

Use of Storytelling with and for Children in Primary Classrooms: Views of Teacher Educators

Dimple Rangila (Ph.D.) Assistant Professor, HDCS Department, Lady Irwin College

The present paper explored the use of storytelling in primary classrooms. An attempt was made to understand views of teacher educators training student teachers regarding significance of using storytelling with and for children. The focus was also on how teacher educators prepare prospective teachers for use of storytelling. The participants were teacher educators preparing prospective teachers for elementary teaching program in Delhi. The present study was part of a larger study to understand role of storytelling in children's lives by giving them active agency and voice in the storytelling process. A qualitative research design was used for the study.

Introduction

Stories can be important resources in the repertoire of the teacher. Storytelling can be a powerful way to communicate experiences and to explore ideas. Using stories, the teacher takes her students on journeys that introduce them to new vistas of lived experience. It can be used as an approach that honors cultural diversity and empowers students to reflect on and share their experiences. It can further provide an inclusive pedagogy which can challenge prejudices. It can be a basis for understanding cultural traditions, folklore, a common language and shared experiences for the classroom culture. Ruane (2001) propagated the need to include multiple voices and stories of culture in teacher training to create professionals who are more reflective of the strengths of the history and diversity they are a part of. Furthermore, fostering voices of children and teachers would serve powerful purposes by bringing in their diverse experiences, cultural narratives to a single forum. Narratives can thus be used to critically look at underlying meanings, biases or prejudices and a discussion on the same would ensure participation and meaningful engagement of children. Culturally responsive teaching recognizes the importance of considering cultural background of students in learning, and classroom experiences. In multicultural classrooms the curricular content is related to the cultural background of the learners. It respects and acknowledges variations that children bring to the classroom in terms of cultural capital. Culturally Responsive Teaching is a pedagogy that recognizes the significance of cultural references of all students in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Classroom teaching that builds up on children's existing ideas and real life experiences for developing their thinking, reasoning and knowledge construction (Ladson-Billings, 1995) actually strengthens their cultural identity by inducing a sense of belongingness (Banks, 2010; Grant & Sleeter, 2011). Reflective teachers who respect cultural variations in a classroom make sure to tap cultural resources of children during classroom discussions and dialogues. Using curriculum that respects every child's individual cultural background brings equity in classroom and is linked to school success and achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Pewewardy, 2002). Sleeter (2011) found that use of culturally

responsive approach fails when culture is used merely for cultural celebration and is not connected to promote learning of students.

Villegas and Lucas (2002) encouraged teacher educators to critically scrutinize their programs and methodically interweave six salient characteristics throughout the coursework and fieldwork of prospective teachers to prepare them as culturally responsive teachers and to be able to work effectively in diverse classrooms. They proposed that:

- a) *Sociocultural consciousness* among teacher educators can be developed by understanding that an individual's way of thinking, behaving, and being is influenced by their social and cultural background.
- b) *An affirming attitude toward students from culturally diverse backgrounds* impacts student learning, their concept of self and ultimately their academic performance. Teacher training program become inclusive when it includes courses that relate to multiplicity of cultures and this further percolates into classroom teaching of the prospective teachers.
- c) *Commitment and skills to act as agents of change* enables the prospective teacher to deal with challenges and bring equity to class.
- d) *Constructivist views of learning* means to develop a firm belief in capability of all learners. Constructivist teaching will further promote among learners critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and the ability to recognize multiple perspectives.
- e) *Learning about students' past experience* help teachers to use experiences of children to build up a link between school and home that is very important for learning.
- f) *Culturally responsive teaching strategies* support the constructivist view of knowledge, teaching, and learning. Teachers use individual child's personal and cultural knowledge to help them construct knowledge.

One central aim of the teacher education program is also to introduce prospective teachers to pedagogy and curriculum that is based on listening closely to students and their communities, hearing what they say, acting and further building on that knowledge. Storytelling engages kids in critical thinking, analysis and evaluation, rather than presenting them with what they should think (Kumar, 1992). He further cited that stories represent an individual's desire to interpret life. So these can be used as instruments by teachers to help children imagine events and characters and to relate to a story.

