

## CRITICAL PEDAGOGY OF A LANGUAGE THROUGH STORIES IN A CLASSROOM

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### **Abstract**

As classrooms in India become more diverse, it is becoming imperative for teachers to not just know their subject matter, but also be able to make sense of the lived realities of children. Teachers need to know their students well and hence must challenge conventional ideas of teaching, literacy and assessment in their classrooms. For literacy and education to go beyond just learning a set of skills, children need to connect reading and writing to their understanding of the world around them. Grappling with ideas of equity, justice and fairness enables students to realize the transformative potential of education. When classrooms move away from mechanistic and skill-based learning, young children respond with intelligence, imagination and sensitivity towards the world around them. In this article, I will look at how literature-based classrooms can enable children in the primary classes to negotiate meaning and connect texts with their reading of the world.

**Keywords:** Critical pedagogy, children's literature, young children, response, stories

Most studies on critical pedagogy focus on secondary or under-graduate students. The abstract concepts of justice and equity, and the transformative potential of education can only be partially realized by children in the primary classes. However, when classrooms move away from mechanistic and skill-based learning, young children respond with intelligence, imagination and sensitivity towards the world around them. Moving away from the notion of a single right answer, multiple meanings of texts can emerge. In this article, I will begin with a brief outline of critical pedagogy and critical literacy. Thereafter, I will compare critical pedagogy with the more commonly used "critical thinking" which is taught in schools as a cognitive skill. My research with stories in the primary classroom reveals that they are enablers of critical pedagogy by turning a literature-based classroom into a dialogical one, wherein meaning-making is a social process.

### **Critical Pedagogy and its need:**

Critical pedagogy emphasizes that the knowledge taught in schools is not neutral and the processes for learning that children acquire, reward certain school-sanctioned ways of acquiring knowledge. If we see critical pedagogy as a prism, then viewing education through this prism allows us to view schooling as a social, cultural, political and economic process. In other words,

critical pedagogy emphasizes that schools often silence children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds because their lived realities do not find a place in the curriculum or textbooks. An education system which sees children as passive recipients of information, and not as active thinkers eager to make meaning of the world around them, cannot be a meaningful place.

For a country such as India, mass education is relatively new and the struggle to make each citizen literate is far from over. While we recognize that literacy is indispensable if the nation is to progress, and is also important for the development of its people, we teach reading and writing in such unimaginative ways that children in school are hardly excited. Reading and writing are broken down into smaller skills and sub-skills that children are required to master through repeated drill and practice. In other words, literacy is seen as a fixed body of skills which are universal and neutral (Luke & Woods, 2009).

Stories and other forms of children's literature can therefore be used as powerful tools to allow the lived experience of the child to form the basis for classroom learning. In his book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970) expresses deep dissatisfaction with the "banking model" of education, which sees learners as empty vessels into which schools and teachers need to deposit knowledge and skills. He adds that we make our students numb by imposing our knowledge on them. Hence, the students' participation in learning is very passive.

Freire suggests that the teachers should support their students in thinking and questioning, so that the learning emerges out of their own experiences. Teachers who use storytelling as a tool can get their students to engage in the experience of participating in a story for reflexivity, which is both liberating and transformative. This would also be a more dynamic model of education as it requires reciprocity and interaction. Stories are a valuable resource for teachers who would like their students to engage with questions of power, hierarchies and equity to see how language functions in the real world. It is clear that the aim to create a democratic classroom goes much beyond the "skill" of critical thinking.

### **Critical Thinking and Critical Literacy:**

Critical thinking is a "neutral" skill which is regarded as being valuable, while reading just allows the reader to analysis and draw inferences from the words on the page. Critical thinking is regarded as a valuable goal for education as not only does it enable students to become better problem-solvers, but it also makes them better citizens, capable of thinking for themselves and less prone to dogma and prejudices. Hence, curricula and exams assess students on Higher Order Thinking Skills or HOTS, which are taught discretely through tasks that demand problem solving or inferencing.

