



Everybody has a story: Use of Storytelling to address inclusion and diversity in primary classrooms

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Abstract

Children's ability for sharing and exchange of stories in the classroom can lead to a form of anecdotal learning that can be particularly useful for many children who might otherwise face difficulty in sharing their thoughts and ideas. Even though need for storytelling and its benefits for children have been established by many researchers but there is limited relevant literature in the Indian context. The study envisaged that storytelling can develop and integrate awareness, sensitivity, understanding and appreciation of empirical realities of the children's world. The present paper attempts to demonstrate through specific exploration of storytelling in primary classroom, its role which is far more complex and interplays at multiple levels than is often believed. The participants in the study were primary school children from three private and three state-run schools of Delhi. Participatory and constructive tools were used to generate storytelling voices of children.

Findings revealed that use of storytelling led to discussions on various themes such as individual differences, sensitivity toward others and also awareness of one's own self. Multiple views on an issue made the classroom more inclusive. Children reacted to the dialogues and discussions by participating, and giving spontaneous reviews and reactions. These dialogues infused and initiated an understanding of having multiple perspectives and they understood diversity in its true sense by being exposed to various experiences that other children had to offer. It turned out to be a powerful tool for learning and enabled students to be empowered social and cultural beings. Use of storytelling in classrooms had the potential to build up an environment that encouraged a respect for cultural diversity in classrooms.

Keywords: storytelling, primary classrooms, inclusion, diversity

Introduction

Children need ample of opportunities to express themselves including vocal expression. Before children start engaging in reading, writing and digital world they must be able to communicate orally. The digital and technological world does not give them the touch and feel of human to human interaction that they need.

Article 12 and 13 of the Convention on the Rights of Children (UNCRC, 1989) created the right for children to their own voice, right to expression, and for their own media. It directly denotes the role of society and community to create spaces for children to express themselves freely. The National Curricular Framework (2005) emphasizes that both in rural areas and metropolitan contexts children can gain a great deal by being exposed to local arts and crafts, stories and folk tales, songs and language variations. The inclusion of these elements makes the classroom setting an extension of the community. Such experiences enhance children's social competence and awareness about the socio-cultural backgrounds of different people. The National Focus Group Position paper on Teacher education (NCERT, 2005), states that teacher education must enable student teachers to understand children within their socio-cultural and political contexts. Furthermore they must view knowledge not necessarily as an external reality embedded in textbooks but as constructed in the shared context of teaching learning and personal experiences. Furthermore the National policy of Education (NPE, 1986-1992) recognizes that teachers should have the freedom to innovate, to devise suitable methods of communication and activities appropriate to the needs and capabilities of the community. Each child has certain rights that are of great importance. "If

the new philosophy of the rights of the child is to fulfill its promise, it must ensure that children not only survive, but have a voice in the world surrounding them and in planning their future" (Cohen, 1996, p. 131).

Singh (2002) ^[12] found that children's repertoire of stories and their ability to narrate comprises a cultural resource usually neglected and unrecognized as a source of competence and of educationally significant experiences in schools. By becoming storytellers, children can create for themselves a special presence in the classroom. The emphasis on fixed syllabus-based curriculum in the primary school years ignores the *cultural literacy* that children imbibe through methods like storytelling.

By the time children go to school they are able to construct their stories, drawings and play irrespective of their socio-cultural background (Dyson, 1994). The inherent diversity they bring with these symbols act as resources on which children and teachers build new possibilities. Using folklore in curriculum is also mentioned by Kumar (1992) ^[8] in *What is Worth Teaching?* as an important oral knowledge. He further appreciates storytelling for its worth that lies in its pluralistic inheritance as according to him, it protects diversity of cultural experiences from homogenising effects of modern education and media. Kakar (1978) ^[6] pointed at the role of folktales on psyche of a child and stated that spread of Hindu cultural values from one generation to the next takes place through the narration of stories in family.

