Celebrating African Drumming and Dance in a Rural Montana Classroom

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CELEBRATING AFRICAN DRUMMING AND DANCE IN A RURAL MONTANA
CLASSROOM

By

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Professional Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Arts
In Fine Arts, Integrated Arts and Education

The University of Montana
Missoula, Montana

Summer 2007

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Community is the key word when describing Lone Rock School, a rural, K-8 school located in the Bitterroot Valley in Montana, and my place of employment. Lone Rock takes pride in the fact that it is the oldest continuously operating school in the Northwest. The school and community have a symbiotic relationship, both maintaining strong identities, in part due to their close relationship. The challenge is to maintain and enrich this relationship, helping it to remain relevant in a global and ever-changing world. I include myself in this relationship, as I too, have been embedded here for the last thirty years.

During the summer of 2006, I had the good fortune to take a class in West African Drumming and Dancing at The Creative Pulse, University of Montana. The experience was powerful and joyous, and when it was over, I knew I wanted more. I decided immediately that I would somehow bring this experience to my second grade students at Lone Rock. And so, my second graders and I spent the year "walking through Africa". We explored the cultures of its many and diverse countries by way of music, dance, art, storytelling, biography, history, and current events.

On a Saturday afternoon, March 10th, 2007, we presented what we had learned in a performance designed for parents and the community. My students performed a play adapted from the book A Story, a Story, by Gale Haley, as well as two African dances. Afterwards, four members of LEDA, (a group of performers of West African drumming and dancing), engaged both students and audience in a wonderful African dance experience.

This project became a vehicle that has helped me reflect on the many issues that are being faced in our local school community and the educational community at large. In addition, this particular group of students was one of my most challenging ever in terms of behavior and neediness. When considering a title for our performance, a colleague suggested "An African Miracle", because we thought it would take a miracle to get through the performance without some sort of meltdown. Miracle or not, on the day of the performance they were magnificent! That success came about as a result of great risk and rigor, especially from the students.

The importance of this success to these children and their families has affirmed to me the importance of keeping the arts alive through celebration in one's community.
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The intent of my original project was to use West African dancing and drumming as a vehicle to:

- Introduce my students to a different culture from a different part of the world.
- Introduce my students to a new type of music and dance.
- Make connections between African culture, slave culture, and American culture today.
- Integrate music and dance with African children’s literature, and African Art.
- Culminate with an African dance performance by my class.

I assumed that my students would have had little exposure to African dance and music. As such, I would need to do quite a bit of research myself. Part of my plan (the part I was most excited about) was to take African dance lessons in Missoula and to practice the drumming skills that I had learned during the summer. My students would need to be taught that Africa is a continent consisting of many countries, and they would need to learn where it is located. Of course, they would have to learn about Guinea, but what other African countries? They would need to understand that music and dance and storytelling are fully integrated into the lives of the people. There was a huge amount of information to teach these children. When would I do it? I had done an African Unit before near the end of the year that was integrated with a story in our Reading Anthology, *Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain*. I decided this project would need to be initiated near the beginning of the year due to its size and scope.

Because of the pressure of NCLB for reading improvement to the exclusion of almost everything else, I knew that I would no longer have the time to immerse my students in
an area of study as I used to do in the past. Therefore it was not likely that they would have the learning opportunities that I would wish them to have before the performance or the scope of the project was completed. My plan was to outline the entire year and thread the theme between subjects. This topic could be related to slavery, migration, art, traditional tales, climate, plants and animals, among other themes.

Threading themes throughout the year is exactly what I did. But as you will read in the following chapters, West African dance and drumming became a smaller piece of this African mosaic and children's literature, particularly traditional tales, became the cement which held everything else together.
On August 9th, 2006 I was sitting on a plane heading for Iowa for my son's wedding. All I did was reach forward to pick up my purse. That small action resulted in ninety days of chiropractic back treatment, intense physical therapy, cold packs, hot packs, pain medication, and a new penguin walk. I was told that I had a deteriorating disk. This was my condition on the first day of school, September 5, 2006.

I conceived this project imagining the kind of children I've had in my best classes. This year, I had a different kind of class, one that turned out to be one of the most challenging of my twenty-seven year teaching career. One of my colleagues describes this kind of class as shredders. These students never get to see your very special things. This is not the kind of class that you would choose to spend an entire year teaching about Africa through the arts, especially for the Final Project of your Masters program. On the other hand, it was my Final Project and I had to do it. This was the class I had.

It turned out to be a good thing for these kids, because in spite of the many challenges they presented, we somehow managed to pull it off. These children needed this journey. For many of them it was transformative. During those moments of high creativity and hard work, of the "Ah hah!" connections, of the performance, they became their best selves and they realized it.

To get back to the first day of school, all of my previous classes have been pretty good for the first few weeks. For some reason, this class had never heard of a honeymoon
period. One of my students was a whistler who also "ate" pencils, broke sharpeners, blurted out when he wasn't whistling, spit, annoyed his peers, and operated independently of whatever was happening in the classroom. His counterpart was an adorable looking girl who sang, roamed, and shouted across the room, argued, ignored the rules, defied authority, hid under tables, and often had to be removed from the classroom.

It was almost impossible to read a story, teach a lesson, or even give instructions and keep the attention of the class. It seemed like these two children set the stage and "gave permission" for the rest of the class to talk to each other and over me continuously. Although these two students definitively set the tone, a large chunk of the class was equally needy in a variety of ways. At one point, I had seven behavior plans going. I sometimes felt I was living out one of those books about teaching tough kids in the inner city. Would the last chapter have a happy ending, or would I remain in classroom management hell? I realized from the beginning of the year what a challenging group of students I had.

