

Audience: This activity was designed for my class of twenty grade three students.

Objective: This activity utilizes storytelling to help create classroom community. It is part of a larger storytelling unit intended to reduce violent and aggressive behaviours in the school setting. This activity will help students recognize the potential impact of their actions on others. It will also help students realize that each person can contribute to a cause in their own way, according to their abilities, and that no contribution is too small.

Rationale: Some students in my class find it difficult to adapt to school settings and display appropriate school behaviours. One of the most serious problems faced by students is not knowing how to solve problems and recognize their own emotions. This often leads to reactionary behaviours such as violence and intolerance. This activity will help students learn to accept and value others.

I must address these serious behaviours while keeping the rest of my class focused and learning. Storytelling is a great vehicle through which to capture all of my students, especially those struggling with social/emotional and behavioural issues. As Senehi and Byrne (2006) assert, storytelling “... provides for a collaborative process of meaning making and relationship building that is a necessary first step for social change and that mediates between the personal and political” (p. 236).

Description of the Activity: This activity utilized the story *How the Squirrel Got its Stripes*, a Malaysian tale from the Ramayana people, found in *Becoming the World* by Laura Simms (2003). The activity began with telling the story *How the Squirrel Got Its Stripes*, introducing its country of origin (Malaysia), its landscape, and a brief history of the Ramayana people. During the story, we discussed the emotions each character may have felt throughout the story. We also discussed the impact of the characters’ actions on themselves, the other characters, and the natural environment. Following the telling, we built a “Bridge of Dreams Mural” (Simms, 2003, p. 61). First, students used paper to create rocks, stones, and boulders of different sizes. They coloured one side of the paper to look like a rock and wrote their dreams for their future or the future of the world on the other side. As a class, they decided how they would construct the bridge using the stones (i.e. how the pieces would be organized, which side of the paper would face up, how to support the bridge, etc.). During the mural creation, we discussed what types of behaviours and actions are helpful and harmful in our classroom and why.

Reflection: As can be expected, classroom management was still an issue during this activity, as some students found it difficult to control their behaviour throughout different aspects of the activity. However, it was still an extremely successful classroom experience. During the telling, I felt a unique sense of community and shared experience with my students. Watching my students' faces as they listened to the story and engaged with it was valuable to me as an educator – and something that I feel is missed when I *read* them a story. When reading a story, I am focused on looking at the text more than my students. My students are aware that the story comes from the book and is not a shared creation between me (the teller) and them (the listeners). The experience, although enjoyable, is less intimate and less powerful than *telling* a story. When *telling* this story, I could immediately identify my students' levels of understanding and/or confusion. Students engaged with me and posed questions about vocabulary and concepts that they likely would not have asked if they were being read to. For example, one of my students raised his hand during my telling of the story to ask what “ceaselessly” meant. This student rarely speaks up in class. He is usually disinterested and disengages himself from school. Obviously, this story experience was meaningful and relevant for him. He wanted to know more.

I enjoyed this activity because I found that the story lent itself nicely to immediate discussion about emotions and treatment of other people. This is always a critical aspect of classroom life and it was useful to have a story to frame the discussion. The high level of engagement my students displayed both during the telling and during the discussion reduced the off-task behaviours that usually arise during carpet time. Even students that are usually disruptive were actively engaged. As such, I found that story telling assisted me with classroom management. My students took pride in their roles as listeners, discussion contributors, and especially as co-creators of the “Bridge of Dreams” mural. We had so much success with the mural that students wanted to add a sun, clouds, monkeys, the squirrel, other animals, Ravana's Kingdom, Queen Sita, and King Rama. The mural-making process continued for two weeks!

Storytelling, including this activity, has made a difference in how I teach and the overall climate in my classroom. I have found that storytelling engages *all* of my students and greatly decreases the number of behaviour problems we have in the classroom. It also helps to build community and allows all of my students to feel valued, especially when they work together towards common goals such as building the “Bridge of Dreams” mural. My students are beginning to realize their importance in the classroom and that no contribution they make is too small. This realization is paramount!

References:

- Senehi, J. & Byrne, S. (2006). From violence toward peace: The role of storytelling for youth healing and political empowerment after social conflict. In S. McEvoy-Levy (Ed.), *Troublemakers or peacemakers? : Youth and post accord peace building* (pp. 235-255). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Simms, L. (2003). *Becoming the world*. New York: Mercy Corps.