

How Stories Nourish Children

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In our rapidly changing and unpredictable world, it is imperative that we have the right tools to lead a happy and successful life. It may come as a surprise to many that the most fundamental of such tools can be acquired by simply engaging with stories. Telling stories has been a way of life in all cultures as the most elementary way of imparting not just knowledge, but wisdom too. Unfortunately, the increasing burden of academic course content slowly edged it out as the most basic tool to facilitate learning. As complicated curricula made schools more teaching focussed, the gap in learning due to the disconnect with stories became wider. The focus on using storytelling as a tool was recently revived by its mention in the NEP, which says that learning should be, 'Holistic, Integrated, Enjoyable and Engaging.... The aim of education is not only cognitive development, but also building character and creating holistic and well-rounded individuals equipped with the key 21st-century skills.'

Seems like a tall order? Not really, if you ensure an ongoing engagement with stories. There are short-, medium- and long-term benefits of it. Interestingly, even the short-term benefits open the doors to medium- and long-term ones!

Storytelling fosters belonging

When talking about stories, we cannot ignore the huge relevance of folk tales. People understood the value of stories and that is how wisdom was passed down through generations, through the medium of folk tales, myths and legends. These inculcated a

sense of belonging as well as attitudes of inclusion, sharing and understanding other cultures, both the differences and the similarities.

Children are most likely to be impacted by stories of an environment which they are familiar with or feel a proximity to. Folk tales tell the tales of their land, its people, customs, rituals, beliefs and sensibilities. Listening to folk tales of one's own land strengthens one's bond with it, thus strengthening one's identity. It provides a mooring so that no matter how high a person soars, they are never like an untethered kite, at the mercy of the winds. Listening to or reading folk tales of other lands is like a window into another culture. While showcasing the customs and beliefs of that land, it teaches one a fundamental lesson: that people all over the world are different. A child learns to accept that differences are a part of who we are as a species. Not just tolerating but respecting and rejoicing in diversity is an attribute naturally acquired through reading and listening to stories. In so doing the engager transcends 'tolerance'- a word often coupled with 'differences.'

Stories of wisdom and common sense

In India, we are blessed with a huge ocean of folktales where birds, animals, trees, mountains, kings, hermits, women and men deliver nuggets of tried-and-tested wisdom in engrossing ways. Here is an example of the immense wisdom ingrained in a short and simple folk tale which also illustrates the eternal relevance of folk tales.

The Foolish King

While walking in his royal garden, a king came upon a very pretty bird and caught it. The bird tried to bargain for her freedom, by promising the king three valuable nuggets of wisdom. When the king agreed to the bargain, she gave him these three nuggets:

1. Do not regret what has already happened.
2. Do not long for what you cannot have.
3. Do not believe that which is impossible.

The king thought the nuggets were good enough to let the bird go. The bird flew off to a perch beyond his reach and started laughing.

‘My freedom was cheaply bought’, she said. ‘Because in my stomach is a diamond the size of your fist.’ The king immediately lunged for the bird and missing, then, tried to lure her with promises of a royal life.

The bird looked at him scornfully and said, ‘O foolish king! You have already forgotten the three bits of wisdom I gave you! You are regretful after losing me. You long to have me even though now I am out of your reach. And how can you believe that a little bird like me would swallow a diamond the size of your fist and still be alive?!’ So saying, the bird flew away.

Here are some themes touched upon in this story:

- The value of freedom
- Cleverness and quick-wittedness – not losing one’s mind – even in the face of grave danger
- The fact that wisdom is not directly proportional to size, might or wealth
- The mention of a non-existent diamond leaves one wondering whether a large diamond would enrich the king more or acquiring and internalising these nuggets of wisdom would do.

There are several other strands that come to mind – cruelty to animals, respect for nature and power equations. One can come away with multiple strands of learning from the experience of engaging with a single story. And this was just one short story about one tiny bird! Can you think of any other source which carries so much valuable learning in such a small bite?!

Children encounter and begin to appreciate goodness, humour, intelligence, courage and beauty of the characters in stories, much before they recognise these qualities in the world around them. So, stories can introduce values early in a child’s life and lay a sound foundation. Dealing with COVID-19 over the last few years has taught us the value of resilience. It is not an attribute which can be taught from a textbook but engaging with stories where one comes across characters acting with resilience in the face of adversity, enables one to develop such attributes in an organic manner.

Learning to listen

There is a story about a child who eagerly looked forward to starting school. When the day came, she picked up her brand-new bag and tiffin box and excitedly boarded the school bus. However, she returned from school crestfallen and announced to her mother, ‘I don’t think you should send me to school. ‘A worried mother asked her why. The child looked up teary-eyed and said, ‘I can’t read or

write, and they won’t let me speak!’

Her simple reply speaks volumes about what we allow or disallow children to do in the classroom. We focus on LSRW (Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing) but often conveniently forget L and S in our hurry to arrive at W. Talking in class is considered unruly behaviour, so we make the children sit quietly. Teachers who keep exhorting children to ‘pay attention’ and ‘be quiet and listen’, are seldom good listeners themselves. We do not want to listen to what children want to talk about and yet expect them to listen to us. But if we do not teach children what listening is, how can we expect them to practise it?

