

A Workshop on Story-telling and Pedagogical Potential of Stories

Sharmila Rathee

The human essence is made of stories, and therefore, they are fundamental to one's sense of identity - Wright (2000)

Stories, in their different forms such as folk tales, fairy tales, myths, fables and legends, etc., appeal to individuals across the globe. This universal and powerful appeal of stories makes them an integral part of the world of inter and intra-human communication. Irrespective of the age group, stories have tremendous power to elicit emotions, evoke curiosity and sustain the attention of the audience. Researchers and practitioners across disciplines have acknowledged that stories serve different functions such as cognitive, emotional, social, cultural and epistemological. Ample proof has been provided concerning the effectiveness of this valuable form of human communication in different domains of human development. In the field of education specifically, there is a significant body of literature that highlights the importance of stories and storytelling in the teaching-learning process. Every day, researchers are making advancements in related fields, the most recent being relating stories to various domains of human cognition and neurological roots. However, ironically, despite significant theoretical advancements in the practical field of education, i.e. inside classrooms, the pedagogical potential of stories and storytelling is still highly underestimated by a significant section of the teachers' community. Hence, the status of stories being a mere leisure activity still dominates the arena of classrooms as only the fun element of stories and storytelling is considered in most instances.

In this context, a two-day workshop was organized for the teachers of Swami Balendue

V. Primary School, Vrindavan, on 25-26 September 2015 at Vrindavan, U.P., India, with the intention of training teachers to capitalize on stories for curriculum transaction and encourage its use in classroom. The objectives of the workshop were to:

- Explore stories holistically taking into account various aspects of language, science, mathematics, society, culture and identity, etc.
- Discuss the pedagogical potential of stories and storytelling
- Demonstrate the various modes of storytelling
- Discuss the subject of adaptation and improvization of stories according to the needs of the children

Participant Profile

The participants of the workshop included all the teachers of Swami Balendu V. Primary School, resource persons, the workshop coordinator and organizers. The teachers, who were the prime focus of the workshop, were from various disciplines such as mathematics, commerce, languages, science and social sciences. The workshop was coordinated by Sharmila Rathee (Assistant Professor, University of Delhi) who was also the resource person. The other resource persons Vijay Kumar, Yashika Chandna and Ria Gupta were affiliated to Katha Manch, (a registered trust comprising school teachers, teacher trainees, field facilitators, university professors and students associated with the field of education). Members of Katha Manch have a shared vision of making stories an integral part of the curriculum transaction and to accomplish this vision, Katha Manch regularly organizes workshops with teachers and students across schools in areas related to stories and storytelling.

Sessions

The workshop was divided into four sessions, with a pre-lunch and post-lunch session on each day. The pre-lunch session on day one started with introductions, where participants shared their qualifications and experience. The majority of the participant teachers expressed their inadequate understanding of the concepts related to stories and their pedagogical use. During this session, an attempt was made to overcome participant hesitation and encourage interaction between participants and resource persons. After the introductory session, the coordinator described the objectives of the workshop—focusing on the pedagogical potential of stories in classroom across subjects. This was followed by an activity by Ria Gupta, in which each participant was asked to think of a story she/he liked the most and share it with the other participants. Based on the interaction with the storyteller, participants were encouraged to envisage the possible factors that would prompt individuals to choose that particular story. Each participant shared their story and other members tried to predict the reasons for the selection of that story. This was followed by remarks from the storyteller. Through this session, it was emphasized that the choice of a particular story communicates the behavioural aspects of a person. Further, the selection of a story may depend on its connection with the context and may even be specific to the situation in the story, identification with the characters in the story or bonding with someone. A range of emotions were expressed by the participants during the narration of stories and through this experience, they discovered that stories have a strong potential for eliciting emotions of the storyteller as well as the audience. The participants also discussed that giving opportunities to students for sharing their stories on a regular basis would give them a chance to express their dominant emotion in that

moment. This sharing of emotions through stories could even act as an emotional catharsis for students and by understanding their dilemmas and needs, appropriate support could be provided to them.

The post-lunch session focused on the modes of story-narration. Ria Gupta narrated a story entitled “Angry Witch”, about a witch who was frustrated with her name “*Panch*” (five). The story describes the way *Panch* plans to take revenge on the other characters who were suspected of teasing the witch about her name. The participants were requested to volunteer for drawing a sketch of the witch on the blackboard according to their perception of the witch’s image. While one participant volunteered to draw, others were requested to suggest additions and modifications to the sketch. The sketch revealed how we have stereotypical images of some characters in our mind, for example, the witch in this sketch was an ugly and evil looking woman. Ria emphasized that such exercises would be helpful in developing interest in the story among the audience when done before narrating the story. Moreover, by understanding what the audience thought about a particular character, the storyteller could make requisite modifications and adaptations to the story to break prevalent stereotypes. The participants enjoyed this activity and participated in it enthusiastically. The completion of the sketch was followed by a narration of the story. Through the narration, it was conveyed to the participants that gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, body language, variations in the tone of voice for different characters, silence and pauses make storytelling more interesting and powerful.