Thinking and attitude of teachers are considered to be of great significance and as hidden curriculum within a classroom. Teachers who innovate new and stimulating ways in classrooms invoke attitudes that consider children as a person in their own right and not as passive beings in the class. Infusing certain methods in classrooms that give an agency and ownership to the child makes it possible for teachers to have corroborative exchanges with children and thus relation to literacy develops in powerful ways (Roskos & Christie, 2000). There is a need for more flexibility in the school system as far as such stimulating ways need to be introduced and retained along with intellectual fervor. Children usually are looked upon to have a subordinate position

because of being less experiences but this does not limit their ability to think, reason and infer. The attempt here is not to blame schools but to focus on ways in which schools can draw from society and vice versa.

Kumar (1986) reiterated that every child must get the freedom to recreate a story and its characters in a meaningful way. He adds that it is terribly sad that even teacher training institutes do not completely understand the importance of storytelling and hence do not pay the kind of attention that needs to be paid to storytelling as a pedagogic tool in the classroom. Story telling is taken up during the course of teacher training but perhaps not rigorously. Studies have also pointed to the issues and challenges that teacher's face in implementation of innovative ways in classrooms. Stipek and Byler (1997) interviewed 60 early childhood teachers to explore the relationships between teachers' belief and the way children learn, teaching practices, views of teachers on goals of early childhood care and education, policies on school entry, testing and school practices for change. The teachers were all working with children from economically and ethnically diverse families. Almost all teachers reported not being able to implement the programme they believed was appropriate because the orientation of the programme was to impart basic skills. Teachers reported parents as the biggest source of pressure to increase emphasis on academics. Other sources reported were administrators, unrealistic expectations and the school curriculum.

Findings

Evolving Role of Teachers

All the teacher educators believed that using stories increased likelihood of engagement among children in classrooms, which further led children to emote, which was considered to be an important aspect of teacher student relationship by them. They also stated various techniques to be learnt and used with children to make the process more engaging. They gave examples of making children predict the title of the story by showing the cover page and predicting a storyline by looking at the pictures. This undoubtedly reflects that the teacher educators did not limit the significance of storytelling to teaching of specific subjects in classrooms but also to what it does to children. Singh (2002) in her work with teachers concluded that knowing children's minds does not have a direct bearing on child's academic performance, yet use of methods such as storytelling, drama in classrooms creates in teachers a regard for children as people rather than as only those who are being taught by them. She further added that a sensitive teacher would definitely create an environment in the class to capture children's attention, concentration and to connect with them. Egan (1997) perceived storytelling as a generative activity that creates an integrated and "educated mind," one that is connected to both the logical and imaginative ways of knowing. Moreover he suggested that stories are essential pedagogical tools for teaching and learning. First simply by airing diverse experiences from different points of view, we might be able to identify those tacit cultural narratives that presently limit our actions and our sights. Furthermore, we might be able to look critically at the new narrative we accumulate, struggling with their adequacy, limitations, biases and power to

educate. Bruner (1996) advocates such telling and investigation of narratives as a collaborative act conferring on participants a sense of agency.

Teacher educators also believed that storytelling would help children get aware of different cultures and cultural practices thus transmitting cultural knowledge. At the same time they reiterated that the role of training institutes is also significant to impart the right knowledge in choosing stories, using it effectively and the purpose of using the same. Perceptions of teacher educators corroborated with research studies which propose that teacher educators must infuse culturally responsive pedagogy and its usage for preparing student teachers. Villegas & Lucas (2016) proposed that teachers can use culturally responsive ways by becoming conscious of socio-cultural pluralities of students; having optimistic views of students from diverse backgrounds, taking charge of bringing in change and equity among students, understanding process of knowledge construction amongst learners and supporting it further, getting familiarized to the lives of students at home and school and planning teaching learning activities based on already existing knowledge of learners (both cultural and others) and then taking them beyond that is towards the unfamiliar. Such a practice brings equity in classroom and is linked to school success and achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Pewewardy, 2002).

