

EARLY CHILDHOOD STORYTELLING: DEVELOPMENT AND GENDER IMPACT

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ABSTRACT

The research paper focuses on early childhood storytelling: Development and Gender impact. As children have diverse capacity to learn, teachers must assess and teach the children accordingly. The demand is increasing day by day. Children learn faster as it is the prime time to mould learning. The first thing for children to learn is phonic sounds and then vocabulary. The study explores how teachers present stories in their classrooms, how they think stories in gender's point of view and what impact they have on young children. Storytelling has become a daily norm and gender is a part of it. Children's imagination knows no bound. In the Bangladeshi context, I want to present a slice of children's and teachers' thinking, responses and views in the existing culture.

My report begins with the introduction to the classroom as well as outside learning environments, and the elements and materials through which young children acquire knowledge and understand the context. Then the ways they adopt using different materials and activities in general. Storytelling creates the identification of a child's existence. The review explains the benefits of storytelling and its impact. Certain issues like experience, society's role, and subjectivities are included. The five research questions for survey along with the methodology have been prepared. The data collected from the survey of four different English medium schools through questionnaire and interviews are analyzed in the following section. In conclusion, some effects of the findings and skill development are stated based on a qualitative research.

Keywords: Storytelling, Learning, Gender, Identity, Roles

Introduction

There are many ways through which young children or toddlers start their learning in the classroom or outside the classroom. They learn from pictures, popular cultures like TV, videos and new gadgets. Children are engaged in different kinds of learning sources. There are kinesthetic learners too. But, there is one thing which is universal for adults as well as for toddlers i.e. they have a great innate power to capture the audiences: Storytelling is a simple and a useful technique.

From South-Asia to North-America, stories have got names. Children from their early childhood listen to their parents' read out stories and go to sleep at night. Some call it folklores which have passed down to generation after generation i.e. Aesop's tales. Children's practice orally such as asking out of curiosity or inspiration, collaboration and playing a role in the family, schools and society.

Society has two counterparts: Male and Female. The girls love to dress or act like a 'Cinderella' when they listen to the Cinderella stories. On the other hand, boys love to act as a 'Batman' or draw a 'Spiderman' picture when they listen to their super hero characters. Stories create a landscape among children. There are reasons why these two gender are somewhat disconnected from each other. I want to explore the fact why a mother figure in a family or a father figure sets the backdrop of a child's identity in the society by adding a feather to it. My paper seeks the possibilities of gender impact on children of primary level in schools in storytelling in a Bangladeshi context. Teachers and stakeholders usually do not realize how stories can benefit children in the course of time. Mostly, it is only the part of extra-curricular activities which is not as important as mainstream education. As my goal is to present its significance, I have tried to explain how important the matter is through empirical information.

Literature Review

A story plays a vital role. According to Daitzman (2011), "My research showed that gender differentiation in stories is not necessarily correlated with age but rather experience." Identity is formed through socialization process and the influence of the social institutions like the family, the education system and the mass media (Browne,2008).Therefore, identity is based on environment; whereas, gender stereotypes are constructed by beliefs, and norms in the existing society(Eckert et.al.).Provided with perspective of building an identity, peer interaction in the classroom with the teachers and students underlies a pedagogical technique (Sara, 2008).Storytelling is followed by dramatization. Through the use of a wide range of storytelling and drama techniques, children can also be helped to

develop and discover their own individual learning styles and preferences (Carol,2008).Girls are by nature imaginative and boys' a little aggressive. They (girls) build castles in the air and boys crave for adventures (Karen, 2004).

Scholars have given their physiological aspects of child development which generates identities. Chomsky (personal communication, November, 1983) thinks language acquisition is completely a heredity. Through time, a child advances his or her language competence from the environment.

Even in language, sexism has its roots in the society....as in the case of a woman doctor, a lady judge, a lady senator, a male nurse, and a male secretary where they would never use the terms man doctor, gentleman judge, gentleman senator and so on. Although, these are used under special circumstances (H, Clark et al., 1977).

