Take-Home Book Bags: A Motivating Strategy for Home Support

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Abstract

As recreational reading is decreasing as a chosen activity for young children, pleasurable family reading experiences can contribute significantly to students’ literacy motivation and skills. This article suggests that teachers can promote effective home literacy support with motivating, creative, and interactive take-home book bags. The author shares processes and strategies for creating these bags, which she used successfully in her own classroom for many years and now shares with teacher candidates and workshop attendees.

“Students need opportunities to stretch their reading abilities but also to experience the satisfaction and pleasure of easy, fluent reading.”

(Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, Appendix A, p.9)

Children constantly stretch their reading abilities with texts across ranges of complexity that are part of their daily lives: They are fluent in watching movies and TV, using mobile devices, and playing video games. They can talk easily with friends about plots, sequences, characters, problem resolution, protagonists, and heroes, and they draw thoughtful and meticulously detailed conclusions with no prodding from adults or laboring over worksheets. Totally engaged, these young consumers of pop culture display confidence, excitement, enthusiasm, and incredible recall of information, using extensive vocabularies, making countless conceptual connections. But when children are expected to read at home, do they “experience satisfaction and pleasure of easy fluent reading” (CCSS, 2010, Appendix, p.9) through books? Can we provide opportunities for enjoyable literacy opportunities that benefit all family members?

This article suggests that teachers enhance recreational literacy through providing take-home book bags. During my elementary classroom teaching years, I utilized these bags to encourage motivating and authentic homework which included creative thinking experiences. It was enjoyable for me to create and share the bags with my students, their families, and other teachers in workshops I conducted for statewide professional
development. Now as I share some of those bags with the pre-service teachers I currently teach, I am drawn to the possibilities these materials hold for a new generation of young readers and new teachers. My goal is to suggest ways to make reading satisfying and pleasurable. Home literacy activities may counteract the feeling in some young students that "reading is something you do in school," as I was told by a second grader in a local school during a recent classroom visit.

**Review of Related Research**

While the goals of CCSS include deep thinking and problem solving, engagement in pleasure reading activities is minimal. Rebora (2011) notes that recreational reading is at high risk due to over emphasis on academic reading focused on improving scores on high stakes standardized testing. More than 125 children’s book authors and illustrators recently petitioned President Obama, calling attention to overtesting with a statement of British author Philip Pullman: "We are creating a generation that hates reading and feels nothing but hostility for literature" (as qtd. by Neill, 2013, n.p.). If children do not have opportunities to read quality children’s literature for enjoyment in school, how will they choose recreational reading as a home activity?

Programs in British (Ward, 2013) and Canadian schools (Murphy, 2012) cite successful, creative ways to enhance children’s reading for pleasure both in and out of school. While we cannot assume that all parents read with their children at home—or that they even know this is helpful—educators can provide examples to try to get the conversation started. Organizations such as Reading is Fundamental (RIF) offer tips, provide resources on choosing good books, and help families establish a motivating literate home environment. Paired reading (MacDonald, 2010) extends home literacy, as children share books with family members, building on school experiences, with the potential to improve overall literacy behavior in easy, enjoyable ways. Rasinski (2012) suggests three of "the essentials" for developing reading fluency: (1) reading real literature, (2) getting real-time word recognition support, and (3) participating in assisted reading activities. These are included as families are encouraged to participate in book bag activities on whatever level they are able.

The concept of home-school literacy activities is not new, but in these times of scripted one-size-fits-all classroom instruction, there is a need to find more engaging recreational reading opportunities for children. Paired reading literacy interactions with family members may connect school with much needed parental involvement (Compton-Lilly, 2009; Compton-Lilly, Rogers, & Lewis, 2012; Topping, 1987), while supporting developmental reading skills. Ada (2003) urges teachers to connect students’ two worlds—home and school—in meaningful ways. Ordonez-Jasis and Ortiz (2006) specify that home-school partnerships should be respectful, building on strengths of parents and other family members. Morgan, Nutbrown, and Hannon (2009) focus more particularly on ways children’s academic achievement is enhanced when their fathers are involved in their development. Take-home book bags can help make those connections, not only presenting books to share, but reinforcing literacy strategies.
Benefits of Take-Home Book Bags