Storytelling and the Teacher

The opinions and views of teacher educators reflect their firm belief in children as storytellers. They brought significant points that reflect how use of storytelling can actually help children in classrooms based on the feedback they get from their student teachers and also through observation that they conduct while student teachers use storytelling during their teaching practice. Out of the three teacher educators only one connected storytelling with children's emotions and that it was a medium to build and strengthen bond between teachers and students. She focused not only on teaching specific subjects through storytelling but also on the role of storytelling to revitalize classroom teaching and to make the classroom a vibrant space where storytelling helps children form a collective body and a classroom community ultimately leading to a strong bonding amongst children. She also highlighted its importance to enrich the individuality of a child. It turned out that she herself was the one who had studied this course as a part of her coursework in Pre-service Program and experienced this herself and also through her students. It definitely calls for training of teacher educators along with the teaching fraternity to understand completely the need for storytelling in classrooms through pre-service and in-service programs specifically directed towards use of storytelling in classrooms. Palincsar (1998) stated that interpretive talk in classroom leads to more significant learning than simply descriptive talk. Teachers have a significant role to play in facilitating classroom by initiating stimulating conversations and seeding new ideas that push students' thinking and prepare them for further discussion. Group activities lead to sharing, distribution of expertise and create an ethos for building preceding ideas.

It is quite apparent from the data analysis of the present study that the success of using storytelling as a curricular tool depends on schools' openness and the teachers' training to meaningfully engage with children.

This also corroborates with the findings of Singh (2002) who also found that, “Children’s repertoire of stories and their ability to narrate comprises a cultural resource usually neglected and unrecognised as a source of competence and of educationally significant experiences.” She further added that apart from other benefits storytelling has the potential to create awareness and helps in sharing cultural and personal knowledge amongst children.

Children’s personal narratives embedded in their stories revealed dominance of family members and their expanding social world beyond family, that is peers, *teachers* and significant others. Their stories about everyday encounters at school and home brought about multiple realities. In fact such reflective accounts of children’s lives are hardly a part of classroom discourse that leave teacher’s unaware of children’s cultural backgrounds. A connection between teachers and students that privileges the perspective of children can result in a dynamic relation between the two.

The National Focus Group Position Paper on Teacher Education for Curriculum Renewal (NCERT, 2005) states that preparation of student teachers should include opportunities to observe and engage with children, communicate with and relate to children; provision of opportunities to enhance knowledge and understanding related to subject matter within social milieu; and providing opportunities to develop skills in drama, storytelling, reflective inquiry apart from skills in pedagogy, observation, documentation and analysis. Data analysis reflect that, all these can certainly be achieved by using storytelling in classrooms in addition to other pedagogies adapted. Learning happens when students are actively involved and participate in classroom activities as this way they construct knowledge in their own ways with teacher as a facilitator. Storytelling can thus prove to be a culturally responsive way of teaching children as a teacher would be more sensitive and responsive to the social milieu of education. It was understood that affirmative views of teacher educators for use of storytelling in classrooms would percolate in the way they would prepare student teachers. As they trust the potential of storytelling with young children, their conviction will then be further reaffirmed by the student teachers. It is imperative for student teachers not only to know how to use storytelling but also to know the importance of using it as pedagogy. This way Teacher Education can promote the social dimension of learning, giving primacy and agency to children’s voices by preparing student teachers. Creating classrooms where children have a voice, recognition and respect for their agency will go a long way in making them happy learners.

Conclusion

Teachers are the pivotal links of classroom interactions and need to understand and use methods to gain an insight into socio-cultural contexts of children coming from diverse backgrounds to the classroom. Storytelling activities with children provided deep pedagogic insight about children and childhood and also why storytelling is important.

