



INTERPRETING AND RESPONDING TO LITERATURE IN ELEMENTARY CLASSROOMS: A TEACHER RESEARCH

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Interpreting and Responding to Literature in Elementary Classrooms: A
Teacher Research

In a fourth-grade classroom in a small village in West Bengal, a teacher reads aloud *Thaela gaadi*, (Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhaya, Sreshtho Kirshore Omnibus(1995), Kamini Prakashalay), a story about two children who are very close friends. The younger one, Nuru, owned a wooden cart and enjoyed giving rides to the boys in the village, especially his dear friend Tuni da. Tuni, once, fails to stand up for Nuru when the other boys in the village bully him and break his cart. This creates a misunderstanding between the two that never gets resolved. Here is a snippet from a discussion that happened during the read aloud¹.

Sreya: Now that Nuru has pulled around everyone and is requesting that someone should pull him while he sits on the cart, what do you think will happen?

Nihari: No one will want to pull Nuru around.

Sreya: Why?

Furkan: Because he is small.

Sreya: What do you think, Amina?

Amina: Tuni will pull Nuru around in the cart.

Pradip: No, Tuni will not pull the cart because his friends will tease him.

Sreya: How many of you agree with Amina?

(Some children raise their hands.)

Sreya: What would you do in Tuni's place?

(More or less unanimously): Pull the cart.

Sreya: Now that these other boys have thrown the brick and Nuru's cart is broken what do you think Tuni will do?

Asim: Tuni will scold his friends.

Inayat: Tuni is feeling bad for Nuru, but can't do anything because of his friends.

Firdous: Nuru is feeling sad because they broke his cart.

Sreya: What do you think Tuni will do?

Asim: Tuni will say sorry to Nuru.

(Classroom discussion, November 21, 2018)

¹ All examples of talk and writing presented here occurred in non-standard Bengali, and has been translated into English.

² All children's names have been changed to protect their identity.

In early language classrooms, teachers often focus on teaching children to read the script and to spell words correctly. Rarely do they engage children with good literature. Even when literature is used in the classroom, it is often restricted to the teacher reading out the story, followed by asking children simple comprehension questions. We do not often see interactions of the kind presented above. In this brief, we would like to share a few learnings from a teacher research project that looked at helping children respond to literature in deeper and meaningful ways.

Why Engage Young Children With Literature in Classrooms?

In many Indian schools, we see literature as appropriate for older grades, while, in early grades, we focus on script acquisition, or reading passages or poems, followed by a set of comprehension questions. There is a pressing need to bring rich literature into elementary school classrooms and engage children meaningfully with it. Here, we list a few important reasons for doing so.

Supporting Narrative Development

Many of us think that we should read out or tell stories to young children for their enjoyment, or to support their imagination. While these are good reasons, Gordon Wells (2009) points us to a fundamental one to engage children with literature, more specifically stories. According to Wells, even very young children begin making sense of their worlds by constructing stories about them. For example, a young child may have thrown a ball, which hit a jug of water and knocked it over. His mother may have scolded him, and he may have cried. Later, she may have picked him up and comforted him. These are many different events, which need to be sequenced and strung together to make a coherent story.

Young children learn to associate different events in their lives into strings of events to make sense of them. Wells refers to this as *storying*, which he saw as a *primary act of the mind*. When we narrate stories to children and engage them with storytelling, we are supporting this primary cognitive function, which eventually supports learning of various kinds, besides providing pleasure to the child.

Understanding Ourselves and the World Around Us

Literature provides two kinds of opportunities to children. First, it gives them an opportunity to connect texts with their lives and to reflect on them. It may get them to think about aspects of their lives they may not have paid attention to or may not have made sense of. For example, after reading *The Boy Who Asked Why* (Sowmya Rajandren, Tulika, 2015), a child might become more aware of caste distinctions in her own community or school. So texts that connect with the child's environment could help them reflect on the familiar and gain insights about it.