Another capricious issue is color coding. Little girls love to pick the color 'Pink' and be like a fairy mother. The boys are rather aggressive and want to be like 'iron man'-the super hero. In America, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women's favorite color was 'blue' and men's 'pink' (Anne Fausto-sterling, 2000, as cited in stanford.edu) compared to this present generation.

"Feminist pedagogy" is explicitly designed to foster equal access, participation, and engagement for all students in the learning process. The practitioners seek to oppose sexism, racism, social class prejudices, and homophobia as barriers to equality. Moreover, they wish to encourage students, particularly female students, to create an education that foster personal awakening and growth as well as social equality and justice (Maher et al. as cited in Women in Education, p.130).

Depending on familiar figures, a teacher can tell children and retell stories too. According to Vygotsky, all the learning is based on previous learning. Including the individual learning, society is also a part of it-humans, virtually always learn from dialogues whether explicitly or implicitly (Falk et al., p.51). Rabbidge and Lorenzutti (2013) also mentioned that lessons can warm up and generate interest in the story. The students look at the cover of the story picture, predict and then contextualize socially. Even presentation of stories actively involve demographic information and difference between places and people from that place (Canada/Canadian), a religion and the people (Islam/Muslim),and a place and its primary language (India/Hindi) according to Rucynski and Neff (2013).

Gender is indebted in the society. The moment a child is born, people buy gifts for it keeping in mind 'it' a boy or a girl' identity. Some treat children as uneven and some do not. However, they are two important sides. Both have different values: feelings, thinking, interacting, and understanding. By keeping aside stereotypes like freedom and constraints, male and female have asymmetrical contribution.

Besides, day by day, children scaffold their individual identities and find out their roles in schools, and at homes. From the outside world, they make a boundary between reality and imagination. That does not mean that they will stop thinking more and more out of storybooks. It is just the part of learning that drills their cognition and societal practice.

Methodology

The Study

The study presents the research questions and the research methods that I used. In addition, this section finds out the objectives of my research.

The Research Questions

My plan is to focus on finding answers to the following questions. These are answered later that are included in the Data analysis and discussion. This section guides me for the current study:

- a) Why is storytelling important for children?
- b) What kind of skills do children develop through storytelling?
- c) What are the viewpoints of Bangladeshi teachers on the role- play of gender identity?
- d) How does storytelling benefit the learners?
- e) Why is a prince (masculine) always a boy and a princess (feminine) a girl in most of the classic stories?

Participant Profile

The participants are teachers from four different English medium schools who have responded to my survey. Ten teachers from kindergarten and primary sections have given their responses. Also, they have participated during interviews. All of them are females. Six school going children except one have shared their feelings towards storytelling outside school which is a focused group interview. Chronologically, I have analyzed their responses.

Data Collection Tools

Based on primary resources, the data collection is divided into two groups i.e. some case studies and statistical illustrations. Presentation of reliability depends on how much variable the responses are. Though there is no hard and fast rule to reach the conclusion, some common aspects are provided with the tools to support my research questions.

There are six open-ended questions for the teachers. All the six answers are clarified. I conducted a semi-structured interview and asked three questions. However, in a semi-structured interview, the interviewee has a general idea of where he or she wants the interview to go, and what should come out of it, but, does not enter the interview with a list of predetermined questions (Nunan, 1992). I applied semi-structured interview keeping in mind that each teacher has unique teaching skills. Moreover, their teaching experiences count too. They had experiences of two to eighteen years respectively. Ten teachers were participants in the interview who were able to provide relevant information. Since they are interacting with the young kids every day, the interview is subjective. Their opinion might vary.

Nine interview questions were asked to five kids in a friendly atmosphere. This is also a semi structured interview. Five kids are from five different schools.

