

Role of Stories in Development of Children

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Abstract

The following article defines story and story telling in relation to child development. Story forms an integrative part of young children's lives as they enjoy listening to stories of various kinds and cult. Stories, when used by primary school teachers, can play an important role in aiding the development of children cognitively, emotionally, socially and linguistically. Communication through stories not only makes it easier for children to understand their environment better but renarration of the stories by the children also makes it easier for teachers to understand the perspectives of children in a better manner. This has the potential of making classroom interaction smoother and more effective.

Introduction

A story can be defined in various ways such as a description or recitation of an event or a series of events that can be either true or fictitious. It can be the adapted version of a narrative or dramatic work, a legend or a historical event. It is a narrative consisting of an act or occurrence of an event that can be presented through written, visual or audio mediums. Stories are often in the form of texts with pictures or diagrams that make them more appealing to children. In addition

to the course material, they also act as supplementary reading that aim at fulfilling children's psychological and social needs. They also form a major part of children's literature and are often the most important part of a child's education through which children not only enjoy but also learn lessons of morality, creativity and imagination. To name a few stories known to most of the children are Harry Potter, Cinderella, Sindabad the Sailor, Alladin, Shekhchilli, Snow-white and Seven Dwarfs, Beauty and

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Beast, Ice Age, Bal Hanuman, My Friend Ganesha, Rapunzel, Akbar-Birbal, Panchatantra, Barbie of the Swan Lake, Gayabaya, Ali Baba and Forty Thieves, and Red Riding Hood. Stories are work of fiction/ reality that attract children. These stories are enjoyed by children because mostly they are detached from the reality and away from daily monotonous life.

Stories are known to play an important role in the development of children and are an important part of childhood. The sources of these stories are vast including fables, mythological and religious legends, fantasy stories, biographies and life histories of great men, stories of kings and queens, lands and people, festivals, friendship, discoveries etc. The genesis of children's literature can be traced to the informal oral tradition of tales told by parents and grandparents to their children, to entertain them and acquaint them with moral values. Kumar (1986) mentioned that stories "represent our desire to interpret life." Stories are instruments that can be used by primary school teachers to help children imagine events and characters and relate to the story depending on their past experiences. According to Piaget this also helps the child to identify new information, which is presented in addition to new information, assimilate it and accommodate to this new discovery without much difficulty.

Stories narrated in classrooms by teachers help in building under-

standing amongst children, that is noticeable when children imitate, identify or recognise the similarity and differences of his or her situation with the story and accordingly adjust themselves in their surroundings. It is well known that values, love, courage, honesty, peace and friendship, etc. can be inculcated very easily through use of stories. Kakar (1978) pointed at the tenacious hold exercised by myth and folk tales on the child's psyche and stated that much of education and spread of Hindu cultural values to the next generation takes place through the narration of stories and parables by mothers, grandmothers and others in the circle of the extended family. Teachers at the same time play an equally important role in the primary schools as teachers are the only trained people that the child interacts with, outside the family, after family members and parents, who utilise stories to inculcate values in children. The epics, legends and folk tales of India are the concrete manifestation of a rich and ancient cultural tradition (Srinivasan, 1998). Stories have been called the "social cement of society". Stories used by primary school teachers help to serve as a vital link in preserving and communicating the humanistic tradition from one generation to the next.

To sum up, stories are extremely important to children. They are the route that helps children to know various points of view, learn and adapt to different situations. Most

of all they are an activity enjoyed by primary school children as much as they enjoy playing. They are inclusive of instructive function, integrative function, informing function, evaluative function, and directive function (Rayudu, 2003). When used by primary school teachers, help in not only inculcation of knowledge, language skills and values to children, but also help the teachers to evaluate the behaviour of children in their care.

How Stories Help in Child Development

The first and foremost use of stories narrated by primary teachers in class is to amuse and entertain the children. But that is an extremely limited view. Stories are a tool through which primary school teachers can aid in cognitive and language development, transfer a wealth of information to children, encourage reading, foster imagination and creativity, inculcate social values of 'what is right' and 'what is wrong', explain social concepts such as 'kindness, cleverness, etc.', play (role-play) with ideas, familiarise them with different emotions and so on.

Nutbrown (1999) explains the importance of stories through a discussion on children's literature. He supports that children need story books that promote equality among people coming from different cultures and having different abilities, have easy and memorable phrases that can be easily absorbed, "nourish their

minds and emotions," and "support as well as challenge children's emotional development, reflecting and affirming their feelings, challenging their thinking and presenting characters who experience different emotions of fear, sadness, excitement, love and disappointment" (p.85). He also emphasised that stories, when utilised by teachers in classrooms, help in building loving and intimate experiences shared by adults (parents/ teachers) and children. Stories maximise the prospects of language development and understanding of the world in children. This further depends on the "quality of production, illustration, style of teaching-learning, process adopted by teachers, opportunities for developing particular understandings of text (such as phonological awareness, punctuation, genre), content and the pleasure" of the primary school teachers which is being offered to the reader/ listener, which in this case are children. Stories become a powerful instrument in the hands of teachers when they convey useful and intended messages to children.

Cognitively, stories help children to learn how to recognise, memorise, identify and use words, themes and skills. Teachers can put across same/similar ideas through use of different stories that help children to organise their thoughts and predict the results of the actions that they take. Stories used by teachers can help in familiarising children with different cultures and religions. In

addition, stories help in creating what Vygotsky defined as "zone of proximal distance and cooperative learning" in classrooms, between the teachers and the children. In case of former, more experienced/ learned primary school teachers and children begin at different understanding points but reach similar understanding and this understanding is reached by children with the aid of the teacher through the medium of stories. This is more like a one way process where a teacher helps the child to reach an understanding which for child, by himself was difficult to reach. Cooperative learning (two way interaction) takes place when all the children and the teacher discuss various aspects of the story, and where questioning, explaining, responding, circulation, modeling and renarration are encouraged as they help in bringing about similar understanding of all people in the class. This involves continuous interaction between teacher and children, and among children themselves.

