

The tent of stories¹

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The tent of stories is a method of engaging refugee children in storytelling and social interaction. Through the tent and a 'story-stone' a safe and structured environment is created. Different ways of processing a story are explained. In dealing with stories, children learn to use their imagination as a valuable coping strategy. Like any good method, the 'tent of stories' evolved through interaction with the children it was meant for. This article tells the story of the 'tent of stories' itself.

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Once upon a time...

In October 2001 a brightly coloured tent was pitched at the asylum seekers' centre in Arnhem, in the Netherlands. It returned every Saturday and the refugee children living in the centre were invited to join a team of storytellers and artists. It was 'the tent of stories', a new method of promoting refugee children's creative skills and social interaction. The method has since proved very successful. The main advantage of the tent of stories is that there is no need of artists' or other materials, and it can be set up anywhere.

Working with stories is not just another creative activity, but a motivated choice. Stories are an important means of structur-

ing one's experience into a meaningful whole. In social interaction, stories function as a strategy to convey meaning that transcends everyday experience.

Communication through a story allows the listener to extract meaning in a personal and eclectic manner. Unlike a theory or a law, a story is never a mere explication, but encompasses many aspects of real situations. And above all, a story allows the listener to develop empathy by identifying with one or more characters. In a story the imagination performs in the most complete way, combining images, sounds, movements and different human characters into a meaningful sequence of events without needing any physical objects.

The aim of all activities that take place in the tent of stories is to enhance the imagination of the children, and to stimulate them to use their imagination as a coping strategy.

The method is based on the idea that by using your imagination you can think up alternatives for present situations and - in a way - create your own, better world in your mind. On the journey of life you can treasure pleasant stories in your memory, as you might carry your favourite toy in a suitcase.

A special place

The first essential when working with the tent of stories is to create a warm and enjoyable atmosphere, providing stimuli for all the senses. During storytelling time, a clear structure must be provided, in which the child can feel safe and free to create.

The organiser of the event starts by marking out a space to be used only for storytelling. This can be done by setting up a tent or – where that is not possible – by simply drawing a circle on the ground. Using a tent makes it easy to shut out outside noise and distracting sights or activity, and most children find it very attractive. But if there are absolutely no means of shutting out external noise, the organiser could try other ways of capturing everyone's attention. As in traditional cultures, a skilled storyteller who can fascinate his listeners would be a perfect help. The circle on the ground and the tent are both mobile, which makes it possible to take them wherever the children want to listen to stories, e.g. on special outings. The most important function of creating a special place, however, is of a symbolic nature. Creating a special place that is solely intended for storytelling makes the event magical and exciting and invites children to enter the world of the imagination. It is also the first step in structuring the workshops. The 'tent of stories' functions as a small world with clear boundaries and a set of special rules. To intensify the effect the organisers can introduce a small ritual for entering the special space, e.g. entering one by one, accompanied by exciting music or the beating of a drum.

The tent or storytelling place must have a special seat for the storyteller: the story throne. The adult or child who is sitting on it is elevated, as is his or her self confidence and respect from others. To make a throne, any material can be used. When no materi-

als are available the 'throne-idea' can also be achieved by putting the storyteller in the middle of a circle of listeners.

The tent we used in the workshops in Holland is made of colourful fabrics, and is made cosy by brightly coloured cushions, a carpet, and children's drawings on the wall. In our work with children we learned that the tent was even more important than we had expected. Some children would come an hour before the storytelling event to help us build it up and they also helped us to dismantle it afterwards.

The rules and the stone

The second task of the organiser is to establish a set of rules to guide the process of telling, listening and reacting to a story. The key role in the process is played by a small stone. This perfectly ordinary stone has no special qualities in itself, but is essential for anyone who wants to engage in storytelling. It is passed from person to person. Whoever holds it is allowed to speak, everyone else must remain silent.

