Encountering through Storytelling: Whose Stories?

Parinita Shetty: What role does storytelling play in encounters with different others? And how can we make room for multiple storytellers and listeners in the diverse spaces of public social and cultural life?

My name is Parinita Shetty and I'm thrilled to welcome you to the second episode in the ETHER podcast series. The conversations here come from the three ETHER seminars which brought together educators, researchers, poets, museum curators, sign language interpreters, artists and musicians. Throughout this episode, we're going to explore who tells the stories that shape our imaginations and whose stories should be included and how. We also look at who listens to these stories and how we can pay attention to those narratives which have historically been excluded from mainstream spaces.

In her viral talk called The Danger of a Single Story, Nigerian-American writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks about the impact of only being able access a limited number of stories. She says:

> *Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.*

Dagmar Dyck is a Pasifika art educator in New Zealand. Her Pasifika culture has historically been marginalised in her country's educational and cultural contexts. She shared how educators could find creative ways to invite multiple stories inside classrooms. This would not only allow indigenous students to see themselves reflected in stories but also enable them to tell their own stories.

Dagmar Dyck: In our primary school, we do a whole school inquiry every term, and we always answer a question, and we integrate the arts throughout every inquiry. Maggie, you've been to our school and you know exactly how we do this. We've just done one last term and it was called "how do we tell our story through visual arts?" So the children all had to produce an artwork, but it was an artwork with the story beside it. So the story was just as equally important to the children's individual artwork. We have 520 students in our school, 520 pieces of artwork were made depending on what the teacher decided what sort of medium it would be in. But, most importantly, was the emphasis around the child's story and how we got their story out of them.

How do you leverage the power of storytelling to affirm and value your students?

As an art teacher and as part of our school's localised curriculum, we understand the importance of equipping our students with the skills and confidence to tell their own stories. We do this powerfully through whole-school inquiries and through our integrated arts programme. I believe we do this so:

- our children can become more aware and strongly connected to the stories about places and people who have gone before them
- that our children might imagine or see themselves in those stories
- that they build stronger identities through their knowledge and security with their connections and connectedness
- so that they can begin to dream up and construct their own stories about who they are and where they are going to end up; we call this visualizing

- that when they become leaders, professionals, mums and dads, teachers, knowledge-holders, guides, storytellers, story writers and social actors in the future, they might feel a greater sense of connectedness and groundness in who they are
- that ultimately, the chances that those qualities will contribute to a greater awareness, acceptance and celebration of all our diverse and rich stories is greater if we become familiar with them when we are young

From a teacher's perspective, storytelling can be conveyed through conversations and other means of communication, including the visual. Engaging in storytelling provides students with the opportunity to share unique experiences. It is an act of reciprocity, exchange and negotiation. The teacher's role is one of providing advice without confining the students' visions. The importance of supporting students' voices lies in making room for diversity and awareness.

The stories that seem to matter to people ultimately are not perfect or trouble-free. They are filled with drama, failure, morality, symbolism, imperfect people, humble beginnings, loss, redemption, weakness and strength, consequences, courage, bravery and cowardice. Any quality that we can think of as part of the human experience or condition is in a story. Knowing this allows us full licence to be bold and courageous, to stand in our truth and let our stories be seen and heard.

Parinita: Such storytelling practices can also help develop a greater understanding of unfamiliar cultures for non-Pasifika students. Dr Rudine Sims Bishop introduced the concept of mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors in children's literature scholarship. To quote her, "We need books where children can find themselves, see reflections of themselves … Children need to see themselves reflected. But books can also be windows. And so you can look through and see other worlds and see how they match up or don't match up to your own. But the sliding glass door allows you to enter that world as well. And so that's the reason that the diversity needs to go both ways."

This theory can be applied to other social, cultural and educational spaces as well. Rae Si'ilata is an indigenous researcher in New Zealand whose work demonstrates this concept. She showed how using multilingual children's books can help bring in various knowledges, languages and cultural histories into the classroom.

Rae Si'ilata: So this project currently, the Pasifika Early Literacy Project commonly referred to as PELP, has been operating in Tāmaki Makaurau in Auckland since 2014 with teachers of young Pacific learners or children. And, since 2020, also working with teachers from English-medium early childhood centres and Pacific-medium early childhood centres.

It uses the Ministry of Education's Pasifika or Pacific dual language books as windows into the lived experiences and worlds of Pacific children and as catalysts to support utilisation of Pacific languages and our embodied literacies at home, at centre, and at school; and focused on five Pacific languages: Cook Islands Maori, Niuean, Samoan, Tokelauan, and Tongan.