While engaging with the literary piece, children should be encouraged to bring their experiences, thoughts, ideas, emotions, understanding of human relations, and so on, which are relevant to the text (Rosenblatt, 1995). This way, they can relive the work and begin *thinking about* and *feeling for* what they read. Rosenblatt writes that during a creative reading experience, different kinds of responses may emerge simultaneously or over time - emotional responses, formulation of ideas, opinions on the attitudes held by the characters, or the situations addressed by the work. Children need to be able to return to texts they have read. Adults also need to help children develop the ability to reflect on their initial responses and come to deeper and better-formed interpretations of the text.

Second, texts can also open up new worlds beyond children's immediate experiences or concerns. For example, a child from urban India may become aware of life in rural areas or the other way around. Texts can help children broaden and deepen their understanding of the worlds they live in.

Cultivating Literary Understandings

Can young children also learn *about* literature? We know that even very young children can begin to understand ideas about how, for example, narratives work - they have a beginning, a middle and an end, and there is a sequence to the events. Later, they begin to notice that stories have plots, characters, settings, and so on. They may also understand that there are many different *kinds* of literature, such as poems, non-fiction, and fiction; and within each of these categories, so many sub-categories, such as autobiographies, historical works, informational pieces, picture books, realistic fiction, fantasy, nonsense rhyme, and blank verse. With the help from supportive adults, they understand each of these aspects better over time. They also understand that different authors have different *styles* of writing; different

illustrators, similarly, have different styles of illustrating. They notice techniques authors and illustrators use to communicate; and if supported, attempt to use some of these techniques in their writing or drawing.

Using texts as *mentors* for one's work is not commonly discussed, but texts not only develop children's ability to critically appreciate literature, but also enhance their abilities to express themselves well (Lukens, 1998; Wolf, 2004).

Teacher Research in West Bengal

Sreya Rakshit, a co-writer of this brief, was interested in examining the potential of using literature with elementary-grade children. Working under the guidance of Shailaja Menon, the other co-writer, she planned and implemented a six-week curriculum for 20 fourth-graders at Vikramshila School, in a rural West Bengal.

The medium of instruction in the school is Bengali. Though the language spoken in the community is Bengali, it was different from the textbook variety. Due to Vikramshila Education Resource Society's intervention, children had engaged with literature earlier, and had some reading and writing proficiency in Bengali. Their proficiency in writing was varied - two or three students struggled to write sentences, while three or four were very comfortable and had high proficiency in writing.



Figure 1. Sreya with her group of children. **Image Courtesy:** Sreya Rakshit.

Pedagogical Principles

We designed our work with the students based on a few important pedagogical principles, which we describe next.

Principle 1: Children should be given exposure to contextually-relevant literature, rich in possibilities for discussion. We noticed a distressing trend in Indian classrooms – that the passages and poems that are included in textbooks were not of interest or engaging to the children. These texts were not rich in possibilities for meaningful conversations with children. Therefore, we kept in mind that we should select rich texts.

A good piece of children’s literature is not one-dimensional, over-simplified, or moralistic; it deals with the complexity which life presents in an elegant manner (Popova, 2015). Texts which are engaging usually offer meaning at different levels – there could be an overarching theme and other sub-themes which one could explore. Most of the times, the plots of stories that spark interest in children, may have metaphors and symbolism, and may require interpretation. Good children’s literature grapples with themes which represent the struggles of human life, of society or of complex emotions (Wolf, 2004).

Principle 2: The aim of the teacher is not merely to have students understand the text but also to interpret and respond to it in multiple ways. Most teachers in elementary school classrooms in India, as we have mentioned, focus on having students read texts accurately, with “correct” pronunciation. Good teachers go beyond this - they help students understand the texts they read.



Figure 2. Allowing children to interpret and respond to a text goes a long way in building perspectives and deeper meaning making. **Image Courtesy:** Sreya Rakshit.

While we wanted students to understand the texts we introduced to them, we wanted to go beyond comprehension to interpretation and response. The word *interpretation* suggests that there is no single *right* answer - there could be many perspectives to one situation, and different people might interpret the same situation differently. We were keen to allow children to engage deeply with the text through interpretation.

Further, we wanted to provide multiple avenues for *response*. Children could respond to texts by connecting them with their lives (text-to-self), with other texts they have read (text-to-text), or with the world (text-to-world). They could analyse what it meant, think about what they liked or didn't like, and discuss the emotions and ideas it evoked.