Teacher education must emphasize on using methods, such as storytelling, that place children at the center. The insight that teachers get through children's actions, interactions and dialogues are very much need of the time. This egalitarian approach inculcates in the prospective teachers an understanding of the curiosity of children, questioning and developing affective approach, which enables them to relate with children. Stories constructed by children often present unique ways of looking at the world. Teachers can relook at the kind of stories and can nurture every child's distinct way of storytelling and not just one fixed style. It can aid in building learners who respect cultural diversity and bring variations to the classroom. This makes for a strong argument for teachers to use it in the classrooms. The prior knowledge that children may bring in through their stories can be immense and can be used to tap their potential to the fullest. Teachers can thus plan activities based on cultural knowledge that students already possess and can further extend the same. Furthermore this would familiarize students with multiple perspectives and can promote critical thinking and problem solving (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Ladson-Billings (1994) also stated that *culturally relevant pedagogy* rests on the criteria that students must experience academic success irrespective of their cultural backgrounds; cultural competence; and a critical consciousness through which they challenge and critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities. Culturally responsive pedagogy promotes that teachers should not judge students based on their cultural affiliation and should be inclusive of their cultural backgrounds to be effective facilitators. Storytelling thus can provide opportunities to teachers to get familiarized with the lives of students' home as was revealed from the findings of the present study. This way they can be the agents of change to bring equity to classroom. The teaching learning in this case would align with the aims of culturally responsive teaching involving culturally responsive pedagogy that is not only linked to academic achievement but also to success of students in school.

Voices of children pointed to many lacunae in teacher child relationships in classrooms. Physical punishment, labeling children, and overemphasis on English for storytelling were some of the issues that came to light during storytelling sessions. Children in all three private schools were familiar with these activities yet only one of the private schools was doing it in a way that inculcated active meaning making among children. For almost all children from State run schools, printed text had greater importance although these children brought most of the variations in their style of storytelling and story construction. It also pointed to the method of teaching, wherein children from state run schools usually asked for something that they could copy. If given a chance their storytelling potential could very well be actualized too. An insight into such issues will prepare teachers to

get acquainted with the variations in terms of abilities, language, plurality and varying interests of children. Storytelling in classrooms provided for a significant resource and could create an important balance of formal with the informal if planned as a part of teaching pedagogy.

The study further proposes storytelling as a resource to vitalize teaching, especially because it offers participatory processes for both the teacher and the students. The teacher could view it as a classroom resource that can be used complementarily with other pedagogies employed. In the classroom, it also reflected Corsaro's (1997) views as he considered children as active contributors who although are affected by the society, affect the society at large too.

References

- Banks, J. A. (2010). Approaches to multicultural curriculum reform. In C. A. Banks & J. A. Banks (Eds.), *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives* (pp. 233-256). John Wiley & Sons.
- Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Corsaro, W. A. (1997). *The sociology of childhood*. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press.
- Egan, K. (1997). *The educated mind: How cognitive tools shape our understanding*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Grant, C. A., & Sleeter, C. E. (2011). *Doing multicultural education for achievement and equity*. New York: Routledge.
- Kumar, K. (1986). *The child's language and the teacher*. New Delhi: National Book Trust.
- Kumar, K. (1992). *What is worth teaching?* New Delhi: Orient Longman.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. Jossey-Bass Publishing.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory into Practice*, 34(3) 159-165.
- National Focus Group Position Papers. (2005). *Teacher education for curriculum renewal*. New Delhi: National Council of Educational Research and Training.
- Palincsar, A. S. (1998). Social constructivist perspectives on teaching and learning. *Annual Reviews*, 49, 345-375. Retrieved November 8, 2016 from <http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/full/10.1146/annurev.psych.49.1.345>
- Pewewardy, C. D. (2002). Learning styles of American Indian students: A review of the literature and implications for practice. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 41(3), 22-56.

- Pewewardy, C. D. (2002). Learning styles of American Indian students: A review of the literature and implications for practice. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 41(3), 22-56.
- Roskos, K. A., & Christie, J. F. (Eds.). (2000). *Play and literacy in early childhood: Research from multiple perspectives*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- Ruane, S. F. (2001). *Teacher education and the cultural imagination*. NJ, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- Singh, A. (2002). *Socio-Cultural Contexts of Teacher-Taught Interactions*. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis. Department of Child Development, University of Delhi, New Delhi.
- Sleeter, C. E. (2011). An agenda to strengthen culturally responsive pedagogy. *English teaching: Practice and critique*, 10(2), 7-23.
- Stipek, D. J., & Byler, P. (1997). Early childhood education teachers: Do they practice what they preach? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 12(3), 305-325.
- Villegas, A. M., & Lucas, T. (2002). *Educating culturally responsive teachers*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Villegas, A. M., & Lucas, T. (2016). Preparing culturally responsive teachers. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(1), 20-32. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177%2F0022487102053001003>

