
Stone Soup: A story about using story for research

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As librarians serving youth, we have an advantage when it comes to creating and communicating the meaning of our work and research: our knowledge of traditional and contemporary literature. Folklore often provides the shared framework for a culture to understand and guide behavior. The story of Stone Soup offered a culturally shared framework that informed my theories about what was going on in collaboration and communicated those theories to others in my research. This paper explores the use of three variants of this folktale as a conceptual framework for research into the collaboration of a school librarian with a team of second grade teachers.

Introduction

Human minds rely on story to make meaning (Haven, 2007). As librarians serving youth, we have an advantage when it comes to creating and communicating the meaning of our work and research: our knowledge of traditional and contemporary literature. In my work as a school librarian collaborating with teachers was like *Stone Soup* where the contributions of many were transformed into a hearty meal to be shared. In my research related to collaboration, *Stone Soup* became a way to think about the work of collaboration, to formulate interview questions, and to bring coherence to my findings. I was a school librarian and my research involved recording eight monthly planning meetings between myself and a team of second grade teachers throughout a school year (Kimmel, 2010). The metaphor of a soup where everyone contributes became a surprisingly rich way to conceptualize collaboration particularly as I encountered different variants of the story. In the middle of this study, I interviewed the three teachers and asked each one the question: "If collaboration with the school librarian is like *Stone Soup*, what ingredients does the school librarian bring to the soup?"

In this article, I will share the thinking that led me to ask this question and the various answers provided by the teachers to this original question. I will frame this initial question with a variant of the story retold and illustrated by Jon J. Muth (2003). Then I will share an episode from my planning with one of the teachers in which we discuss using *Stone Soup* variants as part of a science unit on mixtures and how heat changes matter. This episode will be framed by another variant of the story, *The Real Story of Stone Soup* (Compestine, 2007) that led me to think differently about my first interview question and to ask a variant of that question during the end of the year interviews with the teachers. I will share their responses to this variant question. Then I will talk about how their responses and my analysis led me back to an early *Stone Soup* (Brown, 1947) - one that I remember from my own childhood. My re-reading of this *Stone Soup* added a further

dimension and depth to my exploration of collaboration and the role of the school librarian as an outsider. The impetus for me to share this story layered with stories is probably what has moved storytellers from the beginning of time. We want to understand ourselves, and we do that by sharing our stories with others.

Literature Review

Stories, and in particular folktales, have been told and retold for generations. Researchers interested in psychology and anthropology have studied their impact on child development and the learning of individuals and of organizations. In the literature review I share some of this work including specific examples of using the folktale, *Stone Soup* from the library field and online education. Other researchers have also explored the use of narrative inquiry in qualitative research and the relevance of this research method to the current study is also reported.

The Importance of Stories

Bettelheim in his landmark work, *The Uses of Enchantment*, talks about the importance of the “folk fairy tales” for both the aesthetic and psychological impacts they have on children showing how “fairy tales represent in imaginative form what the process of healthy human development consists of, and how the tales make such development attractive for the child to engage in” (1977, p.12). He makes a profound argument for the importance of traditional fairy tales in the healthy psychological growth of children as they deal with the common fears and anxieties of childhood.

Haven (2007) provides compelling research about the importance of stories in all disciplines as a powerful and effective way to communicate information. He draws on research about the brain to demonstrate how our minds are wired for story as we attempt to find meaning in events. Stories are linked to logical and critical thinking, memory, and the activation of prior knowledge that are each valued as important aspects of learning and higher level thinking (Brandsford, 2000). Stories provide us with “meaning, context, relevance, and empathy” (Haven, 2007, p. 125). Lave and Wenger (1991) demonstrate the importance of stories in apprenticeships such as midwifery or membership in Alcoholics Anonymous as they shape an identity as a member of a community of practice. Stories are not just important for the complex lessons they may convey but for their communal value as they are shared and passed down in an organization or community. Wenger (1998) also talks about stories and fables as a powerful means for sharing understandings. Stories, Wenger asserts, “can be integrated into our identities and remembered as personal experience, rather than as mere reification” (pp 203-4).