Critical literacy goes beyond individual cognitive skills to examine literacy as a social practice. Critical pedagogy regards the school as a contested space, where struggles of identity, equity and justice reflect the larger inequalities in society. New literacy practices regard reading and writing not as neutral skills, but as social practices that are deeply impacted by the cultures from which they emerge and also shape. In other words, literacy is not merely something individuals do inside their heads. Literacy happens outside in the world, and is shaped by the practices of the communities in which people exist and work. Hence, critical literacy also examines the role

played by technology, particularly video games, social media and the internet, in shaping the literacy practices of students. Why is it that schools regard only reading from a book as the goal of literacy, and do not acknowledge children's participation in information and communication technology as shaping their literacy practices? In my research on how children make meaning with stories, I focused on multiple interpretations of texts, which enabled children to take a stance on a story and then examine their own response to the story. Moreover, since critical pedagogy emphasizes on a community approach to literacy, I used a dialogical approach, which encouraged children to participate in an exploratory talk around issues of power in schools and communities.

### **Stories in the Curriculum:**

Stories are the most popular form of text that children in the primary classes encounter in their Hindi and English textbooks. Even if classrooms are deprived of children's literature, which is often the case in most government schools and many private ones as well, children have access to the stories in their textbooks.

In the B. El. Ed. program, students and teachers in the third year carry out analyses of language textbooks to understand the pedagogical theory behind them. Year after year, such surveys of language textbooks from private publishers, most commonly prescribed in private schools, reveal some common findings. These findings are as follows:

- a. Stories, particularly in Hindi textbooks, are selected for their didactic content.
- b. The singular purpose of hammering the moral message of the story is so obvious that the moral message is even separately highlighted at the end of the story.
- c. Very often, stories are written by textbook writers (not authors of children's literature) to drive home a moral message such as obedience to teachers and parents, or the value of always telling the truth. As such, these stories do not have much depth in terms of their plot, characterization or the central character's struggle.

As Kumar (2004) points out, in Hindi textbooks "the content explicitly emphasizes the moral advantage that the child may gain. It is not surprising that themes like suspense and adventure are rare in a Hindi textbook, and humour is altogether absent" (p. 717). These insipid and prescriptive stories are hardly likely to engage children as readers.

The selection of such texts also determines the classroom pedagogy, as the purpose of reading the story is to drive home a moral message. Even if the story offered some possibilities for interpretation, they are reduced to a single didactic question—"Is kahani se hamne kya seekha?" (What did we learn from the story?) Children are conditioned to expect this question at the end of the story and know that they will be asked to identify a satisfactory moral take-away as soon as the story ends. This diminishes the tremendous power that stories wield by way of providing us with the experiences to reflect on our own lives. Instead, the story gets reduced to a single authoritative interpretation sanctioned by the teacher.

The story also becomes an instrument to teach children the meanings and spellings of difficult words, grammar components and other discrete language skills. As a teacher-educator, I have observed classes where teachers take up the task of reading aloud to children, but constantly interrupt their reading to ask them to note down difficult words. In such cases, the story merely becomes a vehicle for teaching vocabulary, as the teacher does not realize that stories bring words alive in a context. Moreover, at the end of the reading, children have to answer questions which ask them to locate specific information from the story.

Children in the primary classes in India are increasingly being pushed towards more testing as the only way to measure learning. Data from surveys such as the ASER survey (2016) reveal alarming statistics that more than 40 per cent of Class 5 children are unable to read Class 2 texts. These statistics are used to demand greater accountability through more testing. The tests quantify primary school children's learning of discrete skills of the language, thereby reinforcing language pedagogy based on the teaching of discrete literacy skills. Teachers get blamed for failing to teach literacy skills, and data from testing is used to point to this failure. Hence, the clamor for standardization of lesson plans, surveillance of teaching schedules and "board exams" for Class 5 and Class 8 children, which leaves no room for the creativity and individuality of the teacher.

### **Children's Literature and its Critical Response:**

Stories represent people and situations in certain ways which enable possibilities of exploring ideas of culture, age and gender. Many children enter school with a strong sense of a story. Stories and narratives form the basis of children's meaning-making. After all, a lot of children's role play and pretend play with dolls and "house-house" is structured around narratives. The stories that they act out enable them to make sense of the strange world of adults around them; and if they come to a classroom where teachers readily share stories with children, their sense of story is heightened.

