

# Emergent Motifs of Social Justice Storytelling as Pedagogy

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Recently, young children have begun to be recognized as active citizens of their world. Stories have a great capacity to explain and explore the world through sensuous and poetic knowing. Based on these understandings, the author investigated how her practice as a storyteller with a class of five-six-year-old children might provoke and promote the children's active citizenship. This article explains teaching and learning through a practice of social justice storytelling that highlights significant motifs and some folktales that reflect these motifs. It provides a living theory of social justice storytelling as pedagogy that can serve as a model for others to enhance their living practices and theorizing of practice.

After prior experience of sharing social justice stories with young children, in which I saw children speak and act with social awareness and responsibility, I embarked on a study<sup>1</sup> to examine the capacity of storytelling to motivate young children to be active citizens. This article describes my research in relation to one objective of the larger study: to explore social justice storytelling as pedagogy that promotes young children's active citizenship practice. I begin with an overview of the study and its methodology. Next, I discuss three relevant motifs identified in the research. The paper concludes with a summative assessment of the learning that emerged through the identification of these emergent motifs of social justice storytelling.

The study is informed by the three theoretical foci of practice, narrative and action. Practice is understood here as "real-life theorizing" (Whitehead and McNiff 32). The focus on narrative is based on the idea of story as a way of knowing (Arendt; Benjamin; Bruner) in order to explore social justice issues (Greene; Nussbaum) and as pedagogy (Egan; Kuyvenhoven; Rosen; Zipes, *Speaking Out*). Finally, narratives are a way to read socio-cultural influences, for example, metanarratives (Lyotard) and counter-narratives (Lankshear and Peters), on children and citizenship.

Stories were purposefully shared to promote young children's active citizenship through social actions, in accordance with the principles of education for social change (e.g., Freire; Giroux, *Theory and Resistance*; Greene). The process was fueled by a political conception of democracy in education, informed by Arendt's theory of action. Theories of practice, narrative and action are infused with ontological values of agency, interconnectivity, responsiveness, multiplicity and practice. These helped give form to my

sense of the possibilities for provoking young children's active citizenship through social justice storytelling. Throughout, participants were understood to possess the capacity to be social agents. I welcomed their diversity of opinions, choices and means of participation while recognizing the interconnectivity of all elements in the study.

## **METHODOLOGY**

My inquiry took the form of weekly, 90-minute storytelling workshops across 10 weeks with a class of 20 children aged five to six years of age in a metropolitan school in Brisbane, Australia. Each workshop began with the telling of a story. This was followed by a class discussion applying a community of inquiry approach (Lipman) in which participant's dialogue to search out the problematic borders of puzzling concepts. Further interaction with the story occurred in small group activities. The children explored the stories by drawing, sculpting/building, dancing and developing social actions to redress injustices related to the stories. Both the children and teacher contributed to critical reflection on the workshops through follow-up conversations that occurred two to three days after each session. A different group of five to six children would self-nominate for each weekly follow-up conversation. These conversations with the teacher and the children, as well as video and audio recordings of the workshops, were then analyzed to identify points of interest and concern that warranted further exploration in order to guide the crafting of the following week's story, critical discussion and poststory activities.

My work focussed on my practice as a storyteller through a living theory approach to practitioner research (Whitehead and McNift). From a practitioner position, I enabled an insider and inter-relational view of evolving processes of creation with others, which informed this approach to action research. I sought to build familiar relationships with the children and their class teacher by cultivating open and attentive spaces for shared reciprocal learning. The teacher and children influenced my practice and reflection, just as I influenced their actions and thoughts. Through reflection in and on practice (Schon), there evolved a living theory of social justice storytelling as pedagogy, that is, living in the concrete sense that it was formulated through living practice and open to ongoing intersections.

As a practitioner/researcher, the practice was foregrounded in the epistemology, methodology and pedagogy of the study. In accordance with

the methodology of a living educational theory approach to practitioner research, I examined moments when these values did not flow into practice, failing to produce evidence of reflexive learning or of grounded theoretical extrapolations from the social justice storytelling practice. During data collection I planned, acted and reflected on my interactions with the children in the moment. Between storytelling workshops, I reflected on the previous session to determine a suitable story for the subsequent workshop that could aid children's meaning-making of social justice. After finalizing the data collection, more detailed reflections of my practice were possible. This was when I noted recurring elements in my notes (e.g., reflective journal, electronic workshop plans, e-mails to the teacher) that informed the selection and crafting of the stories told in the workshops.

My main research questions were:

1. Which new story will extend children's understanding of social justice issues?
2. What do the stories set in motion?
3. How can children's agency be welcomed and cultivated?
4. What qualities of social justice storytelling support or provoke young children's participation as active citizens?

These questions brought attention to different elements in my practice of social justice storytelling that highlighted central recurring themes. To name and explain the significance of these elements to my practice, I sought terminology grounded within the storytelling studies. For this reason, I use the term *motifs*, meaning recurring themes with underlying meanings (e.g., MacDonald). The three key motifs I identified were *story-tailoring*, *spinning and weaving*, and *a walk in the shoes of another*. These motifs capture the essence of the identified elements that guided the crafting of the stories I told as provocations for young children to explore active citizenship.

What follows are explanations of these three motifs as contributions to a living theory of social justice storytelling as pedagogy. Each motif is introduced with a story that portrays the metaphor and purpose of the motif. These stories were selected for their capacity to bring deeper layers of knowing to each motif and make visible underlying meanings through imagery and symbolism. I then describe how learning is accomplished through a practice of social justice storytelling, using data from the study to illustrate how the motif shaped my storytelling and dialectical analysis (Winter) that places the data in broader contexts of relevant theory and literature.

