

# Children's Voice in Children's Stories

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The school is an institution which we believe ensures children's wellbeing, yet all the decisions in and about schools are taken by adults. Many times, adults who do not even know children's realities are responsible for the way a school functions. This belief that adults know more than children, needs to be examined. This article explores how children can be encouraged to share their interpretations of school life through storybooks, and also advocates for the enhancement of children's agency in children's literature.

*School Mein Seekha aur Sikhaya* (Muskaan, 2022) is a story written by Nikita Dhurve, a Gond tribal resident of an urban slum settlement, Ganga Nagar in Bhopal. The story starts with her excitement to join a school with her friends that soon turns into disappointment with their classroom experiences. They feel lost in the ways in which the school functions. The teacher speaks in a language different from their home language, Gondi, and when they try to seek clarifications, they are reproached. The children do not want to quit and give up their dream of formal education, so they start looking for ways out of this situation. Through this negotiation, the young writer raises relevant questions on teaching pedagogy.

## The story in class

The book was introduced to a mixed group of 20 students in the age group of 10 to 15 years in our school, studying in class V. It seemed quite magical how easily the children connected to the situations unfolding in the story. There are a couple of sentences in Gondi in the story, and these when read out, elicited requests from children. 'Do read it out again'. 'What was it that was said?', they asked. Based on the flow of the conversation and some familiar words, they were trying to guess what was being conveyed. There were no Gondi children in the class, but the children had Gondi-speaking friends. As a facilitator, one could sense that the excitement was not only because it was a language that they were somewhat familiar with, but it had more to do with the root of the story. Ragini Lalit, in

her reading of the same story to a group of children in Himachal Pradesh, also found that the children in the hills associated with Nikita and her friends immediately.<sup>i</sup>

## Sharing experiences

After the storytelling, the children were facilitated in sharing their experiences with prompts, such as 'What do you think about the four girls? 'Have you ever felt lost in school? 'What would you do if you felt lost? 'Have you ever asked an adult to change their way of functioning?' The children were enthusiastic about sharing their views and we had to ask them to hear others' stories. These were shared orally, and some children also wrote them. Three kinds of stories emerged.

### *Experiences in school*

A 10-year-old boy shared that in his village school, the teacher would write something on the board and ask the children to copy it; if the children were not able to write or made mistakes, they would be beaten with a 'fresh green stick taken off the tree'. 'We would keep thinking of excuses to be able to get out of the room. I did not feel like going to school at all, but family members would force us to go.' A similar experience was shared by an 11-year-old girl who wrote, 'Sir would ask us to memorise, but I just could not do that. I would really try but I couldn't. So, when he hit us with a stick, I would be very upset.' There was also one girl who wrote, 'Sir would gaze at us, moving his eyes from top to bottom.' She could not share this with her mother but told her that this teacher did not teach them well. Her mother asked her to leave her studies.

A 14-year-old girl, who began her education journey only a year ago, wrote about her earlier attempt to be part of a school. 'When we went to school for the first time, we were there for only three days. We could not study there. Initially, we thought that it was because it is a new place. I hoped that the man there (the teacher) would not hit us.' My friend assured me he would not and that we should open the book and sit. But it was an empty notebook.

The teacher filled the board with big sentences. I didn't know how to read, but the teacher said he wouldn't teach anything else. So, my friend said, 'We'll study in some other school.' The teacher did not seem to care and just said, 'Yes, go'.

As facilitators, we tried to get at least a few positive experiences of school, but there were none.

#### *Experiences associated with their language and the outside world*

An 18-year-old adolescent shared that when she spoke to friends in her language (Pardhi), other children would feel that they were talking about them and would complain to the teacher. 'At lunchtime, the children would sit far from us and distance themselves from us saying that we are Pardhis.' A similar experience was shared by a child from the *kanjar* community. She wrote, 'When I used to go to school earlier, children in my school would ridicule us and our language. If someone made fun of them, how would they feel? Nobody should taunt us because we speak a different language.'

#### *Experiences of putting forth their views to adults*

A 14-year-old girl shared that often her mother would send her out for alms, she did not like that. Her mother would also get angry with her if she did not go scrap-picking. She was very scared of her mother (and continues to be) and was not able to tell her that she did not want to go out to beg. But one day, she gathered courage and told her mother. Her mother stopped sending her out to beg and enrolled her in school.

One of the authors also shared a personal experience of her school life, 'When I was in class X, the math teacher, Tiwari Sir, would always call me to the board and without explaining the problem, would instruct me to solve it. When I could not do it, he would pull my plaits. This went on for several days. I would feel scared of him and wanted to miss his class. One day, as he finished the class and left, I found my courage and ran after him. I asked him point-blank why he did this to me. Sir coolly responded that he wanted me to do better. I didn't know what to say in response. But he stopped pulling my plait after that. I also stopped feeling scared of him.'

The children's expressions clearly indicated the following:

1. Children recognise discrimination. They may not

be able to differentiate or analyse whether it is due to language or caste or something else, but the experience of being made to feel small is one that many children of marginalised communities imbibe from the world continuously, that too at a very impressionable age. This is likely to have a significant and lasting impact on their personality as they grow up.