Sometimes called “story backpacks,” “take-home literacy kits,” and similar names, these take-home bags include a piece of children’s literature, a notebook for family responses, a book for the participating student’s activity, and some type of literacy extension activity for the family to complete at home. Activities might include writing, drawing, or making something related to the book. Borrowed from the classroom and returned in a day or two, the bags include all materials necessary to complete a project and simple directions for families to follow. Tasks reflect a variety of reading levels and interests, providing opportunities for children to develop and refine fluency, while helping parents better understand what their children are learning in school and how they can support those approaches. Grande (2004) highlights similar benefits of literacy bags as enjoyable involvement for families, effective communication tools between school and home, and a means of providing parents with awareness of the literacy skills their children are learning in school. But the most important purpose is to engage families in pleasurable literacy activities in a relaxed, comfortable environment.


Children may feel they are in control of this literacy experience as they lead family members (Galbraith, & Alexander, 2005). Paired reading allows children to share books they have experienced at school, to lead literacy activities familiar to them (similar to those done in class), and thus to take a comfortable leadership role in the family activity. As they interact with their family members, children can experience first hand how parents or older siblings may grapple with text complexity and make connections among themes, characters, unknown vocabulary words, or story concepts (Newkirk, 2012). Larrotta and Yamamura (2011) remind us that as the Latina/Latino school-aged population...
increases, educators need to find materials that appeal to all children and help them feel comfortable and represented among the wide range of book characters and stories. Being able to identify with book characters may increase children’s motivation to read. Using bilingual picture books and associated activities may help fill this need for some students, particularly those from minority backgrounds.

Steps for Organizing the Project

Assistance and objectives. Make a list of book titles, goals, and developmentally appropriate tasks you may want to include in bags. If you need help, you may ask others to make the bags and gather associated materials. You may ask local community groups and clubs for volunteers to create bags and fund materials. For more extensive funding, you may apply for grants, PTO monies, or support from business partnerships. Keep in mind, however, the bags need not be fancy or elaborate. Plan at least four for your first year, one per quarter. Using a backwards design approach (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011), define your purpose for each bag (e.g., increasing comprehension, writing a letter, using puppets to retell a story, sequencing story events), and decide what you want parents and children to do.

Book choices. Use books you already have, with which children have some familiarity. Use quality children’s literature: for instance, books recognized by the Caldecott and Newberry Medals, the National Book Awards, the Coretta Scott King Award, or the Children’s Notable Books List. Liang (2013) provides a helpful list of awards given annually. Book reviews are available through the Hornbook and on blogs like A Book or Two: Children’s Literature Reviews (Marciano, 2011), written by my teacher candidates. Parents struggling with their own reading ability might find shorter books more accessible. Avoid choosing books tied to a season or holiday, so you do not limit bags to a specific time of year. Fiction, especially fairy tales, can provide many interpretations and may be familiar to parents.

Look for books that lend themselves easily to a literacy extension activity. For example, Henkes’
*Chrysanthemum* (1991) has 13 letters in her name. Families might enjoy listing each member’s name, counting the letters, and then creating a simple bar graph representing the family’s information. Jumpstart your own brainstorming with sites like Pinterest.com and Readwritethink.org. Choose books the students have enjoyed in class. Finally, use books you personally love! Your enthusiasm will increase as you create your backpacks, and that excitement will be contagious for your students!

**Material choices.** Make sure all materials necessary to complete the project are included in the book bag. Providing materials helps remove stress for families who might not have needed items at home or the means for purchasing them. Remember, you want to easily engage families in the activity, to help them feel comfortable and invited—not stressed and uncertain of how to proceed. Due to potential for loss or breakage, do not send home expensive items or large equipment.

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**Considerations for Assembling Bags**

**Bag and contents.** If you are crafty, design the front of the bag to resemble the book cover. I’ve used canvas bags, mostly collected at teacher conferences or purchased at local fabric/craft stores on sale. Solicit gently used backpacks at the end of the school year to contain next year’s new kits. Fabric paint or markers, simple appliques, or sewing right on a canvas bag can make it immediately recognizable. An easier method is to use craft bags that have clear pockets on the outside, inserting a photo or copy of the book cover in the pockets. You can replace these as you reuse the bag for other books; however I find it more convenient to designate one bag for each kit. All materials stay in the bag for later storage.

