

Meaningful Conversations Through Stories

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There is an assumption amongst educators, and perhaps adults in general, that children are ‘innocent’ and should be ‘protected’ from some of the harsher realities of the world. These can include deeply personal feelings, like grief, loss, and anxiety, as well as certain structural issues, like caste, class, gender or race.

As a teacher in different spaces over the last 10-12 years, I have seen largely two kinds of behaviours from teachers to ‘thorny’ issues, such as caste and gender. One is the kind of common, overtly-bigoted response that is still the norm in most parts of Indian society – from comments, such as ‘why do girls need to study maths’ to behaviours, such as beating a child from what is considered a ‘lower’ caste for drinking water from the common tap. The other is a kind of ‘elevated avoidance’ response where teachers feel that the way to eliminate bias from classroom spaces is to pretend that inequalities do not exist. Illustratively, this can be a statement, such as, ‘This is a gender-equal space; we don’t talk about gender inequality as that will introduce students to the idea – everyone here is kind to each other’. This is perhaps a well-meaning attempt, but it does not represent the reality of the everyday experience of discrimination, prejudice and bigotry that minorities and vulnerable communities face. There is also a cultural reproduction that takes place when we do not actively work towards changing an existing situation; by this I mean existing structures and forms persist and recreate themselves. When we do not openly address the casteist notions that are present in existing generations, there is a high likelihood that the next generation will repeat those patterns and hold the same notions.

As teachers in such spaces, we have a responsibility to make these, often invisible, experiences visible, as a first step in a process that builds towards addressing the inequalities that create these experiences. And eventually – in an ideal world – learning to question and then eradicating the prejudices that these behaviours stem from.

An attempt to address this

I had the good fortune of spending many months looking at the work done in the area of understanding prejudice and studying the attempts that have been made to reduce prejudice in schools and other institutional settings. From the work of various social psychologists and sociologists, I kept returning to the work of Gordon Allport. His research indicates that *contact* between members of different groups under certain conditions could go some way towards reducing the prejudice the groups hold towards each other. This can take various forms, such as inclusive classrooms, workshops or theatrical productions. However, as teachers, there are certain practical factors that we need to consider.

For one, we work in specific settings; it is impossible to force ‘contact’ between members of different groups in our classrooms if those groups are not already present in the immediate area. I currently work in a small village school with a very specific population – there is religious and linguistic homogeneity, but diversity in terms of caste and gender. In this situation, I cannot force conversations among, for example, Muslim, Hindu, and Christian students for the simple reason that there are only Hindu students in the classroom.

There are alternatives, as mentioned above – workshops, after-school sessions, etc. However, there is rarely time to do much extra-curricular work, especially in the face of pressure from parents who have academic aspirations for their children and a pedagogic and administrative set-up that prioritises examination performance. There are also limited resources in most school spaces, which means that several of the alternatives are outside the reach of most teachers.

Taking all of this into account, I chose to work with ‘extended contact’, that is, I try to generate contact through media – exposure to people from other cultures and groups via stories that the students can immerse themselves in. I worked with picture books and children’s literature – while this is a resource

that could require some expenditure, the relative expenditure is much less than, say, laptops and tablets, or a projector. Also, this is a resource that never expires or needs upgrading or maintenance. Additionally, picture books and children's literature (and any activity using them), in general, contribute to the 'curricular' goals of language instruction as well.

Some experiences

Over the last year, I have used two or three periods a week with classes III, IV and V to read aloud various picture books to the students and use them to start conversations about issues, such as caste, gender, religion, loss, and more. This year has been extremely rewarding and has resulted in some meaningful conversations and raised several important questions. But before getting into some of the highlights from this experience, I would like to focus attention on some of the unique benefits of using stories and books for a project like this.

Picture books fulfil a specific requirement when it comes to the attention span of younger students. They demand a certain focus and attention – different from watching something on a screen – where some of the work has to be done by the listener/reader. This skill of focus and learning is a building block for establishing the skill of self-learning which is still relevant in classrooms and our educational system. However, they do this in shorter spans than textbooks, because with language that is age-appropriate, picture books with images both grab the attention of the reader as well as contribute to the storytelling itself. The combination of text and image gives the reader visual cues and context, but still leaves scope for imagination. It encourages the reader to immerse themselves in the story, rather than simply receive it passively.

