

Learning Through Stories

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Introduction

Stories are engaging and universally liked. Our history and mythology are full of stories, and we never forget the stories we hear in our childhood. In Kannada, stories such as *Kagakka Gubakka* (The Crow and the Sparrow), *Govina Haadu* (The Cow Song), *Elu Samudrada Aache Iruva Rakshasa* (The Demon Residing Beyond the Seven Seas) are always remembered. Since everyone loves stories, I strongly urge that all subjects in schools be taught through stories.

Search for children's stories

Looking for children's stories in Kannada, I ended up finding only 'story poems'. There were no picture books. Most books were translations in which word usage, sentence structure and some themes were beyond the children's cognitive level. It is then that I got the idea of rewriting folk stories inherent in our culture and new stories that are relevant to our environment. Since teachers know the children they interact with so well, stories written by them are relevant and useful. A workshop on story-writing was organised by the Bangalore District Institute (Azim Premji Foundation) for *anganwadi*

and government primary school teachers with the objective of creating a repertoire of stories for children. We got a lot of stories as a result.

Methodology

Since the dialects, customs and environment of the various regions of Karnataka are different, it was decided to bring the teachers of all the regions under one roof to create the stories. Before the workshop, we read a number of translated, illustrated stories from children's literature and sorted them out according to their subject matter. We also discussed the focus of, and the learnings inherent in the stories.

Some of the stories were ones that the children could relate to, for instance, *Akka Tangi Gubegalu* (The Owl Sisters), which we illustrated and published as a bilingual book, was written by one of the teachers. There were others: *Hunase Peppermint* (Tamarind Candy), a story of the quandary two sisters find themselves in while making tamarind candy; and *Puttiya Prashnegalu* (Putty's Questions) about a little girl called Putty, who questions everything that comes her way during her visit to her grandmother's village. *Mara Rakshasa*, (The



Figure 1. *Puttiya Prashnegalu*, one of the stories created and illustrated during the workshop

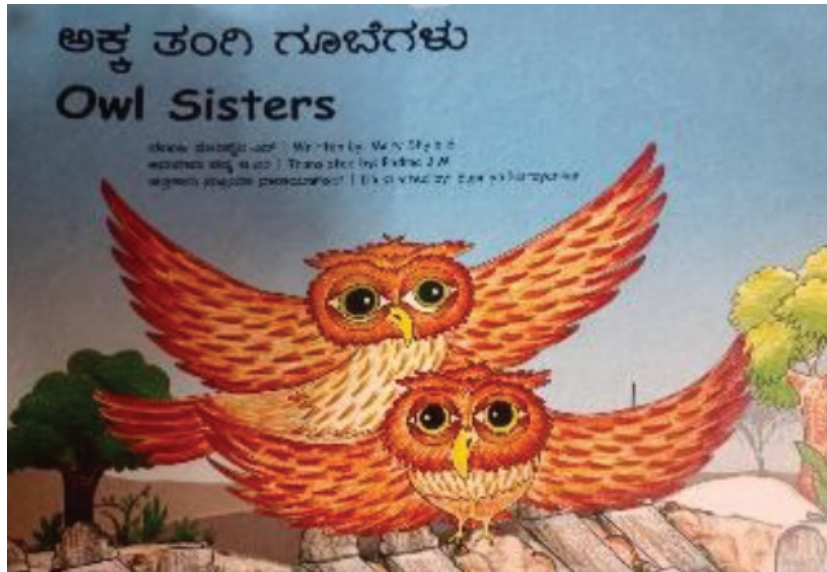


Figure 2. Akka Tangi Gubegalu, another story created and illustrated during the workshop

Demon on a Tree) was about a demon coming to a grand feast to the house of a woodcutter who had come to cut the tree.

The children could relate to these stories and found them interesting and enjoyable. These stories were used extensively in the language development of children. For instance, in the *Hunase Peppermint* (Tamarind Candy) story, the children themselves had listed the ingredients used in preparing the candy. As another example, a teacher from Mangalore used the practice of hand-fans in her story *Tampu Gaali* introducing the ideas of weather (humidity) as well as culture.

Storytelling and learning

We used books published by Pratham and National Book Trust (NBT) to enrich not only language development but, also our maths and science pedagogy.

Language development and imagination

Reading stories to children at the primary level before they learn to read themselves makes them aware that spoken language itself is different from written, or literary, language. Children are introduced to new vocabulary through stories and recognise letters and their sounds. For example: in *Manguvina Buguri* (Mangu's Top, NBT) Mangu finds an old top which he 'makes' new with oil and paint. Later, he notices a hole in it and is saddened. But when he whips it around to see whether it spins like before, he is surprised because it spins with a whistle. He now has a 'top that whistles'. Additionally, many new words that the children can relate to are learned from listening to this story.

