

**Threading Tales: A Model for Inclusive Learning that  
Celebrates Cultural Diversity in Contemporary  
Communities**

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### Summary:

The paper explains the “Threading Tales” initiative. It examines a participatory-arts/literacy based process that is driven by multiple intelligence theory. The “Threading Tales” process is intergenerational, intercultural collaborative and self-directed

## Introduction

Finding modes that connect new ideas with previously learned approaches requires imagination. Creative innovation that comes from the imagination of an educator can stimulate the learner to fuse new ideas with what is already known, to connect the world of experiential learning with an educational, social, cultural or emotional context. To express this thought more succinctly, the author describes a recent conversation. Having learned of our “Threading Tales”, initiative, a professional working with children in foster care has been inspired to work with the children on the creation of “family bags”, filled with photographs, toys and symbolic items that keep the child connected to family through troubled times. A second concept that has emerged indirectly from the “Threading Tales” experience is the idea of “memory bags”, a project that could be centred around adults with special needs. A third concept has emerged in a recent discussion with a community development worker. This concept centres on how the “Threading Tales” model can transfer to an after-schools context with parental involvement. Therefore, the author posits that the key factor in the introduction to the concept of “Threading Tales” is the process and the product that inspires such innovative thinking.

“Threading Tales” began as a participatory arts-based reading development and story-gathering project that organically and holistically engaged diversity, unity of skills and cultural experience. This in turn translated through the finished work, the unity of talent and individuality of all participants. The essence of the process focuses on diversity and equality. It transcends language, literacy and educational, social and cultural perceptions. This result is achieved through the tactile, communicative nature of its process.

The fusion of story-making, and the use of textiles, crafts, needlework, painting and the human experience, while focusing on the central theme of gathering and telling stories has engaged the imagination. It has lifted our senses to share and to inspire. “Threading Tales” therefore, can be described as a visual patchwork of colour, texture and much-loved stories. It is a project which, in it’s own unique way, demonstrates the layers of process and experience that can evolve into a small piece of the biography of a community group’s journey towards experiential learning, development and sense of place.

## **Background**

The project was developed over a series of phases. It is now in the final stages of its second year. The genesis of the idea to develop it began in January 2005, when the Department of Education and Science released a one-off grant, making €500,000 available for the purchase of books for primary schools serving disadvantaged communities throughout the country. Six hundred schools were involved in the initiative. The Department of Education and Science’s aim was to ensure that pupils most in need of literacy support would receive maximum benefit. The books purchased with this grant were to be used in collaboration with parents to promote a culture of reading in the home. This money was channelled through the public libraries, administrators of the National School Library Scheme.

The National School Library Scheme is currently funded per capita at a rate of €4.52 per pupil. In Kildare alone, at the time of writing, Department of Education and Science figures record a primary school population of 22,458 pupils. It is unfortunate that, “at a time when research shows that one in ten children are leaving primary school with reading difficulties”

(NALA, 2002: 5), that the disparity between the monetary element and the actual number of children entitled to avail of this core service is so great. The burden of residue costs continue to fall to the local authority to absorb: Haslett (2002:64) notes “It was the experience of several librarians that where their county council did prioritise the school library service by way of substantial subsidisation, this was done at the expense of other areas of service development”

However, as already noted above, for Kildare County Council, the importance of grant funding of this kind can never be underestimated in its value. It remains an intrinsic supplementary element to the library service’s commitment to the provision of books and other literacy support measures to primary schools in the county.

## **Preliminary Research and Consultation**

The additional funding in Kildare, provided the library service with an opportunity to liaise with the schools in question. In Kildare, 7 from a total of 101 primary schools throughout the county were selected to benefit from the grant. The library was not advised as to the criteria for the selection. Minister Mary Hanafin, when announcing the special grant initiative at a launch of the report ‘Reading Literacy in Disadvantaged Primary schools’, in November, 2004, made reference to the fact that more training incentives and encouragement for teachers is needed. The author, in response to the Minister’s call, undertook a process of research exercises that aimed to learn more about the schools involved. The author also set out to ascertain how the library service might be of assistance to teachers in this area. While regular consultation takes place between the schools library service and the primary schools it serves, the grant was unique in its importance for it provided an opportunity to work more closely with home/school links and resource personnel. This action enabled the

building of an informed and accurate picture of the difficulties experienced by the pupils of the schools that were selected. Data was gathered on the communities they were centred in and their needs in terms of the limitations of what could be achieved with this money.