Stone Soup: The Story

Stone Soup is an old story with numerous variants identified by a variety of sources. Marcia Brown’s (1947) Caldecott honor-winning title originates from France. In the *Storyteller’s Sourcebook*, Macdonald (1982) identifies Brown as one of eleven variants from Russia, Sweden, Belgium, England and France. A stone, nail, or hatchet were featured in this story type in which a soldier or tramp wins hospitality with the promise to make soup from the object. Clarkson and Cross (1980) identify the story as a “noodle tale” in which the unsuspecting are tricked by the apparent foolishness of a stranger’s offer to make soup from a stone and in turn, become the foolish ones by unwittingly providing the key ingredients themselves. Muth (2003) mentions related stories from Jamaica, Korea, and the Philippines, while he takes the creative license to set his variant in China “where tricksters spread enlightenment rather than seeking gain for themselves” (Muth, Author’s Note).

Folktale variants are popular in schools. Western (1980) includes *Stone Soup* as part of a proposed plan to use folklore variants as part of a systematic study of literature beginning with elementary school children. Asking children to identify the similarities and differences among versions of familiar folktales provides students with early experiences in comparative literature. Various authors have adapted the familiar story of *Stone Soup* with cowboys in *Fandango Stew* (Davis, 2011), a group of unruly but hungry boys and an old man in *Burgoo Stew* (Patron, 1991), or in Mexico with a cactus spine instead of a stone (Kimmel, 2004). Walther and Fuhler (2009) suggest teaching point of view through Marcia Brown's *Stone Soup* and Ying Chang's *The Real Story of Stone Soup* in their discussion of pairing contemporary and classic stories to promote higher level thinking skills.

Stone Soup As a Metaphor for Collaboration

Folktales offer us frameworks for digging deeper and conceptualizing more abstract and difficult topics. In particular, the story of *Stone Soup* has become a useful metaphor for the work of libraries and for the work of collaboration. An ethic of sharing clearly infuses the mission of libraries that offer free access to resources. A community pools its resources to support a library that is shared by its members whether they are public, academic, or school libraries. The result is a rich and communal soup for everyone to partake. Johnson (1999) pointed out that *Stone Soup* is a great metaphor not only for the sharing of ideas but for the sharing of library resources between libraries in order to offer patrons a much richer selection of materials. Discussing resistance to this concept of shared collection development, Johnson contrasts a perspective of scarcity where sharing requires having less for ourselves with the metaphor of *Stone Soup* based on a perspective of abundance and richness derived from collecting and sharing resources. Woodward (2004) writes about "Stone Soup Libraries" as small, often isolated libraries with few resources that manage to hang on with the support of volunteers, donations, and often the assistance of a nearby library.

During my over fifteen years working in elementary schools, there wasn't a year that went by without some kindergarten teacher creating a *Stone Soup* experience for her students with the smell of a crockpot soup wafting through the halls. Folktales endure and this one about a group of strangers who convince a suspicious town residents to search their cupboards for ingredients remains a perennial favorite in elementary schools. So it's not surprising that others used this particular folktale to reference the work of schools and in particular, the work of collaboration in schools. Murrell (1998) used *Stone Soup* as a metaphor to describe professional development schools and the collaboration they promote between schools and universities.

Rusinko (2003) depicts using stories as an accessible way to gain participation in online classes. Having a shared reading allows students to read at their convenience. The ambiguity and seeming simplicity of a story allows students to read into the story and feel more open to respond with an opinion. A folktale offers cultural diversity and a different "paradigmatic" approach to a management topic for students. In particular, Rusinko (2003) describes using the story of *Stone Soup* in an international management course. Issues of teamwork, trust, and the reaction to strangers are all discussed in the context of management. A school librarian who desires collaboration with teachers in a school may face similar issues as managers. Just as in *Stone Soup*, the school librarian is an outsider to classroom teachers and must gain the trust of teachers in order to work together as a team to plan instruction for students.

Narrative Research

Narrative research is a recognized field of qualitative research that focuses on the collecting and re-telling of the stories of participants (Creswell, 2012). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) describe narrative inquiry as that in which narrative is both the “phenomenon and the method” (p. 2), and they trace a long history of the use of narrative in social science research. These authors portray narrative inquiry as a collaboration between the researcher and participants to develop a shared narrative “in which both practitioners and researchers feel cared for and have a voice with which to tell their stories” (p. 4). Narrative research with its focus on character, plot, setting, and the voice of the narrator strikes a particular resonance for those of us involved with children and youth services particularly as it draws us into the related field of literature.