Kumar (1992) ^[8] also talked about the perspective of the child. He proposed that it is always imperative to take learner's view point as it is difficult to think on their behalf. If they all would love storytelling to happen it should be introduced and done. He also added that the decision to

include storytelling as a compulsory school subject depends on the importance that is perceived of the folklore in its socio-cultural milieu. "It requires reflection on our conscious choices, the socio-economic and political underpinnings of these choices, and ultimately on the implication of choosing folklore as a school subject for all children." Some of the guiding principles that he derives from Gandhian legacy and child psychology are: the child's milieu be considered as a resource for itemizing required knowledge and skills that is local language, folklore, art and crafts; activity based teaching; children be trained to work in small groups; activities aimed at building school and home linkages; conducting outdoor activities; project work and opportunities to work independently.

Stories and cultures are inseparable as stories carry cultural heritage and spread cultural images, values, beliefs, and rhythms and even shared meanings of stories. Stories thus give voice to communities and keep the tradition going. Ramanujan (1991) ^[11] emphasized that a story gains its meaning in a context. It is like a 'travelling metaphor' that is ascribed a new meaning with every telling and retelling. And thus it travels and crosses boundaries, physical or linguistic every time a person shares it. He arranged the tales that he collected, in cycles (p. xxiv) and these were-male centered tales; women-centered tales; tales about families; tales about fate, death, gods, demons, ghosts and such; humorous tales or tales about jester or clever person; tales about animals and stories about stories. He also advocated that, "cultural forms such as stories make people what they are as much as people make culture" (p. xxx). His idea originates from the notion that stories also want to be passed on from one person to another otherwise they fall in the category of "untold stories".

Method

The present paper explored the presence and place of stories and storytelling in the lives of children in primary classrooms. An attempt was made to understand the role of storytelling and story construction in primary classrooms and how this related to the agency of the child. The focus was to understand and map the content of stories constructed by children within their socio-cultural context. While delving into teacher educators' understanding and perceptions regarding use of storytelling for primary school children, an attempt was made to understand how they prepare prospective teachers for use of storytelling in classrooms. The participants in the study were children of class II and IV (one section each) from six schools. The children were from three state run schools and three private schools of Delhi. Teacher educators preparing prospective teachers for elementary teaching program were also part of the study. Tools used for data collection were Story construction using 'Story Space' (conducted in groups), Story construction using 'Story Dice' (conducted with a child individually), Interviews with children and with teacher educators.

The very basic premise guiding this work was that children have significant contributions to make and to say and what they say is as valuable as that of an adult. To achieve objectives of the study, a qualitative research design was considered to be most appropriate. A contextual approach was used to connect with everyday lives of children by choosing a setting where they spent most of their time in a day. Therefore data was majorly drawn from children as

focal participants of the study. The school as a context provided an opportunity to arrive at a nuanced understanding of their storytelling experiences.

The present paper discusses how children's context was inherent to the stories constructed by them. Through their stories, children brought rich experiences and their prior knowledge from their respective socio-cultural contexts. It thus made classroom an extension of community with shared cultural beliefs. Storytelling led to discussions on various themes such as individual differences, and multiple views on an issue made the classroom inclusive. Children reacted to the dialogues and discussions by participating, and giving spontaneous reviews. These dialogues infused and initiated an understanding of having multiple perspectives and they experienced diversity within classroom. Children articulated their desires, wishes, and needs through the stories they constructed. They projected themselves through their personal narratives and even sought self-reflection in stories shared by others. They empathised with the characters when they established a similarity and broke identification with the characters to separate out the worlds in case they could not find a resemblance. This way storytelling brought in the elements of joy, happiness, contentment, success, and even of unhappiness or failure, and thus stories became a medium of reaching the inner self. However, all stories constructed by children had a happy ending signifying 'hope'.

