

Understanding Culture and Identity Through Family Artifacts

*L'Etoile du Nord French Immersion School
St. Paul, Minnesota*

Handmade dolls, bracelets fashioned from silver spoons, and a great-grandfather's watch became the stuff of fifth-graders' stories and, eventually, books, thanks to an extensive project on family artifacts at this French immersion school. Understanding Culture and Identity Through Family Artifacts was a multi-disciplinary project that involved language and arts curricula, and tapped many resources, including a local book artist, an art center, parents, and teachers.

Twenty-eight fifth-graders undertook this project, which began with a 12-week residency by book artist, Lori Brink. She met first with the Action Team for Partnership (ATP) to suggest ways to include families in the school's narrative and publishing activities. She later presented a bookmaking workshop to the school community, laying the groundwork for the students' projects.

"Fifth-graders and their families identified one artifact that has a significant meaning to them and created a vibrant visual and literary book that tells the story of their family's experiences, culture, beliefs, and creative expression," said one of the teachers who was instrumental in the project. "Through bookmaking in the writers' workshop, our students gained a deeper understanding of personal narrative as an art form, and bookmaking as a container for the creative process. This is a true collaboration with family partners!"

Once the students chose an artifact, they talked to their families about the item and gathered the stories that often surround such possessions. The youngsters interviewed their parents and other family members, and wrote daily in a writer's notebook practicing personal narratives and descriptive writing. Eventually, each student produced several writings inside a handmade Family Artifacts box.

The students painted their 5x6-inch wooden boxes and topped them with marbled paper they made themselves. Each box

contained a fold-out map of the country from which the artifact came; a handmade book telling the story of the artifact, written as realistic fiction; a family tree; and a handmade pamphlet describing the artifact in both English and French.

Among the artifacts students chose were a bracelet that the student's uncle made from a silver spoon while imprisoned in Vietnam, a watch that had been handed down from the student's great-grandfather in Denmark, and a doll made by a girl's grandmother as a gift to her mother.

The project culminated with a celebration at the Minnesota Center for Book Arts. Students presented their artifacts on Family Artifact Day in May. Their parents, who were involved as resources and translators, also joined the celebration.

"The fifth-grade teachers discovered that the books not only represent a student's culture and traditions, but also the unique fabric of our school community," one teacher concluded.

The school received a St. Paul Public Schools "Arts for All" partnership award to support the project and the artist's residency. In the fall, the ATP will share what it produced and learned at an immersion education conference at the University of Minnesota.

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