Stories enhance children's imagination and impact their thinking. For instance, in *Prakruthi Koduge* (Nature's Gift, NBT), an elephant wanted to fly like a baya weaverbird (*geejaga*) and since they were friends, the elephant told the bird this. The weaverbird collected a feather from each of its flock and wove two large wings for the elephant. At this point, the story was brought to a halt and the children were asked if they thought that the elephant could fly. Some children answered, 'It can because now it has such big wings,' but some others said that the elephant would be too heavy to fly. The children had reasoned out the answer for themselves.

In another story, *Ombatthu Putta Marigalu* (Nine Little Chicks), the mother hen asks the rooster (the father) to take care of the eggs while she goes to drink water. But a storm comes and some eggs break. The rooster gets an idea. Halting here, the children were asked what the idea could be. Some said that the rooster may have glued the shells together, some others thought that the rooster may have confessed that the eggs had broken.

What surprised me the most was a child's response to the story *Haaralu Kalita Mangatte Mari Hakki* (The Little Hummingbird that Learned to Sing, NBT). In this story, the parent hummingbirds build a nest and lay three eggs. One baby bird is born but it is afraid to fly. So, to encourage the baby bird to learn to fly, the parents throw the other two eggs away. When the children were asked to guess why the mother bird had done this, a 6-year-old boy said, 'It would be difficult to feed many children, so the bird threw the two eggs away!' How differently

children think! Storytelling helps in the cognitive development of children and makes them think for themselves.

Learning maths

Teaching early mathematics through stories helps children comprehend the concepts easily. In the story *Ombatthu Putta Marigalu*, described above, the rooster collects the eggs of eight different birds and puts them in the nest. After a few days, the chicks hatch and go in search of food. They come across a flock of birds of their own species and start flying away one by one. The questions were: how many birds flew away each time? How many birds were left? The children learned subtraction in a natural way.

Learning science

We introduced 'magnetism' to the children using the story, *Mantrika Tundu* (Magic Piece, Pratham). A little girl finds a magnet in her brother's room and discovers that some objects stick to it while others do not. After the story was read to the children, they were given a piece of magnet and asked to list out the objects that were attracted to it. The children were interested and curious even while doing the activity. The story of the birds had taught them how long it takes for the chicks to hatch, their diet and lifestyle. Another story, *Muniya Padeda Nidhi* (Muniya's Treasure) introduced to them the stages of a plant's growth.

Learning social science

Early learning includes an introduction to the family, different professions and regions, illustrated

characters and events. In the story *Kshoura Dinaacharan* (A Day in the Life of a Barber), Shringeri Srinivas, a character in the story, goes to different professionals, like a tailor, a carpenter and a barber to get his hair cut. The children could easily identify these characters through the illustrated dialogue in the story. The inclusion of family members in the story made it easy to introduce various relationships. In another story, *Sasaki Matthu Savira Kokkaregalu* (Sasaki and the Thousand Cranes), Sadoko Sasaki was a two-year-old girl when the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. As a consequence, she was diagnosed with cancer at the age of ten. Sasaki starts preparing thousands of paper cranes, with the hope that the Japanese will survive if she accomplishes this goal. But she dies before accomplishing the task, which was later completed by her friends. Listening to this story made it easier for the children to understand the backdrop of the bombing and its consequences.

Enhancing awareness

The questions asked during the course of storytelling play an important role in increasing awareness and empathy. If children are asked, what would they do if they were a character in the story, it helps and develops their thinking and problem-solving skills. For example, if the story is about dreams: *What do you dream of?* If the story is about fear: *What are you scared of? What do you do if you are afraid?* Questioning children's reactions gives them an opportunity to express their feelings and also to relate their own lives to their learning at school.



Figure 3. An illustration from the story *Ombatthu Putta Marigalu*

Discovering values

In the story, *Prakrutiya Koduge* mentioned earlier, a weaverbird and an elephant are friends. When the elephant wants to fly, the bird helps create wings for it and teaches it to fly. But the elephant falls to the ground, making the bird sad and apologetic. In the end, however, both the weaverbird and the elephant realise that each of them has different physical attributes. When the children were asked for their opinion, some said that it was good of the bird to help its friend. To others, the bird apologising to the elephant for the elephant being injured seemed unfair. One group said they liked the dialogue between the bird and the elephant at the end. There was no need for us to bring out just one moral from the story when the children themselves could think of so many different points of view.

Some useful tips

- While telling a story to children, stop at an interesting point and ask some questions. Tell

them to complete the story, either orally or as written work. For example, when this line, 'A fox falls into a well,' was read out, the question asked was, 'How do you think the fox managed to come out of the well?' The children completed the story in the following ways: 'The well had steps and the fox came up climbing those,' 'The fox came up with the help of climbers (vines)' and 'The fox came up with the help of others'.

- Simple English stories can be translated into Kannada and illustrated. This can be done for any language.
- When a series of pictures were given to the children, they wrote different stories which were kept in the school library for other children to read.

In addition, apart from the important part stories play in children's language learning, the characters and themes help in the significant process of socialisation, a very important aspect of school life.



Figures 4 - 5. The story translated and illustrated by children



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