Language development is another area where children can benefit by the use of stories. Stories provide children with essential vocabulary, gestures, etc. that aid them to express their feelings and emotions. Repeated listening to stories and re-narration of the same by the teachers in nursery classrooms allow children to practice linguistic skills, understand nuances of language and adapt themselves to a proper way of communication. Brian Beakley (2004) explains Paul Grice's

rules of communication as "Grice's Conversational Maxims". These he says consist of maxim of quantity (that is conversation should be informative), maxim of quality (that is conversation should be authentic), maxim of relevance (that is conversation should have meaning with respect to the context) and maxim of manner (that is to avoid misunderstanding). Grice's maxims and rules represent the basic expectations of participants in a conversation. Speakers generally act according to them and listeners may base their interpretation of an utterance on the fact that they expect the speaker to adhere to them.

Sharing stories encourages linguistic skills that can facilitate socialisation. When teachers utilise stories in classrooms as a medium of instruction, it helps children to socialise with each other, understand concepts of sharing, friendship, ways of behaving in different social contexts, and different roles that adults play in society. It also helps them to realise emotions (aggression, happiness, sadness, cunningness, perfectionism, bravery, fear and so on) of self and others in different situations and ways in which the same can be manipulated or controlled. This aids in development of perspective taking. Stories form bases of beliefs that children develop through years. They stimulate the development of attitudes, values, perception of self with respect to others, and so on. Hence, stories when used by primary school teachers also

aid in developing the personality of children.

Stories that are constructed or reconstructed (child's version of the story that he/ she has already heard) can also help teachers in the psychological assessment of young children. It can be used as a projective technique. According to Freeman (1965), story telling/ completion has been an informal way of testing for some years. He also mentions that this method is also used to evaluate the emotional well being of the child. In such cases, a story is constructed by a teacher and told to the child, which is later written by the child for the teacher. This written version is given to a therapist who, keeping in mind the memory distortion of the child, analyses the emotional account produced by the child. "Users of these methods report that these are helpful in revealing a child's conflicts, aggressions, anxieties, wish fulfillment, affectivity and so forth" (Freeman, 1965, p.671). In addition, stories constructed by children are useful in revealing moral dilemmas which a child faces, his ways of reacting to dilemmas and finding their solutions the children explain. Through this method, the children explain how they relate themselves to real life experiences and behave in relationships with different people. Stories as therapy are also used to release tensions or pressures that disturb children but to which they are unable to react in real life.

Why Stories should be used by Teachers in Class

Stories, when told to children by teachers, create a receptive atmosphere in the class. They help to teach various concepts to children easily. Kehoe & Fischer (2002) describe that "teachable moments are those times when your child is most attentive, ready to listen and ripe for the next step, guidance or bit of information that will spark some insight or action. In 1990 the National Curriculum Programmes of Study for English supported that stories and related literature should be included in children's reading material which takes into account their linguistic competencies and backgrounds. "Sharing stories in early years of childhood is not just about learning to read. It is about relationships, both between adults and children as they read together, and between children and the characters they meet in the text. Children's literature can support the development of children's language; help them to listen attentively, to talk about interesting things and meaningful content" (p.86, Nutbrown, 1999). Even if children find the stories as horribly terrifying, they are still important to children's experience because children associate their own meaning, knowledge and emotions with the text. Stories help the children learn many things. Teachers share different kinds of stories in the hope that they will help children in difficult/ challenging times in their lives. These stories also teach them the social mannerism and etiquettes of social relationships.

Ways of using Stories appropriately in Class

Stories can be shared with children in various ways by primary school teachers. Television, pictures, movies, books, role play, verbal story telling in class etc., are few ways through which stories can be narrated to children. Borrowing from Halpern's (1989) rules for clear communication, stories can be put in front of children by primary school teachers in accordance with the following rules for clear communication with children. **Main points:** **1.** Tell children what they want to know (something that is of interest to them, something new that they wish to understand and learn); **2.** avoid telling them what they already know; **3.** teachers should change their style of communication (modulation of voice, type and length of stories, details of the stories) with children depending on the knowledge, age and awareness status of the children; **4.** teachers should put as much honest information in front of children as possible; **5.** be as simple and succinct as possible (use clear and easily comprehensible style for communication); and finally; **6.** utilise manner and context to clarify meaning" (p.104). The manner in which the teacher forwards the information to children and the situation in which the teacher conveys a message is of great importance.

A final Note

Usually, in schools, it is emphasised that teachers and children stick to the time bound curriculum of teaching and learning process. But this squeezes out all the fun that children want and teachers try their best to deliver while teaching small children. Stories then become a powerful technique to bring together the essentials of what has to be taught in a joyful manner. Therefore it would be interesting to understand: **(a)** What stories mean to children and teachers? **(b)** Are stories helpful to impart education and knowledge to children? **(c)** What are the limitations of using stories with children in classrooms-are there censorship issues that limit the story telling activities? Is there censorship required for telling stories? and if yes, what are the particular areas that need such actions? **(d)** Besides imparting knowledge, are there any other gains of using stories in daily classroom activities? **(e)** What are the developmental facets that stories enhance in children? Story telling is an important part of primary teaching and should not be dismissed as a playful activity without much benefit to the children.

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