

*Children's literature — oral, performative and written — has the capacity to welcome children into the world of pleasure, imagination, emotions, creativity, curiosity, different cultures, play with language, empathy with human lives, and an understanding of self.*

*KathaVana, Azim Premji University, 2023*

The children came in a big group, and I asked them to sit in a semi-circle facing me. Their keen, shining eyes looked expectantly at me. I slowly brought forward the book that was hidden behind my back. I showed them the cover page and with all the appropriate theatrical antics screamed, 'Catch that Crocodile!'. The group in front of me roared with laughter, and I knew the show had begun.

As part of our annual children's literature mela, *KathaVana*, I had set up a stall that had storytelling through a read-aloud as the activity. These children who came were conversant in Kannada, and I knew only Hindi and English. So, a colleague's help was

enlisted to translate into Kannada what I read aloud in English. Despite the language differences, the read-aloud interspersed with gestures, expressions, voice modulation, and other paralinguistic features led to reasonable comprehension and elicited thoughtful and exciting responses from the children. Their spontaneous reactions of shock, wonder, laughter and excited anticipation were the highlights of the session.

### What is KathaVana?

*KathaVana* is an annual, bilingual, children's literature festival organised by Azim Premji University in collaboration with Azim Premji Foundation's Field Institutes in Karnataka. It is an initiative to work with government and low-fee-paying private schools to make the benefits of literature accessible to children from different cultural, socio-economic, and linguistic backgrounds.



Figure 1. Children at KathaVana, the annual bilingual children's literature festival.

Each edition of *KathaVana* is based on a theme with workshops, discussions, oral storytelling, read-alouds, puppet shows, meet-the-illustrator and other events around it. Some of the past themes have been 'Children's Voices in Literature', 'Teachers as Readers' and 'Nurturing Children's Response to Literature'. The festival enables children's access and engagement with children's literature and prompts them to explore it even after they return to their classrooms. Teachers observe and take back several ideas and ways of bringing literature into their classrooms.

### **Why storytelling?**

Ever since human language came into existence, storytelling has been an important part of human life through a variety of oral and performative traditions, such as *dastangoi*, *harikatha*, *kalakshepam*, *yakshagana*, *kaavad*, *burra katha*, *kathputli*, *rabna chhaya*, *tolu bommalata*, etc. These oral and performative traditions are now rightly recognised as literature, and as children's literature when performed with children as the audience.

Several reasons merit the use of stories and telling of stories in a classroom that have led to their becoming an integral part of *KathaVana*. Some of these reasons are as follows:

#### *Learning about oneself and the world*

Storytelling allows children to look inwards and outwards, empathising with the characters and events in the process. Children become aware of the emotions, reactions, interests, and motivations behind their actions, and become familiar with cultures and people similar and different to them. For children, stories not only act as a springboard for imagination but also enable them to link the world of fantasy with the real world. Storytelling can provide a platform for them to think and reflect on issues important to them and help address themes universal to humanity. Above all, storytelling in a classroom makes it a shared social experience, leading to children's socio-emotional development where they laugh, worry, feel excited, become sad, or anticipate together as a group, building a community in the process.

#### *Learning to think*

Storytelling helps children develop the strategies of listening, planning, hypothesising, predicting, identifying patterns, and paying attention. They begin to implicitly use visual and audio cues, their prior knowledge of the world and the language to make meaning.

#### *Learning a language*

The frequent repetitions and exposure to similar patterns of language use in storytelling expose children to a speaking and narrative discourse, developing oral language, which is central to the development of literacy and language skills. Vocabulary, sentence structures, grammatical rules, pronunciation, rhythm, intonation, comprehension, and the use of language in particular contexts can also be introduced and reinforced.

#### *As a pedagogical tool*

Storytelling can provide a context for introducing and reinforcing different concepts across the curricular areas of mathematics, science, art, technology, and social sciences, making it a very useful pedagogical tool for teachers. Listening to stories is found to be fun and pleasurable for children and adults alike. Storytelling allows teachers to strategise children's participation and engagement in a classroom based on children's interests and motivations. This also makes space for individual differences, needs and diversity in a classroom and helps teachers respond to these.

### **Why is storytelling absent from classrooms?**

Despite the educational value of storytelling, it continues to face resistance from teachers as several of them are unaware of the true value it holds in children's lives and learning. If they do understand its importance, they struggle to identify ways in which storytelling can become part of their classrooms and teaching-learning. This struggle can be around planning a lesson, managing time the constraints of a curriculum, or identifying the right kind of books and traditions for storytelling that are age- and learning-level appropriate. Some teachers also avoid storytelling because of their lack of confidence in their abilities to tell stories or read them aloud.