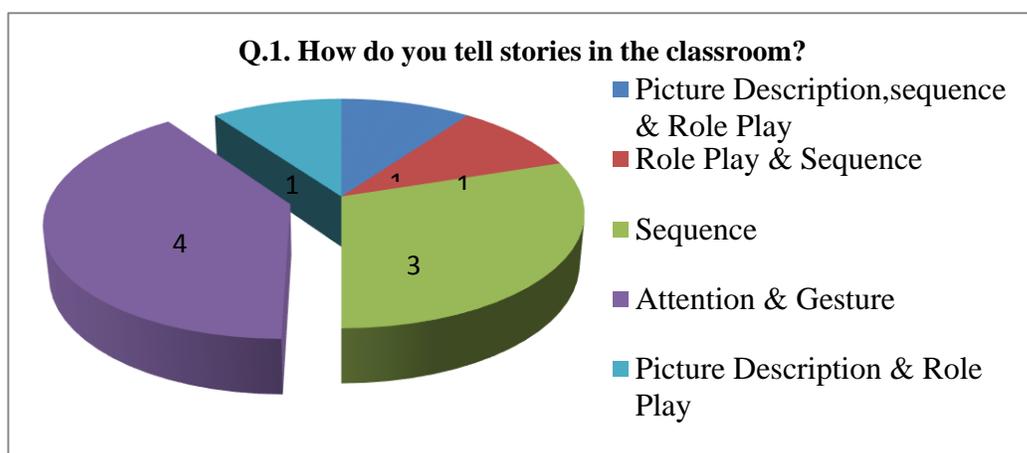
During classroom observation, I have adapted a checklist form. I observed two storytelling classrooms. It was a kindergarten level survey.

In a particular school, the teacher provided color pens to three to four toddlers who drew ‘family’ pictures. I assessed their pictures and asked what they thought about their families. I wanted to portray what they thought about their father, mother and siblings.

Findings & Data Analysis

The figures show the results of the survey. And in the description of the figures, I included the answers of the research questions of what the teacher’s opinion is about from the interview. This is a primary data collection (Appendix A). In all, my focus is on two issues: language development and gender impact.

Figure 1



Overall, creating a learning environment is important. Teachers use the storybooks and describe pictures from the colorful books. Four responded that by grabbing children’s attention and trying to involve children through actions or movements could make them feel one with the characters in the role-play. Three teachers said that sequencing or story narrating was a major part of storytelling. The rest of the teachers taught only through sequence, picture description, and role play.

Figure 2

Q. 2. Does storytelling explore different learning style?

Imagination & Creativity	4
Imagination & Visual Learning	2
Vocabulary & Creativity	2
Kinesthetic & Auditory	1

Drilling	1
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According to the second question, four respondents thought that imagination brings creativity. Two teachers considered that imagination was only possible if there was an exposure to visual learning. The other two said that creativity came through learning vocabulary from stories. Storytelling is a great way to gain early childhood knowledge from practicing and drilling. Traditional behaviorists believed that *language learning* is the result of imitation, practice, feedback on success, and habit formation (Spada & Lightbown, 1999). Only one mentioned that children were kinesthetic and auditory learners. They learned by doing and listening. The respondents reflected on different learning styles rather sticking to one style.

Figure 3

Q. 3. How does storytelling affect the short and long terms of memory?

Short Term	Long term
Motivation, characters and narrative style of the story(2)	Message/moral of the story, retelling, reading habit (8)

Sometimes, too much imagination would spoil a child’s connection to reality according to two of the respondents. The way teachers narrate the stories can motivate children. The language inputs are processed from the environment. This is a short term effect.

