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Dieses Projekt wurde mit Unterstützung der Europäischen Kommission finanziert. Die Verantwortung für den Inhalt dieser Veröffentlichung trägt allein der Verfasser; die Kommission haftet nicht für die weitere Verwendung der darin enthaltenen Angaben.

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Multilingual Storytelling



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Introduction

This essay provides the theoretical background to go with the didactic materials on multilingual storytelling, and the video about “The Town Musicians of Bremen”, as a multilingual storytelling experience and exercise.

Multiliteracy as Social Justice

The premise of the materials presented in the “Making Literacy Meaningful” project is that literacy in school needs to move out of the deficit model, specifically with view to children who do not speak the instructional language, and, rather than strictly focussing on gaps in the curriculum, to take a meaningful and applied approach to help children integrate their multiple languages and literacies. Ashton, Arthur and Beecher (2014) draw on research conducted in Australia, and explore literacy as a social practice, which combines family literacy, environmental literacy, and literacy development in educational contexts. In families where a different language is spoken at home, a child’s literacy experience may also be in a different language, however, including these experiences, and making space for their development, is a social justice issue, and families may have their own literacy practices, involving multiple languages, tied to multiple family members (Little, 2017). Taylor, Bernhard, Garg and Cummins (2008) point out that many heritage language families are viewed as marginal to the child’s curriculum needs, resulting in issues around social exclusion and lack of communication. Encouraging children to explore all aspects of their identity, and to signal to families that their home language, literacy and culture are seen as an integral part of the child’s development, is vital in this approach.

Storytelling

Storytelling is a literacy practice that has the potential to bridge both home and school literacy practices. Agosto (2016) clearly distinguishes between “storytelling” and “story reading”, exploring both the literacy-related benefits to a purely oral story, and the potential physical barrier a book may pose. In reality, not all teachers

will feel perfectly confident telling a story completely freely, and many classrooms may explore a compromise.

Lotherington et al. (2008) explore three separate case studies of multiliterate story-telling, giving other practitioners a broad overview of possibilities in the classroom. One example involved one story (“Three Little Pigs”) which was then told by several children in their various home languages, often involving parents in the preparation of the story. Another case used role play and technology to re-create an Aesop’s fable in multiple languages. A third example created a multilingual storyboard, based on the story of Little Red Hen, forming a visual, multilingual representation of languages and cultures present in the classroom. Lotherington et al. (ibid) point out how important it is to have a visual representation of classroom languages present, and embedded in curriculum development, going beyond the basics of having greetings or “welcome” in multiple languages in the classroom.

Taylor et al. (2008) show how, through the creation of dual language story books, family members who may traditionally be excluded from a child’s educational journey (such as parents or grandparents who do not speak the instructional language at all) are able to establish a different inter-generational connection, and share the family’s cultural and linguistic capital, thus leading to a sense of self-worth and improving the support network of the child.

The didactic materials related to multilingual story-telling will draw further on the ideas presented above, and provide hands-on ideas and examples to try in the classroom. Importantly, Taylor et al. (2008) point out that such efforts must not be part of celebratory, ‘occasional imports from out of-school spaces [that are] irrelevant to core learning’ (p. 272) – instead, they need to become part of the core culture and philosophy of learning and teaching.

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DOI: 10.1177/1468798408096481