THE VILLAGE STORYTELLER PROJECT

IN COLLABORATION WITH
THE EARTH SCHOOL
And THE HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN STORYTELLING CENTER
Led by
STORYTELLER LAURA SIMMS
Sponsored by THE TRAVELER’S FUND
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C2017LauraSimms

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CHILDREN BECOME STORYTELLERS

VALUE, EMPOWERMENT AND BEAUTIFUL WORDS

“A small key opens a big door” Turkish Proverb

SUMMARY

L. Simms
For one month, 46 children at The Earth School (part of PS 64), on the lower east side in Manhattan (and their teachers and parents) learned to become storytellers. under the guidance of storyteller Laura Simms, the artistic director of The Hans Christian Andersen Storytelling Center They immersed themselves in meaningful folktales from throughout the world. This was a lovely and successful project. In a very diverse community based low income school dedicated to the best in education, creativity and ecological responsibility. The VSP brought out the best communication skills in the children. I added a special workshop session where twenty eight parents underwent a similar process. Parents, however, created stories from their own childhoods to share with their children. Five parents, as did the children, told stories at a culminating Town Hall Gathering where all parents, children and staff from The Earth School were present.

I am very grateful to the Andesen Storytelling Center, The Traveler's Fund, The Earth School and the parents and staff of PS 64.
January 31, 2017

To Whom It May Concern:

We are very grateful for the chance to work with Laura Simms on the Village Storyteller project. The program was a beautiful integration of literacy and social studies and promoted the development of focus and imagination. The third grade students who worked with Laura were actively engaged in all components: listening to the stories; reading folktales; creating visual story maps; and telling their stories to parents and peers.

Watching Laura and the children working together refreshed my deep commitment to bringing more storytelling to our school. At The Earth School, we enjoy a widely diverse student population. We have children from all continents and many from families who speak a language other than English. Half of our students are
economically disadvantaged. A quarter has special needs. We feel that storytelling is an important avenue for enhancing the diverse needs of our students.

The Village Storyteller project has been wonderful. We thank the Traveler’s Fund for making this important work possible.

Best regards,

Abbe Futterman

DESCRIPTION OF PROGRAM:

The Village Storyteller Project included two visits with staff, seven sessions (two classes each time) with children, rehearsal morning before Town Hall and the 7 am hall event. I added a session with parents. 46 children participated from two third grade classes. The population was diverse. The VSP had as its goal and method a natural and creative way for children to learn to tell stories. The program encouraged children to engage with each other, to expand deep listening, enjoy contemplation, participate in dialogue and learn the unique skills of a storyteller. I helped children to remember the story, the landscape, and what happened internally and intuitively, rather than learning the words or text of the tale by rote. The series of activities they enjoyed brought literature alive as it empowered children to speak with passion and kindness. Their activities supported patience, works with strong emotions that is vital in their lives. Each child made the story their own. For much of the time, kids worked together or in pairs. As the children became more confident, they discussed the significance of the story for their lives.
just as traditional peoples have always done. In this way, the lessons learned were meaningful and relevant. I shared my personal process of learning a story with the children. It allowed them to see how a story functions and can come off the page dynamic to a new form. For some this was a way into literature, enjoyable speaking, and making presentations. For some it was a source of personal healing - giving voice to issues that were too complicated to speak of directly. It also promoted friendship. Every child participated. Every child succeeded!

**AN OUTLINE OF ACTIVITIES**

1. First meeting with teachers and therapist to define the range of the program.

2. Visited each classroom: I told a single Norwegian Fairytale called THE GIANT WITH NO HEART. This story provided us with inspiration for discussion about story structure, kindness, bravery, and generosity. The tale included participation activities during the telling that kept children deeply attentive and excited. We then talked about what they observed were the skills of a storyteller and the value of a story told.

