

SUPPORTING CULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH STORIES

By Susan O'Halloran

All of us who have loved children have had moments when we've wondered if these outrageously self-centered beings will ever be fit to enter the civilized world. We watch children refuse to consider that others exist for any other reason than to fulfill *their* needs and, yet, somehow, miraculously, one day they offer to help other children with their homework or ask if *we* need anything.

While stories can't be given all the credit for this transformation, the narratives that surround children are one of the ways they grow from a me-and-only-me awareness to a collective consciousness. Stories have always been there to help children make the journey from egocentric newborn to sensitive, contributing member of society.

Successful integration into the larger world starts with a growing sense of oneself as a discreet, unique and valued entity. Identity-rich stories help children paint a self-portrait of who they are, what they're likely to face and all they are capable of. Stories can be the balm for developing and often bruised egos so that children's self definition can begin to include others.

With a foundation of self awareness, children's perceptions begin to expand in rippling concentric circles from the individual to his or her family, to the child's school, neighborhood, place of worship, community groups and, eventually, to the wider society and world.

At the same time, an overlay of cultural concentric circles develops – starting with a personal cultural identity to an awareness that others are a part of groups as well to an understanding of how these various groups form communities, alliances, nations and even universal or “we” identities. Over time, cultural identity becomes part of self-identity.

Here I'm using cultural identity to mean a child's sense of place, time, gender, race, history, nationality, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, ethnicity and so on. It is in these cultural circles of identity where storytelling partnered with social studies can give children a most precious gift: a more interrelated, appreciative and generous self.

First, children need to see cultural representations of themselves

Just as the individual child starts with a growing sense of “I am”, children need a personal cultural self as the basis for forming a positive community identity. Professional Storyteller, Anne Shimojima, talks about being raised in the 1950s and what a rare occurrence it was to see Asian Americans on television. Whenever it did happen, someone in her family would shout, “Asian on TV!” Everyone came running to see this astounding sight.

Years later, when she was in her thirties, Anne tells of going to a play that had only two actors. Like her, they were Japanese-Americans. In all her childhood and in all her adult life up to that point, Anne had never seen people who were Asian on stage. An odd sensation swept through her body. She says, "Because they were up there on stage, I had this overwhelming feeling that I was there in my seat. It was that profound. Because they were there; I was here." Till that moment, Anne never realized how invisible she had felt.

If you grow up and never see anyone who looks like you in the popular culture, Anne says, "It's as if you're looking into the mirror of life and there's no reflection."

Children deserve to know they are real, that they, and people like them, exist. How basic! Yet, teachers and storytellers are overwhelmed by the changing demographics of present-day school children. How to know about all the many cultures present in our classrooms today?

Of course, we want to learn as much about the backgrounds of the children sitting in front of us as we can. But whether we are responsible for a yearlong class, a weeklong residency or one assembly, we can include the children's voices and experiences as a central part of the curriculum.

At a recent residency, one third-grader, after being coached about speaking in images, described her grandfather coming to America each year from Mexico to pick cotton. In describing her grandfather picking cotton for 12 hours a day and cutting his fingers and hands on the dried bristles she said, "He watched the white of the cotton turn red from his blood."

I don't have to know "everything" about the life of migrant workers or all the other cultures in my classroom (for example, there are 43 languages spoken in the homes of my local high school!) We just have to let the children tell the class who they are and what their families are like. Whether they're telling stories of how they make tortillas or why they like to go to the mosque on Friday afternoons, simply telling or hearing stories with their cultural markers can avoid the split so many children experience: they feel they are one person at school and another at home. Our students can feel whole or as a hyphenated-American friend of mine said when her culture was finally integrated into her school experience, "I no longer felt as if I was straddling two worlds. Each patch in the quilt of my life was unique but, finally, I felt that I was made of one cloth."

Children need to see others

As children hear stories from others' cultures, they start to understand that others in their schools and community are both individuals and part of groups as well. Having felt culturally seen and valued, now I can see and value you *and* the groups to which you belong.

