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# Using Stories for Teaching Primary Social Studies

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*Stories are often used by teachers to transmit knowledge, values and dispositions, deepen understanding and develop critical thinking in children. The power of stories and storytelling is highlighted in this article which focuses on why and how stories can be used for teaching primary social studies concepts and generalisations, how to choose suitable story books for children, and how to use some of them in the classroom. Three teaching approaches, namely, the shared book approach, the integrated biographical inquiry and storytelling are featured along with ideas of how these may be applied during lessons.*

## Introduction

Since the beginning of time, stories have been handed down from one generation to another in various societies. Stories help to transmit knowledge, culture, traditions, beliefs, morals and values of a community. They can make us laugh at ourselves, hold our breath, feel excited and be encouraged and uplifted in our spirit when we are down. Through stories, we can learn more about ourselves, the humanity and the world we live in (Sim, 2004). As stories are rich resources, they can be used for teaching and learning.

## Why Use Stories for Primary Social Studies Teaching and Learning?

Generally, researchers have found that young students are able to recall and describe things that are crucial to them because of their familiarity with using narrative thinking modes (Bruner, 1990; Downey & Levstik, 1991; Egan, 1988, 1990). Stories are usually organized in a format that comprises a person/group of people with certain goal/s and who use/s particular strategies to achieve these goal/s which can lead them to certain outcomes. This goal-strategy-outcome format enables students to remember story details and bridge from the known to the unknown. When narratives about the past are used, students are able to see the time, place and situation through the eyes of the people in the stories. Such narratives can develop students' empathy and combat their tendencies towards presentism when thinking about the past, and chauvinism when thinking about other cultures. They can be powerful tools to help them learn about different places and environments.

In the classroom, teachers can use stories as supplements to the primary social studies textbooks to spice up lessons and to pique students' curiosity and interest. Stories can enhance their content mastery and deepen their understanding of big ideas in the form of concepts and generalizations. They can grow their knowledge of their own culture, history and heritage, and broaden their awareness

and appreciation of other cultures. Stories can also develop their empathy, social and moral values and attitudes, self-confidence and self-esteem. In addition, they can bond the class together when students participate in telling a story and solving the protagonists' problems as the plot unfolds. They can feel proud of their performance and experience the joy of sharing stories. Stories can also develop their abilities to listen, speak, imagine, compose phrases and create stories. Because stories can speak to the heart, students can be motivated to be story readers, tellers and creators themselves (MacDonald, 2001; Raines & Isbell, 1999; Spagnoli, 1999 in Sim, 2004, p 140).

### **How to Choose Stories to Read or Tell?**

Teachers can draw from children's literature to read or tell stories during primary social studies lessons. The question to ask is what is good children's literature? According to Roxburgh, Zolotow, Engle and Kruse (1982), it is impossible or futile to define what is good children's literature because the definition would impose or set limits which are "specious, plausible but not genuine" (p 262). Heins (1982) agrees that defining good children's literature is "almost terrifying in its ambiguity" because one needs to find a common denominator for the diverse forms of children's literature which include fiction, non-fiction, poetry, folklore and picture books. Despite the difficulty in defining as highlighted by these scholars, it is still meaningful for teachers to bear in mind the traits of good stories for teaching especially with the smorgasbord of children's literature that cuts across different genres and cultural settings.

Gregory (1996 in Sim, 2004, pp. 140-141) provides several helpful criteria for

consideration: Stories should appeal and speak to the reader's/teller's and listener's hearts. This is critical because appealing and meaningful stories make the greatest impact on teaching and learning. Stories for teaching should be relevant to the curriculum taught. For example, "*Lim Bo Seng: Singapore's Best-Known War Hero*" retold by Clara Seow (1998) is suitable for the Primary 4 unit on "Journey towards Independence". Stories from "*Earth Care: World Folk Tales to Talk About*" by Margaret Read Macdonald (1999) are appropriate for teaching attitudes such as environmental care in Primary 3. Stories should also help to achieve lesson objectives.