It is important to apply this rule very strictly, at all times and to all present (including the workshop leaders). The workshop leaders, therefore, are not the only peacekeepers, but share that responsibility with everyone present. Through using the stone, the children who attend the session learn to listen to each other and to respect the storytelling abilities of other people.

Because the workshop leader can relinquish his or her unique role as peacekeeper and involve all participants, the atmosphere becomes more relaxed. Does anyone want to say something? Ask for the stone first!. Many workshops given in Dutch asylum seekers' centres showed that the children who regularly attended showed solidarity with the workshop leaders, and would protest when someone spoke before his turn.

A good way to introduce the story stone is to tell the story of its origin. You can make up a story that applies to the environment in which the stone was found. The history of the story stone in fact goes back to the American Indians.

In one of our Dutch workshops we invited a famous writer of children's books. She arrived late, and when she entered the tent the children noticed one of her toes sticking through a hole in her sock. The children sniggered. One boy immediately handed over the story stone to this perfect stranger to hear why she had a hole in her sock, and why she was late.

To help children relax and concentrate on the story, warming-up exercises are done, starting outside the tent with physical movements and inside with relaxation exercises such as breathing in and out while thinking about quiet movements in nature, for example the slow ebb and flow of waves on a beach. The exercises use more aids to stimulate the imagination, imitating weather conditions such as rain or thunder with your body, for instance, or imitating the movements and noises of animals.

Storytelling

When everybody is sitting comfortably and relaxed in the tent or on the storytelling spot, the story begins. An adult storyteller tells a tale. In the Dutch situation we told the children fairy tales from all parts of the world. We chose fairy tales because they are attractive to children because of their fantastic unrealistic nature, and because they enable us to deal with all kinds of familiar themes without intruding on the children's lives. Themes in the stories we told included 'exile', 'misuse of power', 'humour', 'starting a new life', 'missing'.

In telling tales we place ourselves in a long cultural tradition of transference of meaning. The children who attended our work-

shops came from different countries and consequently had different cultural backgrounds. To take this into account we told a wide range of stories from all over the world so that every child could recognise something from his or her own country of origin. We also took time during the workshops to locate each story on the world map. The stories were told in Dutch, a language which all the children more or less understood. To overcome the language barrier, the storyteller showed objects and pictures to illustrate the story. During the session the storyteller would frequently interrupt the narrative by asking questions, to check whether the children understood. None of the children seemed to worry that a central role in the workshops was played by a language in which they were not completely fluent. On the contrary, most children were very interested in improving their language skills and tried very hard to express themselves in Dutch, for example by writing their own stories.

Where all the children present speak the same language and have the same cultural background, storytelling is presumably much easier, and no materials are needed to help the children understand. One can choose more difficult stories, which can be understood at different levels. Of course it is best if people from the same cultural background as the listeners can be invited to tell their own traditional tales.

The social interaction of storytelling is of a special nature. When the listeners devote their full attention the 'magic' of storytelling begins. The storyteller sees the eyes of his listeners grow round and their mouths fall open, as they become totally absorbed by imaginary events. The storyteller feels huge responsibility, because the listeners will now believe anything he tells them. Knowledge derived from the story will be profound.

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The storyteller also knows that as soon as he ceases to believe his own story, he will lose the attention of his listeners. (This combination of conviction and attention explains the great effectiveness of storytelling in the transference of meaning and moral values).

Sometimes the 'magic' is even stronger when a story is drawn from real events in the lives of the listeners. In one of our workshops my colleague told a story about two people who were trapped in an empty train, every door of which was locked: this had actually happened to us the week before. The two people, as the children rightly guessed, were me and my colleague. They were on their way home from a wonderful children's party, which was of course the workshop. When the children found out that the story was based on fact and that they were in it, they reacted with delighted surprise.

The organisers should bear in mind that storytelling requires some relevant skills, such as conviction and good timing. If these skills are lacking, they can be easily acquired.

