

## **The role of traditional children games within the context of intangible heritage**

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### **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of an educational programme for grades 6 and 7 learners. The emphasis is on children's verbal expressions that come to the fore through traditional children's games and specifically hand-clapping games, circle games and skipping rope. We all have stories to tell, whether you are ten, thirty or sixty, and this programme attempts to create a platform where children are given the opportunity to tell their stories by means of children games. Undoubtedly a wealth of stories, rhyme, traditions and customs are contained in children's games. Children observe certain things in their environment, family and amongst friends, and add some music, words and drama. Sometimes the game has rules, other times not. Through this they are conveying a certain message.

### **Background to the Afrikaans Language Museum**

In contrast to museums that are traditionally known for exhibiting tangible objects the approach of the Afrikaans Language Museum (ALM) is one of defining intangible heritage. The museum lends itself as a place where visitors can interact with the exhibitions and have a "hands on learning experience" of Afrikaans in its many facets. Themes include, amongst others, naming, such as place names, the development of Afrikaans, and its variants and character in the modern context so that visitors can understand that Afrikaans is indeed a living, growing language that is constantly adapting itself to the modern world. Other themes include folk language, word craft and word craft in media. The most important factor of our exhibition is that it is very interactive and different age and cultural groups can identify with the theme.

### **Project definition**

The ALM is currently involved in a project recording the verbal expressions of the people from Kamiesberg, which is located in Namaqualand in the Northern Cape. These verbal expressions include, amongst others, the dialect of the people in the Kamiesberg region, folk tales, songs, idioms and sayings, and of course traditional children games.

In 2006 the ALM approached the local community leaders with regard to a study of the verbal expressions in the region. Between June 2007 and July 2008 interviews were conducted in the fourteen towns in the Kamiesberg, and educational workshops were presented at the local schools. Besides conducting research amongst the adults, research amongst children was also essential and the focus was on a theme that they can identify with – a theme that is also an oral history (product of an unwritten tradition), oral tradition (a custom that has been practised for generations) and a heritage because children inherited traditional games from their parents and peers. The programme strives further to make children aware that they are creators and cultivators of their own folklore and that they play from an early age an important role in the cultural life of their group. It is also important that children be involved in the museum and heritage sector so that they can realise that they can also make a contribution in these sectors. In this programme their stories are being told through traditional children games.

Today children are exposed to entertainment such as cinemas, television, amusement parks, shopping centres and computer games. As a result of these forms of entertainment the creative faculties of children are not stimulated as in the past. In cases where children do play it is imperative that these games be recorded and kept alive. The preservation of this priceless heritage is very important.

### **Objectives of the project:**

- To emphasize the importance of traditional children's games and to demonstrate that children should not be excluded from the cultural and heritage sector.
- To increase awareness of the rich cultural heritage of these games.
- To set up a database of the various children's games.
- To process and interpret the data, which will be displayed in the Afrikaans Language Museum and the end results also will be distributed to the various towns and participating schools.

### **Children games and the National Curriculum**

In the South African context you can not just enter a school and wish to conduct an educational programme. Educators always want to know how your specific programme will link up with the learning areas of the National Curriculum. In taking this into account, we have identified four learning areas: Language (Afrikaans), Social History (History), Arts and Culture, and Life Orientation. One of the aims of the National Curriculum is to develop the full potential of learners so that they can become confident and independent, multi-skilled, etc.

In realizing this, it is important that museums and other heritage sectors form partnerships with the Department of Education. As a language museum we have also realised that language is a powerful instrument for preserving our tangible and intangible heritage (Shohel, 2000). Children games, for example, are a unique folklore performed by children for children. These performances are a reflection of their culture and an indication of how children connect with the adult world. By recording and examining the collected data, the Afrikaans Language Museum will further promote the importance of traditional games through exhibitions and other means of presentation. The findings will be interpreted and documented so they can be accessible for future research.

### **Learning Areas**

#### **Languages (Afrikaans)**

In this learning area the focus is mainly on Afrikaans as well as the influence and the mixing of other languages that occur in traditional children games.

In terms of children games, children learn that verbal communication is also a form of literature and just as important as written communication, and that it also transmits a certain message. According to Iona and Peter Opie, the language used by children helps them with word form and structure. This is because of the spontaneous use of words, sentences and rhymes.

Because children's games are passed on orally many variations occur. We have visited fourteen schools and at each of these schools the same two games occurred, namely *Nelly* and *Around the Bush*, but at each of the schools different variations were recorded. Since these games are passed on orally variations are quite a common phenomenon.

Variations are due to loss of words and or word phrases, different interpretations, and in some cases the melody might change.

