

**Many Stories Many Lands: Storytelling as a Tool in the Affirmation of Cultural Identity and Promotion of Tolerance and Equity in Children. Implementing a community based storytelling programme in early childhood centres and lower primary classrooms.**

***Abstract***

The *Many Stories Many Lands* programme offers a holistic and inclusive approach to children's education through the empathic and interactive medium of storytelling. The oral presentation of world folktales by both a professional storyteller and community storytellers has a myriad of benefits in both an academic and socio-cultural sense. The programme introduces children to the concept of traditional stories as a cultural birthright, of which they may be the custodians. The stories teach the concepts of courage, compassion and co-operation and the act of storytelling develops language, listening and learning skills. In its broadest sense, a storytelling programme that celebrates cultural diversity not only raises the self-esteem of its members, it strengthens that community.

*I'm half-Chinese and half-Australian. I'm Chinese on the inside.*

*Olivia aged 8, (Schatz Blackrose, 2004)*

Cultural identity is a composite of ethnic, national, social, political and geographic criteria. We may change our national and geographic identity according to the region or country we live in, we may move between different socio-economic classes, revise our political and social views and interests, but our ethnic identity remains immutable. We cannot change our ancestry, but this doesn't mean we embrace or even acknowledge it. Suppression of ethnic identity occurs through both choice and ignorance.

As adults we decide how we want to be identified by others and how we identify ourselves. The specifics of the situation we are in, our past experiences and our purpose in being there determine this. An environment that does not foster cultural diversity is inherently exclusive. If we don't want to feel excluded we may choose to suppress particular aspects of our cultural identity and attempt to assimilate into the dominant cultural group. This may mean denying our ethnic heritage, sexual orientation or religious persuasion and adopting the dress, language, customs, names and demeanour of the dominant group. This is much more difficult to do if our skin colour, facial characteristics and hairstyles immediately identify us as being 'other'.

If Anglo Australians are identified as the dominant cultural group in Australia then Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, all indigenous peoples, Asians and Africans are 'other'. In addition to those people physically recognisable as 'other' there are those who 'look' like they fit into the dominant group, but their customs and language also place them in the category of 'other'. Further, there are a growing number of people of mixed heritage, second and

third generation European and Asian migrants born in Australia. The 'other' then may comprise a larger population than the dominant cultural group, but this must be viewed in relation to the social construct of being 'Australian'.

There are many people living in Australia who have come here as migrants but have actively chosen to assimilate into the dominant cultural group. They anglicised their names, learnt English and included Australian colloquialisms in their speech, rejected their ethnic customs and identified as 'Australian.'

To be 'Australian' is not simply to identify as living in the country Australia, but to embrace the mythology surrounding Australia's national identity. Prominent among these myths is the belief in Australia as a nation where 'a fair go for all' is championed. Politicians and citizens alike fondly adopt this aphorism when describing the character of Australia. However, Australia's history of racial discrimination makes a mockery of this notion. More recently the Australian government produced a national advertisement congratulating people from all the nations of the world who had just become Australian citizens, at the same time it was refusing sanctuary to refugees. A decidedly 'unAustralian' act. This paradox is a closer representation of our mythical identity.

Every race of people who have migrated to Australia, with the exception of the English has experienced discrimination and sometimes violence by Anglo Australians or Australian government policies. However, none more so than the indigenous people of Australia, the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. A concise history of Australia's history of institutionalised racism and discrimination

can be found at the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission website (HEROC 2004) and (HEROC 2003).

Fear and suspicion have characterised the relationship of successive Australian governments to the indigenous people of Australia. From the beginning of British settlement in Australia in 1788 genocidal practices were enacted by both governments and settlers on the original inhabitants of the country. Introduced diseases, organised massacres, dispossession of land and the stealing of children occurred until the last decades of the twentieth century. However the legacy of two hundred years of attempted genocide continues in the future generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. The White Australia Policy and the apartheid practice of a colour bar in public places may have ceased but Australian government policies have a long way to go before they can be regarded as compassionate or just to our indigenous people.