Narrative inquiry has been reported as a form of assessment where students used journaling to capture critical incidents in a library management course (Farmer (2004) and for a narrative analysis of interviews with library school graduates (Mardis ,2013). Jones (2010) used a narrative design to examine the life stories of graduate students preparing to become school librarians in order to understand their career choices. In her phenomenological examination of the meanings of the first year of practice for a new school librarian, Watson (2001) employed a narrative method. Watson discusses at length the value of narrative in library research to call attention to the “small and ordinary moments” and to promote reflective practice for practitioners, researchers, and readers of research (p. 147). Holley and Colyar (2009) also explore the importance of narrative and narrative questions not just as a research methodology but to share or present research findings and as a way to critically read research. “Ultimately, narrative constructs offer another set of lenses that can assist scholars as they address, with greater intention and attention, their central role as writers and meaning-makers in the research process” (Holley & Colyar, 2009, p.685). In this revisiting of my research, I employ techniques of narrative inquiry in order to retell the story of myself and the teachers as practitioners and my own story as researcher.

Background & Method

The findings presented in this paper are drawn from a larger ethnographic study that involved recording, transcribing, and analyzing eight planning meetings between myself as the school librarian and a team of three second-grade teachers throughout a school year. The purpose of this study was to understand what the talk of collaboration between a school librarian and team of teachers sounded like. Given that talk is the means of collaboration, a discourse analysis was employed to analyze both the larger patterns across the data (Kimmel, 2012a) and was also applied to provide a more detailed analysis of a particular passage in order to understand the meanings and identities of a school librarian present in collaborative planning (Kimmel, 2011). Analysis of the data employed a three-step process adapted from Spradley (1980) of making broad descriptive observations followed by more focused observations and finally, selective observations. In each case, the observations involved careful listening, transcriptions, re-listenings to the recordings and re-readings of the transcripts. At the most selective level, small passages were meticulously transcribed following Gee and Green (1998). Interviews with the teachers were conducted midway during the school year and again at the end of the year and these were also analyzed for the ways teachers talked about the role and contributions of the school librarian (Kimmel, 2012b). For this article, findings were selected from the larger study to illustrate the use of story in conducting, analyzing, and reporting research.

In discussing a qualitative research design, Maxwell (2005) underscores the importance of a conceptual framework as a model for the researcher to employ in order to understand what is going on in the study. In particular, Maxwell discusses the use of theory as a framework to inform

and guide the study. "A useful theory is one that tells an enlightening story about what you think is happening and why" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 42). Ethnography attempts to uncover cultural meanings or knowledge and has defined culture as "the acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate behavior" (Spradley, 1980, p.6). Folklore often provides the shared framework for a culture to understand and guide behavior. *Stone Soup* provided a culturally shared framework that informed my theories about what was going on in collaboration and I communicated those theories to others. As a participant observer in this research, I kept frequent researcher memos (Maxwell, 2005) and met often with faculty advisors to discuss my theories and stories about what was going on.

These memos and discussions frequently referenced the folktale, *Stone Soup*.

In this paper I explore the use of this folktale as both shared cultural knowledge and as a conceptual framework for the ethnographic study. The findings that follow are drawn from the data of this larger study (Kimmel, 2010) but are shared here as findings about the folktale itself and its utility for qualitative research. I divide these findings among three variants of the story: *Stone Soup* (Muth, 2003), *The Real Story of Stone Soup* (Compestine, 2007), and *Stone Soup: An Old Tale* (Brown, 1947).

Findings

In this section, I share three variants of the folktale, *Stone Soup* that provided important frameworks at different times throughout the research process. The first variant helped me to conceptualize the research about collaboration from the beginning; a second variant emerged in the middle of data collection and offered a very different perspective on collaboration, and the third variant was important after all data had been collected and I was deep in the analysis stage.

