

## Tree of Life in Sundbyberg, Sweden



by

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For the last two years we have (in a small scale) been trying to develop different kinds of practice built on the Tree of Life metaphor in a Swedish context. In this paper we summarize our use of Tree of Life and some of our experiences.

The first time we first got in touch with Tree of Life was when we visited the 8<sup>th</sup> International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference in Norway 2007. We were deeply moved by Ncazelo Ncube-Mlilo and her story about her work among highly vulnerable children in Southern Africa. We immediately bought the DVD Tree of Life, which was really helpful in understanding how to learn and try out the method, and also teaching it to others.

### **Who are we?**

We work as family counselors in a municipality based service in a small suburb called Sundbyberg close to Stockholm, Sweden. We work with family therapy oriented approaches to support families, parents and young people to take on challenges in their relationships and life circumstances. Part time we also offer group oriented methods for parents and children. In that context we became interested in using Tree of Life to facilitate rich identity narratives that enhance the participants self esteem and coping abilities.

### **How we got going.**

All the articles about Tree of Life experiences that are published on Dulwich Centre Website were very useful in getting ideas about different ways of exploring the method. We started out with translating and putting together a short guideline in Swedish. At that time we mostly had in mind to work with a group of children in age 8 – 12 years.

Afterwards we discovered that REPSSI, South Africa, published a manual on internet; The Mainstreaming Psychosocial Care and Support: A Manual For Facilitators, authored by REPSSI, © 2007. It helped us a lot, all though we had to figure out how to apply Tree of Life in to our context.

### **Where we started and what we have tried.**

Our first approach with Tree of life started in January 2009 with a group of children aged 9-12 years old in our community. We wanted to test if the model was useful to children with various difficulties or traumas. The group met three afternoons to get to know each other by telling stories, playing together and doing exercises such as mental guidance to find your totem animal and what it stands for. The children named strengths they saw and qualities they liked in each other. To make the Tree of Life-work a structural cohesion we spent a weekend together. In addition to the Tree of Life-work we played and made lunch together. After the weekend we had group meetings once a week for a month. The last get together we invited the families of the children for a ceremony of future wishes for the children. In our eyes it was like a magic moment showing the family members the trees and sharing their hopes and dreams for the children.

Next time we tried Tree of Life with a group of children, almost the same age (two boys only 8 years). We split the work with Tree of Life in seven days, during the afternoons in the beginning of the summer. Some of the members of this group had difficulties focusing on the work and when we got to the point of telling and re-telling about the tree, they started teasing and not listening to each other. Pretty soon we stopped the telling and played some games instead. This didn't work! So, how should we go on with the telling and re-telling? We decided to have separate meetings where every child invited their parents, grandparents and siblings, as they wished, to be outsider witnesses to the story of their tree.

The Tree of Life-method has been used as a theme in an "empowerment group" for teenagers, dropping out of school and not knowing where to head in life. Tree of Life helped the youngsters to find their strengths, values to hold on to in life and dreams for the future. The method will be recurring also in future groups for "lost" youngsters.

We have also used the Tree of life with two brothers in foster care, making their trees together with the biologic parents and inviting the foster parents as outsider witnesses. The Tree of Life-work was made during one day for about six hours. The parents helped the children in making the trees by filling in to expand the story, name their strengths and the struggles of the family. The parents have declined that this day gave the family a combined experience, that deepened and confirmed the relationship between the members of the family.

### **Project for children of refugees and immigrants**

The news about Tree of Life spread in the surroundings. We were contacted by a school nurse responsible for the children of the refugees and new immigrants in Sundbyberg. A project between the social workers, helping the grown up immigrants and refugees, and the educators of the children were about to start. The United Nations convention on the rights of the child was the focus of the project and the aim to see the family as a whole system. This seemed like a very interesting work to us and so the cooperation started. Our part of the project was to teach the method to the teachers of the introduction classes, social workers, language guides and native language teachers. We decided to teach the method the same way Ncazelo Ncube-Mlilo did in the DVD Tree of life, by guiding the staff in making their own trees. During one day they created the trees and made the telling and retelling in groups of 4-6 persons. At the end of the day we discussed how to arrange the method in school, set dates and staff for the days.