Australia is a culturally diverse country, but that doesn't mean diversity is universally valued let alone celebrated. Although the Australian government may have adopted a policy of multiculturalism and supported the establishment of migrant resources centres in our capital cities, racial discrimination, abuse and violence are still experienced by many people living here. When diversity is equated with difference and difference translates to 'other' then the suppression/assimilation route once again becomes an attractive option to avoid feeling excluded, or violated.

The quest to 'belong' is a human one and exclusion from your community is a traditional form of punishment in many cultures. Along with physical and

emotional violence, exclusion has also been identified as a key-bullying tactic. In the capital cities there are distinctive ethnic communities, which have grown to provide acceptance, support and services for their residents. However, once you go to rural areas of Australia there are few ethnic enclaves and individuals and families are often isolated from their ethnic group. The town or regional community is then the primary community in which people feel they need to belong.

Children experience many of the same feelings in relation to the expression of their cultural identity that adults do. Their need to belong, their desire for acceptance and their right to feel safe are central to the concerns of parents and educators and the subject of the *Many Stories Many Lands* programme.

As children spend a significant amount of their lives in care and learning centres then it is imperative that these be culturally inclusive environments. The simplest way to celebrate cultural diversity and promote tolerance and equity is to implement the *Many Stories Many Lands* programme.

The key components of the programme are the oral telling of folktales, using professional, community and children as storytellers and the building of social capital through the inclusion of the school and broader community in programme activities.

The *Many Stories many Lands* programme is an individualised school and or pre-school based community-learning programme that can be tailored to most environments. It can run as an ongoing integrated programme or

as a specific unit of learning. It also has the ability to be a springboard for additional intergenerational, arts in education and community based learning programmes.

Each programme is run according to the specifications of individual learning centres. They determine sources of funding, the employment of a professional storyteller(s), the time frame of the programme and how it is to be documented and evaluated. The only feature common to all programmes is the philosophy: oral storytelling is a tool to affirm cultural identity and promote tolerance and equity in children.

#### A rationale for telling folktales.

*The Three Butterflies* (Schatz Blackrose, 2001)

*Teller* : Once upon a time there were three butterflies. A pink butterfly, a purple butterfly and a yellow butterfly. It was a beautiful, sunny day and the three butterflies flew around the garden. After a while the wind began to blow through the leaves of the trees and a big, grey storm cloud floated in front of the sun. There was a clap of thunder and pitter, patter, it began to rain. The butterflies were frightened their wings would get wet and looked around for shelter. The pink butterfly saw some pink flowers and flew over to them.

*Teller & Pink Butterfly* : Can we take shelter from the rain here?

*Pink Flowers* : You can, because you're pink like us, but your friends can't.

*Teller & Pink Butterfly* : If my friends can't stay, I won't stay.

*Teller* : So the pink butterfly flew back to her friends. The purple butterfly saw some purple flowers and flew over to them.

*Teller & Purple Butterfly* : Can we take shelter from the rain here?

*Purple Flowers*: You can, because you're purple like us, but your friends can't.

*Teller & Purple Butterfly*: If my friends can't stay, I won't stay.

*Teller*: So the purple butterfly flew back to her friends. The yellow butterfly saw some yellow flowers and flew over to them.

*Teller & Yellow Butterfly*: Can we take shelter from the rain here?

*Yellow Flowers*: You can, because you're yellow like us, but your friends can't.

*Teller & Yellow Butterfly*: If my friends can't stay I won't stay.

*Teller*: So the yellow butterfly flew back to her friends. The rain began to fall harder, pitter, patter, pitter, patter, and soak the butterfly wings. They began to droop and the three butterflies began to shiver. Just then the wise, old gum tree that stood in the corner of the garden called out.

*Gum Tree*: Butterflies, butterflies take shelter from the rain here. There is room for everybody.

*Teller*: And the three butterflies flew over to the gum tree and sheltered among her branches. When the rain stopped and the sun came out, a beautiful rainbow appeared in the sky. The three butterflies thanked the gum tree for sheltering them and flew off to the end of the rainbow.

