



MMS Bulletin #97

Memory Work

The 10 Million Hero Book Project

“I am a hero. I will survive.”

Von Jonathan Morgan

In response to the extraordinary range of challenges facing so many children, hero books, a particular kind of Memory Work and psychosocial support tool, have evolved. This article will focus on hero books, which as far as Memory and Life Story Work go, are a particularly child centered and child focused intervention.

Memory Work might be defined as the deliberate setting up of a safe space in which to contain the telling of a life story. This space might just be a room or the shade under a tree, but is likely to go beyond to include a memory box, a memory book, a memory basket or a body map. In therapeutic contexts, the scope of Memory Work is not necessarily restricted to the past or dealing with death. Its purpose is often to deal with difficulties in the present, to hold on to and to celebrate life, and its main orientation often tends towards planning and the future.

The 10 Million Memory Project (10MMP) is a recent initiative of organizations concerned with the wellbeing of children living in difficult circumstances. It aims to create a platform for collaboration around Memory Work which will reach at least ten million children across Africa by 2010. Some of the main partners through whose extensive networks we operate are the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, REPSSI and Save the Children.

A hero book is a document, and a process, in which a child is invited to be the author, illustrator, main character and editor of a book that is designed to give them power over a specific challenge in their life. The hero book process can be described as one in which groups of children are led through a series of drawing exercises and autobiographical story telling, designed to help them with mastery over specific problems or challenges in their lives. At the end of the process, the child has a handbound storybook of their own making, that heralds and reinforces their hero-survival-resilient qualities. A mini library refers to a bunch of hero books made by a group of children who live in the same community, or by a group of children who live far apart but who are facing similar circumstances and who are connected in some or

other way. These children might have decided to publish and distribute their books as part of a series, for example they might send a package containing all their books to children down the road or across the planet.

Hero books draw heavily on the theory of Narrative Therapy and “externalizing discourses” developed by Michael White and David Epston. There are also strong elements of expressional art and of projective drawing in the hero book process. The challenges a child might want to take on using a hero book include behavioural, emotional and social problems. Behavioural problems might include bedwetting, poor concentration, and aggression. Emotional problems might include depression, sadness, grieving and anxiety. And social problems might include having to look after the cattle and not be allowed to attend school, bullying or being subjected to abuse in the home.

The basic formula or map of the territory to be explored in these externalising conversations is:

1. A particular problem is identified and named.
2. It is then located as something outside of the person and not bound up as part of their identity, personality disorder, or within their field of self-blame.
3. A “shining moment” or “unique outcome” is identified in which the person experienced, however fleetingly, some power over, or hope in the face of the problem
4. There is an unpacking of some of the things (tricks, tactics) the person can do, or has begun to do, to achieve a measure of control over the problem.

An important part of the hero book happens after the child has drawn and explained a whole series of drawings. The co-author or helper then retells a hero story back to the child preferably in written form, which is then incorporated into the book but only at the end as a book review or afterward, with the child remaining the primary author.

Dishy-the-Frieked-out-Jealous-Monster

The first coherent hero book using this formula was a hero book written by, illustrated by and featuring Masego Morgan (“the hero”) then seven years old, and Dishy-the-Frieked-out-Jealous-Monster. In this story, Masego identifies Dishy – a scary looking creature with snot coming out of his nose and a yukkie yukkie tongue – as her named and externalized personification of jealousy or sibling rivalry. Having identified him or it, Masego is in a better position to see that her aggressive behaviour towards her brother is something she might also have power over. Having identified a shining moment – one day when she felt jealous but was able to restrain herself from hitting her brother – she then goes on to identify her tricks and tactics that help her to win over Dishy. One such example is Masego, in the act of imagining her now deceased granny as an angel looking down on her when her arm is raised and about to come down on her brothers head. This stops her from engaging in the problematic behaviour and gives her power over Dishy.

The Dishy story puts across the principles of hero books fantastically, but for training purposes, sibling rivalry was felt to be an insignificant kind of problem in the context of more serious problems faced by so many children, for example, grief as a result of being orphaned, hunger, poverty, living with HIV etc.

For this reason, further hard punching hero stories were needed as examples for training purposes and to get the 10 Million Hero Book Project rolling. The next mini library of hero books were born in Nekkies.