While listening to a story, the listener is often not aware at which point he/she enters the story and the magic of the story takes over; and this is the impact of a good story. It enables reflection. As teacher and educationist James Britton points out, stories enable us to stand back and use language in spectator mode to reflect on the world around us. According to Britton (1970), participation in an event often leaves out evaluation and reflection. When we take part in the events of our lives, as spectators, we are freed from the need to act and can contemplate what has happened to us or to other people (Britton, 1970). Britton explains that one of the pleasures of a spectator role is the chance to live events through someone else. Such critical engagements with texts in the language classroom lead to deeper and more lasting connections.

In my research on stories, I wanted to see if stories could provide the space in the classroom to question accepted notions of identity, whether communal, gendered, regional, caste or class-related. Traditionally, stories have been used to pass on notions of order, values and culture to the community because they exert a powerful influence on the mind and the imagination of the reader. But for the same reason, teachers can use stories to encourage students to question commonly accepted notions of power and dominance, leading perhaps, to a more democratic society based on justice and equity. The dialogic process that is generated by teachers and

students talking about stories is possible only because storytelling is a uniquely co-creative process (Baker & Greene, 1977).

### **Critical Pedagogy and the Idea of Difference:**

I will now talk about how children responded to and made meaning from Ashley Bryan's story (1998), "Why frog and snake never play together". This is a *pourquoi* folk tale, i.e. it explains why the snake and frog are no longer friends. One day, a baby snake and baby frog run into each other when they step out to play for the first time. They have a lot of fun together and teach each other tricks. The frog teaches the snake how to hop and the snake teaches the frog how to slither. When they get back home, both show their mothers what they have learnt. Mother frog is horrified that baby frog has been playing with their sworn enemy, the snake. In the other house, mother snake is disgusted that the baby snake has come back home hungry. She tells baby snake to eat up the frog after play next time. The next day, when baby snake goes out in search of frog, his friend refuses to come out to play citing his mother's warning. After that day baby snake and baby frog never played together again. The story ends with a question: Would the snake and frog have continued to be friends if their mothers had not warned them?

The story enabled children to talk about friendship. Is it possible to be friends with a perceived enemy? Another important theme in the story is that we are socialized into prejudices by our families and communities. Parents often warn children not to be friends with a particular child for various reasons—for not being academically sound, for belonging to another religion or caste or for simply being different. The story makes it possible to explore the idea of "othering" and how notions of being different are passed on in families.

At the literal level, the story pitches two enemies against each other in the natural world where animals are divided into prey and predator. Beyond the literal level, the story requires another level of engagement which is metaphorical and allegorical. The story questions these binaries at the allegorical level and draws us in to consider notions of friendship and connections which challenge the status quo. In the end, most folk tales are about human emotions, politics, hierarchies and clashes; they work at different levels, which requires students to be familiar with stories and different possibilities for interpretation.

I narrated the story of the frog and the snake to children in Class 4 (9 to 10-year olds) in two different settings—an elite private school in Gurgaon and a government-run school in north Delhi. Students at the private school were more used to responding aesthetically to children's literature as the school allotted thirty minutes of sharing time each day, where they read aloud stories and poems to each other. As a result, many children in the private school were readers in their own right who had books at home, and had clear notions of what they liked to read. The only reading opportunity for the students in the government school was from the textbook during the Hindi class. Moreover, their response to stories was in the form of writing "correct" answers to important questions from the guide. Therefore, in the government school, many children were struggling to read and the school library was kept locked in a steel *almirah*. The genre preferences of students in the government school were shaped by their notions of stories available on TV in the form of daily soaps and children's channels. Yet, an important aspect of the common response of students to my stories in both schools was the request for books.

These two vastly different school settings brought out variations in the way children constructed meaning from the stories. Children in both schools were asked to provide an ending to the story based on their interpretation. The classes were divided into groups and each group was asked to present their version of the ending through role play or through the narration of a collective interpretation. Students in the private school were used to working in groups and constructing meaning from literature, at least for stories outside the textbook. The groups selected various parts of the classroom to discuss ideas, allocated roles, discussed dialogues and most groups presented a dramatization of possible endings to the story.