The suitability of the story for students is also vital. The content and illustrations should be age and developmentally appropriate for them. For young students, suitable imaginative or expressive language with appealing sounds in stories is particularly essential to capture their attention and imagination. For older students, the plot and character development are the important considerations. In addition, stories should offer possibilities for students' actions and participation. Stories, which allow for students' involvement such as singing, clapping, making sounds or dancing, will enhance their enjoyment and engagement of the lesson. The text and illustrations in stories should be free from bias and stereotyping. This will ensure the inculcation of appropriate values and perspectives in students. Additionally, text and illustrations in stories should be accurate to enable students to learn the right thing. The illustrations must support the text and offer clues to the plot or concept formation, character traits, moods and settings. Stories should have elements of humour, suspense or drama which are the ingredients for a good story to sustain student interest in the story and lesson.

Changar and Harrison (1992 in Sim, 2004, p 141) have also suggested other factors for consideration. A good story should have a clearly defined theme, a well-developed plot with each incident related to the plot, quick actions, believable and well-defined characterization and vivid word pictures.

### Stories for Primary Social Studies

Figure 1 below shows a list of story books suitable for the primary social studies curriculum in Singapore. It is an extension of the list in Sim (2004, pp. 142-

143). The story books can be obtained from the National Library. To source for more books in the library, teachers can go to the collection of folktales in the Children's Section. Look out for books that are classified under 398.2. Look out for award winning children's books such as those that are awarded the Newbery Medal, Carnegie Medal, Canadian Children's Book of the Year Award, Australian Children's Book of the Year Award and the Esther Glen Award. Besides these books, one can also obtain stories from the Internet. Do a search with the word "story tell" for instance and many sites will be listed.

**Figure 1: Stories from the National Library and Internet**

<p><b>A) Stories from the National Library</b></p> <p><b><u>Singapore Stories</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ahuja, A. (2003). <i>Sasha visits the botanic gardens</i>. Singapore: Sunbear Publisher.</li> <li>• Chandran-Dudley, R. (2001). <i>Tales from the islands of Singapore</i>. Singapore: Landmark Books Pte Ltd.</li> <li>• Chou, C. (1995). <i>Beyond the empires: Memories retold</i>. Singapore: Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore.</li> <li>• Goh, S. T. (1998). <i>One Singapore: 65 stories by a Singaporean</i>. Singapore: SNP Publishing Pte Ltd.</li> <li>• Goh, S. T. (2000). <i>One Singapore 2: 65 more stories by a Singaporean</i>. Singapore: SNP Publishing Pte Ltd.</li> <li>• Goh, S. T. (2001). <i>One Singapore 3: More Singaporean stories</i>. Singapore: SNP Publishing Pte Ltd.</li> <li>• Koh, N. (2003). <i>My bowl of hei bee hiang rice: A Singaporean growing up in difficult times</i>. Singapore: Victory Knights Management &amp; Consultancy Services Pte Ltd.</li> <li>• Latif, A. I. (2009). <i>Lim Kim San: A builder of Singapore</i>. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.</li> <li>• Ling, S. (2002). <i>Down memory lane in clogs: Growing up in Chinatown</i>. Singapore: Asia Pac Books.</li> <li>• National Library Board (2010). <i>The ABC book of Singapore</i>. Singapore: National Library Board.</li> <li>• Ong, L. N. (2014). <i>Stacey goes to the National Museum</i>. Singapore: Little Knights.</li> <li>• Pugalenthii, (2001). <i>Myths and legends of Singapore</i>. Singapore: VJ Times International Pte Ltd.</li> <li>• Salmi, M. (2010). <i>Singapore's sword fish attack</i>. Malaysia: MPH Publisher.</li> <li>• Seow, C. (1998). <i>Lim Bo Seng: Singapore's best known war hero</i>. Singapore: AsiaPac Books.</li> <li>• Tan, C. T. (1995). <i>Story of a WWII resistance fighter: Force 136</i>. Singapore: AsiaPac Books.</li> <li>• Taylor, D. (2003). <i>Singapore students' favourite stories</i>. Singapore: Periplus.</li> <li>• The New Paper Team (2008). <i>Great Singapore stories: Founding fathers</i>. Singapore: SNP International.</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Stories from Asia</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chay, G. (2001). <i>Amazing Asian folktales</i>. Singapore: AsiaPac Books Pte Ltd.</li> </ul>
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- Spagnoli, C. (1998). *Asian tales and tellers*. Arkansas: August House Publishers Inc.
- Spagnoli, C. (1998). *A treasury of Asian stories and activities for schools and libraries*. Wisconsin: Alleyside Press.