I have told this version of the traditional German folktale, *The Three Butterfly Brothers* (Olcott, 1914) in childcare centres, libraries and lower primary classrooms for the past ten years. I perform it as a play with myself as the narrator and children acting out the parts of the three butterflies, the gum tree and the remainder of the group being the flowers. In all the times I have told it, even to children as young as three years old, I have observed that they understand the concept of inclusion and exclusion based on similarity and difference. Usually the second and third butterfly need very little prompting to say their lines, as their sense of identification with their butterfly friends is very strong. At the same time the children being the flowers often find it difficult to refuse shelter to the butterflies, because their instinct is to be inclusive and accepting. Telling this traditional tale addresses bullying, prejudice and exclusion and advocates tolerance, courage and compassion. Is there a more effective peace tool than a folktale?

Folktales are stories of the people, anonymous, traditional, oral tales that have survived to the present day. Many have now been written down and because of that, are now known beyond the cultures they originated in. Through migration these tales travelled and adapted themselves to different localities and peoples. The advent of television may have popularised particular folktales but children's imaginations, social perceptions and desire for knowledge have not been enhanced because they have watched them on TV. Yet a simply told folktale can affect these things and much more in a child.

The engagement of teller and listener, the ability of the teller to improvise, include music and adapt their telling to suit a particular audience makes oral storytelling the most dynamic medium for the transmission of these traditional stories. It is not only the act of storytelling but also the stories themselves that enlighten and entertain. (I do not mean the diluted variants adapted for television).

Storytelling traditions in most countries throughout the world have changed. Some cultures have lost stories and traditional storytellers through war, famine, displacement and natural disasters. Others have been suppressed because of the advent of global technology. Televisions are replacing human beings as storytellers. Simultaneously the use of audio-visual equipment can 'save' stories and the traditions they are told in by recording them for future generations. However in the main, the documentation and promotion of traditional storytelling is not their primary purpose.

I have seen many pre-schools and primary schools also opt for the TV or video versions of folktales instead of having real life storytellers come and present them. The television adaptations are usually animated, Americanised and sanitised and the medium itself offers little opportunity for children to meaningfully interact with the story. The audio-visual medium may be a powerful one but it is not uncommon for children to choose a storyteller over a television... if they have the choice.

In instances where children do not speak the language of their ethnic origin, hearing the folktales of that culture is an affirmation of their cultural

identity. These stories are their stories. I have witnessed this affirmation in both community cultural celebrations and the classroom.

At a festival celebrating Swiss Week in Sydney in 2003, I told Swiss folktales in English. Most of the children in the audience were born in Australia and only spoke English, but they claimed the stories as theirs. The parents and grandparents attending were also excited at this celebration of Swiss culture through stories. In an ESL class where I was storytelling on a weekly basis I asked children to tell me which country they wanted me to tell stories from. Most of the children chose the country of their ethnic origin. Both of these examples support my belief that children want to celebrate their cultural heritage and a cultural festival and an ESL classroom are comfortable places to do so.

A child in the same ESL class who was fluent in her mother's language taught everyone in that class a song that her mother taught her. When I asked her about teaching it to her big class she said she wouldn't.

Creating the right space to celebrate cultural diversity means making sure all children feel safe to express who they are. The ESL classes afforded this opportunity. In a classroom situation enabling this means celebrating our diversity and our homogeneity, honouring the individual but respecting the community and understanding that we are all citizens of the world. Initiatives to make the classroom an environment that celebrates diversity and promotes tolerance include using a globe to encourage children to find the countries that are celebrating, playing recorded music and/or percussion instruments from

different cultures, learning simple dances and games and using diversity dolls, in addition to working with folktales.

Languages other than English should be encouraged through the performance of songs, dances and greetings as a commonplace occurrence in the classroom. Many folktales can be told in English but have rhymes in their language of origin included in them. Placing children in the position of teaching songs, rhymes and games to other children, with the added assistance of parents and grandparents is a culturally affirming and self esteem building practice. It also creates a bond of empathy between children in their shared experience of learning a new language.

To foster diversity through storytelling addresses academic, social and developmental aspects of children's learning, but most importantly, the sharing of our traditional stories is not only an expression of our cultural identity, but a celebration of our humanity.

### Three Suggested Formats for the Many Stories Many Lands Programme

The most important resource in the *Many Stories Many Lands* programme is the community in which it will be implemented; the learning centres and the wider community. Within that community are the stories, the storytellers and the vision to carry it through. The professional or primary storyteller may come from outside the community and be brought in to initiate the programme, inspiring resourcing and training members of the community to become storytellers in the

context of the programme. This means the programme will develop its own momentum and the community will have ownership of their individual programme.