A very effective way to teach listening is to have storytelling in the classroom. *Listening* to stories develops the skill of listening in a natural, organic way. It improves focus, comprehension and expression, among other skills and has a direct positive impact on students’ performance in all subjects. Listening is a great equaliser too. Even a child who is not doing well academically can listen to a story without feeling inferior. It has been scientifically proven that any teaching done immediately after telling a story is better retained. Even a two-minute story told at the beginning of class will get children’s attention and improve their focus on the studies that follow. A class III teacher who follows this practice shared that by the second week of doing this with a new class, children start settling down and wait attentively for her by the time she enters the classroom!

As the skill of listening gets sharpened, other benefits show up. One is able to allow others to speak, read between the lines, and be open to appreciating other perspectives, which sets the stage for developing finer attributes, like empathy which cannot be otherwise taught. Storytelling in

the classroom and generating a conversation around the stories told develops social skills that lead to better personal and professional relationships in the long run. I truly believe that not listening is at the core of all the major problems of the world: people of different communities, different religions and different countries not listening to each other is the most basic cause of conflicts and results in ongoing strife. It is because we, as a species, are not listening to our beautiful planet that we are in the midst of a climate crisis.

What happens to the brain as we listen to a story

Why does the format of a story, where events unfold one after the other have such a profound impact on learning? If we listen to a teacher's lecture or a power-point presentation with bullet points, only the language processing areas in our brains get activated where we decode words into meaning; nothing else happens.

But when we are being told a story, things change dramatically. Not only are the language-processing parts in our brain activated, but so are the other areas in our brain that we would use when experiencing the events of the story. If someone tells us about how delicious certain food was, our sensory cortex lights up. If it is about motion, our motor cortex gets active. Most of us would have experienced the time a friend was telling us about his holiday in the hills, and we remembered our own holiday in the hills.

'The brains of the person telling a story and listening to it, can synchronize', says Uri Hasson, a professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at Princeton. This has two obvious benefits. First, listening to a story stimulates numerous areas of the brain and is a far more enriching experience than the passive one of sitting back and listening quietly makes it appear. Secondly, the story creates a bond between the teller and the listener, which lasts even after the story is over. What a wonderful aspect to add to the teacher-student relationship!

Another wonderful thing that stories bring about in young impressionable minds is that they invite thinking; thinking that is free of the burden of right or wrong answers, unmarred by the expectations of grown-ups or any laid-down rules. It allows the

mind the freedom to wander, and in that wandering, creates a scaffolding of one's own learning. When children engage with stories on a regular basis, more complex cognitive processes are set in motion and they take charge of their own learning, which then ceases to be an activity only to be indulged in in the classroom with the classic tools of textbooks and notebooks and with the purpose of passing an exam. The classroom expands to encompass their entire world and learning opens up to incorporate their experiences in the world. They set off on a continuous learning path – being lifelong learners in the truest sense of the word, fine-tuning and sharpening their skills and sensibilities as human beings. What greater gift can a teacher give?

Where to find stories

Teachers often ask me where they can find stories. We are surrounded by stories.

Moreover, you do not always have to tell a long story. You can make it up and it can be about anything at all: what a pebble said to you while you were walking to class or the conversation between two birds or the squirrels or why the leaf decided to fall from the tree. Making up stories will keep your creative juices flowing and the children will love you for telling them something fun and outside the course content. Everyone loves a story and being curious, attentive and eager is a good state of mind to be in for any meaningful learning thereafter.

Teachers should share stories from their region. To get more of these, they can ask the students to ask their parents to tell them stories of the region. Storytelling traditions of families should be recognised and encouraged before they die out completely. The gap created by a lack of good literature to engage with, is unfortunately being filled by 'news stories' that we are constantly bombarded with through TV and phones.

Folk tales from different regions of India and the world should definitely be read by and told to children. Some of the very good sources include books by National Book Trust in several Indian languages, especially, AK Ramanujan's *Folktales from India*; Pratham Books' storyweaver.org.in, an online collection of over fifty thousand stories for children in 337 languages, which is a graded collection for four different reading levels; and books by Eklavya Publications that are delightful to read and enjoy with children.

A last word

Stories present you with possibilities and alternate universes. They lead you up the garden path, dangle red herrings before your eyes, make you sympathise with people who turn out to do unexpected things and present possibilities that you had not thought of and endings you had not planned. At one level, it helps you to learn to deal more effectively with varied and unexpected outcomes in life. At another, it encourages you to see possibilities, which may not be apparent. And the most beautiful thing about developing this trait is that you are able to see possibilities in people too. For a teacher, especially, it is an important attribute to have – to not just see

your student as who they *are now* but to be able to see the latent possibilities, which will get a chance to flourish if you acknowledge those. Engaging with stories opens the doors of perception. It gets us out of our narrow-mindedness and expands our vision, our perspective and our spirit.

The ending of every story is the beginning of several others. Each ending invites you to stay curious and imagine other stories, which could begin at that point. ‘What happened to the old man?’ ‘Did the traveller set off on another journey?’ ‘Is the dragon still flying around?’ The possibilities, both for questions and imagined consequences, are endless.



Valentina Trivedi is a writer, performer and educator. Her creative work encompasses various mediums: performing, writing scripts, directing short films, editing, translating, adapting and telling stories. Passionate about children and learning, she specialises in approaching the learning process from a child’s perspective and has been invited to numerous educational forums to share her views. As a *Dastango*, singing is a unique aspect of her performance. She has worked in both, formal and informal sectors. She can be reached at storyweaverval@gmail.com