

Reports

A Seminar on 'Different Aspects of Children's Literature'

Vijay Kumar



Introduction

Stories are powerful because not only do they capture children's attention, but they also improve their reading and writing skills and further their imaginative and cognitive skills. However, they do not just add pedagogical value; they also play a role in sensitizing children to their own as well as other cultures and traditions, and to forgotten folk/oral traditions which are the soul of any culture or community. It is for these reasons that Katha Manch makes consistent efforts to promote the use of storytelling as a pedagogical tool.

Katha Manch is a registered trust comprising of school teachers, teacher trainees, field facilitators, university professors, students, etc., associated with the field of education. Members of this group have experienced the power of stories and storytelling during the teaching-learning process. They are therefore interested in stories and activities related to them. In continuation of its concerted efforts in this direction, Katha Manch organized a one-day seminar at DIET, R. K. Puram, New Delhi, to present a holistic view on storytelling, from its folk origin to the art of narration.

Profile of Participants

The participants of the seminar included school teachers, teacher trainees (B. El. Ed., B. Ed., JBT, etc.), DIET faculty (R. K. Puram), Assistant Professors from Delhi University, field facilitators and people interested in storytelling.

Sessions

The seminar started with an introductory session. Dr Sanjeev Kumar, the Principal of DIET (R. K. Puram), welcomed the participants and lauded his students for their presence in full strength. He deliberated on the importance of storytelling and children's literature in teaching and set the course of the seminar. This was followed by a session by Suneeta Mishra of Katha Manch who highlighted its objectives and gave a brief account of its activities. She also touched upon the importance of storytelling in pedagogy and various forms of gender stereotypes present in children's literature. She mentioned that stories are not just about literature, but have many different underlying aspects such as history, culture, mathematics, natural sciences, etc. By using the tool of storytelling in the classroom, children get exposure to all these aspects and their worldview broadens. The introductory round was followed by the business session in which there were five resource persons who deliberated on different topics.

Shikha Tripathi (PhD Scholar, University of Delhi), gave a talk on the topic, "Response to Literature". She mentioned that literature is not just a text but it has the power to connect with situations. In fact, literature involves the reader and he/she experiences the imaginary context and gets emotionally attached to it while reading. During the reading process one may find oneself smiling, laughing, becoming sad, etc. Therefore,

one experiences various emotions, and in fact gets connected to the text.

Yashika Chandna (Assistant Professor, University of Delhi, and member, Katha Manch), spoke on the topic “Stereotypes in Children’s Literature”. She focused on how children’s literature imbibes and strengthens existing stereotypes in society. She talked about stereotypes in animal stories, more specifically how animal characters have been presented in *Panchatantra* and *Jataka Tales*. Many instances can be found in the *Panchatantra* stories where animal characters are perceived as male or female irrespective of what their names are and how their gender is reflected in the verb. In a pilot study done in Delhi schools, it was found that even if a cat (*billee* in Hindi) is a male character named Bhola in a story, children perceive it as feminine. This may be due to the fact that most of the words ending in ‘ee’ in Hindi denote the feminine gender. In another story, “The Crocodile and the Monkey”, when the students were asked questions afterwards, their answers revealed that they thought of both the monkey and the crocodile as male in spite of the fact that they actually had female names. Even in the original story the female character had a disruptive nature, was apparently responsible for breaking the bond of friendship and was not even considered as intelligent enough to be part of the male friends circle.

In all likelihood, the mischievous character of the monkey is stereotyped as being masculine, while calm or serene traits are considered to be feminine. Similarly, the clever or cunning fox is always female. Perhaps the patriarchy in Indian society is one of the reasons for such gender stereotyping; males are generally supposed to run around, play, do all sorts of mischief and are head of the family. On the other hand, females get married, do household work, raise a family and are calm as compared to males. Males in general are seen as those who fight

and ultimately win. During the pilot study, children were shown pictorial stories and asked to narrate them. While narrating, they attributed gender to the characters using the stereotypes described earlier. The resource person was of the view that there is a need to weed out stereotyping of characters in children’s literature and textbooks in order to promote gender equality in society. The NCERT books have now started addressing this issue.

