

**Full Seminar Presentation
Early Childhood Australia
Biennial Conference
3-6 October 2008**

For the next 50 minutes I wish to bring to you an experience that will enrich your practice of working with the young child and that will allow you to reflect on what it means to care for the young child's emotional and social well-being through storytelling.

In Steiner Education when we observe and work with the child we work with the notion of a specific 'picture' of how the child develops and comes into an understanding of the surrounding world. In preparing this seminar to present to you I began with a specific picture in which to bring a starting point for an understanding of storytelling and its benefits for a healthy emotional climate in Early Childhood settings.

I start with my picture of the young child. This sees the child as experiencing the world through doing- through their physical body. The young child does not yet intellectualise –like we do as adults- the child imagines and creates, they muse and wonder. To me the child lives in the dreamy world that is childhood, an inner space that holds feeling, emotion, creativity and imagination. In my picture there is a circle surrounding the child protecting this sacred inner world of childhood. As a teacher, part of my task is to nourish this circle through providing warmth to care for the child's inner emotional well-being.

A second aspect to my task is to support the child in their understanding and experience of the wider 'outside' world. The world of relationships with: people, places and things and also of influences that may challenge a child's emotional well-being and security. Negotiating the 'outside' world and all the individual and shared experiences that it contains can be overwhelming for a young child and it is here that a balance is needed to bridge the child's experiences and support their understanding so that a foundation for a healthy well-rounded and whole emotional intelligence can be laid.

For me, the story is a tool for building this bridge between the child's 'inner-emotional' experiences and their 'outer –wider world' experiences.

Through this seminar I hope to help you to create a starting picture that you can take with you back to your work –to build on and create into your own story telling experience. We will create works in progress - tools to inspire your own creative story processes.

To further explain how my picture works I will share a story from the Land of the Long White Cloud- Aotearoa, New Zealand. A story that touched me the first time I read it and one that I took to the first children I taught as a Steiner Kindergartener. So now relax, and take yourself into the mood of the young child absorb the story as they do – with their whole being.

Inkle Binkle Bonkle Boo, I have a story to tell to you, it comes from far it comes from wide so sit down now as quiet as can be its time to go for a magical ride...

The modern Māori fable 'Cry Baby Moon' is told to the group.

I have adapted this story from the original -a children's story book written by Kāterina Mataira and Terewai Kemp this story has been described as a modern Māori fable brought to life in a simple, magical way.

I bring this story for two reasons.

Firstly it shows what I was describing in my picture. The story is seen as a healing tool – a supportive and imaginative way for the child to process and explore specific aspects of their world. In this way the story can act as a reference point as the child deciphers what living in the world is all about.

Specifically, Cry-Baby Moon presents themes of friendship and of being a friend. This is brought to the child in an imaginative way through pictures present in the world of nature. The child hears about how moon tries to find a friend to help her with her peril but to no avail and then the beautiful rainbow – the image of hope-comes and helps. The children hear how moon has a problem and how she went about to solve it. The children also hear how the different characters went about helping moon and how they talked to her –for some children this may mirror their own language and help them to see a friendlier way to interact socially with their peers. All in all, the story is rich with images of problem solving as well as suggestions for being a friend and maintaining a friendship –essential social skills for aiding a class-room community of healthy social wellbeing.

Through telling a story that acknowledges another culture we can, as teachers, facilitate and model a positive respect for cross –cultural relationships and so begin to present values that positively support an understanding of what it means to live in the community of the 'outer –world'. This sense of community starts –for the child- in the community of their early childhood learning environment. In this respect, the story contributes to the picture of living and working with others that begins in the first instance in the classroom.

The second reason I bring this story today is to show a classic example of how story telling is *according* to Nell Smyth "...an essential current in the river of our humanity and the way we pass on much ancient wisdom." As teachers we can look to the gifts that the first people of our lands give and teach us, for me – as a New Zealand Pakeha –it is a gift of 'connection': of learning to connect with and then maintaining a connection to the world of nature- the world that surrounds us.

This notion of connection with the natural world is important in the picture that I work with as a Steiner Early childhood teacher. The world of nature is also a strong thread woven into my personal teaching philosophy -as a teacher trained in the New Zealand EC Curriculum, Te Whaariki. At the heart of Te Whaariki is the acknowledgement of the first people of New Zealand and their deep connection to the land. This connection to the land is inherent in the strand of Belonging which

talks of the early childhood programme as being a key in the facilitation of: “inner-wellbeing, security, and identity” for the child. (p.54)

How then – I hear you ask- does this relate to the young child and their emotional development? I respond by saying: look to the young child and observe as they play in the natural world then ask yourself as an educator: What is the child’s mood are they calm or agitated? What is the energy of their play? What is the theme, if any, in their play? Is their imagination more present?

