

My Non-Interaction With Children At The World Book Fair

by

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I was a part of the Eklavya team which participated in the World Book Fair (2012). Being a member of the editorial team at Eklavya and having participated in the process of making these books for children—be it editing, translating or writing blurbs—I was eager to see how and why they are picked up to be read. I carried in my mind the somewhat romantic image of our stall teeming with children of all age groups and flipping through our books. I expected this to be an opportunity to interact with children and to understand what books meant to them. But sadly, throughout the fair, apart from a few exceptional moments, the image remained elusive and the expectation unfulfilled. It was surprising to find only a handful of children at a stall where a large collection of books for children (apart from educational classics and modules) was on display.

The proceedings were dominated by parents and teachers who had obviously decided to take things in their own hands. Even if the child accompanied the parents she was mostly present as an onlooker to the proceedings while mothers and aunts discussed among themselves as to which books were best for the kid. The idea, that by virtue of being a parent they had magically acquired all knowledge of and authority over children's literature, was quite apparent in the way they behaved. Even when the child was 'consulted' over a book, she was expected to say "yes", and a "no" almost always resulted in attempts to convince the child that this was the book for her. I asked the children about the books that they would like to buy and sometimes they told me, but that did not alter the parents' choice of books and after a point, asking a child about her choice of books felt like adding insult to the injury.

This lack of agency of the child was quite frightening. Apart from being learning tools, books play the crucial role of giving the child the freedom to imagine and explore, to make her own interpretations and develop her own understanding of the world. To hamper this process right at the outset by disallowing her to make her own choice of books seemed a matter of concern. While talking to parents I often heard the complaint that they had bought many books for their child and yet she did not read them. I think they do not understand the simple fact that a child likes to read books that she chooses.

Another disturbing element was the way the majority of parents related to the books. Parents mostly came to the stall with a business-like air of fulfilling the responsibility of buying 'good' books for children. Books with 'morals' or books which honed certain skills were high on the priority list while imagination and innovation usually didn't figure on the agenda. For many parents it was a mechanical exercise with little interest in the books. It was more like 'shopping' for them and books

mere commodities. Many a time Dad would stand outside the stall with a bored look waiting for Mom to finish with this business. There would be calls to “hurry up”. The sense of leisure and enjoyment that I associated with a book ‘fair’ was missing. They were on a mission to make their children intelligent and successful. They were looking not for books but for recipes.

My other disappointment was with myself. I have always believed that books fairs are not book-selling events. People do buy books in book fairs, but getting to see and know the world of books is the more important aspect (or at least I thought so). So I went to the book fair with the idea that in our interactions with children, teachers and parents, we would exchange ideas and opinions on this book and that, not only about our books but books by other publishers as well; also that we would engage with issues of children’s education and literature. But after a while I found myself selling books. I too left the children aside and went about telling the parents and teachers about how a certain book would be good for early readers and how the other would enhance the creative abilities of their child. I also found myself exaggerating the merits of books almost to the point of lying. I was on a blind marketing spree and seemed happy about it. It took me a while to realize what I was doing and to check myself.

Despite these stumbling blocks I was able to observe a lot of children interacting with our books. I also talked to many of them. It was heartening to see a child who had read most of our books and went on telling her parents, “I have this one” or “I have read this one”. It was wonderful to help children who would demand to see almost every single book on display. I discovered that between children and books it is like magic or love--you simply cannot tell why or how. With infinite curiosity the child will flit from one book to the other or rummage through them, and suddenly she will hold one of them dear not wanting to part with it. There are assumptions: that children like stories with animals in it, that children are attracted to bright colours and illustrations. But to me it seemed that the secret of why a child chooses a book is buried deep in her heart. You can know it only if you know and love that child. Try asking them and if they choose they may give you an answer but to understand that answer is not always easy. It is much more than a cute bird or an aeroplane or an adventure. May be it is about dreams and fears and the soul.

What I learnt was that to make books for children you must love them and understand that they are very sensitive people, much more than adults can be. It is also very important that you let children choose what they want to choose from the pile of books. A child and her book is a strictly personal affair, so it is best not to interfere. And while the entire theoretical knowledge bank of pedagogy and constructivism and the psychological approach in teaching are fine, I felt that nothing beats a direct interaction with children, an interaction in which we listen to them.

