad, unsure what he means. He begins writing. He writes, then looks up, looks around, then writes some more.

Later Pam reflected on what she had learned about Fernando and his learning:

My new friend, Fernando, cannot manage to sit still with his peers, but he'd been observing me and noticed I take notes. It seems that our friendship and what he's noticed me doing (writing) have become important to him. He likes pretending he is doing homework as I do. And he can communicate it all with me in his home language. I don't see the "developmental delays" his teachers have mentioned. (Mata, 2013)

Stories from Folk Histories for Transformation

In a 1994 memo to the Mexican people, Zapatista rebel leader Subcomandante Marcos told the story of the Mayan gods bringing colors to the grey world, colors which are contained in the tail feathers of the macaw bird. In 1996, Marcos' text was turned into *La Historia de los Colores*, an illustrated storybook with the Mexican Indian artist Domitilia Domínguez. In 1998 an El Paso-based press received a National Education Association (NEA) grant to publish the bilingual children's book *La Historia de los Colores*. However, just as the book was ready to be published, the NEA abruptly canceled the grant. They feared that funding a children's book written by masked Mexican guerrilla leader would endanger the NEA's own funding by the Republican-controlled Congress who wanted to abolish the NEA. However, the publicity was a bonanza for the book and the Lannan Foundation funded the publication.

The story is adored by young children who love to read about colors, combining colors, and making new colors. And it is a folk tale about dissatisfaction, and creative possibilities. The world that seems fixed and oppressive can be changed; the 'gods' can be anyone, but what they make and do must safeguard against forgetfulness in case the spirit of revolt should become endangered. The story documents

OBGiving and Receiving Stories: Intergenerational Pathways for Survival

Elizabeth P. Quintero

ancient wisdom and certainly maintains an acknowledgment of a cultural way of life that intentionally perseveres without money or political negotiations. The Zapatistas still struggle for their autonomous Mayan Marxist state within Mexico.

Stories from Theater Arts

In a TED Talk with the theme of Inventions, Sarah Jones introduces “characters” from her one woman shows. “Lorraine Levine” is an elderly Jewish woman who tells the story of her life; a woman named Noraida, a Dominican American college student, describes her organization to support Dominican mothers and babies; Madame Bousson, a French teacher in the United Nations High School, is a human rights advocate originally from India; and Pauline Ming from the Chinese community in New York City who told the story of parenting a son and daughter who have their own ideas about who they will love and spend their lives with (Jones, 2009).

Sarah Jones became known in New York City for her one woman show “Bridges and Tunnels” that portrayed characters from all parts of the world who were living in New York City in the years following the World Trade Center tragedy on September 11, 2001. Her art has created dialogue among people with differing histories and differing views. She is clearly a vivid example of ways art provides access to story giving and story receiving. And she continues this work.

Students in my university literacy class responded to her work and made connections to their own work with young children in these times of truth and lies and misunderstandings. One student wrote:

After watching the TED talk by Sarah Jones, something that relates to our class definition of literacy is the way she uses language to express herself and transforms ideas as she takes on these different personalities and characters. She was trying to prove that even though we live in a world with differences of culture, traditions, and language we are still the same.

How might I support this type of literacy as a teacher? I can support children with this type of literacy by giving the children the opportunity to play out events that they have observed in real life or from a book. I would also make sure that they are provided with the space and props to explore their real life or imaginary world as they pretend to be another character. (Reina, 2018)

Another university student commented on Sarah Jones’ work:

The definition of literacy that we came up with at the beginning of the course is “a process of constructing and critically using language (oral/written) as means of expression, interpretation, and/or transformation of our lives and the lives around us.” This is spot on what Sarah did during her talk. She became different people/characters in order to express herself and her feelings during her talk. Through her acting she was able to teach the audience all about different people she has met throughout her life, and open our eyes to many of the different types of people living in the world. (Jameson, 2018)

Author and human rights activist, Terry Tempest Williams, says, “Finding beauty in a broken world is creating beauty in the world we find...” (Williams, 2000). I believe we find beauty through stories—certainly through children’s stories and stories of those we love, from multiple generations. Stories provide access to the hearts and minds of the children we raise, as parents and teachers together. It is through story that our children keep us honest, if not wise.

OBGiving and Receiving Stories: Intergenerational Pathways for Survival

Elizabeth P. Quintero

About the Author

Dr. Elizabeth Quintero is Professor and Chair of Early Childhood Studies at CSU Channel Islands. Her passion is programs that serve young children and families, many migrating from a variety of cultural and historical backgrounds in multilingual communities, including Mexico, Turkey, Macedonia, asylum-seekers in the United Kingdom, and many areas of the United States. She is author of numerous publications including *Storying Learning in Early Childhood: When Children Lead Participatory Curriculum Design, Implementation, and Assessment* (2015), and, with co-author Mary K. Rummel, *Storying: A Path to our Future--Artful Thinking, Learning, Teaching, and Research* (2014).

References

Alarcon, Francisco X. (2005). *Poems to Dream Together/poemas Para Sonar Juntos: Poemas Para Sonar Juntos*. New York: Lee & Low Books.

Anzaldúa, G. (1999). *La Frontera/Borderlands*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press.

Barnett, M. (2014). Why a good book is a secret door.

https://www.ted.com/talks/mac_barnett_why_a_good_book_is_a_secret_door

Jameson, L (2018). Unpublished manuscript. Camarillo, CA.

Jones, S. (2009). A one woman Global Village.

https://www.ted.com/talks/sarah_jones_as_a_one_woman_global_village

Mata, J. (2013). Unpublished manuscript. Camarillo, CA.

Powell's Books. (2008). Synopses & Reviews. <http://www.powells.com/book/la-historia-de-los-colores-the-story-of-colors-9780938317715>

Reina, A. (2018). Unpublished manuscript. Camarillo, CA.

Williams, Terry T. (2009). *Finding beauty in a broken world*. New York: Vintage.