

Animating Children's Energy and Engaging Minds

Asha Singh

As a teacher educator, I begin my class with a classroom experience, though my undergraduate students, learning to be teachers, find it ridiculous at first to participate in a set of concentration exercises. This is what I tell them:

When teachers enter a classroom, they usually find the class engaged in excited chatter, scrambling to chant *good morning*. The process could be reversed with a teacher initiating playful gestures, such as the action of raising their arms and moving their fingers, chanting *taare taare, tarre-tarre-tarre*, followed by variations such as *hanste taare, routae tare, gussewale taare*, ending up with *tarre-tarre-taare*.¹ And quite suddenly, to create a group with focused attention, lowering their voices to a gentle and soft pitch, say, *shaant taare*.

My suggestion was: begin your lesson with this charged bunch, ready for imbibing new ideas. Of course, the students engaged, though reluctantly, as it seemed to them to be quite an undignified classroom process. I followed my belief that active ways of engaging with children have to be *experienced* and not merely *imagined*.

Soon, the students went for their internship: to execute lesson plans, they had to use theoretical pedagogical practices in real classrooms. I met them after their three weeks at schools and did not hear the end of the usefulness of *taare taare, tarre-tarre-tarre*. The chant with varied emotional beats helped channelise children's energy and get them to value focus, thereby, endearing themselves to the groups.

The above experience of student teachers is shared to suggest alternatives to a curt instructive stance of 'can we all be quiet'- the loud teacher-controlled method for bringing the class to order by just being playful. Sylvia Ashton Werner in her seminal book, *The Teacher*, describes using the piano to draw the

attention of her students. Classroom devices have to be in relation to local contexts and resources. Classroom processes that permit order through chaos are close to children's tendency for play. Children feel emotionally gratified getting time for some laughter, some silliness and giggling. There seems to be an acknowledgement of their being children, not just students who have to be filled with knowledge.

The Invisible magical potion

Curious young minds inhabit the classrooms, especially the early primary classes. It is up to the teacher to sustain the sparks of experimentation or further the spirit of questioning. Teachers' methods of participation and rich content presentation can have magical effects on children's comprehension. The crucial elements for learning lie in appeal and engagement with the content, *free of fear*. A classroom where children are not afraid to make mistakes, or where creativity is as significant as literacy, provides elements of trust. A supportive teacher, an adult who is respectful and warm, will provide emotionally nurturing learning spaces. In the words of John Holt, 'Learning is not the product of teaching. Learning is the product of the activity of learners.' The need is to find ways to take advantage of what benefits children, which is *being with other children*. In fact, the mantra for the teaching community of 3-10-year-olds needs to be:

1. Let each child feel special
2. Children learn best in contexts of play
3. Reflect if your classroom processes engage children individually

Familiarity with child-oriented pedagogy is a must for teachers. Children's search for identity usually gets activated when they carve a space for themselves in a large group. Theatre games have the potential to stoke the individuality of each member, alternating by turns, between group-acts and individual-acts. In the following paragraphs, the attempt is to describe methods of evoking

¹Taare mean stars. I have spelt them in two ways. taare with double a refers to singing with long 'a' sound while spelt with double r as in "tarre-tarre tarre" the meter has to be fast matching the beats in 'taare taare'.

children's participation by encouraging the sharing of observations and interpretation. Creating small groups, mingling children to share, are some classroom devices for encouraging children to think. Such moments of small group sharing are rich in giving time for the shy or the quiet child to muster courage and confidence to express herself.

Collaborative learning as a pathway for critical thinking

As an illustration, five or six children can take up different portions of a chapter from a language text and each small group can discuss among themselves how they will present it. They could draw, enact or even debate. They think of ways and take suggestions from the teacher.

In such a process, they remain active, treat the content with responsibility and critique the work of fellow students. They also get familiar with each other's strong points and develop a sense of reflection and motivation to strive for more skilful discourse. Children feel special and build on-group strength in a playful, engaged manner.

Personal names as sources of linguistic awareness

I share a *whole class* interaction that keeps the intimacy despite perhaps many children in the class. The game is to reflect on your name, what it means, what sounds comprise the whole word and then link your name to other objects, places within a structure just as rules define any game. Before children realise, they have learnt grammatical categories.

Name game

Children are requested to call out their names with an action and an emotion. The class will repeat the action and the name twice. 'I could begin but Gajraj or Rohini, do you want to try?' The beginner could be either expressive or may even just walk forward and say *My name is _____*.