The report referred to earlier, 'Reading Literacy in Disadvantaged Primary Schools', was a helpful document in this regard. Prior to the grant initiative, the Department of Education and Science had commissioned the Educational Research Centre to conduct a survey of reading literacy in primary schools designated as disadvantaged. The *Drumcondra Sentence Reading Test* was used in 94 schools to measure reading abilities on 6,400 pupils in first, second and third and sixth classes, and questionnaires were used to gather contextual information. As part of the research findings, the survey noted that across all grades, pupils from the Traveller Community had average scores well below pupils in the settled community. Refugee or asylum-seeker status was associated with lower scores in First Class only. Also noted was that the common characteristics associated with poorer achievement scores amongst pupils occurred where at least one parent was an early school leaver, where pupils lived in households having a large number of siblings, and where neither parent was employed. A scale of socio-economic status indicated that many pupils' parents had low status jobs, and that lower status jobs and unemployment were negatively associated with pupil achievement (Eivers, Shiel, & Shortt, F. 2005).

## **The Public Library and Multiple Intelligence Theory**

Absorbing this information in light of the allocation opened up a forum for consideration and discussion. It raised awareness and focused on positive actions that could be taken by the library to improve existing efforts to

increase literacy competency among primary school children. The forum also contributed to a thought process that related to the work that was being carried out through the schools library service. Kildare Library and Arts Service bases its policies on Gardner's multiple intelligence theory and on valuing production in all its diversity. Therefore, the experiences and knowledge of all children and people regardless of social class, race, ethnicity and ability is valued: "This challenges librarians to create opportunities for people including minority and marginalised people to access libraries and to be accepted themselves as "knowers". (Kildare Library and Arts, 2006:5)

These values permeate the "Threading Tales" process. Therefore, in terms of reading development, the key questions were considered: Could we sculpture a confidence building, literacy based project for parents and carers of these children? Could we open up opportunities for adults to learn alongside their children and perhaps to develop some deeper understanding of the process by which children learn? Could we generate a positive contribution to the aims and objectives of having real literacy support available to both children and adults in the home? These questions underpinned the momentum to the initiation of the "Threading Tales" Programme.

## **Empowerment of Parents**

Kildare Library & Arts Schools Library Service centres on the child as the focus in the community. Working in partnership with parents, educators and community partners, the aim is to forge sustainable, holistic approaches to learning and development. This aim is reinforced by the belief that when the parent is empowered, so too is the child. Library staff



actively create partnerships with educators and parents to build support mechanisms that allow that focus to be maintained and to strengthen: “The library acts as a seedbed for culture by introducing children and young people to the world of the arts and the oral and material culture of their community” (Dept of Environment and Local Government, 1998: 21) The library can play a role in directive learning, based on the principles of self-learning and the pursuit of knowledge. The author contends that knowledge is power. That reading is an essential key to knowledge and therefore to empowerment. It is the foundation of growth and self-development. Good practice should encompass enhanced outreach to parents. If a process can empower a parent while creating a product that helps in the development of their child, the fusion of both empowers the child: Gardner (1993:12) contends that, “If we can mobilise the spectrum of human abilities, not only will people feel better about themselves and more competent, it is even possible that they will also feel more engaged and better able to join the rest of the world community in working for the broader good”.

So how can the library service, as stakeholder in the community, provide avenues of support towards reading development, while also captivating the imagination of a child in a way that will engage their senses and hold their attention? Accessible options must be made available to adults to improve their reading skills: “Literacy involves the integration of listening, reading, writing and numeracy. It also encompasses aspects of personal development – social, economic, emotional – and is concerned with improving self-esteem and building confidence”, (NALA, 2002:8)

## **Storysacks**

If, as stated earlier, reading is the foundation of growth and self-development, then so too is art, creativity and the imagination. The author contends that children are more visually literate than adults, and are attracted to the tactile elements of the senses, so it seems practical to develop projects that will compliment these natural gifts and yet, be versatile enough to have a positive impact on the objective of reading development. While working through these ideas, Neil Griffith's concept of the "Storysack" was recalled, which the author of this paper first encountered at a National Adult Literacy Agency conference in 2001. A "Storysack" is a large cloth bag, containing a storybook, toys to represent the characters in the book, a storyboard, painting or game, a tape or CD, and a non-fiction book that focuses on an element from the story. Storysacks are used to enhance literacy actions.