### **Social Science**

In this learning area the emphasis is on relationships between people and the relationship between people and the environment. These relationships vary over time and space. An important aspect of this learning area is that it focuses especially on the social group and the time factor.

Within the context of children's games children also belong to a group, and within this group customs and expressions that are an important aspect of folklore occur. Through this children gain an understanding of their own values and those of their group.

The games that children play have been passed on to them orally by their predecessors. Since these games are still being played today, the past and the future are bridged; in other words, children are still connected to the past to some extent and these traditions are still being kept alive by means of play.

Example of a specific game:

*Buck, Buck Rogers*

*Steve, Steve Anderson*

*Aunt Stienie, with the mini, with the Lexington*

The above game is rooted in TV programmes broadcasted in the 1980s. While we were conducting the study, a group of learners were playing the game. I asked them if they knew the characters. They said no and were not even aware that these were real characters. They were totally in disbelief when they were told that these characters did exist.

This game is with no doubt passed on orally. The historical facts exist, but the children were not aware that these were characters from television programmes. The historical events were contextualized so that children gained a better understanding of the origin. If it is possible it is important that the context of games be explained to children. By doing this we are bridging the gap between now and then, and making children aware that through their games they are still connected to the past. Since games are passed on orally the creator is often unknown, but in some cases it is possible to trace the origin of certain games.

### **Arts and Culture**

This learning area focuses on the learners' ability to create, interpret and present various forms of art. The learner develops the skills and knowledge to create and present artworks, learns about history of the arts, culture and heritage, gains individual and group participation, and practises communication and expression based on South Africa's past and present.

In the context of children games, the creativity of learners comes to the fore. It is an indication of how children are creating their own world, interpreting and explaining it. These games are funny, sometimes rude, and at times very confusing and do not make sense at all. But according to Rena de Villiers, play and games are extremely important for a child's physical, social, emotional and spiritual development. Children learn to work together in a team and realise the value of teamwork. She also mentions that children's games allow children scope for giving their imaginations free reign.

Through these learning areas, children's understanding of an existing and still practising custom become much more relevant. They also shed light that children games are not just a given but also contain important historical facts, traditions and customs, and that they have been passed orally from generation to generation.

### **Content of programme**

The target group of the workshops were grades 6 and 7 learners and at some schools, especially in rural areas, they were also presented to grade 5 learners, and in one case to an entire school that consisted of 32 learners in total. Fourteen sessions were conducted, reaching nearly 300 learners and recording approximately one hundred verbal children games.

### **Format of workshops**

The workshops were divided into a theoretical and a practical session that took about two hours per class.

#### Theoretical session

In this session concepts such as oral history, oral traditions, heritage, folk language and traditional children games were explained and discussed. It is important that learners understand these concepts in order for them to understand the essence of the workshop. It is also important to outline the significance of children games; that they not be seen as a given, an act that is part of children's development, but that they contain so much history and customs. The session also emphasized that children's games are the voice of the child and also give an indication of the creativity of children. Furthermore, it is essential to contextualize games if it is possible so that children can understand the now and then. It is important to emphasize the preservation of children games so that they can be available for future reference.

#### Practical session

For the practical session learners prepared and presented games that were tape-recorded. These forms of literary art had to be peculiar to the environment and practised on a regular basis by the children.

### **Outcomes of programme**

The intended outcomes of this educational programme are to enable learners to investigate the past, present and future. Children's games have been passed on orally from generation to generation. Children feel connected to the past by realising the continuity of these expressions that were performed by their predecessors. This programme further strives to bridge the gap between the past, present and future.

Through children games, the learner develops skills to create and present these art works within the context of their social group. Children's games are also a reflection of everyday life. Through these games, children are imitating their parents, other adults, their peers, or any social and moral issue.

The most important factor of this programme is to emphasize the role children play within the heritage and museum sector. We have focused on a theme that children can relate to and identify with, but it is also a theme that contains a wealth of traditions and customs and

it is indeed a heritage, oral history and oral tradition. By playing these games traditions are being kept alive.

### **The road ahead**

This is still a work in progress. The data still needs to be examined and to be interpreted. It is important that the project will continue to exist after completion and that it will live on in the particular communities in which the research has been done. A manual for educators about children's games in the Northern Cape will be compiled. The data will also be displayed in the Afrikaans Language Museum. Through this programme we also want to support the continuous recording of new children's games and variations of them.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this educational outreach project is to create a platform where children can tell their stories by means of children's games. This programme has the potential to encourage conservation amongst learners and educators and to promote and enhance a sense of identity and pride in their own culture.

Since museums also perform an educational task, it is important that the educational programmes of museums be integrated with the Learning Areas of the National Curriculum. Museums are also a mouthpiece of cultural and heritage issues.

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