By using a series of picture books, I was also able to engage consistently with issues such as gender or caste, that require great consistency and commitment without children feeling bored.

Further, reading a storybook allows us to pause at certain points, to allow discussions to go on while referring to the book or images in the book. We can move back and forth within the story and easily refer to things that have happened previously, without breaking the flow of the story, in a way that perhaps is not always possible with other forms of media.

Instances from our classroom

While reading a story called *Mera naam Gulab hai*, in which a group of boys is teasing the main character – Gulab – because of her father's profession (a sanitation worker), it came out in the conversation in class V that one student teases another by twisting his surname (an indicator of his caste). Some of the boys on hearing the story, remarked how similar it was to how this student was being teased.

In this instance, no particular ill-will was meant by the boy who was teasing, as to him, this was simply another form of banter that they all engaged in on a regular basis. However, the student on the receiving end had been taking it to heart but had not felt empowered enough to speak up.

These issues – caste and gender-based inequalities – are lived realities in all the students' lives. In some cases, and for some students, they are extremely aware of this reality. Even where they are not consciously aware of these issues, they still hold power in their lives. By having this conversation in the classroom, not only was I able to talk about caste, but I was also able to understand a classroom dynamic that I was not aware of and take certain steps that led to the victim of the teasing feeling more comfortable, a factor that also noticeably changed his confidence and, subsequently, his performance in the class.

Insights from storytelling

We learn so much more about our students' lives by engaging in storytelling – stories are relatable and bring to the fore much more of our inner landscapes than the textbooks we conventionally use. To take another example, in a story we were reading, called *I Will Save My Land*, the main character, a young girl, interacts with her father and grandmother, but there is no mention of her mother. Many of the students asked about it – where must the mother be, etc. I encouraged guesses but did not offer any certainty in the matter.

After we finished reading the story which, to me, was a story about gender, caste and land, one of the students in the class told me with tears in their eyes that the 'mother is a bad person for leaving her child and going away'. Since we had never concluded what had happened to the character's mother, I was surprised by my student's vehemence. After class, I spoke to the student and learned that the student's mother had been working in a different district for the past few months, and the children were