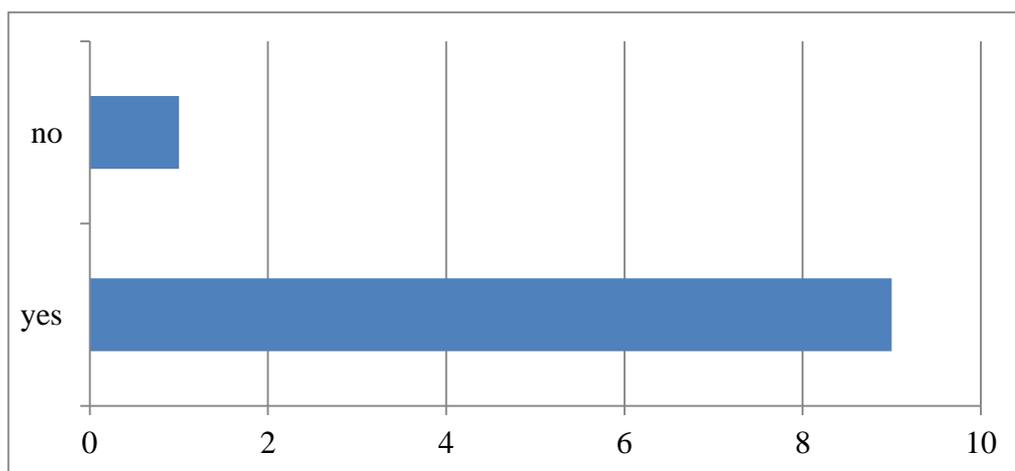
In contrast, the message or moral of the story teaches children how to live in the society and construct behavior. Three responded that stories created opportunities to retell other stories through children’s own way. For five of them, children developed sequencing – speaking- abilities except one who spoke up about the reading habit formation.

Q.4. What kind of social opportunities do storytelling have that arouse interest in or attention for the kids?

Four responded that weak students had a greater chance to attend how a teacher presented stories in an observant way. This means that children who are slow learners can observe and learn faster. Two of the respondents said that peer interaction stems questioning. For one, curiosity is also a part of capturing attention. For example, during narration of animal stories, there are different animal characters. When teachers ask the students to make lion’s roaring sounds, there is a prompt connection between the characters and the kids. Children loved to act out or speak included three participants.

Figure 4

Q. 4. Should storytelling be a part of the curriculum?



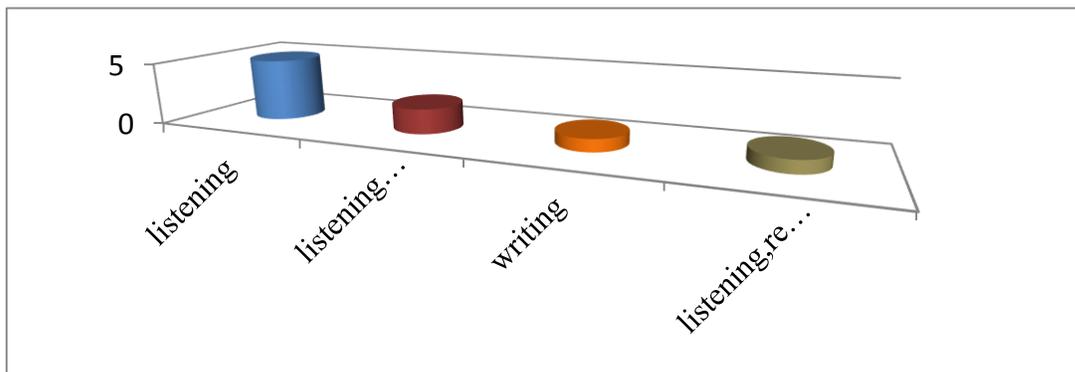
Nine of the respondents strongly believed that there were reasons why storytelling could be a part of the school curriculum. Thinking ‘out of the box’ is an idea from narrating stories. However, the idea varies among the respondents. Children pick storybooks and

share the dialogues between peers. As they learn from pictures and colors, they love to read books like Thumbelina (the thumb sized girl's journey) or The Pied Piper of Hamelin which is a classic fairytale where the citizen of Hamelin town loves to be happy with rhymes and music of the character named Pied Piper. From these kinds of stories, children acquire adaption of vocabulary and presentation skills.