The following story was told during the workshops in the Netherlands. In this article it serves to illustrate possible ways of processing a story.

This story originates from Morocco. It is about a poor man who lived near a rubbish dump. One day he and his wife had nothing to eat, so the poor man went to the rubbish dump to see if he could find anything. Suddenly he saw the end of a rope sticking out of a pile of garbage. Curiously he pulled it out. At the other end of the rope was a pan. Since the poor man hadn't found anything else he took the pan home, thinking that it might always come in handy. When his wife saw that all he had brought home was an empty pan, she was very angry. 'What do we need a stupid pan for when we don't even have food to cook in it', she said. 'What I really wanted was a nice loaf of bread'. She had hardly finished speaking when a loaf of bread appeared

on the table. It was freshly baked and the delicious smell filled the house. 'Well, good heavens', said the man, 'this is incredible! Perhaps it could bring us some fresh milk to wash it down with as well!'. And no sooner had he spoken when a jug of fresh milk stood on the table. 'Ha, ha', his wife laughed loudly, 'I would like a big cake, two chickens and a huge bar of chocolate, and some cola of course'. Lo and behold, there it was. The table was loaded with food. From that day on the man and his wife always had plenty to eat. But after a while the neighbours became suspicious. So one day, one of them gave a party, managed to borrow the pan and kept it after the party was over. Once again, the man and his wife were poor and felt very sad. The man went back to the rubbish dump to see if he could find anything. And to his surprise there was the rope again, sticking out a pile of garbage. So he pulled it out. This time the end of the rope was tied around the neck of a black cat. The man thought: well, it could always come in handy, so he took the cat home. When he entered the house the eyes of his wife grew big with surprise. 'You stupid man, what good is a cat? It doesn't even taste nice', she yelled. 'Go back and find us something useful'. 'Killiewoesj...' whispered the man, and with a deep sigh he put the cat on the table. Then suddenly the poor man and his wife heard a loud tinkling noise. Three golden coins lay on the table, under the cat's bottom. 'Killiewoesj, what's this?' the man exclaimed. And once again, three golden coins dropped out of the cat's bottom. (Here the children can all shout 'killiewoesj' followed by the storyteller telling about more coins) The man and his wife danced around the table. 'We're rich, we're rich', they shouted. And from that day on they didn't have to work and could buy anything they wanted. Until one very hot day, when his wife was not at home, the man decided to go to the public bathhouse. Since the neighbours had stolen their magic pan, the man didn't dare to leave the black cat at home. So he took it with him, hidden under his long robe. When he arrived at the public bathhouse the warden asked him to leave his robe at the door. The

man refused at first, but he could hardly go bathing with his clothes on, so eventually he gave in. When he returned to the warden and asked for his robe, the cat was gone. Sadly he walked home. His wife burst into tears when she heard that the cat had also been taken from them. So off the poor man went to the rubbish dump to look for the rope. He found it again, in a dark corner. He pulled it out and guess what he found at the end? Not a pan or a black cat, but an ordinary stick. The man was very puzzled. How could such a thing ever come in handy? Doubtfully, he decided to give it a try and took the stick home. As soon as he entered the house the stick began to move. It floated immediately to the neighbours' house. The poor man and his wife heard screaming and banging noises. Then the stick returned, along with the neighbour who humbly handed over the stolen pan to its rightful owners. Then the stick floated away again and some hours later it came back with the warden of the bathhouse who handed over the black cat. Now the man and his wife were rich again and they didn't have to worry about anything anymore. But the first thing they did was to invite the whole neighbourhood to dinner. Then they built a big house. From then on all the poor people could come to this house to eat with the rich man and his wife, who never forgot where they came from and how hard it is to be poor.