#### **Environment**

- Brown, P. (2009). *The curious garden*. China: Hachette Book Group.
- Bingham, R. (2003). *A forest of stories: Magical tree tales from around the world*. Great Britain: Barefoot Books.
- Chin, S. C. (2002). *The tale of the magical seeds*. Singapore: Ukulele Design Consultants.
- Cherry, L. (1990). *The great kapok tree*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Hobbs, V. (2003). *Stefan's story*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Hooks, W. H. (1996). *Mr Garbage*. New York: Bantam Books.
- MacDonald, M. R. (1999). *Earth care: World folktales to talk about*. Connecticut: Linnet Books.
- Piroutta, S. (1999). *Stories from the Amazon*. England: Wayland Publishers.
- Taback, S. (1999). *Joseph had a little overcoat*. New York: Viking.
- Weir, B. (1991). *Panther dream: A story of the African rainforest*. New York: Hyperion Books for Students.

#### **School**

- Dungworth, R. (2000). *Start school: Talk about my big school*. Auckland: Ladybird Books Ltd.
- Swope, S. (2001). *Amelia's notebook*. Berkeley, California: Tricycle Press.

#### **Different Cultures**

- Friedman, I. R. (1984). *How my parents learned to eat*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Say, A. (1993). *Grandfather's journey*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

#### **B) Stories from the Internet**

- Heather Forest's Story Arts site  
<http://www.storyarts.org/library/index.html>
- Storytelling Resources  
<http://www.folktale.net/resouces.html>
- Tim Sheppard's site  
<http://www.timsheppard.co.uk/story>
- Whootie Owl  
[www.storiestogrowby.com](http://www.storiestogrowby.com)

### **Teaching Approaches Using Stories**

Teachers can either read or tell stories to their students. Story reading involves the teacher reading from a storybook to students. The focus is on the words. There is not much eye contact with students and teachers use their voices and facial expressions to draw students' attention to the story. Students can be active by chiming in on repetitive sections of the story, suggesting obvious words, predicting story outcomes or engaging in expressive activities (Holdaway, 1979). In

storytelling, the focus is on the audience (Turner-Bisset, 2005). Teachers will memorise and internalise the story and tell the story without referring to the storybook. They have eye contact with students all the time and use their voices, facial expressions, gestures and body language and even props to engage them in the story. They can also involve students in the story by getting them to chant, sing along, clap and dance. Storytelling can therefore be more challenging than story reading as it requires more teacher preparation. Teachers need to learn the

story without referring to the storybook and they have to think of ways to involve their listeners. This is especially so if there are young listeners who cannot sit still for long and love to move around or do something together with or for the characters in the story.

In the following section, under story reading, two approaches will be shared. They are the shared book approach and the integrated biographical inquiry. The difference between the two approaches is that in the former, teachers will read to the class whereas in the latter, teachers will get the class to do their own independent reading for the completion of a social studies task. Storytelling as the third approach will be further elaborated.

### ***Shared Book Approach***

The shared book approach or SBA for the reading programme is developed by Don Holdaway (1979) in New Zealand. It involves the use of enlarged text in big books that assists young students to attain understanding and experience as readers. They participate as readers in a non-threatening manner and acquire literacy skills over time. Teachers using SBA are urged to simulate the home reading environment when they read with their charges in class (Karges-Bone, 1992). This can be achieved by having a cosy reading corner in class with shelves of books, rugs, big bean bags and an easel for big books.

Although the approach is used for teaching language skills, there are useful aspects about the approach as suggested by Holdaway (1982) which teachers can bear in mind when teaching primary social studies. Firstly, the books to be used need to be those that students love. Secondly, the books need to have print large enough to be seen 20 feet away. Lastly, teachers need to inject enthusiasm in reading the

big books. Karges-Bone (1992) adds that good quality big books are short (about 10 to 15 pages) and they engage students. Students are captivated by the rhyme in the text which enhances their ability to remember. Such books are well illustrated and students are able to make sense of the text by examining the pictures. Usually the big books have a strong but simple plot and storyline. They also contain a sense of humour which would be appreciated by students. Strickland and Morrow (1990) state that SBA can be carried out effectively for group sizes ranging from two to 25 students. It is suitable for students as young as two years old and as old as nine years old in the third grade. The choice of the big book and its use depend very much on student development. But basically, the key feature of big books is the patterned and predictable language which students enjoy and allow them to develop literacy skills.