In the government school, the format of group work was alien to the children and the idea of facing the class and making a presentation made most of them uncomfortable. Eventually, in each group one student spoke and the rest simply agreed with him/her. Keeping in mind that unfamiliarity with group work should not constrain the meaning making process, students were also invited to share interpretations in a whole-class discussion, a format which is relatively more familiar to students. Even in whole-class discussion formats, children are used to only one authoritative interpretation of a literary text from the teacher, and are expected to reproduce it in the classroom. The confidence to interpret or imagine a new ending, or going against the grain of the story to challenge the authorial voice are not experiences available to government school children. While explaining the differences in literacy events, James Paul Gee (2007) points out, “resources count: not economic resources per se, but experiential resources, access to experiences, images, and dialogue”.

Students in the private school focused more on the idea of friendship and presented endings where the frog and the snake went against adult injunctions to somehow preserve their friendship. One group, for instance, presented a role play showing the frog and the snake enlisting the help of their maids to secretly meet and play, without their mothers coming to know of their friendship. Many children from private schools grow up in elite households with live-in maids waiting on them, freeing parents of the responsibility of looking after the physical and material needs of the children. The role play indicated the deep awareness of Class 4 students with regard to the hierarchy of the adults in their lives—the maids wielded adult authority in their lives, but were servants who had no option but to fall in line with their demands. Hence, the frog and the snake could manipulate their maids to keep their friendship secret from their parents who had the authority to oppose certain kinds of friendships. In fact, the class ended with a boy declaring “*Didi*, parents are right but they are not always right.” The range of possible endings revealed the desire of class 4 students to hold on to friendships even if it meant opposing parental diktats. Children also spoke about how food choices and exam grades formed the basis of their parents’ approval of their friends and seating partners in class. In a critical literacy classroom, it is important for the teacher to share interpretive authority with the children to enable them to make text-to-self and text-to-world connections.

Students in the government school interpreted the story very differently. Most group presentations indicated the end of the friendship, or the violent thrill of the snake eating up the frog. One could say that since the class was not used to group work, the tone set by the first group was taken up by the remaining groups to show that natural enemies could never be friends. However, the whole class discussion which followed also had children saying things like,

“Ma’amji, saanp aur mendhak toh dushman hain. Saanp toh mendhak ko khaa jayega.”  
 (“Ma’am, snake and frog are enemies. The snake will eat up the frog.”)

Their reading of the story emerged from the practical and transactional decisions which drive their lives. Most of the students in the class had mothers who worked as maids in middle-class homes and fathers who were either rickshaw-pullers or had set up *rehris* (carts) to sell tea or vegetables. Government school students therefore become good at taking practical decisions to manage their lives on a daily basis without much parental support. Children in the elite private schools on the other hand generally lead protected lives and are cocooned from the harsh realities of the world and hence savored the notion of protecting their friendship from the pressures of the world. For government school children, natural enemies could not be friends as friendship is also subject to the practical considerations of who is “in” and who is not. They were not interested in the romanticized notion of saving their friendship from the travails of the real world and in fact enjoyed the thrill of a possible ending in which the snake gobbled up the frog. For them, the predator making a kill was not something to be mourned; it was inevitable in the larger practical scheme of things.

### Conclusion

Storytelling and exploratory discussions around literature enable children to find and hone their interpretive voice and agency. Privileging the reading of one story over another, which is generally the prerogative of the teacher, takes away from the transactional nature of the process of reading literature (Rosenblatt, 2005). Moreover, as Sinha (2009) points out, reading is not a static process but is guided by the assumptions and preoccupations of the reader which provide a kind of “framework” for meaning making. A single “correct” interpretation is a dangerous notion, and stories and poems are social events which require an exchange, a dialogue, or a classroom community. Opportunities to read literature, have stories narrated or read aloud enable students to connect with their own thoughts, feelings and memories, and hence understand their own selves better. They also help the teacher to understand her students better and realize that “literacy events must also be interpreted in relation to the larger sociocultural patterns which they may exemplify or reflect” (Heath, 1982).

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