Contextual instruction is based on connecting words to students' use in books and to children's personal experiences, analytical instruction enhances contextual instruction with semantic analysis of words in contexts other than the books and children's experience (Silverman, 2007). Children learn from context and then explain reasonably.

Figure 5

Q. 5. What kind of cognitive skills do you think children develop through storytelling?



Five respondents provided their approval for empowering listening skills. Children listen and store stories in their memories. They build vocabularies and construct sentences according to one of the respondents. Two teacher emphasized on both listening and speaking skills because it was too early to write and produce sentences. For the other two, storytelling was a compact effort for the four skills like listening, reading, writing and speaking in general.

From my interview, I asked why storytelling was important for the kids apart from classroom teaching (Appendix- B). Stories relate to characters of the society consisting of fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers and the rest of the extended families or friends. One respondent talked about Little Red Riding Hood. A little girl, wearing a red hood, saved her grandmother from a big bad wolf. And, the message is 'never talk to the strangers and always listen to your parents'. Here the girl has to be sweet natured and sensitive. As the character refers to a small girl, she represents all the small kids in the classroom. The other teacher talked about the role of the family members. Things might fall apart if one of the members does not act his or her role properly. Four respondents thought that sounds relate to reality i.e. variety of sounds from animal stories like lion's roaring, birds chirping, chicken cackling, and monkey's chattering. For two of the participants, this action engaged the children to respond promptly. Additionally, two said that intonation pattern was also a part of development and learning such as raising the voice and lowering the voice based on plots and characters.

A prince is a boy and a princess is a girl and that is the way of the world. It cannot be interchanged. A chair is a chair. A book is a book according to one interviewee. Eight respondents thought that from the very early childhood, it was built in our memory that a prince was more muscular and a princess feminine. A prince is supposed to go outside and fight or secure his realm unlike a princess who is more imaginative and stayed-home type wearing pink or other colorful dresses. This is their identity. Being confused, one respondent felt that she always followed the storybooks and did not discuss stories out of the storybooks in the classroom. She stated that 'it is the storybook' that would decide the role of the gender. "Roles could be changed except gender", said one respondent. It is not necessary that a step-mom is a bad mother which is quoted in 'Snow White'. Teachers should not present characters in a negative way rather she or he can clarify or take a broad view of the situation. Children are tender. A teacher can avoid creating negative impact on the children from early childhood.

Four of the respondents said that gender identity was not a part of storytelling. Storybooks inform children about the diverse roles of the genders. Children are immature to decide on gender and their identities; but, they should be productive in identifying their roles in contexts. It decentralizes the role of the characters. In contrast, some supported that only storytelling constructed gender identity because this is a universal biological issue. They thought that children were enthusiastic to act out and see. Stories have male and female protagonists and supporting characters. So, this is a controversial concern because gender identity is a cliché in terms of storytelling. It does not create gaps rather it creates self-identity.

There is another respondent who said teachers could voluntarily encourage weak students to follow the extrovert students who were always ready to participate in peer activities. The teacher guides how the children can play characters and clarifies different characters. In a kindergarten level, children love to talk about the characters- boys love to talk about Spiderman or Superman and girls love to talk about the queens and the princesses.

She blamed the school where the children were discriminated as girls and boys. Boys could not sit beside girls or vice versa in the classroom. Even parents told the teachers not to allow their kids to sit beside the opposite gender.

Also, for her, religion played a big role in shaping children's mind. With due respect to each religion, she gave her views that if a family followed religious views thoroughly then the family members instilled the notion among the children that girls and boys were separated in each and every walk of life i.e. girls should only be a great mother at home and boys should work outside and take care of the family. In my opinion, people take religious views in extreme stand because religion has different explanations for what we do in everyday life. This is questionable. That is why male children are not interested in reading stories which have mostly girls' characters. Therefore, the society might not move forth because of some subjective issues.