Stone Soup: Collaboration is Like Stone Soup Because Something is Created From the Contributions of Many

Originally, I drew on the warm message in Jon J. Muth's (2003) version where traveling monks use their wisdom to encourage villagers to share, "As each person opened their heart to give, the next person gave even more. And as this happened the soup grew richer and smelled more delicious." At first the villagers, wearied by "famine, floods, and war" are suspicious even of each other. The monks recognize that "These people do not know happiness" and proceed to show them how to make stone soup. At the end, everyone sits around one long table to share the feast followed with stories and celebration. When the monks leave the next morning the villagers thank them for showing that "sharing makes us all richer."

In interviews, I asked teachers, "If collaboration was Stone Soup, what ingredients did the school librarian add?" A full list of their responses follows in Table 1. Teachers spoke about resources, knowledge, ideas, support, time and energy. They suggested that the school librarian, much like the traveling monks in the story was the one who helped to pull things together and helped them to make connections so they could make those connections for their students. A heuristic elicitation method (Eisenhardt, Shrum, Harding & Cuthbert, 1988) was used where interviewees were first asked to list "all the ingredients" they could think of, and then the list was read back to them with the request that they identify the most important ingredient on the list. The bold terms in Table 1 show the ingredient they identified as most important. All three teachers identified resources or knowledge of resources as contributions from the school librarian.

Areyanna, in particular focused on the supportive role of the school librarian, remarking “you don’t force it on us.” Teachers also recognized the instructional role of the school librarian. Diana includes lessons on her list; Areyanna includes the curriculum, and Brittany elaborates on knowledge saying the librarian helps us “realize our objective – what happens when we are teaching this objective and maybe some things that we can do and you can do with the kids or we can do in the classroom with kids.” More detail about these interviews can be found in Kimmel (2012b).

Table 1. What Ingredients Does the School Librarian Add to the *Stone Soup*?

Areyanna	Brittany	Diana
Focus	Knowledge	Media resources
Direction	Creative ideas	Curriculum resources
Resources	Experience	Ideas
Good advice	An open mind	“You do so much but I’m
Suggestions	“You help us to connect with	saying so little”
“You don’t necessarily push it	other things so we can help the	Lessons
on us”	kids see those connections.”	
the curriculum		
“you make sure we are		
following the Standard Course		
of Study”		
Lessons		
Time		
Energy		
Support		

“Sharing makes us all richer” when a librarian and teachers collaborate to plan lessons that further circulate those resources and ideas to students. For many of us this is the meaning of *Stone Soup* that predominates: the idea of sharing resources to create something from the combination of resources that is more than the parts that any of us could create alone. In classrooms, the story is often used to talk about creating community from a heterogeneous group of students. It’s a way to appreciate differences and think about creating community.

The Real Story of Stone Soup: Stones Provide the Heat Transfer or Energy for the Soup

I also enjoyed sharing variants of the story when second grade was studying mixtures in science and in particular how heat changes a mixture. Cooking seemed like a natural activity for this science unit. Many a classroom has asked students to bring in different foods to create a soup together. As I was gathering these variants I encountered *The Real Story of Stone Soup* (Compestine, 2007) in which the stones are heated and then added to the soup in order to transfer the heat. In this version the Chang brothers are told to make soup without a pot or utensils. So they dig a hole in the sand, line it with banana leaves, and fill it with water, fish, vegetables and eggs. Stones are heated in the fire and dropped into the soup until it comes to a boil. The Chang brothers trick the lazy narrator into thinking the stones make the soup and into providing some of the ingredients, chopsticks, and bowls. The narrator suggests this is the real story not the one where, “A hungry soldier tricks some stingy villagers into making him a big pot of soup.” In addition to the humorous twist on the familiar story, this version presents a real science lesson about the transfer of heat and a practical way of thinking about the role of stones in a soup. In an email to the teachers ahead of planning I note,

"I have an idea for you to think about. We've got a new book called *The Real Story of Stone Soup* and it's about heating soup but heating stones in a fire and then dropping them into the soup. It's a funny story about the transfer of heat – one of your objectives. Plus the whole stone soup and its variants are often about mixtures of a sort. So just some food for thought (ha!) (email correspondence, March 2, 2009).