SBA comprises the following steps: a) tuning in, b) pre-reading, c) first reading, d) second reading with all the steps a) to d) completed on Day 1, and e) third reading on Day 2. The sequence of story reading from whole to part to whole is utilized in the approach.

On Day 1, the purpose of tuning in is to settle students down and create a mind-set for reading. Here, students are exposed to something familiar such as their favourite poems, jingles, songs with enlarged text which need not be related to the children's book of the day. Tuning in usually lasts for two to three minutes. In the pre-reading, students' schema needs to be activated. Teachers can ask students questions about the illustrations on the book cover to predict what the story is about before reading out the book title. This is because all students will be able to read illustrations but not every child can read the text. This implies that the book chosen

needs to have very good illustrations. When reading aloud, it is important not to point but to glide the pointer under the words to help students match the print to the sound and to teach them that reading English is from left to right and there is a space between words. In the first reading, reading is done expressively and teachers sit in a way that they can see the class and the book. As the reading progresses, teachers can ask more questions that are aimed at literal, inferential, personal response, reorganization / re-interpretation and evaluation levels. By the end of the first reading, students should be able to get a good overview of the story. In the second reading, teachers will read the text aloud again together with the class without stopping and with their voices leading the reading. This will help students attain fluency and automaticity in word recognition, and internalize syntactic structure. The second reading is followed by some assessment of students' understanding of the story.

On Day 2, teachers will recapitulate the story read the day before by re-reading the text for the third time. There will be explicit teaching of one or two teaching points and how the parts fit together to make the whole, that is, to construct meaning for the story. Activities can be constructed to help students deepen their understanding of the story, theme, character application of linguistic/vocabulary items, connect writing with reading and allow for building on story language and sentence structures. Examples of these activities include writing, painting, group murals and mask making for drama.

Although SBA emphasizes the development of young students' literacy skills, the approach can be modified for teaching primary social studies with a different emphasis. Instead of

foregrounding the teaching of literacy skills, it will be the development of students' understanding of core primary social studies concepts and generalizations or the big ideas as the primary teaching goal. The way to achieve this goal is through asking questions targeted at developing students' conceptual understanding of the big ideas identified in the story books, and these big ideas should be aligned with the Ministry of Education (MOE) primary social studies syllabus.

### **Role of Questions in Conceptual Teaching**

Questions on children's literature need to be carefully crafted to promote the learning of primary social studies concepts and generalizations. Many types of questions can be asked and they can serve different purposes. Questions can assess students' understanding, focus their attention, guide their thinking, follow up on their responses and facilitate class participation (Parker, 2012). Research conducted on classroom questions show that teachers often use low-level recall type of questions which begin with who, what, when and where. They involve memory work and although they are important, they do not promote high-order thinking that require students to apply, analyse, synthesize, interpret and evaluate information (Parker, 2012).

Whatever the purposes, in general, questions should as far as possible be clear, focused and open-ended to encourage diverse views and promote thinking. According to Bloom and his colleagues (1956), questions that promote thinking can be classified into five categories, namely, questions for knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis and synthesis. In McTighe and Wiggins' (2004) "Six Facets of Understanding", they have identified

“thinking” questions that ask for explanation, interpretation, application, perspective taking, empathy and self -

knowledge. See Figure 2 for the different types of questions.