So this project really focuses on strengthening teacher capability to validate and utilise Pasifika Tamariki children's languages, cultural resources and embodied experiences at home and at early learning centres and in schools. What we seek to do through the project is to normalise the utilisation of Pasifika linguistic and cultural resources as essential foundations of Pasifika second language acquisition, literacy learning, and Tamariki learner success. And it also supports Pacific children to see themselves, their ways of being and their funds of knowledge represented in the valued knowledges of schooling and of ECE.

So here's a couple of examples - getting ready for school both in Aotearoa New Zealand and in our island nations. So it really supports families to see themselves and children to see themselves and their valued funds of knowledge within the schema or underpinning or underlying messages of these books and to see their own embodied languages and literacies represented in the valued literacy of schooling.

Parinita: According to Rae, making space for marginalised stories, histories and cultural resources within the classroom can help teachers from the dominant culture understand the world from an alternative viewpoint.

Rae Si'ilata: So the ETHER question asks: how do people of conflicting worldviews, memories and future visions encounter each other?

For us in English medium education in Aotearoa New Zealand, it's crucial to provide dominant culture teachers with the opportunities to unpack their preconceived notions of the diversities of Pacific ways of knowing and being. In this sense, encountering the "other" entails teachers seeing themselves as "other". When teachers see themselves through the eyes of children and families whose linguistic and cultural resources are different to those valued in educational settings, deficit assumptions are surfaced and disrupted, and transformational change begins to occur. In the Pasifika Early Literacy Project we normalise bilingual and multilingual language and literacy practices, positioning monolingualism as "other". Through this approach, the linguistic resources and embodied cultural literacies of Pacific children, families and teachers are positioned as central to notions of success. Encountering the other in multilingual, multicultural contexts entails the teacher understanding how the child and the child's family might encounter the teacher as other.

Parinita: As Rae further outlined, this shift in perspective can enable educators to critically examine which stories are privileged in the curriculum and which ones are erased.

Rae Si'ilata: I really think it's part of a bigger picture, where when teachers realised that they had to create space or be willing to share power with children, that created opportunities for the children to then become the leaders or the teachers or the mentors. And so, in creating that space, teachers then began to critically examine curriculum and ask the really important question: whose knowledge is valued at school? And so when they start to ask that question, they start to think about all of the learning areas across the curriculum and whose knowledge is valued and where can they create space for the heritage languages and cultural funds of knowledge or knowledge systems of those children and their families and communities within the valued knowledge of schooling.

And so I think we're still at that stage. We're working with teachers to help them to critically examine curriculum. Because the big issue is, we say to teachers, what does it mean for these Maori and Pacific children to be successful at school? Does it mean they have to change who they are? Because within English-medium education, of course there are certain knowledge systems that are validated and valued traditionally. We're going through a big process here of decolonising and working towards transformational system change. But that takes time. So one of the big developments in curriculum lately, this year, has been the development of the Aotearoa New Zealand Histories Project. Which is looking at pre- and post-colonial histories and saying that all of that needs to be taught in school. So that in itself will change the way teachers think about their own selves, and the way communities think about themselves within the context of schooling.

Parinita: Making an active effort to centre multiple perspectives enables a diversity of stories to be told and listened to. In this case, learning became a collective process. It wasn't just the students who learned from each other's experiences. Teachers were also able to question the mainstream narratives they had long taken for granted via these counternarratives that drew on diverse lived experiences. Instead of a single story that stereotypes and essentialises, multiple, complex and nuanced versions can help bridge divides among diverse cultures.

An increasing number of public spaces are making efforts to include underrepresented stories. Inserting the voices of those on the margins can help challenge the erasure and misrepresentation of their experiences. However, such efforts aren't always without conflict.

Adam Jaffer, Curator of World Cultures for Leeds Museums and Galleries, was once confronted with a comment in a visitor's book where someone wanted to know, "where's the art for white people?" This was in response to a museum's exhibition on African Caribbean art and culture, even though the city Adam was working in had a thriving population of this community. Even when multicultural stories are represented in museums, not everyone wants to listen to them.

At the same time, public conversations about whose stories and histories are told and how can help expose people to alternative narratives. Here's Adam sharing a different experience where a collective of different migrant groups came together to decide how they wanted their histories and cultures represented in a museum.

Adam Jaffer: Fast forward to 2019 and a team of us at Leeds Museums and Galleries worked on an exhibition about migration entitled "A City and its Welcome: Three Centuries of Migrating to Leeds." A cursory glance in the print media or online social media shows you migration is an area of conflicting worldviews and vastly differing opinions.