## MOTIF ONE: STORY-TAILORING

The ideas that informed my use of the motif *story-tailoring* drew from the union of two crafts: tailoring and storytelling. The craft of tailoring has a long tradition in preindustrial societies and a strong presence in folktales. Haase suggested that since tailors traveled from house to house and village to village seeking trade, they become carriers of news, gossip and stories. He proposed that because of these work conditions, tailors became storytellers and came to feature in folktales as everyday heroes and characters to which storytellers and their listeners could relate readily. The Jewish Folktale *the Tailor* (Schimmel) is one such story that offers insight to the union of the two crafts of tailoring and storytelling.

*In a village there once lived a poor tailor. He made overcoats for many people, but had never made one for himself, though an overcoat was the one thing he wanted. He never had enough money to buy material and set it aside for himself without making something to sell. But he saved and saved, bit by bit, and at last he had saved enough. He bought cloth and cut it carefully so as not to waste any. He sewed up the coat, and it fitted him perfectly. He was proud of that coat. He wore it whenever he was the least bit cold. He wore it until it was all worn out.*

*At least he thought it was all worn out, but then he looked closely and could see that there was just enough material left to make a jacket. So he cut up the coat and made a jacket. It fitted just as well as the coat though he could wear it even more often. He wore it till it was worn out.*

*At least he thought it was all worn out, but he looked again and could see there was still enough good material to make a vest. So he cut up the jacket and sewed a vest. He tried it on. He looked most distinguished in that vest. He wore it every single day. He wore it until it was all worn out.*

*At least he thought it was all worn out, but when he looked it over carefully he saw some places here and there that were not worn. So he cut them out, sewed them together and made a cap. He tried it on, and it looked just right. He wore that cap outdoors and in, until it was all worn out.*

*At least he thought it was all worn out, but when he looked he saw that there was just enough to make a button. So he cut up the cap and made a button. It was a good button. He wore it every day until it was all worn out.*

*At least he thought it was all worn out, but when he looked closely he saw that there was just enough left of the button to make a story, so he made a story out of it and I just told it to you.*

*The Tailor* reflects the motif of *story-tailoring* as a practice of shaping stories for audiences, just as the tailor in the story recrafts garments into new garments when they show signs of wear. The tailor crafts from what is still good material to create a new form, sustaining the presence of the past while meeting the needs of the present. The following explains the learning that took place in my practice of social justice storytelling in relation to a motif of *story-tailoring*.

## *Tailoring Stories*

In this study, stories were tailored to the class. Although each story was a story in its own right, there were remnants of previous stories within each subsequent story. Through the shaping and crafting of stories, traces of previous stories remained. To explain my practice of *story-tailoring*, I will outline how the first three stories told in the study were selected and crafted. The tailoring of the stories was informed by ideas of narrative interpretation from Stephens as well as Stephens and McCallum. The idea that the significance of a story can be read from interpretations of the sense of a story and the embedded discourses (Stephens) was used to compare the children's and my readings of significance in the stories I told. Following Stephens and McCallum, I applied the suggestion of examining the register in which a story is told, that is, how field (situation or subject matter), tenor (relationships) and modality (focalization and perspective) influenced my storytelling.

The study began with an idea for the first story only. I did not have a predetermined list of stories that I wanted to share with the class. Instead, I wanted each subsequent story to be responsive to the meaning-making of the children. What I heard the children and teacher say about each story guided the planning of the following week's story and workshop. I read the children's comments to identify what they interpreted as the significance of the story. My intention was to make meaningful links for the children. This practice was informed by advice from Roche that adults listen seriously to children on what is important to them and what concerns them, and the adults explore fully their various suggestions for courses of action to support their participation as citizens.

*The Freedom Bird* (Harley) was the first story told. I selected it for its many layers of meaning on freedom, tolerance and survival and its entertaining yet provocative nature. In this story, the song of the freedom bird irritates a hunter, so he proceeds to bag, chop, bury and drown the bird to stop its song, yet the bird continues to sing. It is a humorous story that engages young audiences readily as they laugh and participate in the "na-na-na-na" and raspberry blowing of the bird's song. I read the significance of this story as the injustice of being silenced and the enduring pursuit of freedom.

I performed *The Freedom Bird* story with aggressive enactments of the hunter bagging, chopping, burying and drowning the bird. My focalization was on the brutality of the attacks on the bird by the hunter to make clear the juxtaposition between pursuit of freedom and enduring persecution. As soon as space for

critical discussion of the story was opened, Max (an Indian boy of Hindu faith) was the first to raise his arm to signal his urgent desire to comment on the story.

Max: The hunter, only if he had a car-so no car-or walk. He could walk to the shops to get food. Why does he kill animals to get food? No, only walk to the shops, get food, then come home-like that. (Lines 79-81 W1)

At the time I heard Max's strong objection to the animals being hurt, especially through his question, "Why do we kill animals to get food?" Other children in this study were also alarmed that the hunter harmed the bird. Perhaps Max set the tone for responses. It was the deeper layers of meaning that I had hoped the children would engage with, however, yet only Juliet voiced commentary on repression.

Juliet: The freedom bird was trying to say something. (Line 270 W1 16/07/2007)

This was suggestive of an alignment with my reading of the story's significance: the injustice of being silenced and the enduring pursuit of freedom. The first time I heard this story, the storyteller (Jacobs Sife) dedicated it to the people of Tibet. In my reflections and considerations of what story to tell next, I considered telling a biographical story from the Tibetan people in an effort to support the children's understanding of the experience of being silenced.

