

The Importance of Listening to Children

Sukriti Lakhtakia

For any instructor at a primary school, a chirping chorus of ‘Ma’am! Ma’am! Ma’am!’ is an everyday affair. In my personal experience, children buzz and hop about all around you until you lend them your ear and listen to what they have to say. The message to be conveyed is usually not at all as urgent as it sounds, and it may be as simple as asking ‘मैम, क्या मैं पानी पी लूँ?’ (Ma’am, may I drink water?) or ‘मैम, क्या मैं toilet चली जाऊँ?’ (Ma’am, may I go to the toilet?) or sharing with excitement, ‘मैम, आज मैं लंच में पोहा लाई हूँ!’ (Ma’am, I’ve brought poha for lunch today!). But it comes with such urgency that one might think that the child has an ultimate secret to share!

The gap between hearing and listening

It is easy to forget that there is a difference between *hearing and listening*. Hearing is a purely physical response by our bodies; our ears are designed to register sounds that occur around us. Listening, on the other hand, is a cognitive response. In other words, listening to someone means that we are giving our attention to what is being said and how it is being said, so that we may respond to the speaker. Keeping in mind this contradiction, hearing and listening to children are two different things.

In my five months at school, I have been a teacher of class I, and one of my most important learnings has been the value of listening to what the children have to say. Many children, especially those in government schools who come from low-income backgrounds, fail to find an audience who is willing to or has the time to listen to their thoughts, ideas, imaginations, fears, and worries. Parents may have to work long hours, siblings (if any) might either be too old or too young, and extended family might be living far away. On top of this, the average teacher at school has little patience and energy to spend on what they generally consider to be children’s irrelevant chatter.

Caught in the middle of all this indifference, children very quickly identify and latch on to anyone who makes time to listen. In fact, holding a conversation with a child is sometimes more interesting than

with an adult, simply because children’s unexpected responses, unconventional manner of thinking, and their still unstructured belief systems are likely to surprise.

Teacher as a listener

As an instructor at school, it becomes important to create the right opportunities for children’s oral expression. A recurring learning outcome given by NCERT for primary classes is, ‘to develop the ability to describe an event in detail, to be able to respond to a given imaginary situation and share their everyday experiences’. These learning outcomes are connected to socio-emotional development in children from a young age. For all of these, there needs to be an active listener who absorbs the shared information, processes it, and responds constructively to prompt further thinking. The teacher at school is the ideal person for this. It will also be helpful because the teacher can read between the lines and learn more about a child through what is being said.

Lived experiences

One day at school, as I entered the class, Ruby (age 8 years) came running up to me to tell me that she had been bitten by a scorpion the previous night. I was shocked, and asked her to tell me more: How did it happen? Are you all right? What did your parents do? She said, ‘मैम, मम्मा-पापा ने तो कुछ नहीं कहा, मैंने खुद से बोरोप्लस लगा लिया।’ (Ma’am, mumma-papa didn’t say anything, I applied Boroplus myself). I was amused as well as relieved to hear this because it meant it might not have been a real scorpion after all.

Ganesh, 7 years old, was unusually silent one day. When I asked him, he said, ‘पापा की साइकिल चोरी हो गई। हम मंगोड़ी खा रहे थे और कोई आया और साइकिल ले गया।’ (My father’s bicycle was stolen. We were eating *mangodi* and someone came and took away his cycle). In the following days, I asked him every day if the cycle had been found, and he said no, but he started greeting me with a smile while coming in and going out of the classroom.

Hari Om, 5 years old, affectionately called Duggu, used to come to school with tears in his eyes, and his first question was always, 'मैम, छुट्टी कब होगी? हमरे भईया कब आएँगे? (Ma'am when can we go home? When will my brother come?). He was completely miserable at school, and it was no wonder that he hated coming every day. I realised that his ability to think and learn was also being affected. I learned that Hari Om was an orphan and over weeks of observation, I also suspected that he might have a learning disability. But the foundation for fostering a relationship with him has been listening to him, holding friendly conversations with him, and creating a fear-free environment so that he is able to express his feelings. He even gave me the name of *Choti ma'am*, and as his tears dried and his smile appeared more frequently, he started to express a willingness to learn. In the pictures below, I drew him on his slate and labelled him, and so he drew me (Figure 2). When I asked him, 'अच्छा, ये मैं हूँ क्या? मेरे बाल कहाँ हैं? और मेरे हाथ और पैर?' (Oh, this is me, is it? Where is my hair? And my hands and feet?) He responded immediately by adding all these details to his drawing.