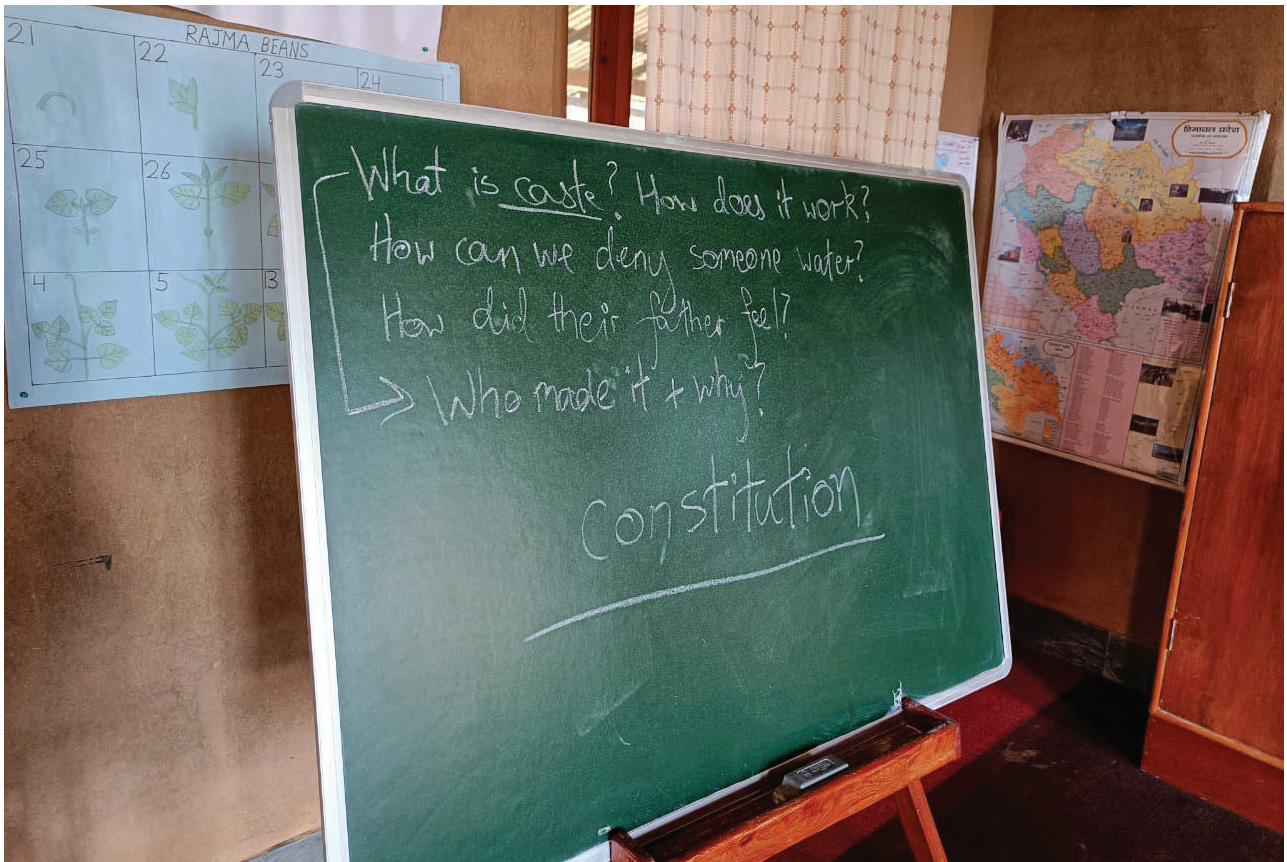


Figure 1. Some of the questions and insights that came up during class

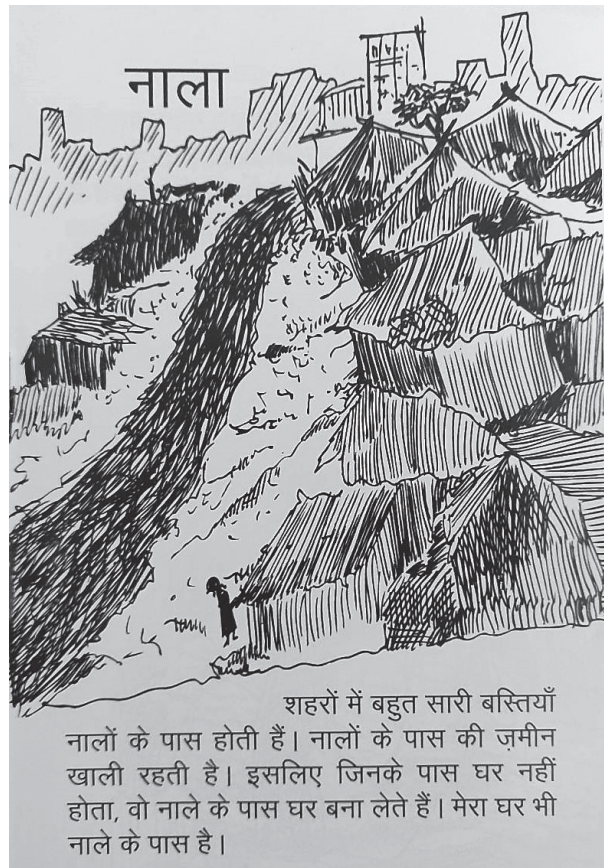


Figure 2. Naala, Muskaan, Padho Rakho Shrinkhala

feeling very lost and abandoned at home. This was something we, the teachers, had neither known or heard of, nor had we thought about the impact it could have on the children.

This pain the child was feeling had been making itself known in various forms, such as a few violent outbursts on the playground that we had been addressing in entirely wrong ways until then. It is not that this revelation immediately led to a successful resolution for the child, but it did help us support the child better.