Data from the follow-up conversation with six children two days later provoked me to think otherwise. Max and Juliet replied to my question, "What concerned you most about the story?" with:

Max: When you kill two animals, like kangaroo, it is very sad. (Line 2 W1 CI)

Juliet: That the hunter killed the bird and it was the freedom bird. (Line 4 W1 CI)

Later Max asked, "Who protects the animals from the hunters?" (Line 16 W1 CI). I explained recovery programs for endangered animals, and another child, Denmark, suggested a plan for creating an enclosure for the birds to protect them, with no gate so the hunters could not get in. Their attention was on stopping the practice of hunting. For many children the significance of the story seemed to be the injustice of hunting. To support their meaning-making, I then followed where their attention was focused rather than impose my thoughts on the significance of the story. Disapproval of cruel hunting was the resounding significance the children spoke of and became the inspiration for the next story.

To continue children's meaning-making of hunting, I chose to present an alternative view to hunting, as guided by the concept of counter-narratives (e.g., Lankshear and Peters) and the suggestion of Stephens and McCallum of modifying the register through shifts in the field, tenor and/or modality. I then selected a story that offered a counter position on hunting, away from the selfish cruelty that was portrayed in *The Freedom Bird*. With regard for the emerging motif of *story-tailoring*, I looked at what was not "worn out" and was still capable of shaping the next story.

The following story continued with the theme of hunting but took a new shape, through a different perspective. It was the Cherokee story *Awi Usdi* (see Caduto and Bruchac), which embedded Cherokee teachings of hunting only at times of necessity. Counter to hunting in *The Freedom Bird*, hunting was conducted in a respectful manner by seeking permission from Awi Usdi (Little Deer) before killing and then afterwards to honor the spirit of the animal by seeking forgiveness.

I told the *Awi Usdi* story in gentle tones, using a vastly different register from that in which I had performed *The Freedom Bird*. My focalization was on respecting a story from an indigenous culture. I paid careful attention to not overdramatize or manipulate the text to limit portrayal of the story through my lenses. This was an endeavor to attend to the cautions of Stephens and McCallum that Western audiences misread stories from other cultures and apply Western values of truth and justice.

In the follow-up conversation two days after experiencing the story of Awi Usdi, some children went on to talk about ways of stopping the hunters:

Juliet: When you are stopping hunters you might ask them in a very caring way: "I love having animals, so stop killing them." (Lines 79-80 W2 CI 25/07/07)

Declan: Put up signs. (Line 134 W2 CI 25/07 /07)

Declan: I could tell my friends. (Line 136 CI W2 25/07 /07)

I attended to the children's energy and interest in stopping hunters and considered the plea of Hart for adults to support children's participation in matters that interest children within their local environment. According to Hart, a local focus enables children to be involved directly and, in turn, deepens their understanding and connection with the issue. This perspective informed my decision to next choose a story that could motivate citizenship participation in the local environment. To present storytelling that provoked meaningful local social action, a story was required based on an animal that needed support in our local environment. This was a conscious decision to build real world connections.

Based on these reflections, I then sought information on a critically endangered bird in South East Queensland, Australia. I chose a bird based on the children's attention to the vulnerability of a bird first aroused in *The Freedom Bird*. I crafted the next story on the plight of the endangered Coxen's fig-parrots, using the theme of concern for animal plights to tailor the story.

### *Is There One Teller (Tailor) or Many?*

Enthusiastic about the idea of using a story on the Coxen's fig-parrot, the teacher shared information on the birds prior to my storytelling of *The Lonely Coxen's Fig-parrot* (based on The State of Queensland, Environmental Protection Agency, *Coxen's fig-parrot cyclopsitta diophthalma coxeni recovery plan 2001-2005*). This background equipped the children with knowledge of the story content.

When I told my story of *The Lonely Coxen's Fig-parrot*, Juliet and Denmark frequently interjected with predictions of what I would say next in the story. Although what they said did in fact flow with the story, I felt that my storytelling was interrupted and perhaps had not been adequately engaging to keep them transfixed on my telling. I had long been seduced by the romantic notion of the power of storytelling to spellbind an audience. The experience of children staring at me with their eyes wide open and mouths agape waiting to see and catch my every word-what Kuyvenhoven referred to as the "listener's hush" (34)-had inspired my passion for storytelling some 20 years earlier.

On closer reflection of the transcript of my telling of *The Lonely Coxen's Fig-parrot*, I realized that the children completed my sentences. Perhaps from their position of knowing, they could preempt what would happen in the story. Rather than viewing their contributions as interfering with the story, I considered whether the interruptions could be viewed as co-story-telling. The children certainly seemed to be engaged; they contributed actively during the story and in the critical discussion and dramatization after the story. I reconsidered my position of storyteller and questioned who controls the story. In preparing to tell a new story, I read the story over and over, not to memorize it but rather to familiarize myself with the plot, descriptions of settings and characters and key pieces of dialogue. When telling a story, my mission is as described by Benjamin to performatively relay the story, that is, to make it the experience of the listeners.