Figure 1. My drawing of Hari Om on his slate



Figure 2. Hari Om's drawing of me, Choti ma'am.

The children feel free to tell me what they truly feel – there have been a few occasions during classroom activities when children have bluntly told me, 'Ma'am, this isn't fun!'. Admittedly, after a moment of disappointment, I consider their frankness, an indication of their comfort.

Children's storytelling with the butterfly tool

One of the finest sets of conversations that have emerged in my classroom has been with respect to our butterfly tool. In beginner-level mathematics, with concepts such as counting and developing a quantitative sense of numbers, the use of a *ganitmala* is encouraged. This is a string of alternately-coloured beads in sets of 10. For children of primary classes, one of the suggested ways to convincingly navigate movement on the *ganitmala* is by creating a playful context, such as the *ganitmala* is our garden; the beads are flowers, and a piece of folded paper serves as our butterfly that wanders our garden. I have made and re-made several butterflies for my class, because they have been misplaced/lost/torn/taken by the smaller children.

One day, when I arrived in class and saw that our butterfly was missing again, I exclaimed in exaggerated exasperation: 'ओहो! हमारी तितली तो बहुत दिनों से नहीं दिखी है, पता नहीं कहाँ उड़ जाती है बार-बार! क्या पता वो कहीं गिर गई हो या उसे चोट लग गई हो?' (Oho! Our butterfly hasn't been seen for so many days now. Where does she fly away so often? What if she has fallen somewhere and is hurt?) The children responded thus:

Vaishali: मैम, तितली शायद अपने गाँव गई है। (Ma'am, she may have gone to her village).

Anuj: हाँ! इसलिए इतना टाइम लग रहा है वापस आने में। (Yes! That's why she is taking so long to return).

Ruby: मैम, उसका घर बन रहा है। (Ma'am, her home is being built).

Me: अच्छा! ये बात है क्या? बात तो सही है, घर बनाने में टाइम तो लगता है. उसका घर ईंटों से बनता है क्या? (Okay! Sounds right. Making a home takes time. Is her house being built with bricks?)

Rishi: नहीं मैम, तितली फूलों में रहती है, उसका घर फूलों से बन रहा है। (No ma'am, butterflies live in flowers, so her home is being made of flowers.)

I found this entire conversation extremely interesting. The children were imagining and creating a story all by themselves and building on each other's imagination! Sometimes, I express genuine disappointment about our missing butterfly, and one or two children quickly fold paper and hand it to me, saying something along the lines of: 'मैम, ये लो, हमारी तितली की बहन आ गई।' (Here ma'am, our butterfly's sister has come). When we solve questions on the *ganitmala*, I remind the children of the context every now and then. For example, if the paper falls, or if a child is holding the paper too tightly so that it might tear, I tell them in false alarm: 'अरे अरे! हमारी तितली बहुत नाजुक है, उसको ध्यान से पकड़ो।' (Uh oh! Our butterfly is very delicate, hold her carefully). One day Anuj said: 'मैम, तितली को बुखार है, वो बहुत गरम हो रही है।' (Ma'am, our butterfly has a fever, she is burning!).

With Hari Om, this continuity in the story has worked – he is at the pre-number concept stage and slides multiple beads at once while counting randomly. I told him, 'हरिओम, तितली अभी बहुत छोटी



Figure 3. Children working with the ganitmala with the butterfly tool

present in body and mind, and that you respect them enough to give them your time and energy. After all, one adult listening to another adult with attention is a sign of respect and children also deserve as much respect as anybody else. It also

adds to children's safety and sense of belonging which makes for a sense of increased wellbeing, enhancing learning to make schooling a place to learn skills for life.

**Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*



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To create a joyful atmosphere, teachers engage with students in fun activities, like dancing, action play and circle time. We keep the atmosphere lively by greeting the students with hugs, high-fives and other gestures of welcome that they choose from a given set. We try to understand how their day is going, how they are feeling, why they are feeling certain emotions, etc. This also helps the children to understand themselves.

Farzana Begum, Focus on Socio-emotional Learning, p 33