Enjoy the action and intervene if it continues in a subdued manner. Try breaking restrained actions: jump, take a *chakkar* (twirl), throw your arms up, call out your name. Children repeat, and their happiness will be increased manifold to see the teacher being playful. The action will be contagious and prompt children to be free and expressive. Different acts and mimicking surprise, bravado, anger, sadness will animate classroom energy.

Identifying sounds

Rubbing your hands, capture the energy between the palms. The first step is to lay down the rules of

the game clearly. Here is an example:

1. First, call out names turn in turn.
2. Tell the children: now we will listen to the first sound of our names.
3. Say a word that matches with the first sound.
4. Allow the children to interpret what has just been said.
5. Intervene and give examples if instructions are not understood.
6. As the children participate, let them judge each other's response and the accuracy of the sounds in the matching word.

There will be a range of responses and the teacher's interjections will depend on the children's level of language learning and comprehension. For pre-schoolers, you could contain the game to just sounds. If Sneha, for example, says *safed*, deal with the sound difference, if necessary, as it is a subtle difference.

With older children, definitely point out the soft and prolonged sound. If Sharad is *shahad* (honey) fine, however, if the child says, *shankh* for Sharad it is the appropriate moment to talk about the difference in sound and its representation with a dot.

Using names to identify nouns

Older children can use a more complex version. Using the principle of the first sound of their name, children must name a place, person or object with a matching sound. For example, if the name of the child is Pavna, her response can be *Patna, palak, and palang, or pushkar, pankhuri and pitaraa*.

This is a good time to point out how sounds expand and the Hindi word for the symbol that adds sounds is *matra*. As the game proceeds, you may need to reflect and add more concepts. Let us take an example from the English language: if the child's name is Madhur, the child says *monkey, mother and Mirzapur or mango*. Now *monkey* and *mother* are terms and not names of persons. But they are names of *categories* for groups, like animals, fruits, and are known as *common nouns*.

Our game has been successful in enhancing linguistic awareness, keeping in mind children's desire for action and for feeling included, and the spirit, animated. If we were to put this activity to the test of *matra* mentioned earlier- making every child feel special, using play as a learning opportunity and engaging children individually - we are doing fine. Add to that, ensuring that there is energy

in the classroom and that the teacher reflects on the process. Would it count as one meaningful classroom interaction? Was the playfulness, the magic potion?

Such interactive child-initiated response turns the notion of conformity and uniformity on its head as each one feels an emotional thrill sharing in their thoughts. As children play with sounds, opportunities to express, not just play out a script, stokes their curiosity. The large classroom group becomes conducive to listening to differences in meaning-making within a safe, personal space.

Exploration as learning

Parents are relieved and rejoice when their offspring are in stress-free environments, happily exploring, and feeling free to experiment. Schools in Finland are a case in point where there is plenty to see, do and explore, with little academic pressure in the early years. Fresh air, nature and regular physical activity breaks are considered engines of learning in the same way that this article emphasises that children gain from physical activity. It often seems that classrooms only value children's heads, while other organs, like the heart and body, are there only to support mental processes! If children are not still, in class, they are often considered *restless* or *hyperactive*. Children's development receives the best returns through physical exploration, as well as dialogues and more experienced others. Heart, head and hands make a powerful team.

In education, there seems to be an assumption that classrooms of the urban poor and rural children have low access to resources with little respect for what those habitats offer. Educational content is driven by the lens of the urban middle class who regulate the testing or the curriculum design. There is never a thought to test children to name ten birds in the environment or list ten common trees or ten different market features that dominate the rural or urban low-income habitats. Our questions are on modes of transport, matching geometrical figures and other formal schooling exposure. The belief remains that high poverty groups or children raised in distant locations need benefits, and there is no focus on how they differ from their urban peers. In actuality, each group has strengths and skills to offer. For instance, in a national children's art *mela*, urban students realised that few had skills for group dancing, playing instruments or the ability to sing collectively or weave baskets. On the other hand, children who live as part of a community had imbibed many such artistic traditions; some hailed from families of traditional performers.

Often, children may be unlettered but be able to perform the task of storytelling as in the art of the traditional *phad katha* of Rajasthan. Urban reporters seem fascinated by the skill and pay lip service, however, they are unable to refrain from the trite question of *school mein kya seekha? Wahan achcha lagta hai?* (What did you learn in school; do you like it there?) The message for the community is: folk art and skills are fine and exotic, but how do you adapt them to modern ways of life and living? While there is no denying that literacy is indeed an important tool, it does not warrant negation of cognitive competence in skills associated with those not literate.