On reflection, I recognized that I saw myself as the keeper of the story until I completed the telling, then the children could do with the story what they pleased. As Benjamin explained, it is up to the listener to interpret the story the way she



understands it. Yet in my telling of *The Lonely Coxen's Fig-parrot*, some of the children seemed to seek ownership and control of the story before it was completed. This behavior is illustrative of the unexpected ways, noted by Gallacher and Gallagher, in which children choose to seize agency. The experience provoked a broader awareness in my practice of storytelling to be more responsive to the children's comments and actions during the telling. The act of tailoring requires careful attention to crafting a garment that fits the customer. The creation of a garment that the owner brings to life is a responsive process of fitting and refitting by being attentive to the customer's requirements. Through the experience of telling *The Lonely Coxen's Fig parrot*, I came to realize that the same applies to a practice of *story-tailoring*; a storyteller needs to shape and fit a story by responding LO the listeners both before and during the storytelling.

Following this experience, I endeavored to be more open to active listeners who could costeer the direction of the story. It was not an easy task to loosen control of the storytelling I was managing as the intervention of the study. Yet I valued and wanted to welcome and support children's agency, and it was the children's meaning-making of social justice issues that the study sought. For all stories after *The Lonely Coxen's Fig-parrot story*, I created spaces for the children to be active listeners in order to nurture a collective climate. I did this by inviting children's suggestions (both verbal and dramatized) at points in the stories that allowed for children's embellishments to be embedded into the stories. This is not to say that I had not included children actively in my storytelling prior to this. What this experience taught me was to be more open to children's contributions as tellers. Yes, I still had considerable control as the visiting storyteller, but I had been awakened to loosen it and shift questioning away from "how can I convey meaning-making on social justice issues through storytelling for young children?" to "how can we explore social justice issues through storytelling together? What do the children want to do with the ideas in the stories? Where do they want to take them?"

This shift was not easy for me. It involved relinquishing some of the control I held over the stories I told, and at times I struggled with this. The experience provoked learning in my practice of social justice storytelling, by being more aware and attentive to listening to others whilst telling stories. Such learning involved a greater interchange of listening and responding that held potential to inspire growth, creation and an expansion of awareness of others and self.

### *Reflections on the Motif of Story-tailoring*

I practiced *story-tailoring* as a strategy in social justice storytelling through acts of listening. My efforts to listen were somewhat like a tailor's listening, measuring and attending to the requests of the customer to fashion garments that fit perfectly. These efforts involved not only listening to the words but also measuring their various dimensions to craft stories that would fit the being of the group. Because the study sample was a group rather than an individual, sometimes the story fitted some children better than others. The recycling practice of tailoring in *The Tailor* resonated, as I saw that my practice of listening to what stayed with the children (the remnants) was what I used to shape and craft the next story, so that a part of the first story was in all of the stories. They were story themes (or threads) that remained present throughout the study. The remnants were at the core; they maintained the presence of the past. The parts that were no longer relevant were dropped along the way. The real skill in this recycling practice of tailoring was identifying which parts to cut off and which to retain. The motif of *story-tailoring* provided me with aspirations of becoming a fine story-tailor, that is, one who skillfully assesses the requirements of the listeners to craft a story that responds seamlessly to their ideas, changing circumstances and demands.

After completing four storytelling workshops, I questioned further whether I was really listening to the children. Was I listening to what they wanted me to listen to, or was I listening to the parts that would create "good fits"? Were the common concerns in the children's responses to the stories supporting meaning-making of social justice issues and the complexities of humanity for children? A motif of *spinning and weaving* describes exploration of interconnectivity to support the children's ability to connect related issues and, consequently, their meaning-making of justice and humanity.

## **MOTIF TWO: SPINNING AND WEAVING**

My second motif, *spinning and weaving*, has long been associated with storytelling. In centuries gone by, women gathered in small groups and spun yarn-and yarns-in spinning rooms. These rooms became social and cultural centers, as women spun and exchanged tales of their lives and others. The stories they told were connected, just as they spun one long connected thread. Spinning is reflected in countless mythological and folkloric sources (Haase); the most well-known in Euro-centric cultures is probably *Rumpelstiltskin*. To explain the motif of *spinning and weaving*, I refer to the Greek Story *the Child Who Was Poor and Good* (see Ragan), as both the acts of spinning and

weaving combine to create desired meaning. In this story, a lamb, a bramble bush, a bird, a spider and a mother collaborate to create what a young girl needs so desperately: warm clothing. The lamb cards tuft of its wool by brushing up against the bramble bush, the bird spins the wool and the spider weaves the wool, all as return favors for the care the girl has shown to them. Her mother then sews the woolen fabric into a dress. The story acknowledges the qualities that each of these living things naturally offers to make it possible to form a warm garment.

There is interconnectivity among all the elements of the story. The story does not follow a linear format, but rather doubles back, forming an intertwined loop of connections. Meaning is then shaped by the interconnectivity of the characters and the story structure. Through an exploration of interconnectivity, three clusters of stories were identified across the study, distinguished by shifts in themes. Ten stories were told: four in the first cluster and three each in the second and third clusters. What follows is an explanation of the place of interconnectivity in a practice of social justice storytelling. I explore the interconnectivity among stories in the first cluster and how it aided in the identification of significance, or the message, common to the first four stories told, as well as links between social actions and stories.

### *The Interconnectivity of Stories*

To further understand the children's meaning-making of the first four stories and to critique whether my practice of tailoring stories was supporting children's meaning-making of social justice, I played with interconnectivity, like spinning and weaving from a tangled thread. That is, I attempted to shape the messiness, confusion and uncertainty of my story-crafting thus far into a form that offered meaning. I mapped the interconnections between my readings of significance and the children's readings of significance to the stories (see Figure 1). What I determined as the significance of each story is noted in the circles, and what the children commonly read as significance is written on the line linking it to the next story. When I began this process of webbing connections among stories, I was already aware of how the first four stories related from one to the next, since these links were determined through an analysis of my practice of *story-tailoring*. The four stories are not presented in a chronological line, but rather as a square to portray connections among all four stories. This process also enabled identification of what I read as a common thread among all the stories.