This variant prodded me to wonder about the items we took for granted in the story including the container or pot, and the source of heat or energy that was needed to cook the soup. I wondered what teachers would say about the energy or heat that fueled collaboration and added a new question to the interviews conducted at the end of the year: "Related to *Stone Soup*... where's the heat or energy when we plan together?"

Each of the three teachers provided distinct answers to this question. Dianna, the most veteran teacher on the grade level said the heat was just "getting it done" suggesting the pressure of time as a source of impetus and energy. Areyanna, the other experienced teacher, recognized that it was the combination of everyone together and noted that when someone was missing it just wasn't as "hot." She also said "I think it's just the fact that we're all there together and the fact that you, that no one is trying to be better than the other. We're there to share our ideas and work together and pull, come up with the best plan we can come up with." Brittany, who was a first year teacher said, "We all have a common goal and that's for students to learn and to find out what's most effective for them to learn." In this case, the metaphor of *Stone Soup* allowed teachers to think about how collaboration might transform learning particularly in the response of Brittany about student learning. As Dianna suggested, time is a scarce resource and scarcity provides its own heat. Areyanna's reference to everyone being together suggests that heterogeneity is also a form of heat.

Stone Soup: An Old Tale: Outsiders Gain Trust With Imagination and Persuasion not Force.

While the gentle Muth variant of *Stone Soup* was the one in the forefront of my mind as I engaged in this collaboration and research, and the Compestine story was discovered in the midst of the collaboration, another version, from my own childhood, surely lurked in the background. In the analysis phase of my research, I determined that I needed to return to this version written by Marcia Brown and first published in 1947. There I found a darker edge to the story rooted in European history. In Brown's version, the strangers who enter the town were soldiers greeted with suspicion by the townspeople or peasants who were clearly wary of hungry soldiers and went to great lengths to hide their food. Hunger permeates this story as the soldiers have not eaten in two days, and the peasants "have little enough for ourselves". The soldiers are pictured with large cutlasses strapped across their backs and later they use these large and sharp implements to slice the vegetables. In contrast, the soldiers used imagination and a gentle a power of suggestion, "If there were carrots, it would be much better" to persuade the reluctant peasants to contribute to the soup. By the time the soup is ready, the peasants themselves decide that bread and cider would make the meal even better. This story enchanted me as a child. The soup, described in the story, was "A rich man's soup and all from a few stones. It seemed like magic." As Bettelheim states, "Fairy tales enrich the child's life and give it an enchanted quality just because he does not quite know how the stories have worked their wonder on him" (p.19).

Revisiting this childhood favorite during the analysis phase of my research, I was struck by the hunger and the potential for the use of force by the soldiers to extract what they wanted from the peasants. In this story the peasants did not seem "stingy" or even unhappy, just hungry. Their

fear and mistrust of strangers and, in particular of these strangers who held a particular form of power, seemed justified and understandable. The soldiers, in turn, made skillful use of the power of suggestion to gain the cooperation of the peasants to make the soup. Brown's version of the story highlighted the mistrust that caused villagers to at first refuse to share their food with traveling soldiers. And while history might suggest that soldiers could use force to acquire that food, these soldiers chose instead to use the power of suggestions. Areyanna's response to the question about what the school librarian contributed to collaboration addressed this aspect of the process when she said "You don't necessarily push it on us. Suggestions, suggestions." In an era of high stakes testing when teachers were often told what to do, Areyanna recognized the value of the school librarian's suggestions to integrate technology and other resources into their instruction. When I asked teachers what they might recommend to a school librarian who was trying to persuade a reluctant teacher to work with her, their suggestions echo the actions of the soldiers in Brown's story, "Find out what this teacher is doing and hey, I have these kinds of things for you. Just kind of ease them in there."

Discussion

As Wenger (1998) suggests, stories have the power to become a part of our identity and the stories from our childhoods do take on the qualities of lived experience (p.203). Bettelheim (1977) clearly recognized this power as well in the way fairy tales allowed a child to do the psychological work of childhood. Perhaps one aspect of the tale *Stone Soup* that represents this power is the issue of the "stranger." Like the villagers in the Brown and Muth variants, we are taught to be mistrustful of strangers and yet, these strangers were able to gain the trust and cooperation of the villagers. In fact, the strangers in these stories are portrayed as the protagonists and their actions provide insight into the techniques needed by strangers to overcome barriers of unfamiliarity and mistrust. As the school librarian, I conceptualized myself as the "stranger" who needed to gain access and trust from the classroom teachers. I was aware of Hartzell's caution that the school librarian's attempts to collaborate might be perceived by teachers as "encroachments on their autonomy by an arrogant peer" (2001, p. 34) and Van Deusen's (1996) conception of the school librarian in an "inside-outside" role. Like the students in Rusinko's (2003) management classes, school librarians will recognize the message in the story about earning trust and forging partnerships to get work done.