It was decided to be involved with the children through several activities and being amidst them. Veale (2005) ^[14] describes Participatory methods such as storytelling, drama and drawing with children as 'Creative Methods'. She further adds that these methods can serve as constructivist tools to help research participants to describe their experiences and give meaning to them. These methods facilitate the process of knowledge production instead of knowledge 'gathering'. James, Jenks & Prout (1998) ^[5] called ethnographic methods designed to engage children to exploit their full potential as 'task centred activities'. Ethnographic studies view children as competent interpreters of the social world (James, 2001) ^[4]. Geertz (1973) ^[3] defines ethnography as an act of 'thick descriptions'.

Discussion

Findings revealed that narrating story to the whole class provided children with transitory status of a protagonist where the narrator received the attention of the whole group. Storytelling privileged the agency of children as it gave assurance to children's opinions and infused in them confidence and self-worth. The very fact that children had freedom to select a story from their oral repertoire made the classroom inclusive of the diversity they brought to the classroom. Paley (1990, p. 23) ^[13] referred to storytelling as 'a primary cultural institution and the social art of language'. Opie & Opie (1959) ^[10] described children as 'tradition's warmest friends' because of their love for traditional rhymes and stories. Inclusion of storytelling in classroom addressed individual needs of children and classroom diversity. Nussbaum (1998) ^[9] was of a strong opinion that children deprived of stories are also deprived of ways in which to view people who are different from them. Storytelling sessions by the researcher were interactive and participatory in nature. Across all the classes and schools, children aptly listened to the stories shared. The stories created a special space for all of them within their formal

learning environments. Each child displayed their special skills and cognitive competence through problem solving, decision making, planning, organising information, sequencing, and collaboration and even bringing humour to the class. Kumar (1986) ^[7] mentions this as an important non-textual knowledge. Children gave reasons and justification for what and why something unfolded in the story. This way they reasoned back and forth in the storyline. The stories generated a lot of discussions among them. It turned out to be a *child dominated process* wherein the children *questioned*, gave their *opinions on why's and how's* of the situations that arose through the stories.

Children's engagement with the storytelling process and classroom dynamics infused an affective atmosphere in the classroom. Discussions and arguments generated several conversations through which children gained an understanding of having multiple perspectives. It was also a reflective process wherein they articulated their personal lives or experiences about the past. Through the story-making tasks, they all collaborated and came up with stories infused with their own dialogues. Certain goals of education can be easily realised through using storytelling in the classroom. The storytelling experience made it easier for many children to express themselves as the boundaries were more fluid. The reactions and quick comments of children showed their *active agencies* and *meaning-making abilities*. Children used *reasoning, problem solving, thought of alternatives, substitution and imagination* while they actively constructed meanings through the stories shared in the classroom. Through stories, understanding differences in ecological settings were also brought to the fore. For example, in one instance a boy from class II did not sit on the floor and reasoned that his uniform would get spoilt and he did not want this to happen as his grandmother had to wash his clothes and she was getting old, so he wanted to keep it clean. Such conversations with young children brought about how early children start thinking and caring for the other. Through their stories, children shared cultural beliefs and others got exposed to cultural differences and diversity in terms of cultural knowledge, social class, etc. The sharing of stories is an ideal way of *affirming cultural diversity and discovering common features specific to cultures* at the same time. While these stories may be specific to a culture the values promoted are often universal in their application.

Storytelling also addressed diversity in the classroom in terms of linguistic, religious, based on caste, class, gender and even varying abilities and competencies of children as revealed by the analysis. The sessions broke the rigidity of an otherwise structured environment of a classroom to an *open and flexible space*. Use of the "Story Space", a group activity, brought about a lot of collaboration as they all collectively constructed stories. All children felt part of a larger collective and cohesiveness within their groups. They suggested each other to select a particular character that modified the theme and also interjected. A lot of activities could be planned in this way to foster peer learning. Presence of other children supported children's contribution and extended their expression of thoughts. The tools also acted as a "scaffold". Children thus developed a storytelling voice through their interactions with others during storytelling. The findings are thus in consonance with Vygotsky's perspective (1978) ^[15] on individual's actual development level and of potential in the presence of other

capable peers. Vygotsky (1978) ^[15] uses the term "zone of proximal development" to describe the distance between "the individual's actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 68). It is in the zone of proximal development that the more knowledgeable individual is able to assist the young and less competent. Encouraging and supporting the child's contributions can effectually lead the child farther in thought and expression of thought.

