

This article presents two different experiences of telling stories to young children. One of a classroom setting and the other of informal interactions with a child. The children and I both loved listening to these stories. Adults, be it parents or teachers, often try to set objectives for the engagement with children even before we begin the interaction. These objectives are usually aligned to some pre-decided learning outcomes. One example of this is that after reading a story or a narrative, youngsters will be able to understand the meaning of difficult words, will be able to re-tell the story or speak about the story in at least a few sentences and so on. Such objectives were not considered in the interactions described here.

I simply read the stories to children. Wherever there were questions, we discussed. Whenever there was a joke, something funny to laugh about, we laughed together. We also shared surprises, responses and our sense of wonder occasionally: 'How can this be possible?', 'How did it happen?' Or, more specifically, 'Why did they (the character) do it?' and pondered on whether or not something that someone did was correct or not, and so on. In other words, children lead conversations about their thoughts and feelings as the storytelling progressed.

Storytelling in the classroom

It was a spacious room with 25 class I students. The large room had four wide windows with ledges on which children could sit. The new session of the school had begun 15 days ago but, it was my first day of school. Before beginning work with these young children, I had visited the school, observed the teachers teaching from the textbooks and was wondering with what and how to start teaching them. Then, it occurred to me that storytelling may be a good idea to help me connect with the children. So, I decided to do storytelling for a few days before moving to other areas.

I told these children of class I that every day, during the first period of school, we would share a story. I showed them the two-three different storybooks

(multiple copies) that I had brought along. Then, I asked children to sit closer to me. Some children complied, while others did not. A few children were sitting on the window ledge and remained there. A small girl sat at the window, and she kept staring out of the window for the whole duration of the storytelling session. Some children were playing with their pencils, while thankfully some others were looking at me. Subsequently, I read the selected story *Kya Tum Meri Amma Ho?* (Are You My Mother?) to them. When this story ended, I told them another story till the period ended.

The following day, children themselves said that they wanted to hear the previous day's story again. The classroom seating was the same as the day before. I began telling the same story *Kya Tum Meri Amma Ho?* But this time, I did not read out the story but retold it from memory, because of which the order in which a baby bird in the story meets the animals changed. Immediately, the girl sitting at the window, stated, 'No, the baby bird did not meet the dog first.' A second child added, 'It first encountered the cat, then the hen, and then the dog.' Another child commented that the cat and dog were good because they did not eat up the tiny bird. There were a lot of similar reactions from the children. I realised that my impression that many children were not paying attention was wrong; they were listening. In fact, they were listening so carefully that they were very sure of the sequence of the story. It was clear that the children had followed the story and remembered each character and their part in the story.

For roughly 10 days, I told stories and recited poems to these children. They became more articulate and communicative and wanted to hear more and more stories. However, this had to be halted to 'complete' the syllabus.

The thought that repeatedly troubles me and keeps coming to my mind is, *what is the meaning of finishing the syllabus? Is this storytelling unrelated to the syllabus? Should it not be part of the syllabus?* If you ask me, what the kids and I achieved during those 8-10 days of storytelling

was phenomenal. Children would hum the lines of the poems and talk about the stories even outside the classrooms. In these conversations, their questions, their understanding of those questions, their analysis, and their understanding of the relationship between one story and the other, was evident. They asked all kinds of questions: *Can a baby bird start walking soon after hatching? What is the size of an egg?* Some children in our class eat egg but others do not. *Is it good to eat eggs? Who has a cow in their house? How does a calf walk?* And many more. I would also like to highlight that while some children asked question along with or just after the first story, there were quite a few children who said something only after 5 -6 days of listening to these.

Even today, whenever I think about storytelling, I find that it is much more useful and effective than reading and writing. It is directly related to the development of the child as a person. Perhaps in our hurry to teach children to read textbooks, we obstruct their natural learning process that comes through listening to and engaging with stories.

Telling stories to a child

One important step towards children developing an interest in reading-writing is their being able to choose texts that they would enjoy reading. Therefore, allowing youngsters to explore books to find the material of their choice on their own is a vital part of creating a love of reading in them.

Children have their preferences for stories. This child that I read stories to was four years old and wanted to hear a new and long story every day. Once, he refused to hear a story that I had read out to him earlier. In the story, a bear cub dies (although it is brought back to life); the child remembered this. I had just begun the first line when he said sharply, 'No not this, I don't want to listen to this; I have heard it; the bear cub dies.' This reaction told me that the cub dying had been on his mind and had perhaps troubled him all along.

Stories help children connect with the happenings around them. I had read out a series of stories about dinosaurs when this child was about 5 years old. These stories contained many facts about dinosaurs – their size, their food habits etc. The stories also had information about dinosaur fossils and how fossils are searched and discovered. A few days later, a garden nearby was dug up to look for fossils. This started a conversation about what fossils are made up of, how they are formed, the

time it takes and also about how much effort and patience is required to locate them.

In one of his papers, Vygotsky states that imagination does not develop in a vacuum and imagining is based on prior experiences. It could be a personal experience or something that has been heard. Stories are excellent ways of providing the second type of experience. They lead to the development of imagination and imagination can go in many different directions. So, apart from the story, a reader can think about the author: *Who is the author? What are they like? Where do they live? Which language do they speak? How do they write? When did they start writing? How old would they be?*

From Roald Dahl's *Going Solo* that I read to him, this 8-year-old learned a lot about Africa. In one of the stories, the author is involved in an accident in a fighter plane. He has bruises all over his body, and his entire face is bandaged. He cannot see; he can only hear. Because he cannot answer the nurse's questions, she tells him to just press her hand if he wants to answer in the affirmative. After 3-4 months of reading this book the child was unwell. I told him to rest and also keep quiet. He said 'OK, you just give me your hand when you ask me a question, if I want to answer yes, I will press your hand.' (He was indicating that I may need to ask if he is thirsty, or hungry or if I want to go to the washroom or stand up etc.)

As mentioned, interacting with concrete experiences helps to enhance these threads of imagination. For example, after reading aloud *Going Solo*, the child had many questions: *Is Africa larger than India? Is it larger than China?* So, we looked at a globe and found out that Africa is not larger than China. Then which new stories should you listen to? What else should you listen to? All these become important concerns.

Conclusion

When I started telling stories, I had not thought about how it would benefit or what children will learn from this exercise. I realised many of these things much later, sometimes, after months of the narration.

It is not necessary that every child will understand the story the way we intend them to. This has been underlined by many scholars and teachers. Anita Dhyani in her article¹ mentions that she came to know the true meaning of a sentence from a story that she had read in school when she herself

became a teacher. Children can create relevant meanings for themselves from stories. We can never fully understand how a child perceives a narrative, what they understand from it, and how

they understand it. However, stories do leave an impact if children develop the habit of listening to them.

Endnotes

- i Why Story? Stories and Different Dimensions of Understanding. Anita Dhyani. Pathshala Bheetar Aur Baahar. Azim Premji University. <https://anuvadasampada.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/2262/>

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Rajni Dwivedi is member of the editorial team of Azim Premji University's *Pathshala Bheetar aur Bahar*. She may be contacted at rajni.dwivedi@azimpremjifoundation.org