

# What Storytelling Brings to the Class

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I have been developing a Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) framework which is spiral in nature and advocates that CSE should be an active part of the formal curriculum right from the early years of education. My classroom engagement is with students of classes V to IX on a monthly basis in Aksharnandan School, Pune. With the older students, I try to open conversations in a more direct manner. But with class V students, the conversation needs to be planned differently. I have tried to consolidate my limited experience of experimenting with 'storytelling' as a tool with class V students; in short, this article will talk about my trial-and-error experiments with stories.

## **Classroom engagements: My experiences**

### *Initiating conversations on difficult themes*

Sometimes, it becomes difficult to initiate a conversation around a theme as there seems to be no suitable starting points. In such situations, stories, poems and films act quite organically as prompts to trigger conversations. In my experience, stories like *Sir Ka Salaan*, *Kyon Kyon Ladki*, *Pyari Madam*, *Barasta Tarbooz* shed light on so many complex social issues such as caste, class, religion, gender etc., by simply putting people's daily experiences in words. Picture books can help start a dialogue on complex social relationships and encourage reflection on one's feelings in a natural way. Such narratives hold special importance in urban classrooms where most of the students come from stable socio-economic families.

### *Building a listening space*

Just as how questions open up conversations, sharing of personal experiences open up space for students to empathise/ relate with each other. Different characters from the stories sometimes offer room for students to align their life struggles with a character in the story, or sometimes they learn about different social realities of people. This representation of different lives and different voices may result in a more inclusive, accepting attitude among students.

### *Creating space for creativity, curiosity and reflection*

Different activities and exercises can be developed with stories. Some of the activities mentioned below can be tried out with most stories by making changes suitable for the students or the context. Theatre activities, like role play, can create an environment where students can experiment to be someone else. The experience of what it feels like to be someone else enables the process to understand oneself better. These activities help in language learning, building vocabulary and finding different ways of expression.

### *Preparing the ground for academic discussions*

Stories can bring numerous curricular connections inside the classroom. For example, while reading the story *The Why-Why Girl* many themes such as social justice, gender, caste etc came up which are directly related to social science. Such linkages can come in handy in social science classrooms because conversations can be built from references in storybooks. Narratives questioning oppressive structures in society offer opportunities to challenge stereotypes and taboos, leading to reflective academic engagement in classrooms.

## **Facilitator's role**

I have tried making a comprehensive lesson plan for a storytelling session but have realised that such sessions are more insightful when they are spontaneous and free-flowing. I usually ask a lot of questions as I read a story which makes the process interactive. What is necessary for a facilitator is to churn the discussion, consolidate it and highlight relevant points and questions as they go ahead. Teachers and educators can try to bring in as many subject-related references as they can through the stories so that students can easily interlink experiences.

In this section, I am going to talk about my experience of reading the story *The Why-Why Girl* by Mahashweta Devi with students of class V. This story is about a 10-year-old tribal girl, Moyna, who is curious and asks the question 'why' to everything happening around her. Moyna's questions make

us think about the wonders of nature, leading to us questioning social injustice at the same time. The story opens with Moyna running behind a big snake, trying to catch it, as snakes are eaten in her family. At this point, the students were discussing different kinds of meat that humans eat. A few students were surprised to learn that snakes are also eaten.

Moyna talks about household and other chores that she has to do on a daily basis. As Moyna and the class V students were almost the same age, it was striking for them to understand that Moyna’s life was so different from theirs. One of the students said that both Moyna and Jamlo’s (protagonist of the story *Jamlo Chalti Gayi*) lives seemed so much more challenging than theirs and their experience of childhood was poles apart. Both Moyna and Jamlo have responsibilities to support their families in various ways, financial support being one. In short, many things that are easily available to my students, and which they think are available to every child, are an everyday struggle for children like Moyna and Jamlo.

The story mentions Moyna’s tribe - *Shabar* - and mentions that the *Shabar* community do not have any access to land and resources. While the community members do not have any complaints about this, it is Moyna whose questions are becoming more profound day by day, examining the unequal division of resources. Bringing up the struggles of marginalised communities is crucial in an urban classroom like ours in order to make the students aware of their privileged lives and what can one do with this advantage.