**Figure 2: Different Types of Questions**

Source: Bloom, B. S., Engelhart, M. D., Furst, E. J., Hill, W. H. & Krathwohl, D. R. (1956). <i>Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals. Handbook 1: Cognitive domain</i> . NY: David Mckay.	
Knowledge	<p>Questions that test for recall (eg: define, recall, recognize, recollect, identify)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The knowledge questions are characterized by who, what, when and where</i></li> </ul>
Comprehension	<p>Questions that test for understanding (eg: describe, compare, contrast, explain, illustrate, associate)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What is meant by...</i></li> <li>• <i>Can you describe...</i></li> <li>• <i>What is the difference/what are the similarities...</i></li> <li>• <i>What is the main idea...</i></li> </ul>
Application	<p>Questions that require execution (eg: select, transfer, use information and generalizations to complete a task such as problem-solving, classifying, hypothesising, relating, selecting or transferring)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>How would you... given that...</i></li> <li>• <i>What would happen if...</i></li> </ul>
Analysis	<p>Questions that test for reasoning (eg: support arguments and opinions through organising ideas, weighing evidence, drawing conclusions, inferring, reasoning logically and critically, identify causes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Why...</i></li> <li>• <i>Take a stand...support...</i></li> </ul>
Synthesis	<p>Questions that require creating something (eg: produce, design, develop, originate, integrate, combine, predict, develop, improve, reflect)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>How could we/you...</i></li> <li>• <i>How can...</i></li> <li>• <i>What if...</i></li> <li>• <i>Do you suppose that...</i></li> </ul>
Evaluation	<p>Questions that require assessing (eg: summarise, judge, defend, assess, argue, reason, appraise, criticise, appreciate, select, deduce, decide on priorities)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Were they right to...</i></li> <li>• <i>Would you agree that...</i></li> <li>• <i>Would it be better if...</i></li> <li>• <i>What is your opinion...</i></li> </ul>
Source: McTighe, J. & Wiggins, W. (2004). <i>Understanding by design: Professional development workbook</i> . Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.	
Explain	<p>Provide thorough, supported and justifiable accounts of the phenomena, facts and data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What is the key idea in... ?</i></li> <li>• <i>What are the examples of... ?</i></li> <li>• <i>What caused... ?</i></li> <li>• <i>What are the effects of... ?</i></li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>How did this come about?</i></li> <li>• <i>Why is this so?</i></li> </ul>
Interpret	<p>Tell meaningful stories, offer apt translations, provide or reveal historical or personal dimension of ideas and events, make them personal or accessible through images, anecdotes, analogies and models</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What is the meaning of...?</i></li> <li>• <i>What are the implications of...?</i></li> <li>• <i>What does ... reveal about...?</i></li> <li>• <i>So what? Why does it matter?</i></li> <li>• <i>How does this relate to me/us?</i></li> </ul>
Apply	<p>Effectively use and adapt what one knows in diverse contexts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>How is...applied in the larger world?</i></li> <li>• <i>How could we use...to overcome...?</i></li> <li>• <i>How and when can we use this?</i></li> </ul>
Perspective	<p>See points of view through critical eyes and ears, see big picture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What are the different points of view about...?</i></li> <li>• <i>How might this look from X's point of view?</i></li> <li>• <i>How is...similar to or different from...?</i></li> </ul>
Empathize	<p>Find value in what others might find odd, alien or implausible, perceive sensitively on the basis of prior direct experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What would it be like to walk in X's shoes?</i></li> <li>• <i>How might...feel about...?</i></li> <li>• <i>How might we reach an understanding about...?</i></li> <li>• <i>What was...trying to make us feel or see?</i></li> </ul>
Self- knowledge	<p>Be aware of what one does not understand, why understanding is hard and how one comes to understand.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>How do I know...?</i></li> <li>• <i>What are the limits of my knowledge about...?</i></li> <li>• <i>How can I best show...?</i></li> <li>• <i>What are my strengths and weaknesses in...?</i></li> </ul>

An example of a social studies lesson using the story entitled, “The Tale of the Magical Seeds” based on a modified SBA

approach and questioning is presented in the Strategy Example 1 below.

**Strategy Example 1: The Story of “The Tale of the Magical Seeds” by Chin See Ching (2002) for a Primary 3 Social Studies Lesson**

<p><b>Topic:</b> Keeping Singapore Green</p> <p><b>Time Frame:</b> 2 periods</p> <p><b>Concepts:</b> Greening, environment, contribution</p> <p><b>Generalization:</b> Greening the environment requires everybody’s contribution.</p> <p><b>Unit Question:</b> How can everybody contribute to the greening of the environment?</p>
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**Specific Instructional Objectives:**

At the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- explain the importance of greening, and
- appreciate the greening of the environment by contributing towards the care of greenery.

**Prior Student Knowledge:**

Students have already covered the story entitled, “*Making the Little Red Dot Blue and Brown*” by Emily Lim, a MOE primary 3 social studies reader. They are aware of the ways to conserve water, electricity and resources through the 3Rs.