We wanted to let children respond through a variety of *modes*. Oral response, or discussion, is a very important mode. In addition, children could write, draw, or perform their responses. Educator Anne Dyson (1990) pointed out that young children use the processes of speaking, reading, writing, drawing, dramatising, and listening interactively to make sense of their worlds. Thus, encouraging children to use multiple modalities to respond to texts strengthens their overall capacity as language users, even as it allows them multiple modalities of expression. In our work, children talked, wrote and drew in response to the texts.

Principle 3: Interactive read alouds are a powerful means for bringing rich texts to children and eliciting responses. An interactive read aloud is when the teacher reads aloud a text to students, having carefully planned a variety of ways to create interactions between the students, the text and herself, *before, during, and after* reading it aloud³ (Barrentine, 1996). Since the teacher is doing the reading of the text, we can select texts that are beyond the students' independent reading levels. By inviting careful interactions throughout, a teacher is able to set context as well as elicit a *co-construction of meanings* that includes children's interpretations and responses to the texts.

An interactive read aloud thus creates a space for children to engage with each other's thoughts and perspectives, and it permits them to make personal connections to the text. Listening and responding to different perspectives that emerge during such discussions

³ See: ELI's Practitioner Brief 9, 'Reading Aloud With Young Children.' Access it here: http://eli.tiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ELI_Practitioner_Brief_9_Reading-Aloud_With_Young_Children.pdf

refines children's understandings, clarifies doubts and expands their engagement with the text. It lets the teacher play an active role in facilitating and mediating discussions and guiding deeper meaning-making.



Figure 3. Interactive read alouds help bring rich texts to children and help them voice their thoughts. **Image Courtesy:** Sreya Rakshit.

Based on these principles, we conducted 18 read aloud sessions, followed by other sessions that permitted children to respond to the texts in a variety of ways. The texts selected were written by acclaimed authors of Bengali children's literature.

Learnings and Recommendations

Six weeks was too short to experiment with read alouds. Sreya was just hitting her stride when it was time to return and make sense of her pile of notes, audio-recordings, and collection of children's writings and drawings. So what we present here is a preliminary sense that we got from our work, hoping it will motivate and help you explore these aspects further.

It is important to use contextually relevant texts. Choosing stories carefully for the group of children, keeping their *contexts* as well as their *age-group* in mind, made it easy for them to engage with the texts. They heard the stories and often connected it to their experiences. They made *text-to-self* connections whenever they could relate to the feelings of the characters. Carefully planned but loosely structured discussions helped bring out feelings, doubts, anticipations, predictions, and inferences of the children. Many times, the discussion was followed by *written response / response using visual art* for which a prompt was provided.

Using multiple modalities gave children multiple opportunities to engage with the text, and represent their thoughts and ideas using different forms of expression.

We illustrate this with examples from the lessons around *Kag Noi* (Lila Majumder, *Kag Noi*, Ananda Publishers, 2018). The story involved a young boy, Budo, who had stolen a strange-looking egg from a bird's nest. The story is about the anxiety the boy feels about having stolen the egg and his worry that the birds will come looking for it.

This story had potential for children to make strong personal connections and became a starting point for them to share instances when they had felt anxious. After the discussion, the children were encouraged to write and / or draw in response to the text.

The first response in this example shows how the children were trying to connect to the feeling of anxiety they had experienced while the second response (see Figure 4) shows how the child visualised the scene in which the character is anxious. The child has added details to depict the situation the character was in. It is an example where the child's imagination met the author's halfway. Details like the character being reminded of the birds by looking at the umbrella was present in the story. However, the lantern to depict that it was night, the time on the clock, the thought bubble to show what was going on in Budo's mind were reflections of Asim's understanding of the situation in the story.

This was a long time back. I had not learnt how to swim. One day I got into the pond to take a dip with my father. I was trying to swim while my father was holding me. I slipped from my father's hand and drowned. Then I got very scared and felt that I will die. But my father saved me and I was unconscious then. (Asim, Child's Writing, 15.11.2018)



Figure 4. Asim's response in the form of a drawing to depict anxiety felt by Budo.
Image Courtesy: Sreya Rakshit.