“Wire Around the Heart”

Nekkies is a “township” on the outskirts of Plettenberg Bay, a millionaires’ paradise in the Cape. Based in Nekkies is MADaboutART, an arts based children’s organization that engages local children in various art exercises and art therapies designed to assist them to become active citizens and agents of change in their own lives and in their own community. Through MADaboutART, packed into a beautiful and colorful bookcase, 12 hand bound color hero books “came off the press”, each one a work of art and each one more poignant, touching and moving than the next (in whatever order you read them). A particularly powerful one is “Wire Around the Heart”, written, illustrated and about 11 year old Oupa. He identifies grief as his problem and draws it as barbed wire around a flower signifying his limited access to his absent mother. A young woman named Beattie draws a man with a catapult aiming at a bird in a tree, referring to the problem of sexual assault and predatory males treating girls and women as prey. Young Chester draws two frogs hop in the ditch beside the road, and writes, I feel happy. A Zen haiku if I’ve ever seen one. On the final page he looks out at you wearing a white tunic and cap with red crosses on them. “I want to be a doctor because I want to help my family and other peoples that have AID/HIV, I’m mad (make a difference) because I love people, and I have peas (peace) for other people, People say I am clever.”

A true hero if I’ve ever seen one, someone able to rise above his circumstances.

As a mini library, the Nekkies books stand as collective testimony to the great challenges faced by so many children but also to children’s extraordinary creativity and resourcefulness. Beautiful as all the books in this series are, they proved difficult to photocopy in black and white so a more graphic kind of look was explored.

The next mini library of three books came out of a RAISA conference on orphans and vulnerable children held in Pretoria in August 2003. Along with Victoria Ndyalunga of the A team, a group of five children from Malawi and Zambia were taken through the hero book process so that on the last day of the conference they could share their stories and new found hero booking skills with the adult delegates.

It was here that I met Memory Phiri from Zambia and James Chipalanjira from Malawi.

“Memory Phiri is HIV positive”

Memory's hero book tells of her struggle and triumph over stigma. The last straw was when someone wrote, "Memory Phiri is HIV positive" on the toilet wall in the orphanage where she lives. Her giant step or shining moment was Memory calling all the girls in the orphanage, and explaining to them that yes this is true, but the reason is that there was no adult or parent to protect her when she was abducted, raped and infected with HIV, and that all the blame and shame belongs not with her but with the rapist.

James' problem, he identifies it as loneliness and lack of support, and he tells us that it has the most power over him when he is left standing alone on a soccer field in Malawi, once the sun has set, with all the other boys having been called home to a family meal by their parents. James lives alone in the same house where his mother and father and two sisters, all of them now deceased, used to spend happy times together.

After collaborating and developing their hero books, James and Memory met us in Victoria Falls in October 2004 to teach a large group of trainers and workers from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies as well as REPSSI partner organizations to do hero books.

James and Memory's books are easier to photocopy than the Nekkies ones for the simple reason that they were developed in black and white and not color with easy reproduction in mind from the start. They include many more photos taken by James and Memory with a digital camera and fit more into the genre of photo comic / graphic novel.

From personal tricks to political activities

The third mini library of hero books comes out of Dikwankwetla – Children in Action. Dikwankwetla means heroes, and this is how the group see themselves as in the face of the AIDS pandemic. Their slogan is "Children Are The Future, Give Them Their Rights".

Recognizing that the Children's Bill will, once enacted, be the single most important and comprehensive piece of child-related legislation in South Africa, the University of Cape Town's Children's Institute has worked together with experts – including children – to establish working groups on a range of issues addressed in the Bill, including children's rights, parental rights and responsibilities, protection, abuse and HIV/AIDS.

Dikwankwetla is a group of twelve children between the ages 12 and 17, who have been brought together as one of these working groups. Their main purpose is to engage with the Children's Bill, formulate their opinions about the Bill, draw upon their own life experiences to make recommendations on the provisions of the Bill, and raise awareness amongst other children and decision makers about the provisions in the Bill, including those which they believe do not adequately address children's needs.