As teachers, professional storytellers and children share their own cultural backgrounds we are able to break down the notion that any one group is more "strange" than another

or even more “exotic.” Through stories, people who are culturally different from our students become familiar friends (“Why they’re just like me!”) and, simultaneously, people with unique experiences. Holding this both/and of cultures – we are alike and we are different from each other - generates a truer appreciation than the unrealistic and often unintentionally disrespectful attempts at color blindness.

This mutual sharing is important because we want to remember that the dominant culture (whatever that may be in any given time or place) can be equally strange and confusing to students who aren’t identified as part of the majority. Professional storyteller, Arif Choudhury who is Bangladeshi-American and Muslim, tells of going to an elementary school where the students were predominantly Jewish. He saw his classmates playing with dreidels and assumed “it was just some kind of game that white people played”. However, Arif’s friend, Christopher, who was white and Christian, said he didn’t know what a dreidel was either. Arif was stunned to discover that there was more than one kind of white people.

As teachers and storytellers we mean well by introducing a culture to our students but, because our knowledge is superficial or our time is short, we can easily fall into the trap of introducing a new culture with just one or two identifiable attributes and, therefore, unintentionally create new stereotypes. Storytelling done well shows that there is diversity *within* every culture. Olga Loya’s parents did not approve of her identifying with her Indian heritage. Nancy Wang’s mother didn’t agree with her style of dress or choice of profession. Arif Choudhury’s cousins didn’t believe he was following Islamic rituals correctly and accused him of “not being Muslim enough”. These stories let children know that there are many ways to be Mexican, Chinese, Muslim and any other kind of American.

Children need to see their group throughout history

Moving out to the further rings of cultural identity, students need to see their groups involved in the national and world arenas. Telling the stories of *every group* within the social studies curricula can move children from being passive spectators to actors on the stage of life because they see that their group has been and is active.

Anne not only missed knowing that Asian people existed as present day members of society, she missed the stories of her group as active participants in the great march of history.

Just as an individual child must develop a sense of pride about who they are, children need a cultural identity that says they come from people who have accomplished great things, resisted oppression and clung to their humanity no matter what de-humanizing traumas they faced. Being awarded this recognition, they are able to extend similar attributes and appreciation to other groups.

These rarely told stories make historical events more exciting and more real while demonstrating that it is ordinary people who make history. Yes, we need children to hear

the stories of Dr King, Rosa Parks, Caesar Chavez and so on, but students need to know these heroes are not out of reach. They and many people not in the history books faced great fears and, yet, developed their bravery over time. Plus, the greats and the less known came from and were supported by communities of people who have always worked to make the world a better place. Through the stories of everyday people working for change, children learn that making a difference is possible for them.

Children learn they are part of a larger group called humanity

And, finally, children can develop a communal and universal identity that supersedes and enhances their group identity. Stories can move children to the last circle of cultural identity, the “we”. Students learn that they are part of their group and their time but, like many before them, they can also answer the call to a higher moral order and connectivity with all human beings.

The citizens of Oberlin, Ohio lived in a time when many supported slavery. Yet, in 1857, seven hundred of them defied the U.S. Government’s Fugitive Slave Law – risking fines and imprisonment – by refusing to allow John Price to be re-captured into bondage. More recently, many were swayed by the anti-Muslim fervor that swept the country after the September 11th terrorist attacks in the U.S., however other citizens took a stand in defense of their Muslim neighbors declaring that we were one, diverse nation and our collective strength comes from that diversity.

Social studies is all about storytelling. Who gets to tell the story? What is the point of view? Storytelling combined with social studies empowers students by showing them that they are part of something larger than their individual selves. Developing a cultural as well as a personal identity allows children to feel connected to those who came before them, to those surrounding them now, and to a future we can build together.

(EDITOR’S NOTE: Excerpts from the professional tellers’ stories mentioned in this article can be found at: www.racebridgesvideos.com)

Susan O’Halloran is a diversity speaker and professional story artist who uses powerful and engaging stories to grab her audiences. She is an author of four books plus diversity curriculums, CDs and films. *The Chicago Reader* says O’Halloran “has mastered the Irish art of telling stories that are funny and heart-wrenching at the same time.” She can be found at: www.susanohalloran.com or by calling 1-866-997-8726. (Creative Commons License: This article may be reprinted when this full byline is used.)