

Reports

Katha Manch: Session of Stories at the Vidya Bhawan Summer Camp

Human beings are meaning making animals, thus we are embedded in layers and layers of narratives to make sense of who we are. In that sense stories are what make us human. Stories bind all of us together as a family, as a society, as humans. Every society known to us has story-telling as one of its mediums for entertainment and education. Through stories from around the world, one can understand and empathize with people one has never known or met. The attractive world of stories motivates the Katha Manch-which is a registered trust dedicated to stories- to read, listen and create them, so that later they can be narrated to children. Storytelling is necessary for the transmission of experience, it not only allows us to experience new things but also allows us a window into knowing things that we couldn't have known otherwise. It is this potentiality of a story that makes it so powerful and such a treasure which always needs to be passed on to the next generation.

Stories are important in the lives of children as they provide them with a platform to explore their fears, take risks, feel like a hero or a villain. They also have the potential to expose children to new things or concepts. Further, they teach children about various cultures.

Realizing the importance of stories, Katha Manch, a group of educators, uses them as their main pedagogic tool. Katha Manch comprises school teachers, B.El.Ed. interns, university professors, students, government teachers, etc. The group shares the belief that stories are not only a tool to build empathetic, creative and tolerant beings, but they can also be used as the main resource in enhancing various literary skills

such as reading, writing, listening and speaking. With this in mind, Katha Manch conducted a five-day workshop for around 200 students from 57 government schools from different parts of Rajasthan, and from Vidya Bhawan Senior Secondary School in Udaipur. The objectives of the workshop were:

- To understand the context of the students
- To introduce the world of stories to the children and capture their interest
- To demonstrate various modes of storytelling
- To respect, recognize and use multi-lingual environment
- To involve the students in discussions, activities and enactment

Participants of the Workshop

The workshop was conducted by four members of the Katha Manch (KM) team. The students who attended this workshop belonged to remote areas of the districts of Udaipur, Chittorgarh and Ajmer. Although they were of various ages, they largely belonged to the senior classes. The duration of the workshop was 2 hours per day for 5 days.

Flow of the Workshop

There were around 160 to 180 students who attended the workshop. All the students were divided into four groups. Each member of the KM team randomly chose a group of students and started their work. The students needed specific and direct guidance as their knowledge of Hindi and English was minimal.

On the first day, the KM team simply observed the children while other teachers were working with them. After a thorough discussion with the team of teachers, the original plans for the

workshop were reframed and the expectations were set differently.

The first interaction of the team with the children aimed at getting to know them and make them do team-building activities. This included encouraging them to sing songs in their languages, introducing themselves by adding an adjective before their names, telling the story behind their names if there was one, and other activities.

After the interaction on the first day, the KM team decided to hold sessions in accordance with the children's needs. The team's primary task was set, since most of the students were first generation learners it was important to bring forth their experiences and make that the center of everything. This could be best achieved through discussions or activities around stories, which would help them open up and share their experiences. Keeping all this in mind, the team decided to introduce a variety of stories to capture their interest, give them some confidence and add to their learning. All four groups of students had one team member of KM working with them for all five days.

Each group focused on a different aspect of story-telling and presented their work, this showed that they were very much active participants of the process. The first group focused on different modes of story-telling like drawing. The second group worked on various elements or aspects in a story. The third group were interested in reading and also pre-and post-reading activities. The last group enjoyed stories in a lyrical form. Different types of stories were narrated, enacted, performed and read in all the groups. For instance, "Wedding Clothes" published by CBT was read, enacted and even extended by the students. The major focus was on vocabulary building, expanding the scope of the imagination of the children's ideas, making meaning from the actions and words in the story and relating to the context of the story with one's own experiences.

In one activity, only half of the story was told to the children and they were asked to complete the story. They suggested various endings for the story. To start with, the children were hesitant, and did not respond to the questions. This was probably because making a connection with an unknown person needs time. As the workshop progressed, all four members of the KM team saw a change in the students. They began to take a keen interest in the activities and even expressed joy at being in the class with others. It was amazing that students who were conditioned to run out of the class as soon as they heard the school bell ring, now did not leave even after the bell had rung as they were so involved in the activities.

The main challenge for the team was getting the children to speak up and to share their point of view. Possibly the children had previously experienced intolerant behavior from their teachers, or they did not have the confidence to express themselves in their native language in class. They may have felt that their language might not be accepted, or they may have been judged if they spoke. The KM team recognized this fear of not speaking up and allowed them to share their experiences without judging them. They were allowed to use the languages they know freely to share their views and hold discussions during the sessions. This helped in building a connection with the other students.

This experience of the KM team with the senior secondary students left them with good memories and a lot of learning. The instinct for learning and understanding was clearly evident in all the students, which shows that this neglect of sharing of experience that is at the heart of storytelling is a very vital part of children becoming reluctant learners. Given the right environment children love to express themselves, which makes them learn, reflect and grow as was seen in this workshop.

The workshop which began as a struggle for the students turned out to be quite a success in