Another discussion opened up when Moyna begins to think about why they have to eat stale food given by the landowners where she works. Here students started sharing experiences of their own homes where too leftover food is given to the househelp. Some students felt that it was fair to give extra/leftover food to people as it anyway gets wasted if not given away. On the other hand, some of the students felt sorry because they understood that it would not be a good feeling to receive stale food, even if it was well-intentioned.

Some of the students had visited *Adivasi Pada* (tribal hamlet) shortly before this session, so they could immediately visualise the description of Moyna’s village. The students questioned the timing of the government school not being suitable for the students in the hamlet and expressed the view that since a school is for students, its timings should be kept considering the routine of the children. Though Moyna was asking these important questions to herself and to those around her, we as readers, start to question the inequality in access to education and other basic needs to children like Moyna.

We, then, collectively thought about: *Do we even ask ‘why’ about the things and practices that happen around us? Or do we simply accept these as they are?* Following the discussion, an activity was conducted wherein the students were asked to close their eyes and think about two questions that emerged in the moment – questions that they may have been thinking about for a while. Some responses were:

Questioning the self, the body	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When I got a haircut, everyone told me that I am looking bad; that I am not their friend. Was my decision to get a haircut wrong?</li> <li>• Can only women have babies?</li> <li>• Sometimes, students around me are very mean. Is this because I am new to this school?</li> </ul>
Questioning society, gender roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is it because I am a boy that I am not allowed to cook at home?</li> <li>• Why are people with dark skin considered inferior?</li> <li>• Why do people verbally abuse others? What do they mean when they use abusive words? Who created these words?</li> <li>• Who decides the skin colour of babies?</li> <li>• If two people love each other, why should other people care?</li> <li>• Is it necessary to tease a girl and a boy when they are seen together? Can’t they be just friends?</li> <li>• Why is it that at home, only my grandfather does the <i>puja</i>?</li> <li>• Why does an <i>Adivasi Pada</i> have only one school?</li> </ul>

Fantasy- curiosity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do ghosts build their own houses?</li> <li>• Is it necessary to obey our parents every time?</li> <li>• Some people fall ill with incurable diseases. Why do such diseases exist?</li> <li>• Can things that exist in fantasy, take shape in reality?</li> <li>• What exactly happened in history?</li> <li>• Who steals our pens in the class?</li> </ul>
Feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why can't I know how other people view this world?</li> <li>• Does shouting necessarily mean scolding or being angry at someone?</li> </ul>

### Activities with storytelling

There are different activities that can be tried out in the classroom with storybooks as Teaching-Learning Material (TLMs). Here are five such group activities that can open up possibilities for collaboration, creativity and questioning.

#### *Changing the narrative*

In this activity, each group is asked to attempt to rewrite the entire story from the viewpoint of a different character from the same story. Interesting twists develop through such exercises as participants 'wearing the shoes' of the new character and trying to visualise situations and interactions with other characters, viewed from different perspectives.

#### *Guess the end/ change the end*

There are two ways of conducting this activity: either the facilitator can read the story and stop at the climax and invite students to discuss the possible endings in groups or the facilitator can read the complete story and then invite students to make changes in the story, if they wish to.

#### *Add a character and rewrite the story*

In this activity, students are invited to add a completely new character to the story and write this new character's journey along with the other characters.

#### *Act it out!*

Theatre activities help greatly in the socio-emotional

learning (SEL) aspect. When students 'play' the characters in the story, they start identifying with their lives. Furthermore, participatory theatre can be introduced wherein the students enact the story and pause at a particular moment where the audience is asked to replace the characters on stage and respond spontaneously in the scene as if they were playing that character. This brings out different perspectives of looking at any given situation.

#### *Design the cover page and title of the story*

The facilitator reads the whole story with its front page covered. Once the storytelling and discussion are over, the students sit in pairs and visualise a cover page for the story based on the discussion and think about a suitable title for the story.

As is evident, storybooks are great TLMs. Reading a story definitely plays a crucial part in a classroom but engaging with them in different forms opens up different avenues. I read a lot of storybooks when I was growing up. Although we had a library period twice a week, book discussions were not included in the curriculum. This isolation is problematic as it prevents the close connection of curricular themes with the subject and plot of storybooks. I think stories have immense potential that we, as facilitators, must explore to create honest conversations, exchange of opinions and, most importantly, develop a listening ear.



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