The texts were in Bengali, so that the children could relate to the language used. Some texts mirrored the external contexts of the children, but we realised that what mattered more than the external contexts, was that the texts selected be relevant to the *concerns* of the children we were working with. Some concerns are specific in nature; while others, such as the anxiety felt while stealing, could be shared by a large cross-section of children.

So, when we talk about selecting contextually-relevant texts, we mean that the texts should open up issues relevant to the children. Relevance could be established by choosing texts that help children reflect upon their feelings, relationships and interactions with others. We elaborate on this aspect later through an example of an instance when the text lent itself to a discussion on complex feelings and emotions.

Asking good questions was central to meaning-making. The teacher (Sreya) played an important role in helping children respond deeply to the texts. She went into each class after careful planning, with clear objectives, and questions she wished to raise.⁴

This interaction shows how teacher mediation helped students interpret the text. This, too, pertains to *Kag Noi* (Lila Majumder, *Kag Noi*, Ananda Publishers, 2018), introduced earlier. After he steals the egg, Budo sees the birds sitting on the edge of his bed, asking him, “Oh, do you want to boil our eggs and eat it?” At this point, the following discussion around the text took place.

Sreya: Why do you think Budo is scared?

Pradip: Budo was scared because he thought that the birds will peck at him for stealing the eggs.

Asim: He was unable to sleep because he thought the birds are coming at him.

Inayat: The umbrellas were black and resembled the birds. So he was scared, looking at them.

Sreya: Did the birds really come and sit on his bed?

Furkan: Yes! They wanted their eggs back.

Sreya: Are you sure that the birds came inside and spoke to Budo? Could he be imagining this?

⁴ See: ELI’s Practitioner Brief 9, ‘Reading Aloud With Young Children.’

Inayat: Yes, he could be imagining it because he was scared.

Sreya: Have you ever felt scared like Budo?

(Children say yes unanimously.)

Sreya: Why do you think Budo was scared?

Asim: He took away something that does not belong to him.

(Classroom discussion, 15.11.2018)

Here, in the beginning, we see that some children took the text literally - they thought the birds were angry with Budo for stealing their egg, and were coming to attack him. Through teacher mediation, children understood that the character becomes anxious due to his discomfort with stealing, and that perhaps the birds had not literally come there to peck at or attack him. In multiple instances, Sreya saw that children were not able to go beyond the literal meaning of texts without substantial intervention and guided discussions.

Rich texts and facilitated discussions create scope for examining complex emotions. An argument for using good literature is to enable children to gain a better understanding of themselves and their relationship with the world around them. This includes not just their thoughts, but also their emotions. Do you remember the vignette at the beginning of this brief about Nuru and Tuni da? Do you remember that Tuni failed to stand up for Nuru when the other boys in the village bullied him and broke his wooden cart? This created a misunderstanding between the two that was never resolved because Nuru died of whooping cough while Tuni was away at his maama's (maternal uncle) house. Tuni came back to his village to a vivid memory of Nuru, whom he dearly loved. The vignette presented earlier provides a glimpse of how conversations unfolded while the story was being read aloud to the children; where they slowly and collaboratively build an understanding that Tuni will not stick up for Nuru due to peer pressure.

Bullying was a familiar experience for the children. When situations familiar to most children are presented through a story, it allows them to take a step back from their experience and helps them rethink their responses to such situations. It is crucial that children get opportunities to reflect on their responses to different experiences whether or not it translates to a change in their behaviour in the immediate future.

After the read loud, the discussion revolved around what each of them felt about the story. It became apparent that different elements in the story appealed to different children. For some, it was the characteristics of the small boy, Nuru, who was so full of wonder and kindness; for others, it was the bond of deep affection between Tuni and Nuru. Many children found it difficult to navigate the sorrow over Nuru's death and the un-repaired friendship, which are complex emotions that the interactions allowed them to explore.

Sreya: Did you like the story?

Asim: No! How can Nuru die!

Inayat: I liked Nuru so much. The way he would call out "Tuni da" in his shrill playful voice.... and Tuni da, also, but I felt bad when they broke Nuru's cart.