And then turn these questions to your own experience and reflect how do you feel when you experience the natural world? Does it allow you to find calmness and a balance to the pressures you face from the busy world that is often our reality? Does being in nature support a sense of well-being and inner security?

From a perspective as a Steiner Educator acknowledgement of the natural world is present in many aspects of what we provide for our children in their learning experience. Providing an experience that honours and respects the natural world provides a balance to the stresses of a busy technological world. The peace and calmness that the world of nature gives is carried into the sacred time that we dedicate to ‘story’. For it is in the calmness of a well-told story that the child can take on deep learning and understanding of their world.

I draw again from Nell Smyth who -in her book: ‘The Breathing Circle’ talks specifically of this:

Stories weave for us the ancient rhythms from which humans have made meaning since they first sat around to chant and to tell stories of creation. When the rhythms are drawn from nature herself we root ourselves in the great teacher and healer that sustains all life. (...) Stories are a wonderful way to heal and counter influences that distance us from ourselves. In the genuine meaning of the phrase ‘in touch’, stories connect us to what sustains our appreciation of each other and the meaning of being human. (p.116-117)

For you all- as educators of young children I invite you to now explore tools to craft your own story picture. I have a ‘story basket’ which contains treasures from the world of nature. To begin your own picture I ask you to now reflect on the children you teach and bring their faces into your mind’s eye. What comes to you as something you are focusing on in your work –what are you helping your children with at present? What is the social dynamic of the group?

Group is guided now through reflective activity to begin their own story.

Reflect briefly, with closed eyes. Now bring a time of peacefulness and calmness that came from an experience of the natural world to your reflection.

Now write down one-two key words from this reflection –first from your reflection of the child-children and then from your experience from nature draw an image if this feels right and necessary for you.

Here -you are beginning the process of crafting your own story picture. A process of 'crafting' of being inspired by nature and linking this to a social or emotional theme brought into view after reflecting on the child or children.

To add to this come to the 'story basket' to choose an object that can add to the theme or nature of what is coming through your crafting – perhaps it is a soft feather or a smooth sturdy stone or a shell that is like that of a slow snail.

Turn back to your words and drawings and with your chosen object from the 'telling' basket hold the object for a moment, hold the thoughts of the children and your experience of nature now begin by crafting the first line of your story, tell whatever comes forth, take a risk and trust that what comes forth is important for you – it is your process and your story as the 'teller':

Ideas:

Once there was...a stone that could not move it felt so heavy that...

Once upon a time...

A long time ago... a feather floated down from the sky carrying a message from a faraway place...

Or sing a little song about the object: "feather feather bringing stormy,
sunny...weather

Write the first line on your working sheet your story has begun! If you wish to share your work turn to the person next to you and tell them the beginning of your story.

To finish a story with my children I simply say: Snip Snap Snout our tale is all told out, a child is chosen to snuff out the candle and we sing a farewell song to mark the end of our day.

Space provided for questions arising.

This workshop/seminar has intended to provide starting tools for your own practice as a teacher – I have drawn on my work as a Steiner educator and Artist and have described a little about the influence of Te Whaariki in my work. I hope you are able to take your beginning pictures back to your own children and find new inspiration in how you are able to nurture and support their emotional well-being.

To close our workshop, I have a short closing activity – that will allow you to take something essential away with you on your journey back to your work and to further enhance and guide your own individual story telling process.

Participants guided through activity.

On the piece of paper write a word that describes your feeling and response from this seminar and from the conference as a whole – write it down and then place it in the basket. Take a moment, then as you leave the room leave in silence – taking with you a piece of paper from the basket –this word is one gifted to you from your community of peers/ colleagues and a word that can be held for your on-going reflection. It is a way for you to carry those thoughts of those around you (who are working as you all are with children) with you and to consciously build our community spirit for working with the young child.

Presenter Bio

Jessica Horne trained in Dunedin, New Zealand firstly with a background in Fashion Design and then Fine Arts. On graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts majoring in Textiles she went on to practice as a full time artist. It was here that Jessica found Steiner education –working as a volunteer assistant in the local kindergarten. This work led to training as a teacher specialising in working with the young child and specifically with the transition from early childhood to school. After graduating with a Bachelor of Education (0-8 Years) Jessica worked again as the second teacher in the Dunedin Rudolf Steiner Kindergarten in New Zealand and as the afternoon games and craft teacher for the older school children. She has lived in NSW for the last two and a half years working initially as Authorised Supervisor at a Steiner Inspired Long Day care centre in a small country village in the Central West. Currently Jessica is teacher and Authorised Supervisor at Glenaeon Rudolf Steiner School at the Pre-school Campus. Jessica holds an Anthroposophical Training from Taruna College in New Zealand. Her special interest is in the creative play of the young child and how teaching can be seen as a healing and creative process.