*Many Stories Many Lands* begins by addressing the question, what is storytelling? This is done through the primary storyteller(s) presenting a series of storytelling sessions and workshops to the school and broader community. There are a number of professional storytellers working in schools, preschools and community organisations throughout Australia. Their presentations are as diverse as the stories they tell. There are bi-lingual tellers, multi-media tellers, indigenous tellers, storyteller/musicians, trance tellers and dramatic tellers to name a few. They present workshops on the role of storytelling in oracy, literacy, drama, psychology and cultural studies. Selecting the storyteller and the time frame for the programme go hand in hand.

#### A ten-week unit of learning

The primary storyteller presents four storytelling performance/workshops to the school and the broader community, during the first two weeks of the programme. This is followed by eight one-hour storytelling sessions with the primary storyteller once a week. In the last four weeks, parents and grandparents are invited to attend the each storytelling session. At the final session children have the opportunity to tell their stories or retell the folktales they have heard and celebrate with a multicultural feast.

### A two-week intensive

Each day a community storytelling session conducted by the primary storyteller takes place. She collaborates with art, music or drama teachers/practitioners to work with the children to publicly (re) present the stories. A public display/performance is presented at the last session and parents and the broader community is invited to attend.

### A yearlong integration

The beginning of each term is celebrated with a community meal and the telling of a traditional folktale by the primary storyteller(s), followed by a cultural performance. The folktale is then retold and (re) presented by children during their class time. The primary storyteller runs a series of workshops on storytelling for teachers, parents and students. Each week a folktale is told and used as a foundation for cross curriculum learning. Teachers are encouraged to become storytellers and parents and grandparents are encouraged to tell stories at home and in class time. Every opportunity is taken within class time to research, celebrate and participate in cultural celebrations and understand the relationship of folktales to the culture(s) they come from, particularly the qualities, which they impart.

These formats are by no means the only ways the *Many Stories Many Lands* programme can be applied. It is the responsibility of each community to implement their storytelling programme in accordance with the specific qualities, resources and purpose of their own community.

This paper was presented in conjunction with the telling of the following folktales. They were told to demonstrate both the medium of storytelling and the concepts addressed in the *Many Stories Many Lands* Programme.

Written sources of these tales are cited, however the nature of oral storytelling means that the storyteller creates their own version of the story to suit their audience and purpose.

*The Drum* (Ramanujan, 1991) A chain tale with variants throughout the world. In this version the child wishes for a drum and through his own generosity initiates a process of exchanges and eventually has his wish granted. The drum is a metaphor for the folktale. Only when we freely give it away through the act of telling do we unleash its power to serve and transform our lives.

*The Lion's Story* (Wilson) "Grandfather is it true that the lion is the king of the jungle?" asked the boy. "It is," replied the old man. "Then why are the stories I hear always about how the lion is defeated by men?" he continued. "That will always be the way until the lion tells the story," answered the old man.

This proverb from West Africa challenges the dominant perspective; whose stories are being told and whose are being heard?

*Stone Soup* (Schatz Blackrose, 1997) known also as *Axe Porridge and Nail Soup*. This folktale is found throughout Europe and is commonly perceived as a trickster tale. In this version the trickster child enlists the assistance of other

children to transform their experience of hunger into one of fulfilment. They serve not just themselves, but the whole community. However, before a community can be created, it must first be conceived. It is the child who entertains this possibility and initiates the process with her Stone Soup concoction. Her vision is fantastic yet feasible and the outcome of the tale nourishes both the belly and the soul.

*The Best Story in the World* (Farley, 1997) This Korean folktale shows the journey of a traditional story from being told for one reason and then being retold to different affect. It expresses the ability of traditional tales to fulfil a myriad of purposes, both conscious and unconscious.

*Why the platypus is special* (Ellis, 1991) An Aboriginal creation story explaining the relationship of the platypus to other native Australian animals. The animal's attempts to woo the platypus into their specific groups, leads her to consider both inclusion and segregation. Her choice to belong to none of the groups because she belongs to all of them recognises the diversity of each, but celebrates their homogeneity.

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