

Children as Authors, Teacher as Editor or Reviewer!

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Reviewed by: **Snehlata Gupta**



As a language teacher I have often lamented about students not being able to write. I have also bemoaned my fate of having to deal with students who do not want to write. I wondered whether it was from a lack of ability or the absence of motivation on the part of my students that I was condemned to read totally dull, boring and uninspiring texts when fulfilling my obligations of “correcting” their written work. I never thought it could have anything to do with the pedagogical practices of writing in school. Anecdotal evidence tells me that I am not alone in this. It is true that there have been a few texts that shone brightly, but they were shooting stars—precious but rare.

The publication under review is a special issue (No. 37) of the Hindi literary journal *Akaar*. This issue features 18 writers from Delhi’s resettlement colonies. The writers are in the age group of 14-18 years and are students of classes 9 to 12 who attend classes at the local government school. They have also been involved in writing practices hosted at collectives run by Ankur Society for Alternatives in Education for about 5-7 years.

In his introductory note to this issue, Priyamvad, the editor of *Akaar*, shares some thoughts about his meeting with the young writers. He testifies that the problems the young writers faced did not relate to finding language, voice and

experience to write their stories. The questions the young authors put to him were at the level of—“How do we take the narrative forward”? “How to end a story”? “How to carry a character across a story”? One wordsmith was struggling with the challenge of extending a story into a novel.

In this special issue of *Akaar*, each young author shares an autobiographical narrative—“Mann ki diary se”, followed by his or her contributed story or stories. The personal note is an expressive communication by the author to the readers on a variety of topics including the reasons why they write, their perception of themselves as writers, what they choose to write about and even a vignette about the character around which the story is woven.

The stories following the personal communications describe a world that is familiar yet strange. They deal with situations and characters that are found in the resettlement colonies. However, it is the treatment of the subject that makes these stories stand out. They bring the locality vibrantly alive, with its people, sights, sounds, and the re-creation of the drama inherent in the commonplace of the everyday.

These stories defy categorization: a fearsome grandmother who makes clay toys—“Khilone bananewali don”; a young boy much sought after for his ability to sing and entertain at different gatherings—“Desi celebrity”; a home that is made of a tarpaulin sheet tied to the wall of the neighbourhood park—“Mera behroopiya ghar”; the life of a transgender—“Kinnar”. Though written by children, the texts do not lend themselves easily to the genre of children’s literature. The stories are very rooted in the context of the authors, yet not limited to them. The writing is that of mature practitioners, which is why they have been welcomed in a literary journal.

Why was I never able to get my students in the language class to generate such quality of

writing? What lesson does this outpouring of literary talent have for the language teacher? As I began to read through the stories written by these young practitioners who are in the same age group as my students and come from similar backgrounds (I teach in a government school), these were the questions that immediately came to my mind.

It is a commonly held belief by teachers that children who come from marginalized backgrounds do not have any stories to tell and in fact cannot have any stories to tell; since they are from economically poor backgrounds, their lives must necessarily lack meaningful content or colour. As a teacher often frustrated by the formulaic, unimaginative and dull writing of my students, (I have to admit) on occasions I too had begun to question whether, because of the background my students came from, they could ever learn to write or want to write differently.

The writings presented in this issue of *Akaar* by these young yet mature practitioners not only instill hope but also indicate the road we need to take. At the end of the day, why do we teach writing to our students, what do we want them to be able to do with their ability to write, what would we like to see them write? These are questions we need to ask ourselves as teachers. If as teachers we would like to see our students and learners acquire the desire, ability and skill to create a variety of literary experiences that entertain, engage and push the reader to think and reflect, I think we would have done our jobs.

What is the difference between the writings of these young authors and that of our students in the context of school? The young writers here have engaged in sustained writing practice over a period of time of about five to seven years. These writers write five days a week for about an hour everyday. They are encouraged to read their writings to a peer group that listens, comments, questions and critiques in a safe and encouraging environment. These writers write

to talk about, share and communicate what they see, hear, and feel about the life around them, the people and places. They have the freedom to write about whatever they want for as long as they want.

In schools, writing is prescriptive and heavy on form. Writing is all about what is valued and may be asked in the examination. Rarely if ever, are children encouraged to write with any authenticity or voice about things they have experienced. Children write in constant fear of being judged on the form of their writing—grammar, spelling, vocabulary or punctuation.

While yearning to read more interesting and varied writing from their students, teachers teach the exact opposite. Somewhere along the way, with our preoccupation with getting children to pass exams, by teaching for tests and completing the syllabus, teachers seem to have lost touch with the reasons why writers write in the real world; and that reading and writing have a life and purpose outside the narrow confines of academic curriculum and syllabi. Being taught to write for the limited objectives of passing exams does not make writers.

The absorbing and riveting style and content of the stories in this issue of *Akaar* is an affirmation of what and how children are capable of writing. Despite coming from an impoverished and marginalized background, these young writers find welcome space in a leading literary journal. What better proof that, given freedom and support in equal measure, children from resettlement colonies can emerge as authors with a new voice. And if children can be authors, should not the teacher take on the role of editor, or reviewer? What new wonders could be seen if this subversion were to take place? Keeping in mind the sheer brilliance of all the texts in this journal, and reflecting on my experience of evaluating written work as a language teacher, perhaps we could see a sky full of shooting stars!