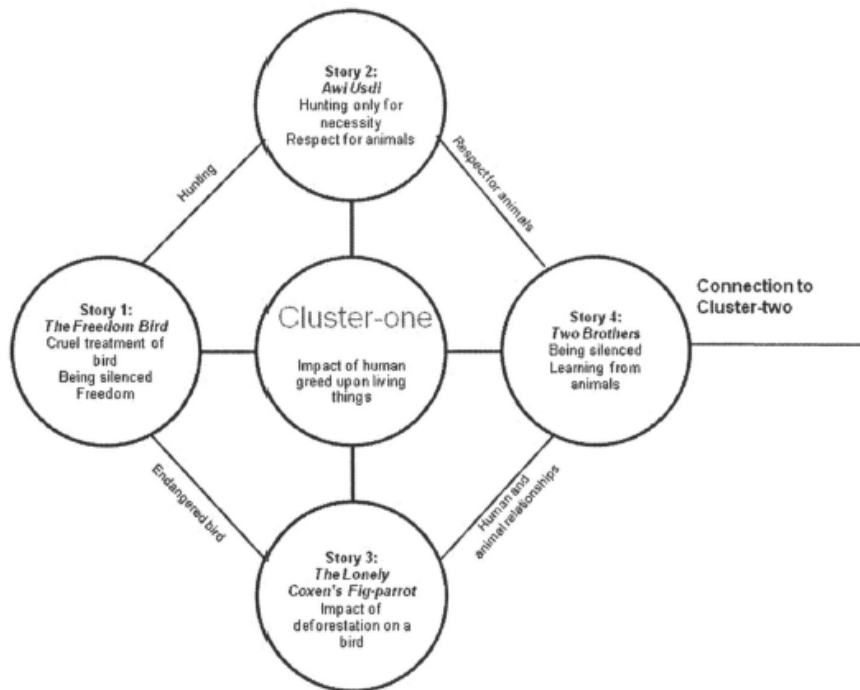


FIGURE 1 The interconnecting story themes of the four stories in cluster-one.

### *Identification of the Significance Common to the First Four Stories*

By mapping connections among stories, I was able to note in each story the ways in which human actions driven by greed adversely affected living things. In *The Freedom Bird*, the hunter harmed the bird because he did not want to hear its song. The children noticed the unfairness of the hunter's action. *Awi Usdi* told of how the invention of the bow and arrow increased the killing of animals beyond what was necessary for their survival, and how the animals (after a number of attempts) managed to reduce the Cherokee hunting practice to killing only what was necessary. The third story, *The Lonely Coxen's Fig-parrot*, suggested that the impact of human logging for housing drastically reduced the Coxen's fig-parrot population. Juliet recognized this impact.

Juliet: They weren't thinking about the animals. Like if they were chopping down a tree with a bird in it. They've got to be careful of animals. (Lines 176-177 W3 30/07/07)

In the fourth story, *Two Brothers*, the greed of the older brother led him to own more than his younger brother and forced his younger brother to work all the time. Molly noticed the unfairness of this and how it affected the life and status of the younger brother.

Molly: His brother bossed him around and no one listened to him. (Line 303 W4 6/08/07)

By reflecting on what I saw as the significance of each story, I determined that human greed was the driving force behind the injustices in each story—which had not been my intention—and I was able to form the notion of interconnectivity beyond a linear sequence. Mapping connections made visible the commonalities among the stories and issues I explored. The impact of human greed on living things continued to be the cause of the injustices in the second cluster, which focused on the injustices of child labor as inspired by the children's understanding of the significance of the fourth story, *Two Brothers*; that is, that younger people are being silenced. Cluster two included biographical stories of Iqbal Masih (Pakistani child laborer and activist) and Craig Kielburger (Canadian child activist) and an adapted folktale that metaphorically explored power and empathy in child labor. Cluster three was designed to tie threads together, that is, to consolidate meaning-making of the social justice issues raised. To accomplish this, I wrote three stories: *Two Blocks*, *The GREED Machine* and *Two Rocks*, all of which built on the "it's unfair" readings of stories told in cluster two yet placed them in a familiar context (*Two Blocks*) and on a community level (*The GREED Machine* and *Two Rocks*). These stories were tailored to include references to previously told stories and to offer hope. I mapped three webs out of the three clusters, noting their points of interconnection, like interconnected lineal nodes. In this way, elements of the study were connected together, just as the lamb's wool was spun, woven, and tailored to form a woolen dress.

### *Mapping Actions Set in Motion*

The mapping of connections also provided a way to plot the social actions that the stories set in motion. This resonated with my earlier shift of questioning to: What do the children want to do with the ideas in the stories? Where do they want to take them? I plotted these connections during data

collection. Figure 2 provides a visual representation of which stories set in motion social actions (for a detailed discussion of these social actions see Phillips).

The mapping of where the children wanted to go with the stories took unexpected directions. The attention in cluster one evolved into the impact of hunting and deforestation on animal populations. The fourth story, *Two Brothers*, formed a shift in attention to young people's experience of being silenced and forced to work. This was not intended. I had selected the story because it told of how a human respected animals as great teachers, proposing a shift in status between humans and animals. However, an unexpected shift in focus occurred to unfair treatment of young people. This shift led to a new cluster of workshops, albeit not completely disconnected from what had already been mapped. This new cluster was still connected to the legacy of cluster one through the story *Two Brothers*.

