

# Teaching Children Beauty through Storytelling

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I love children and have been teaching primary students for over a decade. The greatest consolation to me is that whenever I bump into my past students, they would flatter me, saying I have not changed much in appearance. I do not have a tailor-made diet to offer, but if there is a regimen I can boast of, it is, perhaps, my being with children.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, a Russian novelist and journalist, once said, “The soul is healed by being with children.” His words are likely to resonate with a great many teachers: children cure us adults spiritually with their innocence, simplicity and genuineness. In fact, they show us the road to beauty.

As teachers, we not only learn the art of beauty from children, but we can also teach them beauty through storytelling.

In an extra-curricular English storytelling activity, I shared with my primary two students a story entitled ‘The stonecutter’s tale’ written by Bertrand Fichou. Lord Gold asks Martin, the stonecutter, to build him a tower. Martin does not think he will have enough stones. But Lord Gold tells Martin not to worry about that. Upon completion of the tower, Martin realizes the stones have come from his home, Prettyville. His family and friends have been forced to evacuate for the sake of his own glory and achievement. Regretting what he has done, Martin collaborates with the stone knight to destroy the tower and restore a safe home for the villagers.

Extra-curricular lessons to me are opportunities to tap into the students’ creativity and to create an atmosphere for positive learning. I thus included some doses of kinesthetic, moral and affective components in my lesson plan.

My major focus was on nature and its relationship with us. To commence the lesson, I taught my students three yoga poses -- tree, stone and bird, letting them feel how our body can be integrated with Mother Nature. Then they were put in groups of three, performing at my command: “I’m a tree/stone/bird.” The movement quieted the children’s mind. The moment they repeated the words with me, they felt as if they were part of Mother Nature.

Next, I introduced the characters -- the talented Martin, the lovable Jan, the powerful Lord Gold -- and led the children to understand how the good and the bad co-exist in society, and that we need to decide what is the best for us. This is where the moral issue steps in.

Martin first prides himself on the masterpiece he has created, until he realizes that all the stones are stolen from his hometown. The author wrote: “Martin ran away from the castle, feeling terrible ... The stonecutter collapsed by a big rock to catch his breath.” Sometimes children may commit a wrongdoing, and we, as adults, are obliged to guide them to reflect on their guilt.



Hope is underway. A stone knight comes on horseback, camouflaged against the big rock. Martin tells the knight his story, and together they devise a plan to help the innocent Prettyville people. While showing the children the tunnel of darkness Martin goes through, I told them that solutions can be found when we reach out for help. Just as Martin seeks assistance from the knight, children can turn to their trusted elders for help.

The last part of the story is about reestablishment. Martin and the stone knight go into the forest to find the people of Prettyville. Lord Gold's soldiers rebuild the village houses with stones from the tower. Making mistakes is part of life. However, being able to learn from them and to turn the rubbles into "stones" takes courage, effort and determination. This is the time to let children know that they may not like doing corrections, but only through learning and relearning do they grasp the meaning of studying.

'The stonecutter's tale' is a story of friendship and forgiveness. Jan, the girlfriend of Martin, finally forgives him, concluding



her thoughts with a thought-provoking line: "It's true ... you weren't thinking and I was angry with you. But you came back ... I always knew you were the best stonecutter in the land, anyway!" Success is probably what we strive for; yet, we hope the children will understand that love, friendship and commitment are equally important. Jan's frankness tells us that anger is not a bad feeling. Instead, it can direct our attention to what goes wrong.

Forgiveness, assumedly a friend of anger, can very well play a part here. What if Martin didn't forgive himself? What if Jan didn't accept Martin's apology?

These are some of the areas employed to bring affective education into an English storytelling class.

The psychologist Carl Jung, also a believer in the power of beauty, once suggested to a colleague, "Why not go out into the forest for a time, literally? Sometimes a tree tells you more than you can read in books." From my perspective, teachers can guide students to experience beauty in a classroom through children's good reads.

To echo Dostoyevsky's quote and to sum up my discovery, I would say: "Should they see the beauty of children's literature, they will be healed by the power of beauty."