3. With the assistance of teachers, we gave out 23 folktales for children so they could work with a partner. Every pair had their own story. The stories from almost every part of the world mirroring the diversity of their own school and neighborhood. We talked about the beginnings of stories. Then they sat with their partners and read the stories out loud to each other. In a circle we introduced the story titles, the culture, and country from where the story originated.
4. On our next session we spoke about what happens inside a story - the journey that arises at the beginning, a turning point that sets the journey in motion, and where the story took place. We noted the weather or season if it was relevant.

Then, with their partner, they made maps of the place in which the story occurred.

This was particularly exciting since third graders had just finished studying the landscape of desert and were about to study the landscape of ice and snow.

Since there were many immigrant children, they also shared the tales at home with their parents and told us where their grandparents had come from.
5. Having the maps in hand, each pair then added an overlay of places where events occurred in the story creating a map that included events. With partners paired with another set of partners, they took each other on journeys; telling what happened in their stories. This referring to map and events helped children learn the story without having to memorize words by rote where little comprehension or conversation takes place.

6. 

A. We did physical activities that let us begin to slow down and gain a sense of timing so when the stories would be told they could find their “ground” and rest between sentences.
B. We focused on who was in the story. They discussed what the story tells us about each character and worked with visual ideas about characters, human, animal or supernatural and how they might sound and look.

7.

A. People paired with a new partner to share the telling of their stories. They talked about the stories. When we were back together we talked about how stories were similar and what makes a good story; how with each new listener the story has a new life.

B. We did some vocal activities and repeated the “slow down exercises” of the previous sections.

8.

A. To tell a tale - We worked on the special skills of a storyteller – shifting voices for narrator and story. The exercise focused on having strong emotion for a character and then moving to a neutral state for the storyteller. We did this in pairs and alone.

B. I created physical actions where they could discern between one character and another in dialogue. This was a specifically powerful exercise in which they were able to master a basic skill that was personally satisfying and helpful. In essence, they practiced the ability to have and express an emotion without being overwhelmed by that emotion.
C. We practiced telling our stories. Created a plan for them to tell their stories to other classes and each group chose three children to be part of the Town Hall.

9. The Town Hall experience started early in the morning. Parents of child tellers came to school with their children so I could work with them. These individual sessions were moving and delightful. I got to see children blossom, as they felt more confident. They knew the story, rather than remembered words!

The event was a great success. Although the children were nervous they were wonderful. In fact, one boy, like an epic singer, added call and response refrains for the entire school as I had modeled on the first day. Another boy, who rarely spoke, did a remarkable job. His parents (who work hard and have troubles in their lives) came to school. They were deeply happy that their son spoke up and was appreciated by her classmates. One girl, whose
parents came from Morocco and who does not speak English, invited her mother. The mother was joyful to hear her daughter. She revealed to us that her father had been a storyteller in his country. This was the impulse that inspired me to create a day for parents to share their tales.

I returned to the classroom the next day bringing a typed manuscript of the tale I first told to them and had them create borders (see pictures) based on incidents and titles of the stories that they told. We made two huge books that hung in the hallways. If a child was near the Book, anyone was welcome to ask for a story to be told.

A week later, I returned to the school to meet with teachers, therapist to discuss the project and also talk about how great it would be to have a storyteller in residence program at this time. Such a project could become a model for public schools. A village storyteller who can be part of the school year would be able to help teachers working with themes, and the sudden
arising of celebrations, unforeseen events, and difficulties with some children.

We posted their maps, drawings, titles of stories, and the text of the fairytale that I told on the hallway walls for the whole school to see!

**BENEFITS OF VILLAGE STORYTELLING**

1. **LISTENING** is a deeply personal and a communal activity. Learning to listen enhances focus and attention to details. It literally strengthens one’s capacity to hear one self and others. In our digital world, this is as necessary as medicine to keep children the phone to
2. FOCUS ON ENGAGEMENT/PARTICIPATION – Although a group of children were listening to the same narrative, each child was imagining the story in their own way. Each child has personal associations and memories that arise as they listen. Becoming more aware of how a story moves us is therapeutic for children without having to reveal too much about themselves. Also they had a living experience of how differences and similarities are both necessary and enrich a community.