Class behavior and focus actually did improve (a lot) over time, although it took continuous efforts to keep it that way. Toward the end of the first quarter, with fingers crossed, I felt ready to begin the project. We started with stories.
I began this project in a state of both excitement and paranoia. For the last several years, our school principal has had a myopic focus on reading improvement to meet the NCLB mandate. The result was that I was required to teach two different "research based" reading programs in addition to our regular reading program, on a daily basis. All three had different themes, which made it difficult to keep any big ideas afloat. For that reason, I dedicated (as well as confined) the last forty-five minutes of the day to Africa. I filled the classroom with as many books connected to Africa as I could. This included biographies, photo essays, wildlife, life and customs in different countries, fiction, realistic fiction, and my favorite, traditional tales.

I began by reading aloud Gail E. Haley's book, *A Story, a Story: An African Tale*. This is a Caldecott Medal-winning African folktale of how Ananse (a spider man) took all the stories in the world from Nyame, the Sky God. It seemed to be the perfect place to introduce African folktales. Not only did it explain how all the stories were brought to the people, it had all of the literary elements I wanted to teach: humor, the rhythm of rich language, voice, (the frequent use of onomatopoeia), repetition of words as well as action, the use of animals (the trickster figure in particular) to teach life's lessons and provide moral wisdom and the use of storytelling as part of an oral African tradition. Baba Wagué Diakité, the highly acclaimed author of many African traditional tales for children, explains the importance of oral storytelling in African culture. Taken from *The Hatseller and the Monkeys*, author's note, Diakité says (page 29),
Stories are not only told as entertainment; but they give us knowledge on how to conduct ourselves and live among others and nature. I grew up listening to adults tell me proverbs and stories as advice to guide me through my own life. Teaching our own children and setting a good example must truly be a duty for every adult, as children are our reflection.

Before I opened the book, I said, "Today we're starting on a wonderful and exciting adventure through Africa, and it's going to take us the whole year! Let me read you my favorite story." We read A Story, a Story many times. Each time, we learned a little more, became a little more enthralled, and a little more involved. We loved the descriptions of the characters: "Osebo, the leopard-of-the-terrible-teeth, Mmboro the hornet-who-stings-like-fire, Mmoatia the fairy whom-men-never-see," and "Little Ananse, so small, so small, so small." We listened to the rhythm of the words and would chime in when words were repeated, such as "so small, so small, so small," "yiridi, yiridi, yiridi," or "sora, sora, sora."

A Story, a Story became the springboard for the reading of many other traditional tales. Ananse, (sometimes referred to as Anansi or Spider), the hero in A Story, a Story, is the main character in a group West African tales referred to as Spider Stories. He is what is called a "trickster."

The Trickster characteristically is small and weak in relation to the strong animals or humans he is matched against. He must rely on his wits to overcome obstacles. Although sometimes heroic, tricksters are often all too human. Anansi does not always do what he is supposed to do. He can be lazy and greedy, loves to play and is full of tricks (rather than work) to get what he wants. Although he gets into trouble, and often doesn't
come out on top, he is funny and lovable.

There is no second grader, certainly not in my class that doesn't love a trickster. We read all the Spider stories we could find and more. We found many other tricksters in our readings, such as Rabbit in The Magic Gourd, by Baba Wagué Diakité. We made connections with non-African tricksters, like the Native American character, Coyote and Br’ Rabbit, part of our African-American heritage.

We found other connections as well. We compared The Magic Gourd to "Spider and the Magic Cooking Pot" (included in More Adventures of Spider), as well as Tomie de Paola's retelling of Strega Nona (Italy) and Lily Toy Hong's retelling of Two of Everything: A Chinese Folktale. One student noticed that the same trick of using sticky latex gum by Ananse to catch the fairy Mmotia in A Story, a Story was also found in The Tale of Rabbit and Coyote (The farmer used beeswax to trap Rabbit.). Of course Br' Rabbit and Tar Baby also come to mind.

For the most part, our discussions were informal. The students read these stories and others during independent reading time. Sometimes they would write about them in their journals or use one for a reading project. When it got closer to the time of our play, they started writing the names of all the stories they read on small, colorful pieces of paper. These went into the "golden" box that was to belong to Nyame, the Sky God.
I must acknowledge Dorothy Morrison, the person most responsible for inspiring me to embark on my African adventure. Dorothy is one of my instructors in the Creative Pulse (a summer Graduate Program for Master Teachers in Arts and Education) at The University of Montana. During the academic year, she teaches music at Lewis and Clark School in Missoula. She is also one of the founders of LEDA (Les Étudiants de L'Afrique). LEDA is a vibrant and talented musical group which has performed and taught West African dancing and drumming in the Missoula area for many years.

Dorothy has been drumming for seventeen years. To watch her in action is amazing. As an instructor, she presents herself from a very left brain model, which is a good thing if you're a student who doesn't know much. But something else happens when she drums.

During the summer of 2006, I had the good fortune to take Dorothy's class in West African Drumming and Dancing. The experience was powerful and joyous, and when it was over, I knew I wanted more. I decided immediately that I would somehow bring this experience to my second grade students at Lone Rock School.

An important part of my plan was to take African dance classes which I would then teach to my students. When my back decided to revolt, I found myself in a bit of a quandary. I wasn't sure how long it would be before I recovered enough to pursue dance lessons. One thing I decided from the get-go, I was NOT going to give up my plans. My back would get better, or else!
My original intent had been to introduce West African drum rhythms and dance early on. The condition of my back caused me to push this part of the project farther out in the year and also make it a piece, rather than the focal point of a culmination performance. Instead, I decided to create a play of A Story, a Story, and build in musical and dancing components around it.