2. Children's negative experiences are layered in their minds. The details of how they were beaten have left imprints on their minds and this is described vividly in their expressions. Often, children share details, such as who all were there, and other aspects which may not have a bearing on the experience *per se* but are significant to the child's memory. It is probable that she/he believes that this vividness makes it more real and believable, or simply that she/he is yet not able to isolate the incident from its details. Expressions of this nature have therapeutic value for the children if when they voice it, an adult validates what they have felt and gone through.
3. When these experiences are shared in the classroom through a group process, each child realises that this did not happen only to 'me'. Even when children are very small, they are able to critically analyse using this 'data' – a set of experiences – that this is part of the functioning of society and is not 'my' fault. This is necessary for an education that is premised on the values of social justice.
4. In our culture, the fact that a child and an adult (teacher, parent or any other person in the form of a guardian/senior) can think differently, that what a child thinks is also valuable, is not acceptable. Therefore, such discussions do not take place in classrooms.
5. While children could share experiences of hurt or anger towards somebody who they had categorised as 'against them', it was not easy for most of them to view their 'protector' in a situation where they are challenging him/her. There is probably a logic that works in the child's mind, and it is difficult for them to create a concept of 'self' without this person in the frame.

It is clear that a story like *School Mein Seekha aur Sikhaya* can be used to open up many conversations among students of different socio-economic groups.

The participants may have difficulties with one or many aspects of school life, such as the teacher's behaviour, learning difficulties, adjustment with peers, violence and abuse. Such discussions are opportunities for reflection for the school too.

The interaction described clearly suggests the need for the school system to adapt itself to children rather than the other way around. Anjali Noronha, in a review of this story, also finds the experiences described therein as universal to most children.<sup>ii</sup>

### **Agency of children in stories**

As seen above, stories allow us to start conversations in a safe space. They do not need to be very personal but must provide the data or content from where we can begin to reflect and deliberate. And for this, we need books where the child is in the centre; not only as a character but in his/her complete personality which may throw up stories where the child's worldview is in conflict with that of adults, or there are different views within a group of children.

A critical aspect of the story *School Mein Seekha aur Sikhaya* is that children have been given a voice in this story at several levels. Firstly, the story is written by a child; secondly, what the children are feeling has come out in the story; and lastly, the children are collectively making a plan and implementing it. The teacher is the one person who understands and accepts the children's viewpoint, which lends a sense of resolution and a happy ending to the story. This may not always be the case in life. It is, therefore, more important that the agency of children is clearly established.

Agency has been defined by Bandura (2017)<sup>iii</sup> as 'to intentionally produce certain effects by one's actions'; Mathis (2016)<sup>iv</sup> as 'Agency is considered here as making one's identity and perceptions visible and actively acknowledged by others to enhance and empower the personal, cultural, and social aspects of one's life'. Mathis adds that authors and illustrators have the power to create situations and characters that would further enrich the agency. The story under discussion manages, through the text, to present the cultural background

and aspirations of a child from a marginalised community, while the illustrations provide us with a context to the protagonist's life conditions.

There is a lot of children's literature around us that touches upon the school. However, most of the storybooks revolve around children's integration into the mainstream system with the idea of preparing a first-time school-goer for school or a similar setup. There are only a handful of books where the child's agency inside the school space is demonstrated. Of the many books on this theme published by Pratham Books, *The Right Way School*, written by Shabnam Minwalla (2020), stands out for giving space to a child's natural personality, whether it is about being inquisitive or the way she dresses and looks. *Vidroh Ki ChhapChhap* (Muskaan, 2020) is another such book where the writer Rinchin portrays the teacher as a person very friendly to the children whose child-centric pedagogy makes her the students' ally, but the story takes a turn when it is evident that she is functioning from her adult position. If she really wants to accept the children, there needs to be an internal transformation.

Most books are written by adults, where the perception of a child from an adult's eye (or what their memories of childhood are) determines the content. But if we encourage children and young people to be the authors of their storybooks, it would be a start to building a space for children to share what they think and feel and to respecting children's perspectives.

Is there a possibility of opening up discussions and questions on school processes, when stories which give children's voices a space enter the school? Thomson and Johnson (2007)<sup>v</sup> emphasise that teachers too will have to acknowledge the agency of children, viewing them as 'being extremely creative, possessing a great deal of insight and knowing.' When adults, like the teacher in Nikita's story, are willing to listen to children, recognise their own weaknesses, and identify how our behaviours and our methods are alienating children, then probably we will take the first step in developing the school as a safe and happy space for all children.

### Endnotes

- i Lalit, R. (2022) The Cultivation of Safe Spaces Within Schools. Available at: <https://feminisminindia.com/2022/01/21/the-cultivation-of-safe-spaces-within-schools/>
- ii The Book Review, November 2022, Pg. 62
- iii Bandura A (2017) Toward a psychology of human agency: pathways and reflections. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 13(2):130–136
- iv Janelle B. Mathis (2016) Literature and the Young Child: Engagement, Enactment, and Agency from a Sociocultural Perspective, *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, Volume 30, 2016 - Issue 4
- v Quoted in Reflecting on childhood and child agency in history: Haring, U. et al. (2019) Palgrave Communications | <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0259-0>



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