Nature as a resource

Children are seekers and they have to be as 'natural curiosity' is a survival skill in a world controlled by people of experience who may have only faint recollections of the fact that they too were children once. Easy access to childhood encounters is useful for educators. Nature, linking information, searching the outdoor world with friends are all-time favourites with children. As stated before, children are active meaning-makers and are impacted by their habitats. By age 15, a rural child may have seen so many calves being born that they could be well-versed in recognising women in labour.

Physical skills are shaped by our everyday resources. The absence of access to transport sharpens the skill of speed-running as that is their only way for mobility from one place to another. Children may spend time in repetitive activities like throwing pebbles in a river to observe ripples or test their strength. One rural teacher working with tribals in Telangana shared a child's quest in throwing pebbles up in the air. His curiosity was to know the kind of force needed to keep the pebble suspended in the air. This new-age Newton could be encouraged to make several such explorations by closely observing and interrogating natural phenomena. Some examples:

- Why do birds fly making a triangle as Sir ji shows in class?
- All the trees have leaves yet all the leaves are different... but mostly, they are triangular.
- A group of older boys not in school showed reluctance in using a compass to draw a circle. The city boys were aghast! However, the teacher knew better and asked them to draw the outline for digging a well. The geometry box-challenged children brought a big nail and tied a string to draw a perfect circle!

Observations by children and observations of children at play can be insightful for creating interesting classroom activities. Children in city schools will gain by running out in the open collecting fallen leaves, twigs or pebbles, making shapes or recreating local *kolam* or *rangoli* designs. The patterns, the repetitive lines are good as links for spatial mathematics, design and understanding of shapes.

Reflections by teachers

In my encounters with teachers, I have listened to their successes narrated with pride. One teacher wanted to take the children outdoors to study the trees, play games, bring different objects, learn their names in English. She was trying to promote group learning and was keen to use games in small groups, displaying spellings or collaborating to make shapes.

Knowing the children, she realised that the transition from the class to the field would be raucous. In a flash, she knew what to do. 'Children,' she said, 'if you have seen ants move, I want you all to be like ants who are going to the field.' So, in a conspiratorial manner, they agreed that ants walk in a line, whisper and move forward. In the field, after they had had their fill of touching the trees, seeing the birds and gathering leaves, they engaged in the following games described briefly:

1. To the count of fifteen, make a square/octagon/triangle in groups of seven. Find some shapes in the field and get back before I finish counting 30.
2. On another day, the game was to collect objects whose English names the children wanted to know. Objects ranged from stones, petals, twigs, snails, butterflies, or just the colour of the sky, the English names were shared. Some children

knew the names, while the teacher would provide these to the others.

3. This could be turned into a spelling game by choosing five words, identifying the sounds and allowing the children to learn the sounds and join the alphabets as a team. Four students standing in a line could be an 'I', others curl up to make a 'C'. Children will devise with surprising innovation. The attempt is to let learning emerge from the collective spirit and interpretation of the teams.

Teachers' stories often recount their innovations in how they circumvent many challenges. The idea of workshops for teachers itself needs to be reframed, giving attention to teachers' trials and triumphs. Instances and strategies adopted by those teachers who strive to achieve are based on realistic expectations and outcomes.

Children may have emotional barriers to classroom engagement. A warm hand-holding or some art exercise may guide the restless child to focus or a child in distress needing reassurance while transitioning from the village school to the city school.

A final observation

In conclusion, as an ode to teachers, I wish to propose sharing of classroom experiences compiled as a compendium of best practices. Many educators are never complacent, they are always searching for original ways, respecting the identity of children to define, redefine and extend the boundaries of what is education and explore the gamut of ways about how children can and do learn. Salutations to those innovative champions who guide children's creativity through the spirit of childhood!

References

Werner, S. A (1986). *The Teacher*, Australia: Simon and Schuster

Holt, John. (1967)/. *How Children Learn US*: Pitman Publishing (Perseus Publishing (1995)

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/08/30/what-finland-is-really-doing-improve-its-acclaimed-schools/> Accessed on 29.04. 2020



After 34 years of association with Lady Irwin College as Associate Professor in Child Development, **Asha Singh**, moved to pursue the desires of her heart. Deeply interested in the 'early years of the human life cycle', she has been sharing the value of art-based learning with young minds at the Ambedkar University and in-service teachers in schools. She has, extensively, done storytelling with children, reflecting on animating the digital adult-child interaction. She may be contacted at asha.singh903@gmail.com