A delightful twist in this research story occurred in the actual planning with teachers for their unit on matter with the discovery of *The Real Story of Stone Soup*. This variant where the characters solve the problem of not having a pot to make the soup by using a hole in the ground and hot stones to transfer the heat caused me to think about aspects of the story I had previously taken for granted. What about the cooking pot and the heat? When asked about the energy that fuels collaboration, teachers responded about the pressure of time, the focus on student learning, and the practice of being together for planning. In many ways their responses about the energy could be used to describe the pot or the container in which planning occurred. The work of collaborating with classroom teachers is contained in a particular time and place and structured by the goals of student learning.

What about the stones in these stories of *Stone Soup*? In the Muth variant, they are smooth, round stones that might be found in a restful Zen garden while in the earlier Brown tale, they are large, almost unwieldy, rough rocks. Both the Brown and Compestine stories feature sly tricksters who persuade others that the stones are magic while in Muth retelling the stones are not the only things that seem smoothed over. The soldiers have been replaced with traveling monks who talk about "cat whiskers, the color of the sun, and giving" and wonder about the meaning of happiness.

The Muth variant captures the warm message in the folktale about the richness provided through the contributions of others but neglects the more difficult aspects of collaboration related to outsiders and trust. As Bettelheim warns parents who think children “should be exposed only to the sunny side of things,” this “one-sided fare nourishes the mind only in a one-sided way, and real life is not all sunny” (1977, p. 7). Ultimately the more recent Muth variant with its upbeat message was not as satisfying or useful for an understanding of collaboration as the edgier Brown version that conveyed both hunger and magic.

Collaboration is difficult work. The research on collaboration within school librarianship highlights the difficulty in attaining this ideal (Todd 2008, Moreillon 2008, O’Neal 2004) and identifies numerous barriers including time, resources, and administrative support (Brown, 2004). We may be guilty of promoting the smooth benefits of collaboration, or “Sharing makes us all richer” (Muth, 2003) without exploring the rough edges inherent in human relationships. Each of the *Stone Soup* variants has a happy ending with the sharing of a feast. The soldiers or monks move on. The questions about their long term effect on the village, or the sustainability of their sharing remains unexamined. Hopefully the work of collaboration includes times of feasting and celebration but true collaboration also involves ongoing work. Perhaps we should borrow another folkloric motif: the story that ends at the beginning only to cycle through again. Collaborative partnerships must be continuously renegotiated and renewed. The soup must be re-made to continue to satisfy our hunger.

Conclusion

Traditional stories have been told and retold. Their familiarity provides a core of shared meanings while retellings and variations allow local adaptations and new understandings to emerge. These stories of *Stone Soup* provide several lessons for collaboration and for research. We gather stones and ask others to open their pantries to share with us. Through imagination and persuasive talk we build trust and participation. While these ingredients are important we also need to consider the pot that contains them and the heat that transforms them. The soup may be consumed in feast and celebration, but we have to wonder about the magic stones that endure and sustain collaboration. Perhaps the stories we tell and retell are what we carry forward. Through these stories we re-create our identities as school librarians, give meaning to our work, and find the energy to begin again and again.

Folktales such as *Stone Soup* offer powerful metaphors for research and practice. Many have deep roots in our individual psyches; we remember them from childhood and they are a part of who we are today. Stories provide touchstones of shared cultural meanings. Folktales can be used with research participants to explore understandings of experience, and again to communicate and share the findings of our research within our field. Exploring variants of a familiar folktale in these contexts may help us to grasp and communicate various aspects of our research questions. The story of *Stone Soup* and its many variants is one rich resource for the profession of school librarianship and those engaged in research related to the profession.

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