When I finally got the go ahead from my physical therapist to start classes in November, I was lucky that a bimonthly series of classes entitled African Rhythm Nights had started in Missoula. The classes were sponsored by Dorothy's group, LEDA. Half the classes were drumming instruction, taught by Dorothy, and half were dancing (with drumming). I took them both.

I must say, I was very proud of myself for sticking with it. At first, I tried to engage friends to come with me. However, the forty-five minute drive to Missoula is a bit daunting after you've been teaching all day, so I ended up going by myself. I'm so glad I did, because more than anything, the experience was a wonderful gift to myself personally.

I expected to gain more expertise, which I would then be able to transfer to my students. I forgot that I'm fifty-seven now, and don't seem to function very well after about 4:00 p.m. after a day of teaching. I'd rush home, eat, drive into town and start class. I usually got a second wind, but by about 7:30 p.m. my brain would just shut off. The dance classes were fun and were a wonderful work-out, but the drumming classes required a lot more focus.
When I took West African Drumming and Dancing through the Creative Pulse last summer, it was a very intense experience. We learned a variety of Djembe rhythms and played for a couple of hours every day. It was exciting, engaging, and sometimes overwhelming. I think my experience was similar to most of the other students. At first, as I was learning the rhythms, hand strokes, and terms, the process was very cognitive. Gradually, I'd start having moments when I'd stop thinking and I'd just be drumming. When I was in the moment, it was great! Then, I'd be out and my head would be swirling. And then, if I could, I'd dive back in again. The following is a quote from my journal last summer.

Focus and Grounding. When I drum, my whole self is involved in the experience. And the beat is my beat, is your beat, is everyone's beat. The rhythm brings me back to center. It's creating and deepening those channels in my brain, over and over.

I somehow thought I would just pick right up from the summer and advance to a higher skill level. What I've come to realize is that when I was in the group, I had the support and structure of the group. But, when I was in my classroom, it was just me and the kids. I discovered I couldn't remember much of what I had just learned the night before. Additionally, the classes were pretty well spread out. Perhaps if I had been taking the classes at 6:30 a.m., instead of 6:30 p.m. and more frequently, it would have been more effective for me.

One of the most valuable lessons from the dancing and drumming classes came while watching how the children in these classes were learning. As I paid attention to their attention spans, skill levels, coordination and perceptions, it helped me become more realistic about what to expect from my second graders. I realized that the key ingredients
for these kids were exactly the things that worked for me; to learn without criticism, in an atmosphere of nurturing support and celebration. Basically, to keep it playful.

I started looking for additional resources on the Internet and was lucky to find two real lifesavers. The first is the site *African Drum Beat- West African Drumming and Percussion Music* (www.african-drumbeat.co.uk/index.html). The second site is on YouTube (www.youtube.com).

*African Drum Beat* has a lot of information about African drums and drumming. In one section, "Rhythms", there is a list of twenty-three traditional drum rhythms. When you click on a name, a screen appears with the rhythm notation in two parts. You may click on these to hear the rhythms. On the side are three help questions to click on; "How do I read the notations?", "What do the symbols mean?", and "What do the sounds refer to?" I needed that very basic information to figure out what I was doing. That was how I tried out rhythms to teach the kids, and eventually chose one to incorporate into *A Story, a Story*.

The fact that I didn't have any kind of drums, let alone Djembe, became somewhat problematic. I was able to borrow four bongos from our Music teacher for the performance, but that wasn't adequate for the whole class. So we used our desks. I'm not sure how great it was for the desks, but it was very handy.

I printed out many of the rhythm notations (see Appendix A, Figure A-1, p. 30) and would practice by listening to them on the computer while reading them. Then, I would try some out with the kids. We did a lot of "my turn, your turn", gradually increasing duration until it became more of a call/response. Dorothy's teaching techniques were a
tremendous help to me. I taught them the different basic hand strokes, base, tone, and slap, and the order of left/right for the hands. This was pretty challenging for me, and a lot harder for them, so I tried to choose the simpler rhythms. We would frequently have to click on the computer to hear the rhythms because we would get so mixed up. The kids took this entire experience very seriously, which really impressed me. They tried hard to use the correct hand strokes, even though it was difficult to distinguish the different tones since we were using desks. Although we didn't have the time to practice that often, it was a great experience for all.

YouTube became a great source for exposing my students to real African dancers and drummers. YouTube clips are generally short, (one minute to a few minutes) and, best of all are free. My favorites are of a little boy, Isaiah Chevrier, a child protégé of Djembe drumming. He currently lives in Bamako, Mali with his parents. Isaiah has been drumming since infancy. His younger brother, Abdoulay, is also incredible. The video clips of these children were significant to me because they demonstrated the close interaction, call/response, between the children and their parents. The fact that these are young children made some strong connections with my second graders. I think it may have made them more comfortable playing instruments for the performance.

"It takes a village to raise a child" is certainly an African proverb that was applicable to this year. As the date of the program was approaching, I still had not begun to work on the dance component for the performance. The second quarter was ending, which meant grades and report cards. In my personal life, both my husband and daughter had fairly serious medical issues at the time and I was taking a number of sick days. Time and focus
were not on my side at that point.

Our Artist in Residence, Marina Weatherly, is not only a talented art instructor, but a dancer as well. She has helped choreograph numerous multicultural dances for classes in the past. She offered to teach my class an African dance, and designed the *African Hunting Dance*, which my students ended up performing to the song "The Beat of My Drum", by Ojatuni, Babatunde, from the album *Drums of Passion: the Beat*. This was a circle dance of hunters on their way home. She taught it to the students during one of our art periods, and we continued to practice it on our own. Students were assigned different parts throughout the dance. I had to consult Marina one day because the students were arguing about the sequence and/or number of dance steps. She helped resolve a number of issues, although the kids were very creative about finding new ones.