### **How *KathaVana* has helped**

*KathaVana* has consistently worked with in-service and pre-service teachers through professional development workshops and discussions. Leveraging the theory-practice connect, teachers are systematically introduced to ways of bringing children's literature into the classroom, especially through storytelling. Some of the takeaways for teachers have been as follows:

#### *Learning- and child-centred approach*

Children's engagement with literature should not be passive - where teachers tell the story, explain

it through translation or summary and give its 'moral'. Instead, children need to actively engage with literature by making their own meaning, sharing their interpretations, predictions, and feelings, and responding in different creative ways. For this to happen, teachers need to select stories that have multiple interpretations and meanings, are rich in themes, align with children's lives and experiences, have relevance for children, respond to their interests and needs, and make space for age-appropriate and individual-based learning levels, making sure that the sessions are interactive and welcomes children's thinking and imagination. For example, at one of the story sessions, storyteller Maitri Vasudev read aloud *Granny Knits* by Uri Orlev, translated from Hebrew into Kannada by Ishwarchandra. To help children imagine, connect the story with their lives, think, reflect and respond with their meanings, she facilitated a discussion with questions, such as '*How did Ajji feel when her grandchildren pulled each other's strands of wool out? How do your parents/grandparents react when you break something in the house? Was Ajji's response similar or different from theirs in the story? What do you do when you are angry? Does your anger rise slowly like Ajji's, like an inflating balloon? Or is it sudden, like a bursting balloon?*'

#### *Extension and integration of curricular concepts*

Storytelling can lead to other activities, introduce themes, and help teach concepts in other curricular areas. Storyteller Vanita introduced a story and used it as a starting point to help children create their own stories in the form of an accordion book along with supporting illustrations. Another storyteller, Priya Muthukumar, used stories, such as *Hakeem's Hiccups*, *Bisibelebath Pot* and *The Cat and the Fly* to talk about themes of community helpers, different regional food, nature, and animal behaviour.

#### *Use of multimodality*

Storytelling has a multimodal aspect, in which role play, props and drama can be used. It does not always have to rely heavily only on one's gestures and body language. Voice modulation and expressions can be supported through props and materials. For example, some storytellers (Umashanker Periodi, Gagan Yeyyadi and Anvitha Prakash) used puppets along with other props - dupattas, furniture, musical instruments, etc. - to tell stories. This encouraged children to make puppets of their own and tell stories through them directly or use them as props in dramas.

#### *Creating bi/multilingual classrooms*

Teachers have begun to look for ways to make multilingual classrooms a reality. Being a bilingual festival, *KathaVana* demonstrates how Kannada and English can seamlessly become part of the interactions. We have had students and resource persons who are comfortable with more than two languages, such as high oral language proficiency in Hindi or Urdu in addition to Kannada, and beginner-level proficiency in English.

The interactions are encouraged in any or all these languages during the sessions. For instance, the example I shared in the beginning leveraged our multilingual capabilities where students responded in a mix of Kannada, English and Urdu to my interactive questions during the read-aloud. We were able to negotiate meaning and comprehension using gestures and expressions. The importance was not placed on purity, fluency or accuracy but on children sharing their interpretations, feelings and ideas without any restriction posed on their language. The children, their thoughts and their languages took centre stage instead of the mechanics of language. Ashruti Seventra, another storyteller, did something similar with her read-aloud in English while displaying the book in Kannada over the projector. The follow-up activity required students to make illustrations based on the story. Students used multiple languages not only while responding to her questions in discussion, but also in labelling their illustrations.

#### *Development of language*

The usage of specific vocabulary; opportunity to model and practise pronunciation and intonation; and the development of oral language, especially of presentation through dramas and role play can facilitate the development of language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing woven around storytelling sessions. Some ways of incorporating these can be by encouraging children to create their own story endings, make puppets based on a storyline, and write and enact parts of a story after listening to it.

#### *Exploring connections with local traditions*

*KathaVana* has always valued our rich cultural heritage and traditions of oral and performative literature. As the event is conducted within the context of Karnataka, participants get access to *Yakshagana* and understand the relevance of it as an oral and performative tradition. Teachers have been able to recognise how their local and cultural



traditions of *raagini*, *harikatha*, *pattachitra*, *blaveli reading*, *kaavad*, *pavakathakali*, etc., should also get a valid presence in the classroom to help children build a stronger bond with the community and culture and connect their lives inside and outside the classroom.

### In conclusion

The biggest takeaway from *KathaVana* for the teachers, perhaps, has been the validation that children love to engage with literature. Children have explored books and participated actively in the sessions by responding to interactive read-alouds; telling stories through drama, puppetry and *Yakshagana*; writing poems and stories; drawing and role-playing.

Children continued this engagement after the

sessions when they borrowed books from the school or classroom library. Teachers were amazed by the sheer interest and participation of the students and their hidden talents. This helped them to organise their teaching materials and activities to respond to the needs and abilities of the children and bring literature into the language curriculum and classroom.

To enable access to literature for children, irrespective of their socio-economic background and cultural situations, there is a need for children's literature festivals, such as *KathaVana*, to grow in numbers in different languages across the country. It is imperative that we recognise the relevance of children's literature and storytelling in a child's life and make efforts to incorporate these as integral to the design of language curriculum and pedagogy.



Figures 2-3. Children engrossed in reading and other activities during *KathaVana*

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