There was a tea break after these two deliberations, which was followed by two more talks and one performance.

Suneeta Mishra (Assistant Professor, University of Delhi and Member, Katha Manch), led the discussion on the topic “Stories as a Pedagogical Tool: An Attempt by Teacher Interns” in which she discussed the pedagogical aspects of storytelling. She shared how the genuine concern of most teachers about finishing the syllabus can be taken care of through constant and rigorous engagement with storytelling as a form of pedagogy for a wide array of language skills. She discussed some examples from her own experience of teaching as well as from her supervision of B. El..Ed. interns teaching primary grades. She called upon some DIET students who had taken up story-based pedagogy on her advice to share their experiences. The common points shared by these students were:

1. Children were very interested in story-based pedagogy.
2. Many of the activities and tasks could be linked using the context of a single story.
3. Even those students who did not speak much in the class earlier responded well to stories. The stories proved to be an excellent source of motivation for the children and encouraged them to participate in class.

Through these shared experiences, the students impressed upon the need to include more children’s literature in language-teaching. The

last speaker, Vijay Kumar (Librarian, Directorate of Education Delhi, and Member, Katha Manch), deliberated on the topic “Culture Preservation through Folk Tales”. He discussed various kinds of folk forms—folklore, folksongs and folk artifacts. All these have unique identities. These forms are transferred from one generation to another and nobody can claim authorship of these forms. They have the acceptance of society. When folklore is documented in text form, its originality gets lost. It is most striking and original when performed in local form with traditional aids. With the advent of multimedia, we may be able to document a folk performance in its original form but the spirit of the performance, its cultural component and festivity are lost. He recommended that folklores and folksongs be used in the classroom so that children get exposed to the cultural diversity of India. In fact, both folklores and folksongs can be used for storytelling. There are many local stories sung in the form of folklores and passed from generation to generation. In a way folk forms are a source of cultural preservation.

Ritu Parna Ghosh (freelance storyteller) gave a performance and deliberated on the topic “Story Narration and Integrating Stories in Lesson Planning”. She explained that classics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* that are sometimes avoided due to their religious background can be modified and performed in the classroom. She added that performances using masks, costumes, artificial swords, arrows, etc., add to storytelling and make it livelier. Children really enjoy themselves when theatric expressions and different types of voices are mimicked while telling a story. When the performance is done in an interactive mode, many interesting questions are posed and stereotypes broken. For example, while performing the modified *Ramayana*, Ritu Parna Ghosh of Katha posed a hypothetical question—was Ram right in cutting off the nose of Surpanakha (sister of Ravana)? How could the

nose be fixed back again? Should they use cello tape, Fevicol, Quickfix, etc.? She then used a mask of the ten-headed Ravana and Surpanakha, and various weapons such as a bow-arrow, sword, etc. to enact a scene from the *Ramayana*. Everybody in the audience was mesmerized by her performance. Participants of the seminar felt that classic stories can be modified and performed in classroom using various aids. This helps to engage children and make them think, imagine and get connected to the story. An attempt may also be made to break the stereotypes we encounter in our daily life and encourage children to question them.

Open Discussion

At the end of seminar there was an open session in which participants shared their classroom experiences. There was a consensus that children’s literature and storytelling carry stereotypes which needs to be addressed. Stories can be used not only to learn literature, but also social sciences, mathematics, history, culture, etc. Stories make the classroom more alive and interactive. Classics can be modified and performed in the class. Folklores are a source of cultural preservation and vehicles of its transfer from one generation to another. They can be used in classrooms to make children aware of different cultures and customs. This will help induce tolerance towards plurality among children. Finally, the seminar ended on the note that more such events related to stories should be conducted in future.

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