We were lucky enough to work with a community advisory panel to assist with the exhibition to determine the scope, themes and object content. The panel represented some of the key migrant groups in the city and emphasised that the exhibition should show the positives and negatives of the migrant experience. The latter included experiences of racism and the inclusion of a photograph of National Front graffiti taken in Beeston in south Leeds in the 1970s as part of a migration timeline.

The group we work with were keen to use themes as a way of unifying experiences rather than having discreet sections with, for example, the Irish community in this corner of the gallery, the Pakistani community in this corner and so on.

Parinita: A broader canon of stories and knowledges can help challenge and expand norms people may have previously taken for granted. Thea Pitman, Professor of Latin American Studies at the University of Leeds, spoke about her project in an art gallery in Brazil where indigenous artists similarly represented their own art and culture through electronic art.

Thea Pitman: So my current research has focused on a 2018 arts-based project that aimed to create a positive space for intercultural exchange and the lessening of prejudice, on all sides, between indigenous peoples and non-indigenous society in Brazil.

The Arte Electronica Indigena project promoted the co-creation of electronic art between indigenous and non-indigenous participants and subsequently brought that co-created indigenous electronic art to the Modern Art Museum in Salvador for an exhibition. I'm interested in the ways that the indigenous partners in the project exercised curatorial agency during their time at the museum to effect a temporary decolonisation of the gallery space.

Around 20 indigenous people came to the opening weekend of the exhibition, and they really changed the way a standard hung exhibition works through their presence.

The nice picture that you've got up there on the top right is of Ivan Carrapoto taking the photo of a non-indigenous woman in the exhibition space who's got indigenous body art sort of beamed onto her body. If you have that kind of exhibit set up without the indigenous people there interacting, that runs a risk of turning into an indigenous kind of black face where non-indigenous people appropriate indigenous aesthetics on their own bodies. But with the indigenous people there, that changes the interaction in a helpful way I think.

Parinita: Adam was struck by Thea's research, particularly the possibilities that unfold when institutions make space for people from marginalised cultures in different contexts to tell their own stories.

Adam Jaffer: It does highlight to me what a difference it makes to have people in your spaces kind of bringing the art to life. And certainly, in an ideal world, we would do that more often with our spaces. As I said, I look after objects from a range of cultures - some from down the road in Leeds and some from the other side of the world. And it's always a struggle to kind of not just freeze cultures in time. So we're always looking for ways, cost-effective ways, that we can bring cultures to life - whether that's using video and contemporary photographs, or even doing things like contemporary collecting where we show that cultures are as part of the modern world as they always have been. Because it is often an easy trap to fall into in museums, that have particularly objects collected during the colonial period, to freeze cultures in time. So I kind of liked that that it highlights that. I also feel that it inspires curiosity amongst the other visitors as well if they feel that they can ask people questions. As I say, we do tend to do displays in museums. We have artists come in and do residences. And I would say, just as well as seeing the art being made, it's important for visitors to be able to talk to the artists and ask them questions about who they are and what they do.

Parinita: Poet and writer Nadine Aisha Jassat shared her experiences about how poetry can provide an avenue for people to express their voice and agency by representing their experiences in their own words.

Nadine Jassat:

This is called "Scotmid"

I am 26,

walking through quiet Edinburgh streets

on my way to the supermarket.

and there's a shopping list in my head chanting

aubergine, ginger, butter to make ghee;

aubergine, ginger, butter to make ghee.

Ahead of me two children trail

at the tailcoats of fathers who walk further along

in heavy laced boots. And the wee boy turns

and I smile and he screams. He screams,

"You're a bad woman!"

And his sister hushes him away, apologetic.

She tells me he doesn't mean it, but I am panic.

Eyes to the child, to the pavement, to the wall.

Did anybody else hear him?

To the pavement, to the wall.

Did anybody else hear?

To the child, to the floor.

Returning home, conscious of my face in that child's mind

and the television he has watched and the newspapers he has read

and the words he has heard, I have a memory,

briefly, of a university friend in consoling tones telling me

that I could pass for white.

No matter how gentle, no matter how serene,

no matter how many good works I do or taxes I pay or lives I save,

I will always be, always be to them

a dangerous woman.

And what are they to me?

Parinita: The diverse experiences and contexts of ETHER participants helped us understand the different ways in which people resist the default scripts and single stories in order to make room for multiple voices, knowledges, languages and cultures. Such a diversity of stories can help expand people's imaginations. As writer and educator Walidah Imarisha declared, "The decolonization of the imagination is the most dangerous and subversive form there is: for it is where all other forms of decolonization are born. Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless."