

## Addressing Diversity: Role of Storytelling in Primary Classrooms

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### Abstract

*This paper predominantly validates the role of storytelling as a resource to address issues related to diversity in primary classrooms. By giving narrative authority to children, the author attempts to direct attention towards storytelling as an effective means to be used in classrooms in complementarity with other pedagogies employed. Storytelling was found to be influential for generating intergroup dialogues, engaging children in meaningful discussions, eliciting emotions, and understanding multiple perspectives. It brought to the fore plurality; multiplicity; and collective and individual identity of children, in primary classrooms. The narrative agency of children was brought to the fore by involving them in storytelling activities. The paper concludes by proposing the use of storytelling as a cultural resource in classrooms, to understand children within their socio-cultural context.*

Stories have captivated children and adults for centuries. Stories entertain, reach, convince, evoke, control, explain, justify, and clarify. They are both a product of a developmental process and a vehicle through which development takes place (Engel, 1995).

The emphasis on fixed syllabus-based curriculum in the primary school years ignores the cultural literacy that children imbibe through methods like storytelling. Benefits of storytelling for and by children can be cognitive, social and emotional. In her study done on Socio-Cultural Contexts of Teacher-Taught Interactions, Singh (2002) found that “the oral forms of communication are rich in mnemonic devices that enrich children with useful strategies for intellectual enhancement and knowledge building”. Storytellers used to be keepers of historical events, traditions in preliterate societies and stories have been known for being a means to pass down cultural beliefs, traditions and practices to future generations.

### Need for Storytelling

Article 12 and 13 of the Convention on the Rights of Children, UN created the right for children to their own voice, right to expression, and for their own media. It argues for the role of society and community in creating spaces for children to express themselves freely. The National Curricular Framework (2005, pg. 41) emphasizes that, “orally told stories lay the foundations of logical understanding even as they expand the imagination and enhance the capacity to participate vicariously in situations distant from one's life.” It further reiterates that both in rural areas and metropolitan contexts children can gain a great deal by being exposed to local arts and crafts, stories and folk tales, songs and language variations. The inclusion of these elements makes the classroom setting an extension of the community. Such experiences enhance children's social competence and awareness about the socio-cultural backgrounds of different people. The Position paper states that



Teacher Education must enable student teachers to understand children within social, cultural context and view knowledge not necessarily as an external reality embedded in textbooks but as constructed in the shared context of teaching learning and personal experiences (Teacher Education for Curriculum Renewal, 2005).

This suggests that creating stories allows children to manipulate the connections between inner and outer, public and private. The child telling a story can actively negotiate the distinctions between what is revealed and what is concealed, between following the conventions of one's culture and breaking those conventions. Children use stories (their own and other people's) to differentiate between what they consider to be the domain of fact and the domain of fiction. Narratives allow children to construct domains, and at the same time to create permeable boundaries around those domains (Engel, 2000). Storytelling for children has also been found to lead to meaning making experience, cathartic, to open up their lived experiences, inner subjectivities and fantasies.

In her work with children with disability Krishna (2001) found that storytelling conveys important information to others in ways few other forms of communication can accomplish. It allows children to explore safe and non-threatening ways of expression. It stimulates their imagination and makes them comfortable to reveal their experiences. Children with varying abilities and challenges love storytelling as much as everyone else does.

Use of storytelling in classroom. Storytelling in the classroom has been emphasized as an educational tool that inspires children's learning and curricular understanding. Ability to produce narratives is also linked to academic success, problem solving and invention (Engel, 2000). Studies illustrate that development of vocabulary and syntactic complexity in oral language is enhanced in children who are frequently exposed

to stories. In sociocultural theory, Vygotsky (1978) also saw learning as an active process that was embedded with some social events and occurred as a child interacted with people, objects and events in the environment (cited in Phillips, 2010).

Stories can be important resources in the repertoire of the teacher. It can be a powerful way in which to communicate experiences and to explore ideas. Using stories, the teacher takes her students on journeys that introduce them to new vistas of lived experience. It can be used as an approach that honors cultural diversity and empowers students to reflect on and share their experiences. It can further provide an inclusive pedagogy which can challenge prejudices. It can be a basis for understanding cultural traditions and folklore.

Mello (2001) emphasized the use of storytelling as a pedagogical strategy. Her work demonstrated that the literacy of the participant was enhanced in the academic areas of fluency, vocabulary acquisition, writing and recall. Additionally, she found that storytelling served to improve self awareness, visual imagery and cultural knowledge. She further suggested that, through stories and storytelling, people are exposed to long-standing archetypal models that engage the imagination, stimulate sympathetic responses, and cause participants to think more deeply about their social world. Taken as a whole, these studies suggest that the activity of storytelling has an impact on participants' interpersonal relationships, empathy, and sense of "connectedness" in the classroom. Therefore, telling stories aloud (without the aid of books, multimedia presentations, or other devices) needs to have primacy in classrooms.

Paley (1990) shows a firm belief in the child's ability to make their own stories and considered it to be a process that is simply an extension of the ways in which children negotiate role in their imaginative play. "The classroom that does not create its own legends (stories) has not traveled

beneath the surface to where the living takes place” (Paley, 1990).

Engel (2000) emphasized that through story telling children construct their sense of self, develop a personal voice, learn to communicate their unique experiences and their view of the world. Children also create stories by constructing and reconstructing daily life events. Stories are a means for children to share their experiences with others. The narratives constructed by children reflect their embedded selves.

Keeping the above background in mind, this paper attempts to interpret how storytelling activities in primary classrooms address the cultural knowledge that children from diverse backgrounds bring. It further tries to highlight how storytelling makes the classroom more inclusive.

### Methodology

The participants in the study were children of class II and IV from six schools of Delhi. One section of each class was taken randomly from all the schools. The children were from three State Run schools and three Private schools of Delhi. The State run schools that were part of the study were in the New Delhi area of the National Capital Territory of Delhi. The private schools in the study were located one each in South Delhi, Central Delhi and East Delhi. To achieve these objectives, a qualitative research design was considered to be most appropriate. The very basic premise guiding this work was that children have significant contributions to make and to say and what they say is as valuable as that of an adult. Therefore data was majorly drawn from children as focal participants of the study. The children were in the age group of 6 to 11 years. Individual story sharing and collective story making tasks ensured that both individual and collective voices of children were brought to the fore. The intention was to provide enough scope to match each child's individual needs and interests.

The stories shared and constructed by children were audio recorded and these narrations were then transcribed. The themes emerging from the diverse perspectives were drawn together to construct children's voices and to put their agency in the centre stage. The findings from the study have been discussed in the subsequent paragraphs.

### Role in understanding and appreciating classroom diversity

Story-sharing activity allowed children to experience diversity in its true sense. It led to discussions on various themes such as individual difference, multiple views and perspectives on an issue. It further provided a means to deal with many sensitive issues. For instance, one South Indian child narrated a story with a slightly different accent, so all children started laughing. When asked, a girl explained the reason of why they all were laughing. Then she shared the story of a different looking parrot and concluded that each individual has a distinct way of doing the same thing, so we should accept differences. After this incident the class teacher who was sitting at the back of the class correcting notebooks also intervened and discussed the issue with the students. This way a very sensitive issue was discussed and many students opened up and shared that they too were teased by other children. Soon we realised that all were teased on one pretext or the other and how each one felt about the same. They also expressed that they did not like to be teased, and the discussion helped iron out this issue amicably in such a large group where each student promised to stop and think before teasing another child or a person.

Stories shared by children from their family interactions sensitized their classmates to multiple socio-cultural identities. The versatility of storytelling was found to be attractive to children as text book bound learning does not provide enough scope for stoking their imagination. Dyson & Genishi (1994) also argue for the multiple facets

in the use and the need for story in the classroom as a viable means for nourishing children's own diverse cultural expressions. The inclusion of such oral methods in classroom would attempt to give due credit to the plurality and multiplicity of the Indian society. These skills if nurtured in children within families and in the classroom can help children become members of cultural group. The variations in the styles of narrating stories and the magnitude of diverse range of stories reflected children's growing repertoire of stories.

Addressing plurality & inclusion in classrooms. Children with a range of oral abilities could participate in storytelling activities. The very fact that they were allowed to choose a story or characters of their own choice from their oral repertoire included them all in the activity. Children developed understanding of other people and cultures and learnt to appreciate diversity. Sharing own stories and making stories with other children provided the right kind of scaffolding and a supportive arrangement that children needed to give meaning to their information.

During story sharing activity, whenever it so happened that the teller lost the sequence of the story, the storytelling transformed into being a collaborative performance of the whole group if it was a familiar story. It was interesting to note that this happened more frequently in the State run schools as compared to the private schools. This was a very significant finding as children from the State run schools displayed more collaborative efforts wherein a lot of rhymes and even stories were shared in pairs, and groups of three or more children. In one instance, a girl forgot the rhyme after saying aloud the first line. One child said it aloud and then the whole class started singing along with her in chorus. Many children came forward and shared the story while a partner of theirs stood with them. This provided them emotional support as they narrated the whole story. The story-sharing process took the children through journeys of their life experiences. Many of them connected with the

stories and gave examples from their experiences. Some children of class IV quickly discussed a storyline with each other and as they came in pair or in a group of three children, they shared the whole story by taking turns i.e. one child continuing where the previous child left the story. If the story was unfamiliar, the children would often guess, or give clues or ask questions that would make the teller think and sometimes they went ahead with the original story or changed parts of it. Sometimes, on listening to the whole story, other children interjected and said that it had a different ending to it and then several versions of the story were recalled and shared with the group. This gave them an opportunity to learn and appreciate varied possibilities and multiple ways in which a story could be constructed. They also used different characters or different words for the same thing. The children could quickly recall and recollect if they had heard or read a similar story, and also remembered the source of the story, e.g., from a text book, a story book, etc. Sometimes, similar stories had different characters or a different climax and they would point out the differences it had from their version. Collective story making activity helped children to shed inhibitions, specifically of children from the State run schools. Thus this activity became a social event in which children exchanged ideas and shared and co-constructed knowledge in an interactive way.

Children incorporated instances from rhymes or stories that were already in their story repertoire. This way they linked their current scenario to their previous knowledge. The terms and the personal prior knowledge they brought through their stories showed how clearly context was an inseparable part of their lives. Through stories children brought rich experiences and their prior knowledge from their respective sociocultural context. This "cultural knowledge" paved the way for a new way of knowledge construction among them. Children not only shared their knowledge and understanding with their peers but also co-constructed this cultural knowledge.



Since there was no single right answer or “the only story”, story construction fostered creativity in learning. Children participated in the activities wholeheartedly as they knew they would not be embarrassed or judged for a correct or an incorrect response as there was none in this case. Storytelling provided children with a supportive learning environment wherein they were also active participants in knowledge construction based on their prior knowledge and by co-construction with their class mates. Storytelling thus provided a way for children to share such knowledge that does not come to the fore through other formal learning methods. Ramanujan (1991) while discussing about folktales mentioned that to study culture of a particular society their oral tradition has to be known first. He further emphasized that diversity of our country, multiplicity of cultures, language, and religion can be easily known by studying folk tales of India.

### **Empathy and projecting self in the story**

Storytelling touched children in a way that probably no other medium could do. The children related their self to the story and even with the characters of the story. They projected the situation onto themselves and empathised with the characters. Children thought, reflected and then expressed their feelings about the stories they heard. Many said they were feeling the same as happened in the story so it was a lived experience for them that they were going through at that time. Children gave opinions on the right thing to do on behalf of the characters of the stories shared. Children’s narratives involved making sense of the world around them and presentation of events happened to them in the past so they made sense of their experiences by narrating those. It was important to involve them in storytelling or making experiences as it helped them understand self, the world around them, affirm their culture and the one’s around them. Research studies suggest that storytelling increases self-esteem. Children who find sharing stories in front of an audience a challenge often

feel a great sense of accomplishment when the audience applauds. They carry that confidence with them into other areas of life as well. Children who took time to open up initially expressed themselves gradually as it provided them with a non-threatening and non-judgmental environment. The storytelling session led us all through a journey in which we explored, shared and learned about many issues that concerned children but were not part of their day-to-day discussions in school. Children used reasoning, problem solving, thought of alternatives, substitution and imagination while they actively constructed meanings through the stories shared in the classroom. Singh (2002) in her work on “Socio-Cultural Contexts of Teacher-Taught Interactions” found that children’s repertoire of stories and their ability to narrate comprises a cultural resource usually neglected and unrecognized as a source of competence and of educationally significant experiences. By becoming storytellers, children can create for themselves a special presence in the classroom. Building a classroom ‘culture’

Stories played a proactive function in creating group cohesiveness in the classrooms. The cooperation and collaboration infused a sense of belongingness among the children. It is in agreement with Dyson’s (1994) claim that stories are vehicles for diverse voices in the classroom and contribute to representing socio-cultural differences. This way children not only became aware of individual differences but also about rich cultural legacy that each one of them carried along with them to class every day. Knowing about their differences and so many complementarities actually helped them to form cohesive relationships within classrooms.

Storytelling infused peer congeniality and it seemed that children looked for an affective contact in the classroom and storytelling promoted that. Children’s active meaning making and agency came to the fore.



Storytelling helped in building connections within the classroom with those children who they were close to and also with those who were from different cultures. It acted like a ripple effect that kept on creating a storytelling community and story space within classroom. Listening to stories created a shared experience. It further strengthened child to child relationship. It brought intimacy and connect within individuals and groups that existed.

### Discussion

Storytelling acted as a great tool to encourage multiple interpretations of a shared story. It provided a social context as children got exposed to multiple views and perspectives; multiple ends of the story, thereby exposing them to points of view that others hold and expanding their range of perspectives. It turned out to be a powerful way for intergroup dialogues for explaining constructs, engaging participants, eliciting emotions and breaking barriers between groups. These storytelling activities if done regularly in classroom can emerge as new possibilities of reaching the unreached children and the issues that might be untouched in common parlance or become a part of the curriculum. While deliberating on lack of storytelling opportunities with primary school children Kumar, (2004) said, it is a great pity that our primary schools do not have a separate “period” for storytelling, that is hardly a tall order for a society that has inherited thousands of stories from its past.

It can be used as an approach that acknowledges cultural diversity and empowers students to reflect on and share their experiences. It can further provide an inclusive pedagogy which can challenge preconceptions and biases. It turned out to be a basis for understanding cultural traditions, folklore, and can become a local yet global language for the classroom culture. These can go a long way towards developing positive mental health and well-being of children wherein storytelling infuses confidence, enhances self-esteem, and self-worth, along with developing a narrative voice of their own. Children

not only got a chance to express their desires and wishes but also talked freely about their anxieties, fears and reservations through storytelling as a medium. Storytelling helped them overcome their fears by talking and sharing about the same. Certainly, many goals or aims of education can be easily realised through effective use of storytelling as a cultural resource in the classroom.

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