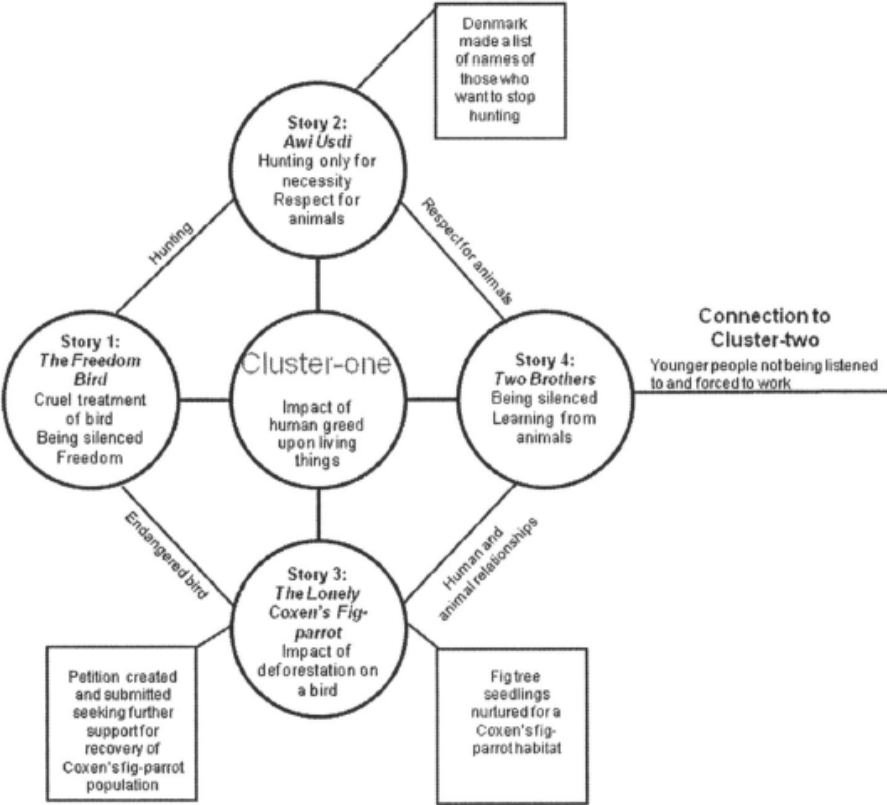


FIGURE 2 Cluster-one: The social actions the stories set in motion.

The act of acknowledging and basing further work on what many of the children felt was the significance of the stories was a conscious act on my part to welcome the children's agency. If I had not listened to what aroused the children's attention in the *Two Brothers* story and instead had stayed with the theme of human relationships with animals, then the children's interest and energy in a separate issue would have been missed. In addition, from an Arendtian perspective, their agency would have been denied because I would have blocked their initiation of a new topic. Acknowledgment of the children's readings of significance loosened adult (my) control and led to their welcome contributions to steer the study in a direction that supported their meaning-making. This plotting of social actions that the stories set in motion shaped subsequent stories and social actions. Through the visual representation of the interconnections among stories and actions, I became more aware of what had transpired, as well as the possibilities for where the inquiry might go.

### *Reflections on the Motif of Spinning and Weaving*

Spinning and weaving are well-established metaphors in storytelling. A storyteller spins and weaves a tale by leading listeners from one element to the next with their interrelationship made visible through her telling, or the interconnectivity is revealed as a delightful surprise at the end. The motif of *spinning and weaving* was present in my storytelling practice not only in how I formed and told a tale but also in how I saw opportunities to spin and weave together identified significances in stories with the social actions that the stories set in motion. This interconnectivity guided the selection and shaping of stories. Mapping these connections offered greater scope for plotting what social justice means and what it might demand, which Greene delineated as the intention of education for social change. However, in this study, the connections mapped are my readings based on resonating comments from individual children. In this way, more scope for children's agency was possible than if I had simply ignored their tangents and insisted on an adult-driven pathway. Their agency was nevertheless limited by study foci, the brevity of my relationship with the children, and the ever-present lenses that inevitably shaped and guided my practice.

### **MOTIF THREE: WALK IN THE SHOES OF ANOTHER**

From years of telling stories to a wide range of audiences, I have learned that storytelling, as a live, intimate art form, has the capacity to speak to both the hearts and minds of listeners, leaving lasting impressions that evoke shifts in awareness and understanding. Through this study, I sought to determine what exactly it was about storytelling that enabled understanding of unjust treatment of others and provoked social actions to redress these experiences of injustice. The motif *walk in the shoes of another* thus explores the element of learning in the relationship between storytelling and social actions. The story of *The King and the Fisherman* (see Jacobs Sife) represents this motif. In the story, a king only came to understand the plight of the townspeople's starvation through a concrete experience that placed him in a similar plight to the people, that is, the threat of impending death. This story can be critiqued in terms proposed by Benhabib ("The Generalized and the Concrete Other"; *Situating the Self*) based on the idea that justice requires engagement with the concrete other. Through experiences with the concrete other, an understanding of an individual's history, identity and affective-emotional constitution can be acquired. The king had a generalized view of the people. Not until he experienced suffering through a concrete experience with the fisherman did he develop an understanding of the plight of the people. What follows is a discussion of how *walk in the shoes of another* is a metaphor for engagement with the concrete other and how the aesthetic qualities, as well as the sharing of tragedy in social justice storytelling, cultivate compassionate action.

