

Effect of Storytelling on an 'Under-performer'

Sonia Khudanpur

In the early days, visiting government schools in Rudraprayag, I would experiment with many language teaching methods that until then, we had only read and talked about. Of these, storytelling was always a hit. I have seen small but consistently positive results with storytelling on children – from engaging the attention, developing an interest in books, to awakening the desire to express through talk or writing.

I am no expert at storytelling, so I decided that the first thing to do was read and memorise stories to tell and expose children to new storybooks. At one of the schools where I spent a few months, I used to carry a few new storybooks to school each day and memorise at least one or two stories to tell in my own words. The time I spent in the school was adequate to befriend the children and observe the effects of storytelling.

The initial days were exciting. Children would be curious to know what I had brought. They would ask me in the middle of the class to pass the book or come and stand next to me to get a good look at the book. They were always eager to see which new books I had brought with me. I would read or tell a story depending on their requests.

Whenever there was free time, I would give these books to the children. Initially, it started with the children turning them over in their hands, flipping through the pages, looking at the pictures and returning them soon after. Very few would try to read. The ones who believed they were good would try to read the text, even if it meant only the title of the book, whereas the ones who thought they were not good, would simply look at the pictures, turn the pages, and often say, 'I can't read'. They would say this, despite knowing the alphabet, knowing the sounds of letters, and reading and writing daily as part of the school routine. Encouragement had little effect in the beginning. But as weeks passed, something happened: even those who were not confident were asking for more stories.

Aman from class II was considered mischievous and distracted. His teacher believed he could only copy well from the board or from his classmates' notebooks. He rarely did his homework and never took much interest in the class. He was forever fidgeting or making mischief. Aman did not take much interest in looking at the storybooks I used to carry to school. If another student was reading, he would peek, comment to make fun and then return to his seat. Expecting him to read on his own was not working. When I told a story, Aman did not have the patience to sit and listen. He wanted to run around, play or fight with someone.

But something about the stories caught his attention. In the initial storytelling sessions, Aman would stand close to me, listen for a few minutes, repeat a line in the same expression and leave the group. He would do this repeatedly. Then this reduced. A point came when he would not only repeat an interesting phrase after me but would ask me to go on: *phir?* (then?) or *phir se, phir se* (once more). He would want me to tell the story again or move to another story.

This change was encouraging. One time, I asked him, 'How about I read a story for you?' He said, okay. 'Will you select a few books from the shelf for me to read? Which of these should I read?' I asked.

Once Aman made me read *Raftar Khan ka Scooter*. I was nervous because I had not read the story before. I tracked the words with my finger as I read and used as much expression and voice modulation as I could manage. If he liked a line, he repeated it under his breath, first after me, then with me. He was paying attention to the lines. If I missed a word or a page, he would point it out to me. Seeing his involvement, I was thrilled.

I made it a point to sit at the level of the children, so they could see and touch the book if they wanted

to. Aman made me read this story at least six to seven times. He had almost memorised the lines. He started selecting more books and even started telling me what kind of stories he would like to hear. To help him read better, after reading a story, I asked the class, 'Shall we write this in our notebooks?' They all said yes. I began writing on the board. A student asked if she could write a line on the board. Then, Aman asked to do the same. I said yes to both. Now Aman had the book in one hand, chalk in the other, and was trying to write legibly. He managed to write clearly, read what he had written, and tell his classmates.

I later spoke with Aman's teacher about the interest he had shown in reading and writing. She did not seem too impressed. After all, she was assessing him on the usual parameters of answering a question from the lesson and getting answers on the test right. Aman could not do these yet. But she did say that when Aman is interested, he does his work well. When I met her next, she said he was reading better. It seemed like she was looking at him differently. There was more empathy and belief in his ability to do well. The teacher explained to me that she had spent months trying to teach Aman to read and write. She made him write letters, words and sentences countless times in the hope that he would improve. There would be some improvement and he would fall back to exactly where he was.

In the short time that I have spent in government school classrooms, one thing is clear – a child usually lives up to his teacher's beliefs about their own abilities. *If my teacher believes I am a mischievous, careless child who cannot pay attention or do her work properly that is exactly who I will be.* In every classroom, a teacher naturally tends to categorise students on the basis of her initial impressions of their work. There are the good ones, the capable ones, and those beyond help. Aman, unfortunately, belonged to the last category. But storytelling helped break that belief. Through storytelling, Aman not only took an interest in looking at books, but was listening to more stories, was able to retell them, comment on the characters and dialogues, and even read on his own.

The belief that all children can learn was fortified with this experience. Aman showed me that if each student is treated as a perfectly capable individual, he/she will be interested in learning. Everyone wants to be able to do things well. All they need is our support and confidence in them. One of the surest ways of doing this is by bringing more stories to the classroom, from books and our everyday experiences – stories from teachers and students. From these everyday stories to telling stories or reading from storybooks children select, teachers can get a chance to connect with each child. Stories give space for genuine conversation, questions, expression of doubts, fears and other emotions and enrich the imagination.



Sonia Khudanpur is based in Rudraprayag, Uttarakhand. She has been a part of the English language team at the Azim Premji Foundation, since July 2018. Before joining the Foundation, Sonia completed her MA in Education at the Azim Premji University. She also has a postgraduate diploma in Journalism and has worked in the media for about three years. Her work in the foundation involves learning about teaching-learning through interaction with children in government schools, working with teachers and supporting them by organising and facilitating sessions and workshops on language teaching. She has visited over 25 schools since 2018. She may be contacted at sonia.khudanpur@azimpremjifoundation.org