If that wasn't wonderful enough, Glenda Edward, a lovely woman who had been subbing for me also stepped up to the plate. One afternoon when she was subbing for me, she taught the class a song/dance entitled *Funga Alafia*. She wrote out the words for me, but they pretty much remembered everything from the beginning. They were wildly enthusiastic about this dance, so we ended up performing it as well.

Although my own drumming and dancing lessons were rich and empowering for me, I was too much of a novice to teach it very well to my students. Figuring that the worst response would be no, I asked Dorothy if she and any of the other members of LEDA would be willing to drum and dance as part of our performance, and how much would it cost? The answer, much to my delight was yes, and only $250! This was the piece that
was truly a gift to my students. It brought the entire year's work to the next level. This was celebration, for them, for me, for their parents, for the community. None of us will ever forget it.
CHAPTER FIVE: AFRICAN ART

Marina Weatherly, Lone Rock's Artist in Residence, committed herself to my African curriculum. She and I collaborated to produce a series of art works which included textiles, stylized drawings of animals, figure drawing, landscapes, and stage sets. I was amazed at the way my students were able to notice the stylization and design elements they saw in African art, and then translate it into their own work.

One cannot open a book about Africa without recognizing the incredible richness and beauty of its many cultures. Colorful, bold designs, often expressing special meanings, are found everywhere; containers, tools, buildings, and especially clothing. Since many of the children's books that we were reading were full of beautiful illustrations of African dress, textiles seemed a good place to start.

During the first week of October, we started making Adrinka prints. Adrinka cloth is made in Ghana and decorated with stamped designs. I have a beautiful panel of Adrinka fabric that came from Ghana, so we had a great example to start from. The lesson I will describe came from the book, *Art by Many Hands*, by Jo Miles Schuman (pages 8-13). Our first attempt was done with a set of sponge stamps, tempera paints, on paper (see Appendix B, Figure B-1, p.31).

On our next try, we used black acrylic paint on cloth. I ripped two yards of cotton into three long strips. These we divided into six squares each. This time, the students made their stamps from a potato. Marina showed them some traditional Adrinka symbols as a suggestion, and everybody did the best they could with a potato and second grade
coordination. I set up a place on the floor in the classroom for the students to take turns stamping their prints. (We almost got away without making a mess.) We used cardboard edges to divide the squares and make borders. All in all, that part was quite successful.

The next steps were up to me. I wish I had delegated these to a parent. Months dragged on until I eventually sewed the strips together and dyed the fabric. For some reason, the dye selection wasn't very good. I ended up choosing tangerine, which looked great on the bottle, but ended up a less deep and rich shade than I had hoped. I then intended for the children to sew over the seams with black, yellow, green, red and blue embroidery thread, in a bright, repeated sequence of color. I was having trouble finding parents to come in and help with this and the result was that it remained an incomplete, unrealized idea.

Towards the end of October, we went on a field trip to the nearby Lee Metcalf Wildlife Refuge. We spent a lot of time viewing and learning about the local birds. Afterwards, we started looking at birds in African, to compare some that were the same or similar and some that were not. I was lucky to find a pocket sized, fold out, and laminated pamphlet of African birds (African Birds. An Introduction to Familiar Species). When it was time for the art lesson, Marina had made a series of stylized drawings of a variety of African birds, using simple shapes and markers. The students chose one, copied the basic outline and added their own more detailed designs. They made a border around it using design styles that they had noticed on fabrics or book illustrations. Another day, they colored their pictures with crayons. I thought they turned out incredibly beautiful (see Appendix B, Figure B-2, p.31).
In January, we tried our hand at figure drawing. Marina's method is to create the basic scene and show them in a step-by-step manner how to draw the figures, i.e., proportion, shoulders, (something second graders don't consider without input), body position, etc. The students would then embellish their drawings by adding detail, especially to the clothing. We had seen examples of a number of African textiles, including Kente cloth, Adire eleko cloth from Nigeria, tie dye, and others. It was very gratifying to watch the students as they incorporated these traditional patterns into their own work. The figures were colored in with markers and crayon. I enjoyed the variety of skin tones that appeared. Some of the children made their figures white, perhaps identifying themselves as participants. As you can see in Figure B-3, (Appendix B, p.32), both individually and as a group, these pictures seem to truly capture the joy and celebration of African music and dance.

Later in the spring, we used a similar procedure to paint landscapes. We had recently read Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain, and so had learned something of the animals living on the Serengeti Plain, and of the dry and rainy seasons. The technique Marina used was similar to the figure drawing pictures. Included was a herder, a cow, numerous African plains animals and birds. This time, however, we painted the scene with watercolor. I felt that the students had difficulty managing the watercolor with all the objects and the end result was a bit busy, although still nice. More previous exposure to watercolor might have been helpful.

The other major artwork we did was scenery for the play, A Story, a Story. I will describe that in the next chapter.
CHAPTER SIX: PERFORMANCE - AN AFRICAN MIRACLE

Once I decided that our culminating performance was to be a play, *A Story, a Story* was a no-brainer. I was originally introduced to *A Story, a Story* many years ago in the form of a video produced by Weston Woods. The video was a tremendous entrée for me because of the wonderful narration and musical accompaniment that went with it. My imagination opened to the rhythms, voice and style of these wonderful African traditional tales as they were meant to be heard. I began to visualize where I might take my students, not only with literature, but performance as well.