## **Threading Tales as gateway to Cultural Inclusion**

The author was hugely impressed and inspired by Storysacks. The idea of "Threading Tales" began to germinate and opened up numerous possibilities for consideration. Apart from the obvious role in reading development and storytelling, the sacks can also be utilised to provide visual support to children with language difficulties, and to children learning English as a second language. The sacks can be adapted to mathematical themes, and can be used to explore diversity and cultural experiences through the sharing of stories and the use of art, colour, character and costume. The use of the sack in the home can also inspire confidence in an adult who may have encountered barriers to their own reading or language development, as they contain the support

mechanisms to bring the text to life. They can encompass learning with play in the most natural environment to the child, namely, the home. As Hall and Robinson (2000) contend “Literacy and play make wonderful companions, and this is not an accident. It is the nature of young children’s socio-dramatic play, and the nature of real world literacy that underpin this relationship”.

In the context of the author’s objectives, the most important element for consideration was how the organic process of support mechanisms, based on participation, inclusion and diversity could be realised.

## **Project Structure**

“Threading Tales” workshops were funded by Kildare Library & Arts Service. The author co-ordinated and facilitated the workshops and the decision to employ a professional textile artist was to inspire while engaging in a communal effort that focused on the child. The author ensured that the workshops were intimate, in a warm, welcoming location. It was most important that the process of the workshops would absorb the very essence of community spirit and would transfer this experience through to the finished work. In consultation with the area’s Home, School and Community Liaison officer, the Curragh Camp was identified as a community that would share these goals, with a real opportunity to channel reading support to families in the community, using participatory arts that would come directly from the heart of that community. The workshops were held over an eight-week period, one morning per week and agreements surrounding timetables were participant led.

## Project Process

The first workshop meeting was a gentle gathering, where everyone involved got to know each other and the role that they would have in the project. Each of the volunteers would create one story bag each, choosing their own favourite tale. Stories were recounted and compared, with new stories emerging that many from the group had not heard before. The exercise was a great icebreaker and delivered a sense of fun to the day when the parents began to recall childhood memories, and to share with the group their reasons for choosing the tale that would become the theme of their work.

Zimmerman (2001:12) writes “The storytelling event unites a community, clarifying or exorcising its shared feelings and beliefs, its fears and aspirations”.

As the weeks passed, that sense of unity grew through the process, which became more organic as it progressed, with a sense of fun and belief in the objectives growing in strength over the next eight weeks. Families of the participants got involved thus ensuring a sense of shared ownership of the process and of the finished product. While the workshops continued, schools from other parts of the county displayed interest in emulating the workshop model. One in particular, Ballymany National School in Newbridge, have already completed a successful project of their own, based directly on the expertise provided by “Threading Tales”, with the author being invited to talk to the Ballymany group to introduce and explain the concept before their workshops began. The “Threading Tales” workshops came to an end in the last week of June 2005.

## **Rippling the Process to Schools**

With the schools closing for the summer holidays, the author felt that it was important to make use of an alternative route to showcase the product to the community in general. The need was to measure how, in practice, the story bags would transfer to a group setting, while also giving an indication of how this initiative could be sustained and developed further. The Library and Arts Services storyteller in residence presented weekly storytelling sessions that would showcase the story bags. The sessions provided inspirational demonstrations of how they could be used to further reading development, play and imagination. Song, dance and discussion of the factual elements were employed to animate the stories, characters and themes. The response from the children far outweighed expectations. Feedback from parents was very positive. The children engaged in the themes of the stories by relating their own experiences and knowledge as interactive participants of the process, and thus created their own sense of belonging and esteem as interactive participants of the process. People from outside the area attended the sessions with their children, having heard about them from friends and neighbours. A high point of the sessions was the engagement of parents who made the high quality, durable bags, who came along with their own families. The pride of achievement on the faces of the parents and the children was most satisfying and very, very contagious. Many of the children had donated their own toys to the project, which also strengthened their sense of inclusion and ownership of the initiative. This act also ensured that they too feel connected to “Threading Tales” and in particular, to the uniqueness of the story bags.