Along with a copy of the book, I include a welcome letter, a student activity book, and a family response journal, with instructions to parents to write a message to the class about their experiences with the book bag. I include all craft materials, puzzles, game pieces, etc. that will be involved in the activities. I replenish as needed such items as glue stick, scissors, cardboard, paper, pencils and sharpeners, colored pencils, erasers, dice, tape, and whatever else you think families might need. You may also include an appropriate theme-related toy or puppet. Make two facsimiles of
the book cover, one for the student activity book and one for the family response journal.

**Additional provisions.** Add a list of similar books, links to author websites, facts related to the story, etc. (e.g., see *Chrysanthemum* at Henkes’ site: kevinhenkes.com/book/chrysanthemum). Keep in mind, however, that many families may not have Internet access. Provide the links and materials in additional languages if appropriate for your student population. Remember to keep the whole bag simple—within your own and your students’ comfort levels.

Since children’s artwork most often consists of drawing with crayons or markers, make a concerted effort to use other activities for your book bag. If drawing is the best means of achieving your goal, however, include different materials, such as textured paper, colored pencils, or pastel oil crayons. Attempt to use a wide variety of materials and activities, but be sure they are simple enough for non-educators to use with children. Give directions for paper bag puppets or use pre-cut shapes to create a mosaic. You might include a set of finger puppets or sequencing props to manipulate during the reading or retelling of the story.

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**Processes for Implementation**

**Management.** Have a kick-off introducing the book bags and activities. Discuss with students the responsibilities they must assume to make this a positive experience for everyone, including respect for materials and the need for returning the bags and materials in a timely way. Organization for borrowing the book bags is as easy as posting a class list with names numbered in alphabetical order. Children use the materials in the bag according to their class list number: Child #8 on the list completes her activity on page 8 of the student activity book, and her family writes their note in the family response journal on page 8. In both books, students use the table of contents to write their names on the appropriate pages. Keep a chart with the book bag titles written at the top and check off as children each have a turn. Eventually all children will have had a chance to take the bag home. A classroom aid might check the bags upon return to restock materials as needed, and families can note if something is
missing or broken. Children with multiple households may borrow the bag again after all classmates have had a turn.

**Follow up.** The main purposes of the take-home book bags are to elicit communication between school and home and to provide authentic literacy activities for use at home. The family response journal, which includes one or two simple prompts, can focus on level of enjoyment, “ah-ha” moments, questions related to the story, and/or appreciation. These responses will give you feedback on usefulness, understandings, and areas needing adjustments. Students share their own page in show-and-tell manner the day they bring the book back. This provides them the spotlight, expanding their social and oral skills while sharing information about their families. Their excitement often inspires their classmates.

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**Conclusion**

Take-home book bags provide outstanding learning and social opportunities. This is a win-win-win project: Parents learn about their children, children learn about their families, and literacy skills taught in school are reinforced at home in authentic ways. Children experience a sense of ownership and involvement, evidenced in Zeece and Wallace’s study (2009) when they asked a preschooler, “What’s in your bag?” Her enthusiastic reply was “Books and good stuff”—thus giving the name “Books and Good Stuff” to their literacy take-home bag project (p. 36).

For me, making the bags has been a relaxing extension of my love of crafts and literacy. I have created many bags, using different books, activities, and goals. Doing this does not need to require a great sacrifice of time if you ask others to help. Wilson (2013) outlines a project conducted with pre-service teachers as a class assignment: They learned how to match standards and exercise creativity, while involving parents—an effective combination for learning.

Take-home literacy bags are easy for families to work with, since book choice, materials, literacy extension activities, and directions are provided for their use. Families have no need to search for paper or craft supplies, chose a book, or spend any money on resources to participate in the activity. Tasks reinforce literacy skills learned in school, which are open ended enough for families to personalize while making
connections with their children as to how they use literacy in their own daily life. Remember, we want our children to be real readers: "A real reader is someone who approaches reading with heated passion, who talks with others about books, seeks out books, compares and devours books for enjoyment and for information, and passes judgment on issues in books" (Oczkus, 2012, p. 43). Let’s ask families to help us ignite that passion at home and keep it burning. Keep Calm and Book Bag On!

References


Cited and Suggested Children’s Books

Note: Books suited for readers theatre and fairy tales make excellent take-home books. Send a set of props or puppets for family members to use.


++ Wordless Picture Books bridge language gaps.