Later on we assisted in the planning of the Tree of life days and we supervised the staff during the implementation.

The children of the introduction classes are divided into three groups, 7-12 years, 12-16 years and 16-19 years. The introduction groups have conducted the Tree of life-project two times each, totally in six groups. And this spring we are introducing Tree of life in three new groups. Teachers, language guides, social workers and native language teachers have worked side-by-side in helping the children making their trees, telling their story, comfort a child when needed, listened and supported the dreams and hopes of the children and finally celebrating together.

The people involved in the project have met and summoned the working together two times and we are now looking forward to spending a narrative day together in April. We have invited a therapist for a lecture in narrative theory to deepen the understanding of the narrative approach.

### **What have we learned?**

So is this a helpful method for children in our context? We think so. In the evaluations the children brings out various values from the days:

About loss and love; *"I have lost everything. This is my new tree, my new life".*

About roots, dreams and helping others; *"We have done a good job together. Saying nice things to each other, makes you feel happy. When I did my roots I thought a lot about my grand mother. It was fantastic! Yesterday I had a dream, that I would go back to my country and do Tree of Life with the children of my country. In my country many children suffer. I think they would be helped by doing Tree of Life."*

About feeling good; *"When I feel sad I can think about the nice words we told each other and I will forget about the bad."*



The staff of the school project described deepened relations with the children. Knowing about the history and about the child's way of coping made a difference in future work. One of the language guides sent us a mail; *"From my own experience as a refuge I feel how important it is that someone is interested in me and my roots. I am sure the pupils felt the same. I have noticed that the self-esteem of the child I was helping, has enhanced. He is more motivated and he seems more relieved and happy."*

The mix of the staff (socialworkers and schoolworkers) helped to widen the understanding of the whole system, focusing on the child. The socialworkers found a way to meet and create a relation with the child. In the future they are planning to have common meetings with the parents and teachers at school. The teachers are discussing how to invite parents to school and how to create a good context for meeting the families.

### Our own learning



We started out with a method we took to our hearts by listening to Ncazelo Ncube-Mlilo, watching the DVD and discussing together. We are both attracted to the narrative approach in meeting with people and difficulties, and eager to find ways to integrate the narrative ways in our work with children, parents and their social networks.

We have found various ways of using Tree of Life in our context and the developing process will continue. One dream is to develop Tree of Life

with a group of parents and children together. We are also anxious to use the method in our ordinary family therapy work.

We would like to notice some of the things we have learned during the process;

- We learned the importance of cohesive days. The children need a good structure and guidance over the days. Splitting up the work in shorter meetings for a full week was not helpful for the children, neither was the change between the Tree of Life work inside school and the ordinary breaks in the school ground. Many of the high school students appreciated making the Tree of Life in a different location.
- The importance of bringing the work of the children, with struggles, strengths, hopes and dreams, to the context of the child. We think the child needs support to hold on to his or her dreams from the family and other people surrounding the child such as teachers, friends etc.
- By trying in various ways we have learned that to understand the method the child needs some reflecting reflection in the method. For younger kids you need to adjust the approach in order to find a "language" that works. skills. We have learned that from the age of 9 year most children can assimilate the levels of

- The difficulties in guiding the children in the telling and re-telling position. We both struggled with the "interviewing" and had the same reflections from the staff of the school project.

All though we felt like beginners in exploring the full body of possibilities that lay within Tree of Life, we decided to lead a short seminar on that topic at The Swedish Family Therapy Conference in Umeå, Sweden in September 2010. We just wanted to share our experiences and perhaps to bring more attention to narrative approaches in our field in Sweden. Based on the seminar we also published an article about our experiences on Tree of Life in a local magazine for members in The Association for Family and Systemic Oriented Therapy in Stockholm.

The response was greater than we expected. There have been quite a number of colleagues who wants to know more and discuss how they can use Tree of life in their context. This is really fun but also a bit scary. We don't feel like "experts" on narrative approaches or Tree of Life. We need to grasp the fundamental and rich ideas of this approach and also to get more practice in conversations that facilitate richer and strengthening identity understandings. In order to make this possible we are connecting with therapists and others who have studied and practiced narrative approaches in our region. Our aim is to be part of a supportive network with shared visions on developing narrative approaches that fit our contexts.