**Equipment and Resources:** A white screen, a LCD projector, a laptop, slides, the story book entitled, “*The Tale of the Magical Seeds*”

**Learning Environment:** Classroom

**Suggested Instructional Activities**

**Tuning-in (5 minutes)**

- 1) Using the LCD projector, teacher shows students some slides with pictures on Singapore’s greenery (eg: Gardens by the Bay, trees along the roads, MRT viaducts, vertical gardening, neighbourhood parks and nature reserves or nature parks, etc).
- 2) Teacher asks the class the following questions:
  - What is common in all the pictures shown?
  - How would you describe Singapore’s environment based on these pictures?
  - How did Singapore become so green?
  - Why is it important for Singapore to be green?
  - What do we do to keep Singapore green?

**Development (40 minutes)**

- 1) Teacher will inform the class that they are going to read “*The Tale of the Magical Seeds*” to find out the answers to some of the questions asked (in the tuning-in).
- 2) As teacher reads the story, she will ask some more questions to help students learn the concepts of greening, environment and contribution:
  - What was the island like before it was developed?
  - Why was the island developed?
  - How did the people develop the island?
  - In what ways was the island affected when it was developed?
  - How did people contribute to make the island beautiful again?
  - How did people care for the trees?
  - Can the island become beautiful with one person’s effort alone? Why not?
  - What is the main lesson of this story?

Note: Teacher will introduce and explain the concepts and emphasise the generalization during the discussion.

**Conclusion (15 minutes)**

- 1) Teacher will read the story one more time together with the class.
- 2) Teacher ends the lesson by reinforcing the generalization and linking it to the greening of Singapore. Singapore is green because a green Singapore can make the country beautiful, offer quality living for its people, make its people happy and attract investors. The vision of a “Clean and Green Singapore” originated from our first Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew. However, the vision of a garden city of Singapore in the past and the Singapore city in the garden of today cannot be achieved without people’s effort. Everybody can contribute towards the greening of Singapore by taking care of the trees and plants in the parks and everywhere.

### ***Integrated Biographical Inquiry***

The assumption behind the use of SBA is that students have not acquired the skills of reading and the approach will help them *learn to read* in the short and medium run. But the ultimate goal in the long run is for students to be independent readers so that they will be able to *read to learn* on their own. SBA is most appropriate for younger students but it is not suitable for older ones as they are generally independent readers. Therefore, instead of teachers reading with their students, teachers can provide stories for students to read independently and learn about social studies concepts in the process. The idea of the integrated

biographical inquiry and creation of a narrative come from Akmal and Ayre-Svingen's (2002) work. They explain that by allowing students create a biographical narrative, they will be able to make sense of and connect with their biographical subjects' lives. This approach can be used to help our students learn more about the founding fathers of Singapore and their contributions. Such knowledge can help to deepen their sense of appreciation of what they have and enjoy today as Singaporeans. An example of how to use stories for students to read to learn and do a biographical inquiry is illustrated in the Strategy Example 2 below.

### **Strategy Example 2: The Stories of “*The Master Sculptor: Goh Keng Swee*” and “*The Big Builder: Lim Kim San*” taken from *The New Paper’s Great Singapore Stories: Founding Fathers* (2008) for a Primary 4 Social Studies Lesson**

**Topic:** Leaders’ Contributions to the Country

**Time Frame:** 2 periods

**Concepts:** Founding fathers, contributions, impacts

**Generalization:** Selfless contributions by our founding fathers have brought about positive impact on the country and people’s lives.

**Unit Question:** How did our founding fathers, Dr Goh Keng Swee and Mr Lim Kim San, impact the lives of Singaporeans?

**Specific Instructional Objectives:**

At the end of the lessons, students will be able to:

- identify the common traits of our founding fathers, Dr Goh Keng Swee and Mr Lim Kim San;
- describe the context under which their contributions were made; and
- describe their contributions and impact on the country and people.

**Equipment and Resources:** Computers, the story books entitled, “*The Master Sculptor: Goh Keng Swee*” and “*The Big Builder: Lim Kim San*”

**Learning Environment:** Computer laboratory

**Suggested Instructional Activities**

**Tuning-in (5 minutes)**

- 1) Teacher writes the question, “What is meant by ‘founding fathers’?”
- 2) Teacher elicits students’ responses.
- 3) Teacher explains the term “founding fathers” and asks students who they think the founding father(s) of Singapore is/are.
- 4) Teacher tells students that the lesson will focus on two of the founding fathers of Singapore.