There is also the undeniable fact that sensitively-chosen stories encourage an opening up of the mind through exposure to new experiences. For example, while reading a short story called *Naala* (written by a child from a *basti* in an Indian city) we came across the experience of living next to an open sewer, and even having to use its boundaries as a toilet. All the students in the classroom expressed disgust (and were also greatly entertained by the language used in the story). But building from that disgust we were able to have a deep discussion about two alien experiences – not having a house to live in, as well as not having a toilet to use. We spent a long time talking about how certain people have to live in these extremely dangerous and unsanitary conditions, and in the case of *Mera Naam Gulab Hai*, their work is even more dangerous with no support from the authorities. We also moved into the question of who does this kind of work in our areas and in our houses. While certainly not the thrust of the story, it opened interesting conversations about architecture, geography and the social structures of our village.

Jadui Macchi, a light story meant as a break between some of the heavier stories and issues we were reading about brought out some wonderful, pedagogically-rich conversations. In this story, an old woman and her daughters set about trying to return happiness to their land. While reading this light fantasy, a girl in the class spoke up. ‘Usually, girls can’t travel so far alone, how are these girls able to do all this?’ That sparked an engaging discussion, which then spiralled into an argument, later turning into a slightly more organised debate about the amount of work girls and boys do at home. Some of the highlights of this were: learning about the laws regarding land in our district; some of the girls in class expressing their desire to do, or be, things that they felt were generally ‘forbidden’ to them; some of

the boys in class making a list of the work that all the household members do and grudgingly accepting that much more hard work is done by their mothers and sisters.

What works and what does not

Over the last year, I have found that there are certain practices we can apply in our planning and classes that lead to richer discussions and openness in classroom conversations.

I have struggled with my personal investment in stories – there are certain books and stories that have moved me greatly, and I go into class with heightened expectations of the impact that a particular story will have on my students. More often than not, that story does not generate the response I ‘want’ from the students, and that affects my ability to engage fairly with the group. Keeping a certain distance, and allowing students to express boredom or dislike is, over the long term, a key component of constructive conversations. This does not mean that there is no exchange in those cases – the conversation can be about what they liked or did not like, and I as the teacher, should also feel free to express what I like and why but without trying to convince my students because, due to the power imbalance between students and teachers, that will invariably lead to less sincere responses from at least a section of the group that will tell me what they think I want to hear.

One of the main factors to keep in mind while attempting this pedagogy is the choice of stories/storybooks. The language must be age- and level-appropriate, especially if children are reading the story themselves. If it is being read out to them the level can be higher because explanations can be given but too much complexity and too many interruptions to explain non-essential things take away from the experience of listening to a story. More importantly, the content and context of the story need to be relatable.

We need to find stories that straddle the line between being a mirror of the reader’s own life and experience and a window into new worlds. Publishers like Muskaan and Tulika Books have several titles that are set in various Indian contexts that are more relatable than those by foreign publications. Even when the right story is not available it is our responsibility to teach our students to read both with and against the text.

The teacher needs to make an effort to integrate lighter stories with the heavier ones (on complex issues, like life, caste etc.), which can keep alive

the spirit of criticality and questioning, as well as dialogue and reflection.

References

I Will Save My Land, written by Rinchin, illustrated by Sagar Kolwankar, published by Tulika Books

Mera Naam Gulab Hai [My Name is Gulab], by Sagar Kolwankar, published by Tulika Books

Naala, written by Shivani, illustrated by Kanak Shashi published by Muskaan Publications

Jadui Macchi, written by Chandrakala Jagat, illustrated by Shakuntala Kushram, published by Tulika Books

Publishers of Indian Children's Literature

Adivaani, Duckbill Books, Eklavya Publications, Ektara, Kalpavriksh Children's Books, Karadi Tales, Katha, Muskaan Publication, Navayana Publishing, Pickle Yolk Books, Pratham Books, Tara Books, Tulika Books, Young Zubaan



Dhruva Desai has been teaching in schools of different kinds in different parts of the country for a few years now. He is currently associated with the Interest Group for Dialogue, Fraternity, and Justice, based at Azim Premji University. He is interested in picture-books, and sports and games, both for himself as well as his students. He may be contacted at dhruva.desai13@apu.edu.in