I told the class that we would be doing a play from this story the first time we read it. They were very excited and were all happily expecting to get their favorite part. At the second grade level, you don't really do formal auditions. There are a number of things besides acting and voice level that you have to think about. For instance, one of my students, the singer mentioned in Chapter 2, would have been perfect for Mmoatia, "the fairy whom-men-never-see." All the kids immediately thought of her. I, however, didn't want to be held hostage to her behavioral whims, so I gave the part to another girl, more bulky, less charming, but much more deserving. Basically, the entire assigning of parts was an act of smoke and mirrors. There were only eight parts and I had eighteen students. The other ten were going to be narrators. I tried to give the students what they wanted. A number didn't want to act and preferred being a narrator. However, there was still a lot of competition for the character parts. For these, I used a combination of behavioral reliability, audition and the luck of the draw.
The two most critical acting parts were the Sky God and Ananse. Ananse, the main character, had speaking lines throughout the entire play and basically had to carry the show. The student that got the part was very tall, and had a loud, deep voice. Earlier in the year, he was on a behavioral incentive plan that included using a quiet voice, no roaming, and MYOB (mind your own business). These same characteristics in a different setting made him the perfect Ananse. He not only completely mastered his own part brilliantly, he knew what everyone else was supposed to say and do as well.

I was in a quandary about the Sky God. My other notable student, the famous "whistler" mentioned in Chapter 2, was adamant that he wanted that part. When he read the lines, he was actually quite good. But what of his behavior? Unlike his counterpart, he wasn't so much an attention getter as a somewhat uncontrolled bundle of energy. Although somewhat risky, I decided it had the potential to be a very positive experience for him and so gave him the part. Plus, the Sky God would be up somewhere, away from the other students, and hopefully less annoying.

I made copies of everyone's parts, which they all took home to practice. The actors learned their lines and the narrators read with fluency and expression. Everyone except the Sky God ended up playing a musical instrument as well.

We started assembling the scenery in mid January and worked on it intermittently. I knew that Nyame, the Sky God, would need to be high up somehow and that Ananse would need to climb up to him. I decided that we could use the volleyball referee stand for Nyame with a section of bleachers in front for Ananse to climb up. With that in mind, we created a village background with a sky design to carry our eyes to the Sky God. We
took our ideas from book illustrations, which I think is helpful when trying to avoid
generic replications of houses, trees, etc. (see Appendix C, Figure C-1, p.33). We
continued preparing the sets, whenever and wherever we could (see Appendix C, Figures
C-2, 3, 4 5, 6, 8, p. 33).

The musical instruments I chose were a conglomerate of what I had and what I could
borrow from our Music teacher. We ended up with a total of four bongos, two
glockenspiels with the B and E keys removed, triangles, plastic shaker eggs, maracas, a
shell rattle, an authentic seed pod shaker from Zimbabwe, two wooden frog pops from
Vietnam, and a cabasa. As we rehearsed, we decided where we wanted music, what
might work, and who would play it. At first, the structure was coming from me, but as the
kids got the idea, more and more of the impetus was coming from them.

Two ideas were especially effective. Ananse was to climb up to the Sky God via a
spider web ladder. This was accomplished by the Sky God pulling up a braided yarn
ladder as Ananse ascended the bleachers, and lowering it down when he descended. The
girl who played the latex gum baby suggested playing the glockenspiel from low to high
during the ascent, and high to low during the descent. She and a narrator got that part and
they did a wonderful job. The boy who played Ananse solved another tricky problem. At
one point in the play he was to cut a banana frond, pick up a calabash (which he was to
"fill with water"), then creep through the tall grass ("sora, sora, sora") to the hornets' nest.
The boy playing Ananse used the casaba throughout this whole sequence. First, he hid it
under the banana frond which he was carrying and used it for the "sora, sora, sora"
rhythm. He then used it to make the sound of rain when he was "pouring water" from the calabash. The sequence was very tricky considering what he was carrying, but he not only did it, he got great sounds from the instrument.

All in all, everyone worked very hard and all the pieces were starting to come together. It was the actual attempt to rehearse that had me pulling out my hair. Our two major problems were that first, there was no space to practice. Second, this was the challenging class described in Chapter 2. They fought and argued endlessly and displayed many inappropriate behaviors. The play itself should have taken only twenty minutes. I don't think we got through a single rehearsal from beginning to end because their behavior dragged practice out until it was time to go home. Part of this was due to the fact that we didn't have enough space and the kids were pretty much on top of each other.

The only place with enough space was the gym, which was unavailable to us. I scheduled our performance for Saturday, March 10th, so we would be able to use it. The only problem was that we never were able to rehearse there. At first, we used the classroom (see Appendix C, Figures C- 9, 10, 11, p. 34). The Sky God's perch was on a ladder. Ananse's climb up was total pantomime. I tried to arrange the narrators in an open semicircle around the "stage". They each had a mat to sit on, so we knew generally how things would go. Unfortunately, because our space was so small, the actors were hiding under tables and everyone was pretty much tripping over each other. We really needed to rehearse using the referee stand, the spider web ladder and other pieces of scenery. Not being able to use the gym, we had a semi dress rehearsal in the lobby on Friday
afternoon, March 9th (see Appendix C, Figure C-12, p. 35). Even there, we didn't have enough room. The entire scene was a nightmare. To start, four students were absent, including three of the bongo players. The Sky God kept climbing down from his throne, and when he wasn't doing that, he was spitting on people. Another student, who was in charge of the dancing, had a meltdown and refused to dance. People were periodically walking through the lobby. When it was time for recess, my class insisted on going out. All this was witnessed by my committee chair, Karen Kaufmann.