I was invited to be the resident psychologist for the duration of a four day workshop in which the Dikwankwetla children engaged with the Children's Bill working towards the development of child submissions to parliament around the bill before it becomes law. It was felt that the

workshop process would inevitably stir up difficult feelings, and that it would be good to have these contained and facilitated by a professional counselor. Instead of just working with the fallout, the children and I chose to make hero books with them which could simultaneously contain their feelings as well as potentially generate useful advocacy material for Dikwankwetla's day in parliament and their wider campaigns. The work with Dikwankwetla helped us to reformulate hero books to embrace much more of the political, as opposed to only personal challenges facing children, and to blur this boundary in ways that are interesting.

Three particular Dikwankwetla hero books are almost complete. These belong to Nkosi, Rebecca and Sihle, all from Kwa Zulu Natal. In all three books, their primary school principal Hlengiwe stands alongside with them, as a truly remarkable and tremendous hero. Kwa Zulu Natal has been particularly hard hit by HIV and AIDS, and when Hlengiwe became aware of children in her school and community who were sleeping in the bush, or being abused at home, or going hungry, she opened up and developed her school into a safe haven that provides food, accommodation and love.

What is distinctive about these three hero books is the fact that these three kids take their personal tactics and tricks needed to gain power over their problems (abuse, poverty, silence) a step further into the realm of political activism directed to ensure that these problems are addressed at a different and higher level, i.e by the state and powers that be. The children show themselves to be not only heroes (people who can solve their own problems) but also experts and public minded individuals. An expert is someone who knows a lot about a particular field. Flipping through their hero books it is obvious that these three kids have acquainted themselves thoroughly with the Children's Bill. They have underlined, highlighted and ringed parts that affect them the most, and over the text of the bill they have scribbled their comments and recommendations. These three Dikwankwetla children are experts with insider knowledge about abuse, stigma and poverty. No one else is better qualified to comment on the Bill and it is hoped that the powers that be really listen to what they have to say.

To Kenya, Namibia, Zimbabwe...

Next in the series of mini libraries takes us to Nairobi, Kenya. As part of a Memory Work train the trainer workshop in December 2004, during which Sharon from Nekkies co-facilitated hero booking, we met a young man called Jesse. Jesse is 21 years old, a man of the street, a musician, and an artist. Without funding, he meets with a group of Nairobi street kids every week and in their group they talk, do art and give each other support. On the last day of the workshop he brought some of these kids along. There they were with the girls in long black robes and with their heads covered, making me feel like we were in Iran or Afghanistan. That the 10 Million hero Book Project might one day meet its objective and reach all kinds of children in all kinds of unimaginable places. In train the trainer workshops, Memory Work and hero booking is taught by allowing the trainee to make their own memory or hero book (rather than a purely theoretical training). Jesse himself made a hero book filled with beautifully haunted sketches of himself and his world, facing up to his shadows and demons, but also identifying his incredible creativity. In our dream list, for the Ten Million Hero Book Project,

there is a line item called mini grants to provide scale up support for materials, transport money, lunch money and nominal facilitation fees for people like Jesse. This will enable such natural young leaders to develop further mini libraries which can be circulated amongst the growing numbers of children engaging with this work.

Next stop Namibia. Based on the success of the Pretoria RAISA conference, we were invited to Windhoek to the 2005 Namibian National conference on orphans and vulnerable children. Here the job description was similar to the RAISA one, but instead of taking only five kids through the process so that they could share their stories and their skills with the adult delegates on the final day, we worked with fifty children. Two of the Nekkies kids, Sharon and Beattie, accompanied me on this journey as co-facilitators.

It was impossible to give each child the kind of attention and facilitation possible in small groups. What was remarkable about this process working with these kind of numbers, is that it forced the kids to become counselors and witnesses to each other and to each others stories. Part of hero booking involves a retelling at the end, where the facilitator/counselor/friend takes notes and then reconstructs a retelling that highlights the teller's hero qualities, resilience and courage, as well as a sense of hope around where the story might go. Although the books themselves were remarkable (as they always are), what really moved me more than anything else were the retellings. Here with very little help other than the manual which each child had, these children listened to each other's stories, looked at each others drawings, and constructed the most beautifully crafted and sensitive retellings which were signed by the reteller and handed over to the teller as a gift to be stuck into the back of the hero book. There are now 50 young trained up hero book trainers in Namibia, each of whom has a manual, their own hero book, and a few from Nekkies, Malawi and Zambia, ready to spread the word.