After the narration, teachers were asked to brainstorm about the kind of activities that could be planned for children after the narration of this story. Their responses were recorded and then some more activities along the same lines

were suggested by the resource persons. Most of the activities suggested by teachers focused on language learning skills, grammatical structures, and development of vocabulary and pronunciation.

This was followed by a debate initiated by Yashika Chandna on correct pronunciation and cultural and regional differences in pronunciation. She recommended that putting too much stress on pronunciation, and especially interrupting young children to correct their pronunciation in the initial years when they are developing reading and speaking skills may result in their hesitating to take part in group reading and speaking activities. She added that pronunciation skills may be improved through exposure to various audio-visual resources.

On the second day, in the pre-lunch session, the tasks of the previous day were taken up. Teachers were asked to categorize the activities in terms of what kind of activities could be taken up for a particular grade. During the discussion, inappropriate categorization of activities by the teachers pointed to the need for an in-depth discussion with the teachers about the cognitive development perspective of skills. Thus, to help them sort out the skills at different levels and their sequencing, further discussions in this session were focused on the relation between activities, skills, strategies and objectives according to children's needs. With the help of some examples, it was demonstrated how some skills are prerequisite to consider particular activities. The cognitive developmental perspective of certain skills was also discussed. The resource persons further emphasized the importance of stories in subjects such as mathematics, science and social sciences. Examples were taken up to highlight the use of stories in other disciplines. Yashika Chandna, narrated the story "*Appu-kuttan ko kaise tole*" which is about the problem of weighing an elephant Appu-Kuttan. There was a discussion

around how this particular story could be used for teaching the concept of weight measurement, Archimedes principle and breaking the stereotype about girls not being good problem-solvers. Furthermore, stories could work as tools to build imagination, foster creativity and various cognitive, meta-cognitive and socio-affective skills.

Next, there was a discussion on the prevalence of stereotypes in children's literature. Sharmila Rathee elaborated on the meaning, characteristics and impact of positive and negative stereotypes on children, the prevalence of stereotypes in society and its reflection in literature. She suggested that instead of taking up stories which consist of stereotypical images, the storyteller should make modifications in the story to avoid reinforcing stereotypes or to thwart them. Lastly, there was a discussion on how group work can be helpful in understanding the stereotypes in children's minds of the abilities of children belonging to other social identities.

The post-lunch session on day two consisted of an open session where participants voiced queries related to the discussions of the previous sessions. The main points that were thrown up through this exercise included: criteria for selecting stories and children's literature, different ways of adapting and improvising stories, creation of stories, components of stories and assessment through stories. Vijay Kumar shared some important readings related to stories and storytelling in education, and also suggested some books to broaden the understanding of the participants in related fields. These included: "*Prathamik Siksha ke Mudde*, volume II, issue I, January-April 2000 of *Kahaniyaan*", John Holt's "*Bacche Asaphal Kyun Hote Hain*", Chomsky-Piaget's debate, Arvind Gupta's website, etc. He further emphasized the importance of implementing the learning from this workshop in the respective classrooms and

asked the teachers to reflect on the implementation of the same.

This was followed by feedback on the workshop and suggestions for the areas where participants wanted further discussion in future. Participants shared that they had found the workshop very useful and had enjoyed the activities thoroughly. They felt that the story narration had helped them understand that they could do much more with their voices and bodies while telling or even reading a story to the children. They also appreciated the teamwork of the resource persons. They further shared that they wanted the organizers to take up issues related to pedagogy, cognitive developmental perspective of skills and classroom management for future workshops. The resource persons requested the teachers to share with them their experiences of the use of stories and storytelling in the coming days. The workshop ended with a note of thanks.

We did a follow-up with the school after the workshop. We gathered that on implementing the ideas learnt in the workshop, the teachers felt that the stories had a strong pedagogical potential. Teachers shared that they found inclusion of stories in the classroom helpful in numerous ways: students took more interest in their work, enjoyed studying without any pressure, learnt to think for themselves and asked more questions than before. They further communicated that students seemed less shy to speak up and answer questions even if they were not sure about the answer. Also, they were less disappointed if they were not right about something. The school organizer, Ramona Goswami wrote saying that the use of stories was helping teachers significantly to reach out to the children and observed that story-related tasks were completed better than regular ones. She shared her contentment that after the workshop, the teachers had a lot of new ideas

for activities surrounding the themes they were teaching.

Wright, A. 2000. 'Stories and their importance in language teaching', *Humanizing Language Teaching* Year 2, Issue 5, online at <<http://www.hltmag.co.uk/sep00/mart2.htm>>

Sharmila Rathee is Assistant Professor at Department of Elementary Education, Institute of Home Economics, University of Delhi. She is currently pursuing her Ph.D. at Zakir Husain Centre for Educational Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

sharmilarathee@gmail.com