Luckily, what they say about bad rehearsals held true for us. The performance was magnificent! I arrived at the gym very early Saturday morning. With the help of some wonderful parents, and my friend and colleague, Jeannette Slattery, we got everything set up. Later, everyone showed up and on time. The children had just enough time to change into costumes and then we went through a quick run-through of stage directions (see Appendix C, Figures C-13, 14, p. 35). By now, the audience was packed, most of them having come with their kids. Dorothy's LEDA group had also arrived, and was parked on the sidelines. After a brief introduction from our Family Resource Center person, Jamie Calhoon, the show started.

Our first number was the *Funga Alafia* which they did without added accompaniment. My job was to turn on the music (*Drums of Passion: the Beat*, "The Beat of My Drum"), lead the dancing children through the audience to the stage, turn off the music and stay out of the way while the children danced. For the rest of the performance, they were pretty much on their own.

After the dance and applause, everyone went to their places. Ananse took center stage...
and introduced the play with, "The African storyteller begins: 'We do not really mean, we do not really mean that what we are about to say is true. A story, a story; let it come, let it go.'" (A Story, a Story page iii). I was off to the side as the play progressed. At that point I figured that they had to own it. And own it they did. When someone missed a cue, Ananse was on it.

When the play was over, they bowed for applause, went off stage and returned for their last dance, the African Hunting Dance to the accompaniment of Drums of Passion: the Beat, "The Beat of My Drum".

Their part of the performance was over and we broke for intermission. LEDA was up next. The LEDA group was composed of Dorothy Morrison, playing the Djembe, Steve Hug and Paul Roys, playing dunun drums, and Yvette Ortega, who would lead us in African dancing. We moved much of the stage set out of the way to make room for the dancing. Yvette gathered us into a circle and with her leading us we danced with great joy and abandon to the drums. At first, the participants were mostly the kids, me and a few parents. Before long, almost everyone was joining in (see Appendix C, Figures 15-20, p. 36).

Dancing had been an issue for my student, the Sky God. During earlier rehearsals of the dances, he was sliding across the floor, slamming into kids, pinching them, etc. I called his mom and discussed the possibility that he might not be allowed to participate if he couldn't control his behavior. The next day she called back and said that he said he hated dancing. We decided that he wouldn't dance and would tell the class it was because he needed to be in position as the Sky God. During later practices, he made his wonderful
purple hat while we danced.

Back to the performance; when Yvette was leading us all in dance, I noticed my little friend sitting quietly with his mother, playing his Game Boy. I went over to him and said, "Come on! Let's dance! You'll love it!" Pretty soon the Sky God, his mom, and little sister were dancing up a storm! I think he changed his mind about dancing.

The performance was a tremendous success! I had made sure to publicize the event in the local newspaper and the weekly school newsletter. The students also made personal invitations for their parents. When the time came, we had an attendance of over eighty. I had also asked the Bitterroot Star to cover it, and was rewarded with a phenomenal article (see Appendix D, p.37). We did one more performance the following Friday afternoon. This was for the school. It was somewhat stressful to set it all up again, with much less time, but was well appreciated by the teachers and other classes. For the second time, the class performed with confidence and enthusiasm.

It was a great feeling to have accomplished all this successfully. I was so proud of my students! They really came through. Though I had many thoughts and feelings at the time, I mostly remember taking a deep breath and saying, "Phew!"
CHAPTER SEVEN: SOCIAL STUDIES - AFRICA AND US

The book, Africa is Not a Country, by Mary Burns Knight, became our roadmap through Africa. Each page gave a slice of the life of children in a different country. As we were introduced to a country, we would outline it on our map, and I would bring in other material if I had any (see Appendix E, Figure E-1, p. 39). For instance, when we read about Cameroon, we went online to learn more. We discovered that Cameroon had an active volcano. I discovered I had a book entitled Village of the Round and Square Houses by Ann Grifalconi. This folktale explained why the men lived in square houses and the women lived in round ones. This tradition related to the history of the volcano. The kids were very excited about this, and the book became one of their favorites.

We also found some interesting articles in National Geographic Explorer!, a magazine my class subscribes to. We learned a little about ecology and life science when we read about addaxes surviving on the Sahara Desert (Fay, Mike. "Desert Survivor." National Geographic Explorer! Sept. 2005: pages 2-3.); or lemurs in Madagascar (Ebersole, Rene. "Lemur." National Geographic Explorer! Oct. 2005: pages 18-22); or giraffes in Kenya (Peters, Jennifer. "Neck and Neck." National Geographic Explorer! Nov.-Dec. 2005: pages 14-19.).

In January and February, we focused our attention on the life of Martin Luther King Jr., the history of slavery and the civil rights movement. I tried to connect this information to Africa as much as I could. For instance, when we discussed how slaves were captured from Africa, how they became property, how they were thought of and treated by white slave holders, I would say "You know all those African people we have been learning
about, with the wonderful stories and beautiful clothing and incredible music and dance? Well, those were the people who were taken into slavery."

When we read about Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, we also read about Nelson Mandela. I have to say, there isn't much material out there geared toward second graders. I did some research on the Internet and put his picture up on the bulletin board along with Martin Luther King, George Washington, and Abraham Lincoln (see Appendix E, Figure E-2, p. 39). I did have one biography about Mandela written for children, Learning About Forgiveness From the Life of Nelson Mandela, by Jeanne Strazzabosco and another book of folktales edited by Mandela (Nelson Mandela's Favorite African Folk Tales).