#### *Engagement with the Concrete Other*

The motif *walk in the shoes of another* was most evident in the nonfictional stories that I shared, such as *Iqbal Masih's Story* and *Craig Kielberger's Story*. These stories cultivated more than twice as many sympathetic responses as did the other stories told. Sympathetic responses were identified when children associated a feeling or expressed caring for those who experienced suffering in the stories. According to Nussbaum, sympathetic responses to stories require imagination and emotional receptivity. For example, the following is Juliet's response to *Craig Kielberger's Story*, in which Craig became a child activist after learning of Iqbal Masih's experience as a child laborer.



Juliet: I was worried because all of those people who were forced to work in the factory. I felt sad for them, 'cos they were FORCED. (Lines 89-90 W7)

Immediately after I ended *Craig's Story*, Molly expressed compassion for the children forced to work under harsh conditions with the following comment, reiterated by Declan.

Molly: To go on holidays there and help them. (Lines 326 W7)

Declan: Me too! I was going to say the same. (Lines 330 W7)

Both Molly and Declan felt the suffering in the story so strongly that they wanted to help. The stories based on real lives seemed to possess a greater capacity to evoke a shift in understanding of the other, which aligns with Benhabib's (*Situating the Self*) claim that justice requires engagement with the concrete other. *Iqbal's Story* and *Craig's Story* were both about real-life experiences of other children rather than generalized accounts. Because the stories were true accounts, this group of children could connect with those in the stories, perhaps imagining that the suffering could happen to them. Emotive connection with an individual's experience of injustice seemed to be one quality of social justice storytelling that may have led to young children's active citizenship. However, this emotive connection could also have been presented as a report or in a picture book. I was still interested in uncovering the particular qualities of storytelling that provoked emotive connection, which would in turn motivate young children's active citizenship.

### *Aesthetic Qualities of Storytelling*

If storytelling is understood as an aesthetic encounter, which according to both Abbs and Greene cultivates a sensuous and poetic mode of knowing and affective responses, further qualities of social justice storytelling become evident. Sensuous and poetic modes of knowing may have been cultivated through use of descriptive language, gesture and tone to paint stories through evocative imagery and heartfelt moods. I took care to bring the stories alive, making them the experience of my listeners.

The following describes how I crafted and told *Iqbal Masih's Story* in order to identify aesthetic qualities of storytelling that may have inspired many children

to express sympathetic responses. This story is particularly significant because it evoked the most sympathetic responses, as well as subsequently triggering most of the children's social actions. I crafted this story from biographical details of child laborer and activist Iqbal Masih (1982-1995) that I acquired from books (Crofts; Kielburger) and websites (The World Children's Prize for the Rights of the Child). The register in which I told *Iqbal's Story* involved narration through an emotive mode. The pace was slow, allowing space for the sharing of tragic events to resonate. The story told of the harsh conditions under which Iqbal and his friends were forced to work in a carpet factory in Pakistan, proceeding onto Iqbal's key acts of antichild labor activism from the age of ten. By reading the story for sense, as well as embedded discourses as suggested by Stephens, I saw the significance of *Iqbal's Story* as admiration for Iqbal's claim for social, civic and political rights, particularly given his youth and the adversity he faced.

I began the story by asking the children to close their eyes, whilst I described Iqbal's Spartan, two-room home that he shared with his mother and sister: one for sleeping on string beds and one for cooking. Apart from the clothes Iqbal wore, the only thing he could call his own was an old, battered cricket bat. The imagery that I painted was based on what I had read of Masih's home life. It fulfilled the storytelling strategy of setting the scene (McKay and Dudley). It also left an impression, as Carl relayed what he thought was important to tell his family about the story.

Carl: That he was very poor and that he had no mattress on his bed. (Line 174 W7 CI)

Carl seemed to view sleeping without a mattress as significant; most likely in contrast to his own sleeping arrangements, it was a stark deficiency. The care I took to evoke the imagery of the setting seemed to enable a sympathetic understanding of Iqbal's poverty.

Throughout *Iqbal's Story*, I used carefully chosen words, pacing and gestures to relay Iqbal's suffering, bravery and achievements in a respectful way. The following comment by Molly gives an account of the influence of my emotive descriptive language and gesture.

Molly: I imagined I was the one who worked in the carpet factory and when I was sleeping- he [carpet factory owner] kept on dragging me out of the blankets when I was cold. (Lines 51-52 W6 CI)

Emotive and evocative storytelling appeared to provoke Molly to imagine herself in the experiences of Iqbal's *Story*.

I ended the story with Max in the role of Iqbal on his return to his village in

Pakistan after his trip to Sweden and the United States to raise awareness of child labor. The rest of the class cheered to welcome Max as Iqbal, and Fergie (a five-year-old girl) placed a necklace of threaded flowers around Max's neck to honor his return. Max wore the necklace proudly and spontaneously bowed. This was a moment of strong connection to the story that both the teacher and I noticed.

Teacher: He was really in role. Understanding what storytelling is really about. It is not just sit and listen. It is whole thinking. (W6 T1)

Max seemed focused in his portrayal of Iqbal; he took his role seriously and responded aptly to my narration of the story. There was a strong sense of Max's being in the story. In the discussion of the story, Max gave this account of his experience:

Max: When they [carpet customers] buying, and I use my hands and I use my teeth to work, to make it easier for me. (Lines 314-315 W6 30/08/2007)

Max's use of the personal pronoun and his expression of the effort to work more efficiently (with hands and teeth) to meet the demand for carpets is indicative of how storytelling makes the story the experience of the listener (Benjamin). Being assigned the role of Iqbal may have further aided Max's capacity to imagine and connect with the story personally.