Processing the story

When the story has come to an end it is processed by a communal activity, after which each child can express himself individually in writing, drawing, playing, dancing etc. To process the story quoted here, for example, a long rope is put in a circle and everyone holds a part of it. Then one by one the children tell what they would like to find at the end of a rope. After a short break the children get their own working space and make a small treasure chest in which they can keep their secret wishes. They can write their wishes on a sheet of paper and put that in the box. The

workshop is concluded in the story-tent or story-place. One or two children make take their place on the story throne and read aloud their wishes to the others. If there are no materials available, instead of making their own treasure chest, the children may sit on the throne in turn and tell their dearest wish.

As you may have noticed, the theme of the story quoted is: your dearest wishes. The wishes in the story are not very likely to come true. But the story also tells you never to give up hope because even rubbish can come in handy sometimes...

Of course it is possible to process a story in many different ways, depending on the composition of the group and the insight and creativity of the organisers. For example you can present a funny, non-existent situation (by describing it or by showing a picture) after which the children are asked to explain how it happened. For example, a monkey in the African jungle eating with chopsticks, or a man in a bathing suit shivering with cold at the North Pole. Another way is to enhance children's storytelling abilities by asking them questions about a picture or something you have mimed, based on the 'five W's' that make up a good story, namely 'who', 'what', 'when', 'why' and 'where'. When you have art materials at your disposal, you can divide the children in groups and ask each group to paint a part of the story. The meeting is then concluded by putting all the parts together in a strip cartoon.

In one of our Dutch workshops we asked the children to think up a non-existing situation. The story stone went from hand to hand and beautiful and melancholy answers were given, like 'the Netherlands, where it never rains' and 'children who never argue'.

To give all the children the opportunity to express themselves individually, the com-

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munal processing is followed by an individual creative activity. For example the children can make their own book and write down their own stories, or they can paint, act, dance, etc. The organiser should bear in mind that children will differ in their abilities to invent their own stories, but also that, in general, children who do have this ability enjoy it very much.

When children make up stories of their own, some organisers use the technique of transforming them into more positive alternatives by talking the children through them. This technique can be useful if a child suffers from severe defeatism and can only invent aggressive stories ending in death and despair. By asking questions the organiser then stimulates the child to come up with a better outcome. In this way the organiser illustrates the flexibility of imagination.

In some workshops each child worked on his or her own storybook, writing stories and making drawings. A small girl made up a story about two cute mice. Unfortunately, the mice were eaten by a cat and the story ended with their death. I asked the girl if it would be possible for the mice to survive in the cat's stomach. The child liked the idea and told me that the mice were pooped out by the cat, and then ran off together to build a beautiful nest. Another workshop took place on the day after 'September 11th' and all the children were totally overwhelmed by the events. I decided to tell them a story about a boy who was in one of the buildings at the time of the bombing but got away by going underground and running through a metro-tunnel. The children listened very intently and the tension lessened considerably.

Every storytelling event should be concluded by a communal cooling down in the story tent or on the storytelling spot. The results of individual creative work are shown to the group while the maker sits on the story-throne or stands in the middle, receiving positive feedback and admiration.

...and they lived happily ever after...

Then, after at least eight sessions, every child will go its own way, stimulated to use his or her imagination when life is difficult, and full of enjoyable stories to remember and cherish. The tale of experience will tell them that imagination makes the impossible possible.

Conclusion

After three years' experience I feel it is safe to conclude that 'the tent of stories' is a useful framework for social workers who want to include storytelling in their creative activities for refugee children. In the Netherlands many people were inspired by 'the tent of stories' to enter the world of imagination together with the children, and to let themselves be absorbed by stories that helped them transcend everyday reality. Telling stories offers rich social interaction which is very nourishing for both communities and individuals. It deserves attention from everyone involved in social welfare issues. Furthermore it can be considered as an effective coping strategy that gives strength to human perception.

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¹ The method was introduced in the Netherlands by the 'National Foundation for the Encouragement of Happiness', a private organisation that offers creative activities for children in asylum seeker centres.