With that skeleton of information we were able to make many connections. We talked about colonialism and discussed apartheid in South Africa. We talked about how both King and Mandela became civil rights leaders in their respective countries. We learned that they were willing to go to jail in order to challenge unjust laws. Most importantly, I tried to emphasize that they were successful through nonviolence and forgiveness and were now recognized throughout the world as great leaders and peacemakers.

We discussed some of the issues of Africa today, particularly poverty and disease, but it's difficult to explain complex issues to children who have yet to develop the necessary contextual framework. I remember an occasion, many years ago, when I was reading my class a biography about Martin Luther King Jr. Whenever a date came up, I would mention my age at that time. This made it much more exciting for the kids, and I hoped it would make it more relevant for them. Sometime later that day, our school secretary
came up to me and said, "Wow, so-and-so was really excited to find out that you were alive during King Arthur's time!" Oh, well.

I had one experience this spring that really touched me, and made me a little sad. We were on a field trip in Missoula, and had stopped at Bonner Park. Bonner Park is a favorite spot for out of town kids, featuring picnic tables, a beautiful grassy area with lots of trees, a wonderful playground, and even a tennis court. As we were getting off the bus, one of my students (probably of Hispanic decent) asked, "Mrs. Nicholls? You know that woman who helped the people get free?" I thought for a moment wondering. I said, "Do you mean Harriet Tubman?" "Yes," he said, "I'm really glad she did. Otherwise, I couldn't come to this playground."
CHAPTER EIGHT - CONCLUSION

So, how do I write a conclusion about all of this? First, I'll share what my principal described in her evaluation of me under *Professional Preparation and Growth*.

Lisa completed her graduate degree in Education in the *Creative Pulse* through the University of Montana this past year. She provided an interdisciplinary unit on African Culture and Dance for her second grade students and their families as part of the requirements to complete the graduate degree.

That was it, period. In addition to being inaccurate (I am writing my professional paper as we speak) she has managed to take something that was so big, in my mind, and make it *so small, so small, so small*. I suppose that this paper bears witness to the fact that it wasn't so small at all.

As I mentioned at the onset, the year started off as quite a challenge. Perhaps working under a climate of indifference was the most difficult. Our administration, Superintendent and Principal both, were not engaged with our school community. They attended virtually nothing outside of school hours; not games, not the Christmas Program, most definitely not our performance. They didn't seem to get that they were expected to be leaders. Luckily, they're both moving off to other jobs, and I'm still here with my students, school, parents and community.

I have begun to think about next year. The idea of replicating this year makes me want to go straight to bed. Yet, I still have a yearning for that connection with Africa. I've been playing with the idea of using African and other traditional folktales as a series of reader's theaters rather than doing one big play. It would be easier to incorporate musical and drumming rhythms incrementally, which would become part of the routine. The scale would be smaller, but we would be building on a repertoire of skills and themes over
time.

This project has been a tremendous challenge and an incredible opportunity. I feel privileged to have brought some engagement and a little bit of Africa to my students and community. I'm starting to get a little excited about the possibilities for next year. In the meantime, I just want to put my feet up and be a little lazy. I have learned a lot from Ananse.
APPENDIX B: SECOND GRADE ART

FIGURE B-1. Designs were stamped in squared-off sections. The vertical strip in center was colored with crayons to represent the way real Adrinka cloth is sewn together. Upper right corner shows part of an authentic Adrinka panel.

FIGURE B-2. Stylized African birds. Medium, black Sharpie and crayon
FIGURE B-3. African Dancers and Drummers. Medium, black Sharpie, markers and crayon
APPENDIX C: THE PERFORMANCE

FIGURE C-1. The dwellings were styled after those illustrated in My Painted House, My Friendly Chicken and Me, by Maya Angelou. The sky was inspired from the illustrations in A Story, a Story, by Gail E. Haley.

FIGURE C-2. Bushes using pastel.

FIGURE C-3. Hornet’s nest using Craypas.

FIGURE C-4. Roughing out the the stage on a Saturday.

FIGURE C-5. More bushes.

FIGURE C-6. Gluing on leaves.

FIGURE C-7. Flamboyant tree.

FIGURE C-8. Banana tree.
FIGURE C-9. Mmotia is stuck to Gum Baby as Ananse and the Sky God observe.

FIGURE C-10. A narrator stands as it is his turn to read.

FIGURE C-11. This picture says it all.
A Story A Story

A story about Africa was performed live on the gym stage by Ms. Nicholls 2nd grade class on Saturday, March 11th. Here they are doing a dress rehearsal in the lobby of the elementary school the day before.

There was an enactment of the story, dancing and a gym full of proud parents in the audience. Three drummers and a dancer from the University of Montana, in the African mode, all entertained us with drumming and dancing after the performance, while students, parents, and all joined in the dances.

It was an excellent performance by all of the students who also had made the props for the stage as part of their preparation. Possibly a future motion picture cameraman Andrew Simmons, 7th grader, volunteered to film the event and help with the editing and creating DVDs of the event.

FIGURE C-12. This photo was taken of the rehearsal in lobby. Lone Rock School Community Newsletter, Spring 2007.

FIGURE C-13. Performance Day. The students are finally at their spots.

FIGURE C-14. Mrs. Nicholls and Ananse go through some quick stage directions.
FIGURES C-16, 17, 18, 19. Students, parents and community dance with LEDA.