Philosophers such as Benjamin and Nussbaum have theorized the connection between story and imagination, along with scholars of storytelling studies such as Zipes (*Creative Storytelling; Speaking Out*). The notion of sympathetic imagination (Nussbaum) helps us to realize just what aesthetic qualities connect young children emotionally with those who experience injustice, as a precursor to active citizenship participation. According to Nussbaum, storytelling can enable listeners to imagine and identify with the feelings of others. Stories can provide inside views of people's feelings that are not usually on display, and connection with these feelings can lead to compassion for another. The listener imaginatively implicates herself in the suffering of this person. This builds on Benhabib's suggestion that justice requires engagement with the "concrete other," by bringing into the equation imagination, in that the children imagined the feeling of the other's experience of suffering. The storytelling strategies of painting emotive and descriptive imagery and actively involving children in the story (through role play, chants and contributing suggestions in the stories) worked to cultivate sympathetic imagination.

## *Sharing of Tragedies Leads to Compassion That Leads to Action*

Another factor of possible pertinence to *Iqbal's Story* could be the degree of tragedy in the story. Nussbaum recommended sharing tragedies with children as a means of building compassion and active citizenship. Her suggestion was that tragedies not only acquaint children with tragic events that may occur in life but also equip them with an understanding of the diversity of choice of action. In this way, as noted in the responses to *Iqbal's Story*, listening to tragic stories can promote or provoke children's civic participation as global citizens acting on behalf of humanity. The communal space created by live storytelling enabled the weight of tragedies to be shared.

Arendt saw significant merit in the capacity of storytelling to bear the weight of suffering. Storytelling provided space for airing emotions and forging solidarity through sharing. In order to create spaces in which the children's thoughts and feelings could be shared, a number of opportunities were provided for the children to express insights and ask questions. These occurred through whole group discussions, small group activities, follow-up conversations and in individual story journals. In addition, a transcript of each story was sent home with every child on the day it was shared (as was requested by a parent), so that families were aware of story content and could support discussions of the story at home. Collectively, all of these strategies offered means for the children to process their thoughts and feelings to the tragedies.

The tremendous loss and suffering told in *Iqbal's Story* and *Craig's Story* seemed to spark a strong fire in the children's compassion for child laborers, in turn fueling their motivation for action. In *Craig's Story*, the children learned a range of social actions that the *Free the Children* network has employed to redress the suffering of child labor. In the discussion after this story, almost every child contributed an idea for social action to assist child workers (such as go there and help, build houses and schools and donate money and resources). However, the children, teacher and I were so removed from the socio-cultural context of the children in *Iqbal's Story* and *Craig's Story* that we ran the risk of deciding what was best for others. The suggested questioning by Nussbaum of "what does this story ask me to care about?" and "what does this story ask me to do?" may offer some way out of the quandary. These questions place emphasis on the listener to determine what she cares about and what she wants to do rather than making suggestions according to the interests of others.

## *Reflections on the Motif of Walk in the Shoes of Another*

The motif of *walk in the shoes of another* signaled the way in which bringing unjust experiences of others alive through stories can cultivate awareness, compassion and action to redress injustices. In the same way that the fisherman created a situation for the king to experience a threat to his life, the stories I told were selected to cultivate compassion toward others who experience injustice. The sharing of experiences of others through story seemed to broaden the children's understanding of humanity by exposing them to the diversity of human experience.

The motif of *walk in the shoes of another* reflected the following qualities of social justice storytelling that contributed to a greater number of sympathetic responses and suggestions of social actions: (a) biographical tragedies, (b) aesthetic qualities (e.g., descriptive language), (c) active participation of children in the story and (d) opportunities for the children to express opinions and feelings about the stories. These qualities were identified through reflections on practice and guided the amendment and shaping of subsequent storytelling workshops designed to cultivate a storytelling practice that supports young children's active citizenship.

## CONCLUSION

This study used a living theory approach to practitioner research. It elucidates the principals informing my use of social justice storytelling to support or provoke young children's active citizenship. My learning as a storyteller practitioner and how it was shaped by others is explored in the work, as each of my decisions to alter my practice was informed by the children and teacher's responses to my practice.

The motifs *story-tailoring*, *spinning and weaving* and *walk in the shoes of another* served to improve my practice in relation to provoking young children's active citizenship. Though I did not name these motifs as such until after the data were collected, the motifs were still present in decision making throughout my practice in the study. These motifs steered and shaped my practice, yet they are not proposed as a conclusive list or recipe. Instead, explanations of these motifs help explain the influences in a practice of social justice storytelling and offer points of attention for future practice.

These points are:

1. To notice how listeners, respond to a story, welcome their contributions and adapt to them.
2. To spin and weave elements of stories and be attentive to what the interconnections set in motion.
3. To share stories that make visible the invisible complexities of humanity so that sympathetic imagination is nurtured.
4. To ask the questions, "What does this story ask me to care about? And what does this story ask me to do?"
5. To continue to imagine the possibilities of social justice storytelling.

Through this study, an intimate learning community was cultivated, where stories awakened awareness of the complexities of humanity. These issues were discussed critically and responded to through aesthetic experiences and social actions. As the teacher in the study said, "If you could imagine having a classroom where this would have been my whole focus day in and day out-it would have been awesome!" (Lines 91-92 W12).

#### NOTE

I. Phillips, L. G. *Young Children's Active Citizenship: Storytelling, Stories and Social Actions*. Diss. monograph. Queensland University of Technology, 2010.

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