Pradip: And I felt bad because they did not give a ride to Nuru and teased him.

Furkan: I am feeling bad because Tuni and Nuru could not become friends again.

Sreya: Did you like the story Asima?

Asima: Yes.. but feeling sad...

Sreya: Hmmm sometimes, we feel sad in life, isn't it? Do we always feel happy?

Children (together): No..

Sreya: Even in stories, there are instances where we feel sad.

Nihar: I felt sad where the mother is keeping the pickle outside for drying and she sees Tuni walk in to their courtyard and tells him that Nuru is no more and offers him some pickle...

Sreya: What did you feel sad about then?

Nihar: Because the mother misses Nuru.

(Classroom discussion, 21.11.2018)

In this vignette, we see the children expressing not just their sorrow over Nuru's death, but also empathising with his mother, which the text does not explicitly refer to. This reading between the lines is essential to developing a higher level of meaning-making - readers do that by drawing upon their life experiences and imagining what characters must be feeling.

Children borrowed from the styles of the texts to enhance their responses to the text.

Introducing different literary elements while conducting read alouds gave children new frames of thinking. Over the weeks, as Sreya worked with the children, she introduced

literary elements, like setting, characters, events, character feelings, thoughts and actions, and plot. By the end of six weeks, the children were able to understand the way in which these elements worked together in a story. Drawing children's attention to literary elements or techniques used by the author helped the children use them in their responses to the text (Wolf, 2004).

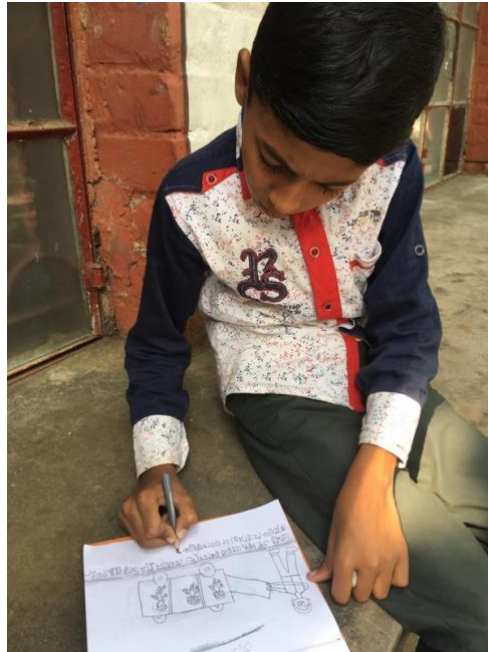


Figure 5. A boy responds to a story that he has heard during a read aloud, through writing.
Image Courtesy: Sreya Rakshit.

One of the texts that children connected well to, and that helped to create relevance for them was a novel called *Aam Anti-r Bhepu* (Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyaya, Signet Press, 1999). The story is set in rural West Bengal and explores the affectionate relationship between two siblings, Apu and Durga, and the various experiences that unfold in their lives. One chapter, '*Nebu Pataye Koromcha*', revolved around Apu and Durga going into a dense forest to gather mangoes during the outbreak of a nor'wester storm, locally referred to as *kalboishakhi*. This chapter elicited heightened responses from the children. An ordinary experience like the nor'wester was described vividly by the author, infusing it with the feelings that arose within Apu and Durga. This also became a way for children to understand how they could turn ordinary experiences into powerful narratives by describing the incident vividly, infusing it with their feelings and imagination. The following response shows how a child borrowed from the author's style of vivid imagery while he tries to give his account of the storm.

Beside our house, me and my friends were playing kabbadi. Suddenly, the dark clouds appeared in the sky; I could see nothing. Then the storm started! We ran to the garden to collect mangoes. The garden was huge, but the trees over there were small. In the middle of the garden there was a big pond. I saw that the mangoes are falling one after the other. Many other boys also came to collect mangoes. There were many things flying in the storm – dust, leaves. Branches of the trees were breaking (motam motam kore bhangche)... After a while the intensity of the storm increased. The strong winds washed us down with rain. I started shivering. I saw that all the mangoes are swaying in the wind. ...When the rain became lighter I ran home. My mother was surprised to see the many mangoes I had brought. She said she would make pickle out of it. (Firdous, Child's Writing, 7.12.18.)