3. RECEIVE STORIES. Two children worked on the same story. They supported each other’s efforts and shared insights about the stories.

4. MAKING MAPS OF THE STORY – learning the story rather than memorizing...

The maps bring to light the importance of place in our lives. Image and place came alive. If they had no idea of a landscape they were able to research using their computer to look at other parts of the world.

5. WHAT WAS ONGOING? Each child had a chance as to look at what pre-existed at the start of the story that the storyteller knows. This gives context to the story. It develops a sense of the writer, storyteller or speaker as someone who recognizes cause and effect, history and the way a story focuses on a single mission. We were able to begin to discover the difference between a story and a litany of events.

6. WORKING WITH EMOTIONS. Developing exercises to work with dialogue between two characters allowed us to practice the role of the narrator and the emotional language of dialogue. This very important storytelling exercise is also a way to develop the capacity to feel strong emotions without being
swallowed or overwhelmed by the energy of the feeling. We always began with “presencing exercises (activities that synchronize body and mind) that provided a home ground for the storyteller to return to during the telling. This exercises is a mindfulness activity I have developed it for youth as a way of giving children control over their own feelings without editing feelings or being ashamed or overwhelmed.

7. PRESENTATION AT THE TOWN HALL MEETING. To be able to hold the attention of peers is a great sense of victory. It is also encouraging generosity and speaking so others can hear, understand and enjoy.

8. RETURN TO SCHOOL TO MEET WITH TEACHERS. Hearing their experience and learning how to improve the residency for next year so that teachers recognize the importance of the storytelling skills and can use stories in their own teaching.
ADDENDUM

LEARNING TO TELL A STORY

— Skills

— Benefits to young person individually and in a classroom

— Benefits the school, family, community, and earth.

1. Genuine storytelling has tremendous benefit beyond the sum of its parts, including the assigned meaning of the text and words. A story has intrinsic truth that comes into being moment by moment in the reciprocity of the special conditions of a live storytelling ritual process.

2. The words of the narrative text hold the details that point toward the full story, the way a map locates terrain but is not the actual fullness of a place. The story has to come alive in order to have others listen. It is in the shared
space of listening where the story arises; always shifting and vivid. Our tools are: knowing what happens in the story; knowing where the story takes place; imagining and feeling the story; making associations with the events of the story so it feels personal and important for the teller. The telling itself then needs genuine voice, visualized place, structure of events and who the characters are individually and to each other. Just as the journey is guided by a map, the live adventure of a telling is dynamic and multi-dimensional. The event takes place because of perception, actual seeing and details and response.

3. To engage someone else, one has to have a felt sense that has authenticity and presence. This enriched recognition of what it feels like to see and hear and speak with embodied genuineness is the first step in learning to tell a story as an unfolding event rather than a memorized text. Words by rote are flat. The event is participatory and alive with engagement, response, and multiple levels of listening, being, and imagining. Here is where the true sharing, and learning occurs.

4. Beginning to slow down the process of learning a story for telling creates the potential for genuine communication and self-value. It is the ground for working with diversity of ideas and beliefs, and solving problems with reflection and understanding; the outcome of telling stories in this way is a more focused and flexible mind that has room for other opinions.

5. These skills, excellent for storytelling, serve in one’s life for finding contentment in communication, increased capacity for perception (senses
alert) and learning to ‘read situations’ for how they are rather than what we assume. Being able to fully express oneself with personal integrity, fun and authenticity is the key to living together and learning together. Ultimately the antidote to many of the difficult issues in our world today.