Thenjiwe Germann, a Memory Work facilitator is doing great work with children in Zimbabwe. Slowly but surely the approach looks as if, with adequate backing and funding, it might be able to take hold, become a kind of young people's social movement, able to grow and evolve to reach its target audience (10 million children in Africa who are facing difficult circumstances by the year 2010).

Back to South Africa, Médecins Sans Frontières and the Children's Rights Centre based in Durban, in collaboration with Lewis Hine Documentary Initiative and the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, are developing the Child-Friendly Healthcare Project to promote holistic, child-centered pediatric healthcare especially in the context of the rollout of pediatric antiretroviral treatment. This exciting variant of hero books is being driven by Sarah Leeper, a photodocumentary intern at the Children's Rights Centre. Specifically, she will work closely with children around South Africa to create books for children designed to assist them to live positively with HIV and to actively involve them in the medical management of the illness. Pediatric ARV medications have recently become available at many (though not many enough) sites throughout South Africa. However these advances in health care are not always accompanied by appropriate attention to a child's wider well-being. A longstanding power discrepancy between physician and patient, a lack of understanding surrounding children's

rights, and lack of resources and pediatric staff often mean that a child does not actively participate in his or her treatment. Not only is this a violation of patient's and children's rights, but may result in lack of understanding of the illness and reduced adherence to treatment plans. By the end of 2005, Sarah and the children will create at least four books for children, providing information about living positively with HIV using narratives of children living with HIV, their caregivers and healthcare team. Each of the books will be tailored to a different age group (2 to 4, 5 to 7, 8 to 11, 12 to 14 years).

...and to Australia and Canada

Our last stops for today are Australia and Canada. Roxanne Adams, another remarkable young woman who works as a volunteer for Relationships Australia, and who is part of the global Narrative Therapy community based in Adelaide, encountered hero books on a trip to South Africa. She took a manual and small pile of African examples back home where she invited a group of Aboriginal kids to make their own.

Finally, the seeds have also been sown at a conference at the University of Victoria, Canada. The meeting was called "Rafting the River of our Stories" hosted by the Department of Writing, University of Victoria. Most of the story tellers were First Nation Canadian story tellers. Amongst the many truly amazing people I met there who are likely to do something with hero books are, Merle Harris, author and library technician, Richard Van Camp, a First Nation Canadian voted Canada's most promising writer under the age of 30, Gregory Scofield, a brilliant poet and story teller, who is from the famous Metis clan and who I was intrigued to find shares with me also a Jewish bloodline, and Roberta Kennedy a.k.a Kwee-gay-ee-ones (Big Precious Loved Cloud), who sang and performed her sacred-since-the-beginning-of-the-world-Raven-stories, designed for and successful in opening up the heart. With both Canadian and Australian stamps on them, I expect, in my post box, fat packages with reading matter printed on the wrapping, very very soon.

A critical starter pack of diverse and unique hero books is something we almost have in our hands. All of this has been achieved on a shoestring budget, feeding into existing impulses, conferences, workshops and the multitude of amazing stories out there. What is needed now is some real funding to keep the pages turning, and to keep the simple hand bound hero books photocopied, exchanged and circulated.

** Jonathan Morgan, psychologist, is the former director of the Memory Box Project at the University of Capetown, South Africa. He is currently working for REPSSI on a long term consultancy that involves materials development, facilitating train the trainer workshops, and that aims to reach 10 million children facing difficult circumstances in Africa by the year 2010 (10 Million Memory Project). His preferred way of working combines elements of Narrative Therapy, Art Therapy and Participatory Action Research. In 1999, his and the Great African Spider Writers' book, "Finding Mr. Mandini" was published by David Philip. "Long Life – positive HIV stories" (Double Storey Books), which harnessed the creative energies of activists, writers, artists and photographers, is his second project along these lines.*

His current passion is the hero book in which children are invited to be the author, illustrator and main character in a hand made book, all about the power dynamic between them and their problems.

Contact: jonathan@10mmp.org

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Kontakt

Deutschschweiz

Medicus Mundi Schweiz
Murbacherstrasse 34
CH-4056 Basel
Tel. +41 61 383 18 10
info@medicusmundi.ch

Suisse romande

Route de Ferney 150
CP 2100
CH-1211 Genève 2
Tél. +41 22 920 08 08
contact@medicusmundi.ch