Children's Interview

One primary level student shed her views about Charles Dickens's classic story 'The Great Expectations' where the orphan protagonist had to live with his uncle and aunt. He was scared of his aunt because she was always controlling over him as well as his uncle. So I asked her whether she liked it that way. In her reply, I find that it depends on how a family member treats the other members of the family. Moreover, a woman is not necessarily a controlling figure. Both male and female can work together at home to help each other (Appendix-C).

In my focus group interview, four girls and a boy participated (Appendix-C). Their age is between 6 to 11 years. Some common characters like Rapunzel, Snow White, Hansel and Gratel, Little Red Riding Hood are the protagonist among classic stories. I wanted to find their views about the supporting characters too. I find that in most of the stories, there is always a 'stepmom'. Most of them said that stepmoms were mostly bad moms. One girl stated it was better for a stepmother to be friendly with the step kids in real life unlike the stories. She should treat her step daughters with care. Here I think the children were little confused whether to accept a step mom as a good mother or not. All the girls accepted the fact that a mother was considerate and she always took care of the family.

The role of a mother and a father in terms of earning is equally accepted except for the male child. He said fathers were bound to go outside to earn even though his mother works outside. He did not support her working outside. For him, his mother should always take care of him and nothing else.

In religion, one girl stated that we learnt about the male and female roles separately.

When I asked the boy to play the role of 'Cinderella', he refused to do so because Cinderella wore a weird long dress that he 'hated'. Moreover, his friends would bully him in the school if he had played the role. So, it is unnecessary! As in Choosing superheroes from the cartoon characters, both the boy and girls would love to participate and play the role of 'Spiderman'(W. Mark et.al., 2012)

Figure 6: "Putting the "Science" in "Science Fiction" – Spiderman - July 29, 2013.



"...because he jumps from wall to wall."

Color choosing for male and female is subjective. Each girl's favorite colors were pink, purple and violet. In contrast, the male kid avoided those colors. For him, it was very girlish. One girl refuted that this color concept was seen in western culture where they had baby shower programs. This is a program where people celebrate for the mothers' forthcoming baby. And, then they have separate colour themes for boys as well as girls. The guests wear those coloured dresses. But, in Bangladesh, she did not see anyone sticking to one kind of colour. From her perspective, even boys wore pink here.

I asked randomly whether boys were good or girls. Amazingly, all the four girls agreed on girls being 'bad'. The reason is girls are jealous of each other and boys are friendly and helpful. The boy remained silent then.

As for storytelling, girls loved to read more and more and be 'imaginative'. The boy liked the easy way out. He seemed restless. For him, to be imaginative was a wasting of time. The girls encountered him and included that boys usually copied in the class. However, boys loved to watch story based movies and talk about it. Here it is a matter of being ethical or not.

Finally, I asked how they viewed 'fighting' as in school and outside the school among friends or classmates. The boys expressed happily that it was all a "winning thing" and it was about masculinity; and, the girls just took it as only a "fun thing".

Figure 7: Boys fighting 4. Retrived on July 29, 2013.



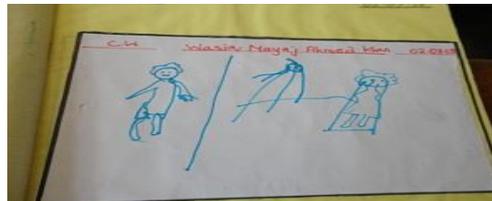
"Fighting is awesome."

Clearly, the girls are better and they converge themselves in the situation and their roles with their peers, siblings, friends, teachers and parents. And, the boy seems diverging his space by taking a stand.

Drawing

At the very beginning of civilization, men had families. They created families in need of each other as they could not live alone. Otherwise, the wild would have perished in the course of survival. Living in a family is a basic need in the society. I conducted a drawing class with some toddlers. I told them to draw 'a family' picture with different color pens. After that I asked them to tell stories about their families. My aim was to delve in their speaking responses, gender roles and identities about their family members. This is a theme based societal learning.

Figure 8: Family



"Father outside...mother and me inside."