FIGURE C-20. LEDA and performers cheer, "We did it!"
White kids can dance: Lone Rock learns about Africa By Gretchen L. Langton

Lone Rock is a long way from Africa but you would not have known that on Saturday, March 10. Eighteen second graders, from Lisa Nicholls' class, performed African dances and their rendition of a traditional African tale about how stories first reached the people. Like many traditional tales, this one involves a young man who wishes to attain something but must first accomplish a number of seemingly impossible tasks requiring him to be both brave and cunning. For the past several months, these children have been reading Gail E. Hailey's "A Story A Story", winner of the prestigious Caldecott Award for Illustration in 1971. Hailey says that the year she spent living in the Carribean inspired her to retell and illustrate this Ashanti myth.

Each second grader has a part; some are musicians, others narrators, still others play characters that act out the story and speak lines in between narration. All the children worked to create the backdrop of beautiful African designs and curly blue clouds resembling a multitude of infinity symbols. Eight-year-old Richard Malanikski, who I met stirring up a post-performance cup of java, said his class worked hard to prepare for this event, about two and a half months. Richard plays a hornet (complete with paper covered coat-hanger wings) that is tricked and put into a bottle by the hero. The hero's tasks include capturing a leopard, a nest of hornets, and a fairy, each requiring him to manifest some wiliness. For example, he anticipates the haughtiness of the fairy, the fairy's need to be acknowledged. He makes a doll and puts a tasty bowl of imaginary yams in her lap. He then paints the doll with honey and disappears to a hiding spot. When the fairy comes along, she eats the yams and wishes to engage the doll in conversation, but when the doll doesn't respond, she strikes the doll and becomes stuck to the honey. While I watch this, I wonder if this tale is the impetus for the story of the tar-baby. This is the way stories are: sweet, multi-layered, cross-cultural, and readily adaptable.

Aaron Johnson, who stands high above his classmates, reachable only by rope ladder, which musically advances to and recedes from his throne in the sky, plays Nyami the Sky King. He says his favorite part is his tall perch. What second grader doesn't fantasize about being ten feet tall? Aaron also enjoyed designing his regal head covering, which was inspired by pictures and colors from Hailey's book. At the end of the performance when the class takes a bow, Aaron tosses his crown high into the air like a college graduate. Laughter mixes with hardy applause as the children exit to prepare for their final dance number. During their final dance, they stand in a circle shouting and jumping and grinning. This is fun for them, to show their families and friends what they are learning in school.

Lisa Nicholls is learning too. Although she has been an educator for 27 years, she is back in school getting a Masters in Performing and Fine Arts from the University of Montana. This event works into her thesis but it is evident as she dances and talks to me at the same time that she loves the music; it seems to touch her as much as the subject matter.

"This study of Africa is tied to Social Studies," says Nicholls. "We have talked about Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Apartheid, poverty, human pressure on endangered animal habitats, colonization, slavery, the separation of families... "Weighty stuff for second graders, but these children at Lone Rock are learning to be children of the World, with a more global perspective than was available to earlier generations."

The kids are now in a wide circle joined by some parents and adults and by Yvette Ortega. She wears a sarong, a puka shell flower necklace, pigtails, and has bare feet. Yvette is leading the participants in a dance to the Bala Kulana, "a song about a bird that flies over big rivers," says Dorothy Morrison, one of the founders of the musical group LEDA. Hearing LEDA, short for Les Etudiants De' Afrique (Fr. - The Students of Africa), was a highlight of the Lone Rock event.

Why the French title? In Guinea, where this drumming and dancing group's heart thumps, the spoken language is French, the palpable leftovers of French imperial conquest in Africa. But the French weren't the first European power to tap Guinea's resources - the Portuguese
used Guinea as early as the 15th Century for the acquisition and transportation of slaves. Although Guinea became independent in 1958, the nation still struggles. While the political and economic situation in Guinea is dire, the musical culture remains vibrant. Drumming and dancing are mainstays of cultural gatherings.

The dunun drums, played by Steve Hug and Paul Roys, are double-headed bass drums with powerful booming beats. Africans call the dunun "lya lu," the "mother drum." The heads are typically cowhide and the ropes and rings around the middle of this drum are adjusted to change its sound. The djembe (pronounced JEM-bay) drum, played by Dorothy Morrison, is a single-headed, goblet-shaped hand drum, typically constructed of a goatskin head, an African hardwood body, and ropes to tighten the head. Dorothy has been drumming for seventeen years; her experience with this instrument is evident in the ease and energy with which she plays. Playing the djembe is a full-body experience and strong drummers, like Dorothy, have a sinewy quality from years of handling and playing this instrument. Djembes were historically used to communicate over long distances and all drums are said to embody three spirits: the spirit of the tree the wood was harvested from, the spirit of the animal the drum head came from, and the spirit of the drum maker.

Spirits were high as LEDA's songs pounded through the room and inspired kids to follow Yvette's liquid interpretations of the music. LEDA has been entertaining and teaching school kids African rhythms for many years, in Missoula primarily. Dorothy tells me that they have collaborated extensively with Washington Middle School, working with student drummers one-on-one, and also accompanying drummers during concerts. CS Porter Middle School, and Meadow Middle School, as well as schools as far away as Troy and Eureka, have benefited from LEDA's instruction. LEDA has also performed for 12 years at Missoula's First Night celebration and entertained audiences at Out to Lunch in Caras Park. But, if I've inspired you to seek them out in concert - sorry! Dorothy explains that their group is officially "on sabbatical" since two of the dancers are pregnant and another dancer is in graduate school. Let's hope we have not seen the last of LEDA.
FIGURE E-1. This is our classroom bulletin board where we kept track of countries we were learning about.

FIGURE E-2. This bulletin board has pictures of Washington, Lincoln, King Jr., Mandela and a photo of a patriotic human flag made by students at our school at the end of "I Love to Read" Month.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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