AIDENS STORY:
A SMALL BIRD SAVES THE FOREST

The day that the stories were given out to pairs of children, one boy was absent. When I returned several days later, I saw him standing apart from the other children. He did not have a partner. And, he seemed to hardly be present. The dynamics in the classroom are complicated. There are at least one third of the
children who have difficulties in learning. Since, I did not want to intrude on the territory of the teacher and therapist in the room, I inquired of them. “He is all right,” said the therapist. But she did not walk him into our circle. After the children read their stories aloud to each other and talked about them, they returned to tables to begin making maps. He lurked on the edge of the room. He had been listening, however. I said to him, “I have one more story and I need a partner. Would you be my partner?” He shrugged and put his hand out for the paper. Hence, we sat together at his table with a blank piece of white paper and ten colored markers in front of us. Before he could or I could make a map we needed to have a sense of where the story took place. I read the story out loud to him and asked him to read the story back.

I asked where it took place. “A forest,” he said nearly audible. “Can you draw a forest?” Across the bottom of the page he created the treetops of a forest. “Who was in the forest?” I asked. He lifted another marker and began to make generic animals on the sides of the paper. “Is there anything else in the story?” He made a small pool of water to the left side and then placed some light blue clouds above the trees.” He whispered, “sky.” “What happened?” “There was a fire,” he noted barely audible. Then he took a red marker and made flames on the tops of the trees.

I taped another paper beneath the first. “I will make the trunks of the trees,” Carried into the energy of drawing he helped me create trunks of trees and engulfing flames. “Was their smoke?” “Yes” he said. And grey smoke drifted up
from the forest below. Without my asking he drew a small bird. "Is that a hummingbird?" he asked.

We went to the computer and searched for a photo of a hummingbird. He spontaneously made small flapping gestures with his arms as we talked about how the hummingbird flew back and forth. "What a beautiful small bird," I remarked. The story leaped off the page and out of the words into a visual event on paper and in his imagination. The entire 40 minutes passed as he dreamed into the map. Afterwards, I sat with all the children on the floor to close the first session. He sat proudly holding his picture. We held up our papers and everyone looked at everyone else's drawings.

The other days that I worked with children, Aiden always carried the map with him. When I had time while children were working we sat together and talked about the tale. He liked the story.

In fact, on day three, we had tour buses to each landscape. Dividing the class into two groups, each group was taken on a tour of the story. Using the map as a template, the story was retold in their own words as they described what and where things occurred in the story. The next two days were skill days and practice sessions telling the story to one another. And, having circle conversations about what the stories might be about that were recognizable in their own lives. Aiden joined the circle but remained quiet during these discussions.
On the last working session, day six, when we were honing performance and engagement storytelling skills he was passionate about finding voices for the animals. I chose his story (which I knew the best) as the example to model skills. I chose bear. Bear was large - and powerful - easy to find a strong deep voice that was distinguishable form my own and where energy could be put into the imagined animal. All the children practiced changing from the neutral information-providing storyteller (who sounded like themselves) to the huge and somewhat angry bear.

I asked the question that gave hummingbird a chance to become the hero of the story. Bear said, “Why are you carrying tiny drops of water back and forth from the lake to the forest? It is a foolish thing to do.” The hummingbird answered, “Because it is what I can do.” Aiden practiced being the neutral teller. He gave bear a strong voice and a special stance. And when he spoke with a small but steady voice-embodying hummingbird he let his arms go up and down quickly in simulation of the flight of the small bird. He practiced over and over. I let him become the model of success in front of the class. The children were impressed and returned to their stories inspired by Aiden’s performance. The forty-five minutes passed with children shifting from neutral to becoming a character. The room was alive and Aiden was totally involved.

When it came time to choose two storytellers from the class to tell a story at The Town Hall meeting for the entire school, the children chose Aiden. He seemed terrified and pleased. I urged him to tell the story to his parents that evening. My
request seemed to move him back to silence. Later his teacher told me that his parents had little time to listen to Aiden. They each held two jobs. I asked the teacher if she could invite Aiden’s parents to school to hear him the next morning at the Town Hall. I also asked if it was all right for Aiden (who lived down the street from the school) to come early for a rehearsal. Aiden appeared at 7:15 am. We sat in the principles office as he told me the story over and over. I asked him to squeeze my hands as he spoke in an attempt to help him be fully in his body. This act of pressing his hands and using energy for communication was a huge hurdle. He pressed his hands with all of his available might, which was barely a touch. I praised him and asked him to stomp fully with energy on the ground. He could not do this. So we worked on bear and hummingbird and through the embodiment of bear he pushed his feet onto the ground, hunched his shoulders and spoke up more loudly.