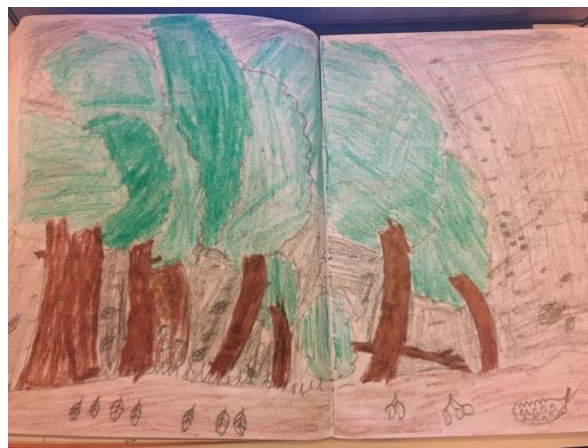


Figure 6. Inayat's response in the form of a drawing to depict the storm. **Image Courtesy:** Sreya Rakshit.

In addition to the vivid imagery in the child's words and illustration, notice how the child has set the context: "The garden was huge but the trees over there were small. In the middle of the garden there was a big pond."

Here is another example, where the child is trying to use the frame of *character feelings* while talking about *Chiriakhana* (Lila Majumder, *Kag Noi*, Ananda Publishers, 2018).

Sreya: So, now we have heard what Firdous had to say! (Pause) ... What else have you all felt?

Asim: I! I! Shall I say? Feeling / Emotion - I felt that the feeling / emotion of 'suspicion' is present in the story because by looking at the finger nail of the old man, the boy was able to decipher that he was the thief who must have pick-pocketed his father's salary. He suspects that the old man is a thief.

Sreya: Alright, so we understand what he has felt... (Pradip interrupts)
Pradip: I felt the feeling of "coolness".
Asim (says out loud to clarify): Suspicion.
Sreya: Okay. So Asim thought that the character felt suspicious - Pradip tell us more about what you were saying about feeling "coolness".
(Little pause) Sreya: Tell us. What were you thinking?
Pradip: Feeling. Because, the moment he dipped his feet in the river immediately he felt the chill of winter in his feet.
(Classroom Discussion, 22.12.2018)

The children had been discussing about *character feelings* over a period of time and had arrived at the understanding that there are different kinds of feelings that one felt – some are at the physical level like *feeling hot or cold* while some are at the mental level like *feeling anger or joy*. In this vignette, we see that Asim has inferred the *character's feeling* using textual clues. It is very unlikely that the children would have been talking about the text this way without substantial teacher modelling and facilitation. Sreya made use of every opportunity to introduce and discuss literary elements and techniques with the students. Drawing attention to these elements gave them a frame of reference to make connections to other texts and helped them understand the interplay of these elements better.

The next example gives us a glimpse of how Sreya helped children notice literary techniques, even as she guided them to making inter-textual connections (*Bandopadhaya, Aam Anti-r Bhepu*, 2018).

Sreya: Why do you think Durga's body has become stiff? When do we feel this way?
Furkan: When we are scared or tense.
Sreya: Have we seen any other character feeling this way in the texts we have read?
Inayat: Yes yes.. Budo... Budo!
Zahid: Yes, when he was stealing the egg, he was scared.
Sreya: Where else have we seen characters feeling scared?
Nihar: Petuk! Where Haripada was scared too.
Asim: Oh yes, when he thought he had laddus which had rat poison in them.
(Classroom Discussion, 5.12.18)

Thus, the children didn't just learn the literal meaning of the story they were reading, but also about the literary styles and techniques used by authors to convey meaning. Sreya also helped children make connections amongst the different texts they had read thus far.

Encouraging children to respond using different modalities (talk, writing, art) mattered. In traditional classrooms, not only do we not invite children's interpretations of texts for the most part but, if we do, we restrict it to talking or writing. As mentioned earlier, young children move flexibly among talk, writing, art, drama, and so on while making sense of the symbolic worlds around them. Providing opportunities and encouragement to use these multiple modalities of response was helpful in broadening the children's responses. We found that, in addition to oral conversations, some children preferred to respond using writing, while others preferred to draw, and still others used both. Had Sreya been able to teach for longer, she might have looked more closely at this aspect, as such, we have only brief insights that suggest that using these multiple modalities were beneficial.