## **Celebration of Threading Tales Phase 1**

On February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006, President Mary McAleese attended a celebration of the project, and met with the parents who voluntarily gave their time and skills to create these beautiful story bags for use in their community. Launching the exhibition of “Threading Tales” in the Kildare Education Centre, President McAleese congratulated the participants and told the assembled group that she was hugely impressed with the skill, creativity and imagination used. It was a wonderful experience for all the participants to receive such praise and affirmation from the President. This affirmation, alongside the confidence that emerged from the process has elevated the parents who took part in the project with a sense of leadership in their communities. At a presentation on a theme of “Threading Tales” in the Curragh Girl’s School, the author witnessed the participants taking active roles in the organisation and delivery of that presentation. Working in partnership with the school staff in a environment of equity and respect, each have taken steps beyond the supports of “Threading Tales” to set standards that make a difference to the community. Standards that others are following, with many more schools and community group leaders expressing interest in their work.

## **A Successful Model towards Multiple Intelligences**

The concept of directed learning towards multiple intelligence has emerged as a workable model. The “Threading Tales” process has succeeded in providing a valuable model towards inter-cultural focus, and that the model of working on the issue of non-literacy, in a creative, holistic manner in the community does involve a process that encourages personal growth. This year has seen further developments in the model of

an outreach programme, funded once again by Kildare Library and Arts Services. Directed by the schools library service, the storyteller in residence has engaged ten primary schools in Kildare in a qualitative pilot outreach programme that encompasses information delivery to educators and parents and interactive exercises and demonstrations using the story bags. Diversity is examined through the process. For example “Poppet”, a story about an elephant, with supporting material that includes a painting of an African scene. Initial reaction and feedback has been very positive from all involved.

## **Theatre in Education**

One early respondent to the ongoing evaluation of “Threading Tales Road Show” in schools process remarked that we were “bringing theatre into the classroom”, giving credence to the suitability of the bags in the area of drama and education: As Baldwin (2004:46) points out, “Drama as a teaching and learning medium utilizes and develops the range of multi-intellegences in an integrated way, offering multi-sensory access to learners with different preferred learning styles”.

On completion of the project evaluation at the end of this phase of the project, the “Theatre in Education” strand will be further investigated. This area of the project will link into the expertise of storyteller and educator, Julie Duane, (2000:7) who contends that “drama in education provides opportunities for teachers to bring newness and a freshness of approach into every aspect of education “.

## **Intercultural Strand: Threading Tales Phase 11 - Pictureógs**

Respect for ethnicity and diversity, whether non-digenous or indigenous, creates an ethos of recognition and reinforcement of cultural inclusion. Cultural engagement is secured by creating interventions that nourish and support self identity, self-learning, growth and acceptance through holistic measures, the very essence of diversity and equality as opposed to isolation and marginalization. Through a series of preliminary, thought provoking consultative measures, initiated by Kildare Library and Arts Services and Dr Marian Browne, Department of Education and Science, identification of a group from the travelling community that would engage in the “Threading Tales” process emerged. It is noted that the same principles of “Threading Tales” phase 1 apply through recognition of diversity with intergenerational, intercultural collaboration and multiple intelligence theory.

As a result of focused meetings and preparation, a member of the travelling community was appointed to facilitate workshops. Eighteen adult members, both men and women, are now taking part in the second phase of the project. The importance of having a member of the Travelling community to facilitate this phase of the project emerged from the learning of the “Can’t lose Cant” project, undertaken in 2003 by a partnership that included Kildare Library and Arts Services, Kids Own Publishing, and two primary schools in Kildare. (Browne, 2004). The integrity of the work and of the participants’ needs was consensual from the beginning of the planning stage. The fusion of learning from the “Can’t Lose Cant” project and from phase one of “Threading Tales” enabled the topic of ‘ownership’ to be explored as an integral component to the success of any work about to be undertaken.