During the presentation I sat in front of Aiden to support him. I hoped he would not disappear during the telling. To my astonishment and his utter joy both of his parents appeared in the auditorium to hear him. His performance was barely heard, but children, interested in the story leaned in to listen. In response, he raised his voice slightly to be heard. When he became bear his class spontaneously applauded and Aiden smiled. Later, in the classroom I praised each of the children who had told their stories and when I praised Aiden’s courage, all the children cheered.

Our hummingbird had put out the fire of listlessness. I had the sense that we were all satisfied and saved by his perseverance. As it sometimes happens, the story
mirrored his own situation. Of course, if another child had chosen the story it might have had another significance for them.

THE FLIGHT OF THE HUMMINGBIRD
A tale from India
Retold by Laura Simms

A great forest caught on fire. All the animals panicked and fled.

Except for the little hummingbird. He fluttered over the treetops watching the flames leap from tree to tree. He did not want to abandon his home. “There must be something I can do to help,” he thought.
He flew to a stream nearby. Little hummingbird took a single drop of water in his beak and carried it over the burning trees. He flew back and forth dropping tiny drops of water on the flames. The other animals watched from the edges of the forest, where they felt safe.

At first they called to the bird, “Hummingbird” said Rabbit.

“The flames will burn your tiny wings!” Wolf howled, “There is too much smoke. You must be careful.” Owl hooted, “I would help you help you help you, but the fire will burn my wings.” Fox whined, “You are too small. You can not make a difference.” And all the while the little bird flew back and forth; each time setting a single drop of water onto the trees.

Finally Bear asked, “Why are you doing this? You can not put out the whole fire.”

Hummingbird did not stop. He called out to bear, “I am doing the best I can.” If we worked together, all of us carrying water, perhaps we could put out the fire.

(The boy who told this story added an ending as he stood before the entire school. Shifting from foot to foot, in an attempt to overcome his shyness he whispered into the microphone, “The little bird put out the fire and all of the other animals went home.” Needless to say, this act of creativity and bravery was very moving.)
Malachi’s Story:

Raven Makes The World

Malachi has a visual impairment. He did not read. He was, however, and incredible listener and loved to draw. He was very interested in heroic power figures. He often did not participate fully. In the end, between classes, I spent an hour with him.
I read him the story of Raven and asked him to retell me the story however he envisioned it.
This is his ‘new’ version of raven as a female superhero.
A NEW RAVEN STORY

Created by Malachi

The Power of Orality and Confidence

Raven Made the World. She was half bird and half god with a woman inside. When the world was complete, Raven rowed out onto the ocean in a kayak to see what she had created. She was curious. Especially about a humongous whale. She wanted to know what it looked like inside the whale. So she waited until the whale yawned, and then rowed inside its enormous mouth.

Raven heard the heart beat of the whale like a loud thumping drum. She walked down the throat of the whale to its belly. There she saw a handsome young man dancing with strings from his arms and his feet connected to the heart of the whale. “What are you doing here,” she asked.

The young man said, “I am the heart and the soul of the whale.”

Raven wanted to take him out into the world. But when he cut the strings the young man turned into a monster.

Raven battled with the galactic creature. They rose out of the body of the whale into the sky where they battled. Sometimes the monster won. Sometimes Raven won. And at last the Monster agreed to rule and live in the underworld. Raven said she would rule and live in the upper world.
This battle went on for a long time until Raven won. The monster remained below.

And Raven turned back into a bird and flew to a branch where she watched and protected the world.