They are the late Mr Lim Kim San who was the man behind the housing development of Singapore and the late Dr Goh Keng Swee who was the economic architect of Singapore. The class will do a research using the stories provided by the teacher and supplemented by their own web searches.

#### **Development (45 minutes)**

- 1) Teacher divides the class into groups and assigns them to one of the founding fathers for research.
- 2) Before the groups start their work, teacher asks the class to generate questions that they would like to find out about the founding fathers.
- 3) Teacher helps students to classify the questions into categories such as person's family background, birth place and date, education, career, contributions, context of contributions, challenges faced and impacts.
- 4) Once the questions are defined, students commence on their research. Teacher supports student learning by providing the stories of the two men from the "*Great Singapore Stories: Founding Fathers*" series. Teacher also encourages students to do a web search on the founding fathers to supplement their knowledge. Students are instructed to organize themselves to take on functional roles (eg: time keeper, encourager, leader, etc) and task roles (eg: one person to do research on contribution, another to do on impact, etc) so that positive interdependence and individual accountability in cooperative learning can be promoted.

#### **Conclusion (5 minutes)**

- 1) Teacher foreshadows what will be covered in the next few lessons:
  - Students will use their creativity to create mobile hangers that provide the biographical sketches of the founding fathers and the groups have to compete to identify the founding father in the biographical sketches.
  - Groups will also evaluate each other's work with rubrics provided by the teacher.
  - For individual assessment, students will compare the two founding fathers and identify the common traits, contributions and impacts. They will write a reflection on what they have learnt from the biographical inquiry.

### ***Storytelling***

Sometimes instead of reading to students or getting them to do their own independent reading for the completion of a social studies task, teachers can tell them stories to engage them in the lessons. MacDonald (1993, 2001 in Sim, 2004, p 140) offers some guidelines for learning a story. She advises teachers to commence with stories which are familiar to them or which they are excited to share with their students. They need to first read it aloud and pay attention to and memorise the key phrases, chants, songs or onomatopoeic words or cultural specific or well-written openings and closings. The purpose is not to reproduce the story word for word but to communicate its intent. The story structure is analysed by breaking it into the opening, the episodes (of development)

and the closing. Knowing the story structure is crucial for teachers to find their way through the story should they forget. They will need to rehearse the story in their own words a few times without any text reference and "repair" the story by taking note of and practising those parts which are problematic. Reflection on their own strengths and weaknesses after each telling will help them improve. Practice stops once they are thoroughly familiar with the story.

After the story learning, the next step is to tell it. MacDonald (1993, 2001 in Sim, 2004, pp. 144-145) makes several suggestions in this area. Teachers need to get the environment ready for storytelling. For example, they may ask their students to rearrange their seats in a circle, or alternatively, they may create a special

“storytelling corner” in class with some bookshelves filled with storybooks and a rug on the floor and ask their students to sit on the rug as they listen to the stories. Teachers need to ensure that their students are settled down and are ready to listen before commencing the story. The story is to be told in one’s own words because storytelling is not about recitation or performance but is about speaking to the audience. Teachers can revel in the language by taking time to roll the lush words around on their tongues and use voice variations and repetitive phrases to draw students into the story. Teachers need to utilize their eye contact, facial expressions and gestures to enhance the story appeal to the young audience. They can share their enthusiasm and warmth with their students so as to draw their attention to the story and enhance their enjoyment. Teachers also need to pace themselves by slowing down if need be or speed up as the story develops. Whatever it is, the pace of the storytelling is

determined by the story. Teachers need to be sensitive to students’ responses and needs. Teachers can encourage students to interact and participate in the storytelling by clapping, singing or chanting special words that appear in the story. However, it is important for teachers to be true to themselves. It is best for teachers to be their natural selves and not try wild gestures if they are uncomfortable about them. Ending the story with confidence is important to bring the audience back to their own lives. Teacher should not worry about the performance technique. They should simply share the tales they love most in a simple, direct way and build up their experience and storytelling techniques over time using riddles, images, rhythms and repetitions, gestures, sound effects and word, music, costumes, masks and other props. An example of how storytelling can be used in primary social studies teaching (Sim, 2004, p 146) is illustrated in Strategy Example 3 below.