One toddler drew a picture saying that the father was always working outside and the mother was staying at home with him. What I think is that though the parents are separated with a line in the picture, together they are a family. Moreover, a family is not complete without parents and the kid himself as a child.

Figure 9: Family



"Mother and me in school"

It seems this toddler thinks when he plays, and the mother is needed beside. And he is happy whenever she is around. Children feel vulnerable. They need someone beside them. They look for motherly figures.

Figure 10: Family



One girl has added his brother in the family. She believes that having a brother is very important and a family becomes a happy family.

Observations

There were two observations in a storytelling classroom. With the help of a checklist, I observed the children of kindergarten level (Appendix-D).

Conclusion & Recommendation

The objective of the paper has tried to show teachers and stakeholders roles and its implication . Teachers need proper training and guidance about narrating, sequencing styles and reading stories with the help of cultural integration. Despite this, they can also correct grammar and spelling by using signs and emphasize on particular words and stress so that children can correct mistakes automatically. Teachers can make activities popular among children in the classroom. Teachers turn into guides for the children when stories are being narrated.

Storytelling has a great impact in two ways: language acquiring and gender roles. The use of language goes through a process of development. This creates space where children can design their cognitive opportunities semantically starting from drilling. Then social skills bring communication advancement. Gender has an undeniable stand in the society. Children start to believe irrationally as they grow up. In the long run, they take part in greater knowledge of rational thinking around them. Clearly, humans are genetically programmed to learn and we do so all the time, learning much of what we know outside of formal schooling (Falk et. al.p.39). Children are creative by nature. Their thoughts are transited through drawing too. Interestingly, in the findings, some use the same color in drawing each family member and some use different colors. For mothers and daughters, they use the same color and for fathers and sons another color for a separate entity. During this early development, their production in personal communication till drawing pictures is inferred that as subjects they are attached to their families and schools. They inculcate the idea of being dependent as well as independent. This is how children decide their roles in family, classroom, and society.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix-A

This is a survey questionnaire on ‘Early Childhood Storytelling: Development and Gender impact’. First, read all the questions carefully .Give all the answers within 4 to 5 lines. Thank you for your cooperation☺.

1. How do you tell stories in the classroom?
2. How does storytelling explore **different learning style**?
3. How does storytelling affect the **short and long** terms of memory?
4. What kind of **opportunities** does storytelling have that arouse interest or attention for the kids?
5. Should storytelling be part of the **curriculum**? Give reasons if yes or, no ?
6. What kind of **skills** do you think children can develop through storytelling?

Appendix-B

Semi-structured Questionnaire:

- I. Why is storytelling important?
- II. How does conventional (prince=boy;princess=girl) concept keep coming in story construction?or, why a prince always be a boy and princess a girl?
- III. Do you think Gender identity is a part of storytelling? Give reasons if yes/no?

Appendix-C

Focus-group interview:

1. How do you view stepmoms characters in classic stories that you have come across?
2. What are the father’s and mother’s roles in a family in terms of earning?
3. Do you find anything regarding the gender roles in your religion?
4. Is playing a ‘Cinderella’ role fun for both for girls and boys?
5. Who are your superheroes and how do you view them in your lives?

6. What are your favourite colors?why?
7. How do you like storytelling?
8. Do you like fighting?
9. Who are good in behavior: boys or girls?

Appendix-D

NAME:

DATE:

	Checklist Items	Yes/No	Comments
Pre-Reading	Uses titles and pictures to make prediction		
	Uses prior knowledge to predict		
	Names main characters and describe settings		
	Associates sound/symbols		
During Reading	Is aware when text does not make sense		
	Rereads when comprehension is difficult		
	Identifies problems and issues		
Post -Reading	Ask for help when it is needed		
	Can identify characters ,settings and plot		
	Extends comprehension through discussion & prediction		
Response.	Retells the story fluently		
	Oral response		
	Written response		
	Drawing pictures		