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Do you remember how, as children, we loved listening to stories? Our favourite adult in the family was the one who would tell us colourful stories. Our favourite teacher was the one who would tell us stories that went beyond the pages of our textbooks. No matter how restless we were as children, with stories, we could sit for hours listening and wandering in a different world. It was as if stories would transport us to a new world of possibilities, wasn't it?

What was the purpose of storytelling? Other than to engage us by catering to our wide interest and ever-exploring minds, our adults wanted to induce some values in us. That is why most of their stories had moral lessons, often explicitly stated at the end.

Stories have attained an important place in learning these days. Storytelling is considered an effective pedagogical technique for the teaching of all subjects (not just languages), especially in the early years of school. Through the medium of stories, children learn to listen, comprehend, imagine, understand points of view and analyse and evaluate history, cultures and concepts. They develop language skills like expression, coherence, presentation, tone, intonation, structuring sentences, phrases, idioms, style of speaking and much more.

Another undeniable aspect of storytelling is that it is a constructive way to ingrain values in young children. While listening to a story, children use their conscience and experience to judge a situation and/or a character and develop their own values and understanding of what is good and what is bad; what should be and what should not be done. As keen listeners, they develop their own perspectives on various situations. They travel across worlds and times with the characters of the stories and connect them with the reality of their lives and experiences. Even the youngest children can connect to stories, characters, and their world, just as we all did when we were children.

My experience and learnings

Looking back on the days when I engaged with children in schools through storytelling to teach my subject, the English language, I realise how I could connect with them at a more personal level too. With storytelling, I could talk to children who were shy and introverted. It made them feel comfortable enough to speak their minds and feel assured that they would not be judged. Whenever I asked them questions, such as what would they do if they were a particular character in a story and why, they would share thoughts that would amaze me. These thoughts provided me with a glimpse into their lives, their identities, their minds, and their families and homes.

Imbibing values

Many a time, I would play the devil's advocate and the children would never judge, rather they would have the most logical reply to questions on what they think is right or wrong and why they thought so. This got me thinking: Isn't storytelling like living a real situation, so much so that one is very clear on what is right and what is not? And is there any better way to make children realise this, so that they develop core values organically, and not just by mechanically mugging up answers to 'morals' in stories? Learning about life through stories will help children make better choices that influence their lives.

Valuing goodness

One of my favourite questions to children after a storytelling session is, 'Who is your favourite character?' Children always make the wisest choices. They are good at analysing a character and a situation. I have never had an experience where any child has liked a negative character. It is always the good character who takes away the trophy of being the favourite, which made me see that children are naturally inclined towards goodness, and they possess the sense of judging it. All we can do as teachers is to guide them. No matter how naughty a child is, they always declare the good character as their favourite proving again and again

that they understand the value of goodness.

Not judging others

Once when I was telling a story to a class of around 8-10 children about a girl who loved eating fish, I did not know how the children, who were largely vegetarian, would react. These children were also a little older -- 9-10 years old. To my surprise, only two or three children reacted as I had expected, but the rest were absolutely okay with the girl eating fish. Some of them even shared that they too were non-vegetarians and loved eating fish, chicken, and eggs. As I remember correctly, their words were, 'It is okay to eat whatever you want. We cannot say if a person is good or bad based on what they like to eat.' I was in awe that children could be so mature. I told them that I was a non-vegetarian too. Towards the end of the story and the discussion, all the children agreed that eating habits do not define a person. Thus, storytelling on that day helped these children arrive at a certain level of tolerance/acceptance. And I learned that stories can be a great way to help children think beyond our societal norms and provide an opportunity for us to stand in someone else's shoes and perceive the world.

For me, the most interesting thing about storytelling with young children was how they would arrive at their own understanding of the story, plot, or characters. They constructed their own values. They also felt confused by their own thoughts and in those states of confusion, most of the time, it would be their peers and not I, who had the perfect answers.

Conclusion

Storytelling can be made more interesting with the use of different storytelling methods and materials, like puppets, story cards, books (*Big Books*, picture books, etc.), big pictures, role-play, drawings made by children, videos, etc. The richer the experience, the deeper the effect. When children tell stories, it removes their hesitation and boosts their confidence to speak and express their thoughts. So, with stories, children get a window to think and reflect, they get a chance to make choices (by changing the end of a story, selecting a favourite character or part), and they become good listeners and creative communicators. All these skills are essential for life in this 21st century. And as we have seen through my experiences, stories provide an organic means to develop core values in children.

The National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) 2022 mentions five developmental domains: (i) physical development, (ii) socio-emotional and ethical development, (iii) cognitive development, (iv) language and literacy development and (v) aesthetic and cultural development. All these domains of development can benefit significantly through storytelling. The NCF-FS talks about 'ethics, values and disposition' as well, and as discussed, storytelling is an effective means of developing these naturally. It is clear that based on stories, a complete learning experience can be built for children, and it is time that we, as teachers, incorporate more storytelling in our classrooms.



Figure 1. Storytelling by children using stick puppets, Chittorgarh, Rajasthan

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It is very important during these early stages for teachers to ensure that children hear, see and read what is familiar. As an example, in a classroom, what is being read in the form of a story must also support what is being discussed in circle time or during small group interactions.

Sharoon Sunny, Power of Stories in Language Learning, page 59