### **Strategy Example 3: The Story of “*Sang Nila Utama*” taken from Pugalenthii’s *Myths and Legends of Singapore* (2001) for a Primary 4 Social Studies Lesson**

**Topic:** Stories of Early Singapore

**Time Frame:** 1 period

**Concepts:** Legend, past

**Generalization:** Legends can inform about a country’s past.

**Unit Question:** Why are legends important?

**Specific Instructional Objective:**

At the end of the lesson, students will be able to describe the people and the significant events that led the island of Temasek to be renamed Singapura.

**Equipment and Resources:** Visualiser, visualizer backdrops showing different scenes (eg forest, look-out point, calm sea, fierce storm) and shadow cut-outs (Sang Nila Utama, his followers, deer, boat and lion), the story book entitled, “*Sang Nila Utama*”

**Learning Environment:** Classroom

### **Suggested Instructional Activities**

#### **Tuning-in (5 minutes)**

- 1) Teacher writes the word, “legend” on the board and asks the class what they know about the word before explaining its meaning.
- 2) Teacher explains to the class that they will be listening to a legend of how Singapore got its name.
- 3) Teacher informs students that they will help to bring the story to life by producing the necessary sound effects. Therefore, they need to listen carefully to the teacher’s story.
- 4) Teacher assigns “roles” to the various sectors of the class. For example, one group will produce jungle sounds whenever the word “jungle” is mentioned in the story, another will produce the sounds of a “calm sea”, a “fierce storm”, an “animal or a lion”. Two students will handle the shadow cut-outs and change the scenes as the story develops.

#### **Development (15 minutes)**

- 1) Teacher tells the story of “*Sang Nila Utama*” taken from Pugalenthii’s *Myths and Legends of Singapore*. (Note that this story is rather long and needs to be condensed. There are a number of difficult words in the story which need to be simplified for the average Primary 4 students.)
- 2) Teacher pauses at the appropriate intervals to allow the scenes to be changed and the sound effects to be produced. If the first narration does not run smoothly, teacher will go over it a second time.
- 3) Teacher poses some questions to check for students’ understanding of the story.

#### **Conclusion (10 minutes)**

- 1) Teacher asks students why legends are important.
- 2) Teacher asks students to draw a series of pictures to depict the main events of the story.

Adapted from Lee, P. & Sim, H. H. (2002). Creative strategies for teaching social studies. In D. Tan & M. Ng, (Eds). *Training manual for primary 3 teachers: Teaching strategies for the new social studies syllabus*. Singapore: Staff Training Branch, Ministry of Education.

### ***When to Use Stories?***

Stories can be integrated into the beginning, middle or end of a primary social studies lesson. When it should be used depends on the objective of reading or telling. If the teacher’s intention is to stimulate students’ interest in a topic, then the story may be integrated at the beginning of the lesson. However, if the story can help students comprehend some concepts or generalizations or if the story can imbue some values or attitude, then it is best to include the story as the lesson develops. However, if the intention is to reinforce the concepts learnt or to wrap up the lesson, then the story can be added at the lesson conclusion. Since curriculum time can be a constraint, there is a need to choose stories that are short, between 5 and 10 minutes long as stories that are too long may not hold students’ attention easily (Sim, 2004).

Many follow-up activities can be conducted after a story is told. A lot will again depend on the lesson objectives. Some examples of follow-up activities include doing art and craft, writing story reviews, retelling the tale from another perspective, making new endings, conducting a role play to interview the story characters, conducting a discussion or debate, making comparisons between the story and actual events (Sim, 2004).

### **Conclusion**

Primary social studies can be taught in various ways and one of the ways is to use stories in teaching. Story reading through the shared book approach, the integrated biographical inquiry and storytelling if used effectively, can enhance content and values learning in primary social studies. Sim (2004) states that the key to effective use of story reading and storytelling is practice. The more teachers tell or read

stories aloud to students, the more confidence they will gain and the easier it will become. One does not need to have a special talent for story reading and storytelling. Rather there is a need to read or tell the story in a way that is natural to the story reader/teller and they are comfortable with it. Nobody can read or tell a story quite like another, not even professional story readers and tellers. Teachers should hone their story reading and storytelling skills and open themselves up to the story and the audience and tell it from their hearts. When the stories are read or told with such enthusiasm, they will engage students in learning.

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