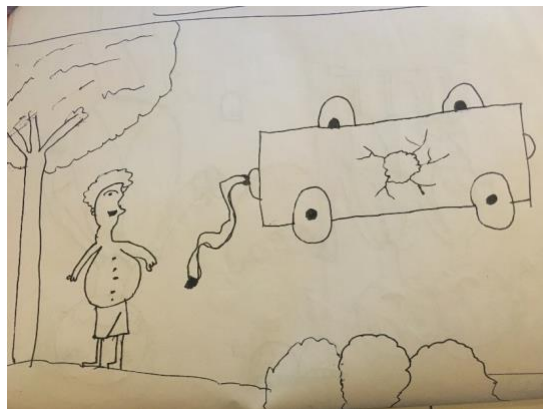


Figure 7. Inayat's response through a drawing, depicting the climax of the story, *Thaela gaadi*.
Image Courtesy: Sreya Rakshit.

For example, in Figure 7, the child has tried to depict the climax of the story as the moment when Nuru's cart was broken. This was also the moment when their relationship developed a crack. Here, the child is able to represent the essence of the story through a simple image, the aspect which moved him the most about it. In this case, the teacher had asked the children to draw or write about the part in the story that stood out to them the most.

At another point, the teacher asked them to write in response to the same story, "If you were the author, how would you end the story?" Asim wrote:

If I were the author, I would have written that Tuni, after returning 10 months later, would see that Nuru has died of whooping cough and that his mother crying was a dream. Tuni would wake up from the dream, run towards Nuru and hug him, and become friends again. (Asim, Child's Writing, 21.11.2018.)

Here, the child is getting another chance (after the oral discussion where children expressed their anguish over Nuru's death) to work through his emotions and express how he might have reworked the text to create a happier ending, an ending more satisfactory to him.

Readers sometimes use texts to escape from or control their worlds. Thus, it was less important to Sreya to point out that not all texts have happy endings as much as to provide a forum for him to grapple with how he felt about this not-happy ending. Over time and with rich exposure to complex texts, children come to the understanding that not all texts have happy endings and that they often mirror life.

Writing workshops supported the children's growing understandings in the read aloud sessions. Sreya noticed that when asked to write, initially, most of the children's responses lacked structure and drifted away from the central idea they were trying to communicate. At this point, she identified three aspects she wished to work on (based on the students' needs) that she decided to introduce through multiple mini-lessons. First, she introduced the framework of writing about an incident with a beginning, middle and ending, a narrative structure. The second aspect she introduced was adding details and infusing one's feelings or voice to the writing. Lastly, she introduced the idea of using a mind-map to develop and organise one's thinking about a topic. To ensure the children understood the ideas she was trying to communicate, Sreya modelled them through her writing while responding to texts she had previously read aloud to the children. After a few sessions of modelling, she encouraged children to include these aspects in their written responses to the texts, and provided opportunities for them to give peer feedback to each other.

We will look at two sample responses to show how each child's ability to express was being shaped. The text they were responding to was a chapter called 'Grishyer Dupur' (Summer Afternoons, from the novel 'Aam anti-r Bhepu', Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyaya, 2018, Signet Press). After reading and discussing this book, the children were asked to write to a prompt evoking text-to-self connections - how do you spend your summer afternoons?

The first response presented here is from a child who has tried to give a structure to his piece. He has added feelings and descriptions in trying to depict the incident as modelled by Sreya. He has also moved beyond the stage of identifying generic ideas he associates with summer afternoons and has elaborated on one of the many ideas he had listed through the mind-map exercise.

When I think of a summer afternoon, I get very anxious. Blazing sun (kha kha rod), cracks on the surface of the earth, lot of sweating. The entire body feels sticky, feel like having ice-creams and taking shower in cold water feels good.

