



## **International Network for School Social Work**

**<http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com>**

**Contact [mhuxtable@olympus.net](mailto:mhuxtable@olympus.net)**

### **Electronic Newsletter August 2011**

Editor: Marion Huxtable

**Once upon a time.....**

**Es war einmal.....**

**Olipa kerran.....**

**Mukashi mukashi .....**

**Hapo zamani za kale .....**

For thousands of years stories beginning this way have passed on values, knowledge, culture and wisdom. Tales were passed from generation to generation and eventually written down as myths, folktales, sagas, fables and legends whose heroes and heroines had battles to fight, hills to climb and riddles to solve. With themes of societal norms and universal human needs they speak to the feelings and problems of young and old in every culture. Usually there is a moral to the story that passes on cultural values. When children hear these magic words "Once upon a time" they get ready to listen, and in hearing a good story they become connected to the lifelong problems of living and loving.

School social workers have a ready tool for their toolbox of therapeutic skills when they learn to be good storytellers. Requiring no materials or equipment, story telling is especially valuable for peripatetic school social workers who lack resources and facilities. A story appropriate to both the developmental tasks and the problems in the children's lives gains the attention of the youngest, unruliest or most alienated child. This is the first step in communicating a message.

When the story has a good fit and the storyteller brings the characters dramatically to life, the children identify with the hero, his problems and emotions. The audience will readily respond to discussion about the characters, events and problems in the story much like the ones in their own lives. The difficulty of approaching a troublesome issue head-on is avoided, eliminating the need to deal with resistance. The story can offer a healthy way of dealing with a conflict similar to that experienced by the child. Alternatively, the audience can develop the ending to the story by suggesting good ways to resolve the conflict.

Many well-known fairy tales and folk stories deal with childhood problems that school social workers frequently work on. For example, Cinderella deals with rejection and mistreatment. The fairy story Hansel and Gretel deals with the theme of desertion by parents.

Frequently such fairy tales have a magical solution rather than a solution initiated by the hero. In a turn of events seldom found in life, a prince falls in love with Cinderella, saving her from a life of servitude. Although such happy endings are enjoyable, they do not offer a realistic example for children about how to help themselves. Cinderella would be better off getting a college education and a good job, rather than waiting for a miraculous rescue by Prince Charming. In becoming educated, she would likely find fulfillment through self-improvement, as well as having a better chance to escape poverty.

Psychiatrist Richard Gardner was a pioneer of the theory that stories used therapeutically with children should have realistic solutions. His *Modern Fairy Tales* provides models of how to write a children's story that has the fascination of a fairy tale, complete with drama, fantasy and even gore, but with the addition of a healthy message that provides opportunity for discussion and learning. Stories starting with *once upon a time* do not have to continue with the words *a very long time ago*. *Not so long ago* segues more easily into a story with a protagonist whose interests, attitudes and behaviors reflect those of the audience.

The recent theory of mirror neurons may contain the underlying mechanism for the impact that stories have on the listener. The theory suggests how neuron activity is activated by exposure to the feelings and actions of fictional characters. This indicates the importance of making the hero of the story an attractive character that the intended audience will easily relate to.

For young children the hero does not have to be human, but could be an animal with human characteristics or even a machine like the famous *Little Engine that Could*. There are centuries of precedent for animal heroes in folk tales. Young children readily identify and empathize with an appealing animal and may find the story less threatening, even though it mirrors disturbing experiences in their own lives. My favorite character for young children is a puppy (represented by a cute stuffed animal) who has all the characteristics of elementary school children. The favorite pet of young children in your country can serve in this role. A wise old owl (personified by an impressive stuffed animal) provides good advice at the right moment and is an obvious stand-in for the school social worker. For older children the hero in the story is a typical modern child or adolescent. After introducing the hero and describing his experiences, strengths and life history, the story moves towards the climax, consisting of life experiences with their inevitable conflicts and emotions, and then the resolution.

It is helpful to ask the audience for the moral of the story. This provides the basis for discussion about healthy ways of resolving personal problems and coping with feelings. Discussion often leads to children sharing their own stories and feelings and the social worker can use this to promote healthy catharsis.

With practice and sensitivity the school social worker can develop stories that deal with any of the issues that children bring to school, ranging from simple temporary concerns such as moving to a new school to serious trauma such as death in the family. The stories can be used in individual counseling, small groups or with the entire class. Serialized stories can be a central part of school-based support groups for children coping with similar problems such as bereavement, anger problems or chronic health issues. For many children the school is the only source of support or therapy that is available. Although the school may not be seen as a suitable place for psychotherapy, the long tradition of storytelling as an educational tool usually makes it acceptable to both parents and the school system.

For more information about a variety of ways of using stories in school social work, contact [Marion Huxtable](#).