With a focus on intergenerational collaboration, participants in the second phase of “Threading Tales - Pictureógs” have engaged in a process of reminiscence and in the re-telling of stories from their culture and ethnic backgrounds. The title “Pictureóg” is a derivative of the word *píseóg* and is a uniquely descriptive name that was given to the product now being created through the process by the participants themselves. The project has identified each individual’s strengths in the belief that when these strengths are recognized, fused and directed back into the community, development is cultivated and empowerment happens. The inclusive nature of the process opens up opportunities to explore issues that relate closely to the project’s ethos of organically encouraging self-development and self-improvement. Stories, ideas, props and materials come directly from the group. The process raises positive self-awareness of Traveller culture and language through the exploration and sharing of their stories. An archive and publishing programme for these collected stories is being considered by Kildare Library and Arts services as a most important action in the mainstreaming of Traveller cultural production, as was achieved with “Can’t Lost Cant”. The Pictureógs will provide a permanent, durable art form that involves and encourages the participants’ skills of art, paper and wood craft, knitting, embroidery, lace-making, patchwork, crochet and scrawling.

## **The Beady Pocket as Cultural Symbol**

Exploring the oral tradition of storytelling from within the culture has translated exceptionally well to the concept of the story bag, and through working with the group, the tradition of the “Beady Pocket” has been revisited. Beady pockets were worn by women in the travelling community in years gone by, and were highly decorated pouches, worn around the

waist like an apron. The decorative embroidery, colourful trinkets, buttons and bows would all bear individual meaning to the wearer, who would keep her most treasured possessions in the beady pocket. The beady pocket is also being explored as a vehicle for storytelling, cultural reminiscence and historical archive. The Beady Pockets are being created together with the story bags to suit all age groups from pre-schoolers to adults. "Threading Tales" celebrates and foregrounds adventures and reminiscences, drawing out stories from the heart of Traveller culture and indigenous Traveller tales of old, stories from the campfires. Some of the finished works will be used by representatives from the Travelling community to recount stories from their culture throughout the community and schools, and some will be housed in the Traveller Cultural Centre in Athy. The pictureógs and beady pockets will also be exhibited and demonstrated through the library service, schools and education centres. Interest in the concept from other counties has already been expressed.

### **Threading Tales: Modelling the Process for Educators**

The author is currently developing a training module for educators based directly on "Threading Tales" as a model towards culturally inclusive learning. The module, hosted by the Kildare Education Centre, will consist of four two-hour sittings with guest speakers invited to translate their own experience. The target audience for the training sessions will be parents, educators and library staff; all partners in the community of support.

## Conclusion

“Threading Tales”, in a unique and organic way, provides opportunities for participants to move towards self-learning and therefore, towards growth of self-esteem, community empowerment and identity of participants as key members of community. “Threading Tales” is successful because of the synergy of a community intent on its own development, and because of that success and the learning process that emerged for all involved in the process, phase three of “Threading Tales” is already in planning and development.

The project shows that a holistic approach to reading development, where adult and child are engaged in inclusive, respectful actions, can be successful. Where process is as important as product, and where families are given the support mechanisms to develop their own unique skills, works so well in forging self development, identity and connection that engages active citizenship and involvement. With these elements in place, empowerment begins, and experiential learning can lead to exploration and self drive. In her conclusion, Browne (2004) contends that “Irish Traveller Cant is the rightful possession of the Travelling Community”. Browne goes on to acknowledge and respect that it is they who will ultimately determine its future as an important and integral aspect of their cultural identity. The work carried on through the “Threading Tales” experience gives the same acknowledgement and respect to the cultural archive that has been gathered and recorded through oral reminiscence, Settled and Traveller folklore, and the creation of story bags, pictureógs and beady pockets. Recognising the participation, the process and the product of the workshops in the Curragh Community and with the Travelling Community in Athy as a gateway of learning that has enabled them to take ownership and to absolutely determine not only the value of

the learning and experience, but to drive it on, to mind it and to entrench it as their own model of education and cultural identity.

The “Threading Tales” process has demonstrated what can be achieved when community is at the forefront of a reading development process and how intergenerational, participatory-arts can identify, value and nurture diversity. In its recommendations, the 2004 National Assessment of English Reading states that “Teachers require additional support in teaching reading comprehension skills as they relate to different text genres, and in developing pupils’ ability to respond to reading (including emotional and imaginative responses) through oral language and writing”. The process and product of “Threading Tales” speaks directly to this recommendation.

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