I wait for the storms. I run outside when it is stormy and play on my own. I pick mangoes and then when I return home, my mother scolds saying, "Mad boy! Branches may break and fall on your head!"

These incidents took place almost a year ago, but I still haven't stopped playing around during the storm. I used to walk down the mango garden, then by the playground... and then down the old path and play around in the storm. Once when I had gone to collect mangoes during the storm, it had started raining...hails (stones) had started falling. Then I had to cover my head with the basket in which I was collecting mangoes and I ran to Inayat's house. Once the hail stopped, I collected few mangoes and went home. Mother asked, "Where were you in all this hail storm?" I said, "I had covered by head with the basket and went to Inayat's house to take shelter, once the rain stopped, I came home." Mother said, "Very good!" (Asim, Child's Writing, 3.12.18)

The second response is by Asima, who is not as confident a writer as Asim and is still learning to express her thoughts and feelings through writing. The mind-mapping activity supported her in this effort, and she put down a few ideas she associated with summer afternoons. Her ideas needed to be developed further to give the reader a complete picture of her summer afternoons, but it was a step forward in trying to organise her thoughts around a topic. After writing, she shared her piece with the group, and the peers gave her feedback on it – thus strengthening the collective understanding about how to make their writing better.

In summers when the school closes for vacation, I feel very happy. In the scorching afternoon heat, I do not feel like going out and playing and that is why I sleep at home. In summers, I like to take showers in cold water. In summers, the clouds move away and the sun shines, so I do not go out in the area outside my house (khamar) and that is why I used to play inside the house. I would go outside (khamar) in the late afternoon around 4 o'clock.

I used to play on a rickshaw in our khamar. In the evening, the sun would float away (bheshe galo). Then I saw the moon appear. In summers, heavy storm takes place and then me and Tabassum used to go to the garden to collect mangoes. In summer, sometimes you can hear the thunders, and heavy storm takes place and the trees are all swaying, then the branches of the trees break. (Piece ends abruptly.) (Asima, Child's Writing, 3.12.18)

Sreya: Okay! Now we will give feedback to Asima about what we thought about her writing. We will tell her about what we liked. We will look at whether her writing had a beginning, middle and end. We will give her some suggestions for making her writing better. Okay?

Haroun: The ending could have been better.

(Three-four other voices express agreement)

Sreya: Okay, what about the ending? Tell me more.

Haroun: The branch broke and she goes home. It did not seem that the writing ended. It was abrupt.

(The children unanimously say yes.)

Sreya: The branch of the tree broke, but then we don't know what happened.

What did you like in her writing? (A pause) You all have just heard her share. I am sure there were somethings that you liked in her writing. I did.

Pradip: Kalbaishakhi (nor'wester), the mention of the nor'wester and the description of that.

(Classroom Discussion, 3.12.18)

What we notice in these two examples is that though the experience of summer afternoons was familiar to all children, each one brought out a different aspect of it based on their personal experiences. Teacher modelling and peer feedback were important in strengthening the children's writing which, in turn, would strengthen their understanding of the texts read aloud to them. Reading, writing, speaking, listening and thinking, were thus supported simultaneously, along with drawing to a lesser extent.

Conclusion

Sreya was fortunate in several ways. First, she worked in Bengali, a language which is rich in children's literature. Second, she worked in a school associated with an NGO that valued the use of literature in the classroom, although the location she worked in had not been using literature in the complex ways illustrated in this brief. But the children were comfortable with basic reading and writing, and Sreya was given space to experiment and innovate, as well as support and feedback on the kinds of texts she could use. Third, Sreya was well equipped to teach the children, having been a teacher before arriving at Azim Premji University for her Master's in Education, where she also acquired additional theoretical knowledge about the use of literature in the classroom. She knew the regional language, Bengali, and so could guide the children comfortably in it. A huge limitation was how little time she could spend with the children. Even so, she was able to accomplish much, and could evoke a genuine connection between children and the texts they were reading and writing. A big take away for her was that children don't need simple or simplistic texts. With sufficient support and mediation, children can navigate complex thoughts and emotions, and learn ways of responding to them that are deep and meaningful.

Now, we hope you are also inspired to take rich texts and use them in meaningful and complex ways in your classrooms!

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