Sharing stories within groups served several purposes in the classrooms. Storytelling served as resource to go beyond classroom boundaries. It addressed issues related to *diversity and inclusion*. Story-sharing activity allowed children to experience diverse cultures and *as sources of understanding differences*. It led to discussions on various issues such as individual differences, diversity, etc. Stories served as platforms for ethnic cementing. It provided a means to deal with many sensitive issues. For instance, one child from Southern India narrated a story with a slightly different accent, so all children started laughing. When asked, a girl explained the reason to me. Then she shared the story of a different looking parrot and concluded that each individual has a distinct way of doing the same thing, so we should accept differences. After this incident the class teacher who was sitting at the back of the class correcting notebooks also intervened and discussed the issue with the students. This way a very sensitive issue was discussed and many students opened up and shared that they too were teased by other children. Soon we realised that all children were teased on one pretext or the other and how each one felt about the same. They also expressed that they did not like to be teased, and the discussion helped iron out this issue amicably in such a large group where each student promised to stop and think before teasing another child or a person. Bruner (2002) ^[1] called storytelling as 'the coin and currency of culture' as it provides an insight into the role that story can play in broadening children's understanding of different cultures and contextualizing their own art work. The teacher educators who were interviewed as a part of the present study also validated this as they stated that storytelling helped to bring up issues that were otherwise difficult to discuss within the class. They further stressed that several issues that are sensitive in nature were best discussed using storytelling as a method.

Traditional stories can go a long way in expanding children's experiences of different cultures and becoming aware of commonalities and differences in the same. Engel (1999, p. 10) ^[2] proposed that, "listening to and telling stories are cultural activities. As children learn the story form, they also learn about their culture. In turn, through stories, aspects of their culture shape the way they think about and remember experiences." She further added that children listen to stories to know about the culture they are growing up in and use this information to function within their community. Children further develop a means of expressing and realizing 'who they are' through their routine participation in culturally structured stories according to her.

Conclusion

Sharing a story and constructing one nourished the individuality of a child. Storytelling provided a shared social

experience, provoking a shared response towards conflicting *emotions* of good and the bad, happiness and sadness, wit and foolishness, innocence and evilness, anxieties and excitement as realities that coexisted. The children emoted and expressed themselves fully, empathized, and displayed care and concern for parents, siblings, grandparents, friends, teachers, fellow human beings and animals. This storytelling *classroom environment enabled and empowered children to share, express their happiness, triumphs, fears, anxieties, and desires*. It served as a tool that brought about their hidden desires, needs and wishes to the forefront.

Not all children learn from the same instructional materials or strategies. The diversity that they bring along with them cannot be ignored. To create children as critical agents and to give them active voices in their learning experiences is essential. Parents and teachers can expand, modify and guide children expand their stories by the kind of feedback they give. This is similar to scaffolding that can be used as a pedagogical tool to help children construct stories. Listening to their stories attentively boosts children's tendency to continue telling stories, motivates them to express themselves freely and explores their storytelling possibilities to the fullest. Similarly, responding to their creation helps them shape the story better.

Social context influences learning in school and if learning outside is linked with learning inside the school, it can prove to be highly valuable and meaningful. For this to happen the teacher education programs need to provide student teachers with experiences that are multicultural in nature. They need to be trained to use curriculum, methodologies and teaching learning materials that are responsive to students from diverse backgrounds. The student teachers need to be prepared to connect to diverse students and their families. This would be possible if they are reflective and keep their biases aside and are well prepared in advance to meet such challenges. Use of storytelling can then turn out to be a *culturally responsive* method of teaching as it acknowledges, recognizes and values cultural background of learners thereby being inclusive.

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