

# Meaningful engagement of preschoolers through storytelling pedagogy

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## ABSTRACT

Engaging students in their learning depends on the teachers' pedagogical practices. The first author is a STEAM scholar and preschool educator who realized engagement is necessary for meaningful learning. For this, teachers and students must have exposure to innovative and arts-integrated pedagogy (e.g., storytelling). However, the teachers in the first author's school practiced a conventional teaching approach, such as lecture and monotonous activity-based instruction, that compelled a disengaged learning culture. Similarly, storytelling was limited to reading aloud from storybooks. Thus, this paper investigated integrating storytelling pedagogy to engage preschoolers in learning by centralizing on the research question: How do teachers integrate storytelling pedagogy to enhance meaningful learning? This study used an action research method to intervene in the current pedagogical practice with storytelling as an innovative pedagogy. The teachers and students of Upper Kindergarten were involved in practicing storytelling approaches to conceptualize content knowledge and learn meaningfully. The findings of this study revealed that storytelling as an innovative pedagogy enhances the students' engagement in their learning process. Similarly, it also helps to enrich students' imaginative and creative skills, which are crucial soft skills in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Moreover, storytelling enhances a deeper understanding of the content knowledge if the stories are developed based on the content knowledge of the curriculum. Therefore, storytelling is an innovative and arts-integrated pedagogy to foster preschoolers' knowledge and skills through engagement and motivation. This research is applicable for educators and schoolteachers to improve and innovate their teaching-learning practices for students' meaningful learning experiences.

**Keywords:** storytelling, engaged pedagogy, preschool, meaningful learning

## INTRODUCTION

Today's world seeks citizens with various knowledge, skills, and competencies (Dahal, 2023; Haste, 2009). Hence, students will be instilled in creativity, innovation, critical thinking, rational decision-making, logical argument, resilience, adaptability, problem-solving skills, and enhanced ethical and moral values. Likewise, Maneen (2016) claimed that "*citizens and workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be able to exhibit a range of functional and critical thinking skills*" (p. 33). This claim further demands a holistic understanding of the phenomenon by exhibiting functional and critical thinking skills. Among them, arts integration in pedagogical practices possibly helps for deeper understanding. Reflecting on the first author's experience as an M.Ed. scholar in STEAM education, the courses offered to reflect on the pedagogical approach as an educator of a preschool. Introduction to an interdisciplinary approach and the use of multiple genres as a form of art, like poetry, stories, animation, etc., provided the first author space to reflect on the pedagogical process of the school. The teachers with experience in the field for about a half-decade were practicing the conventional approach to pedagogical practices, which was the outcome of their experience as learners. Replicating what teachers experienced as school learners and did not get the opportunity to update, they were also practicing the same in their teaching profession as cultural reproduction (Schubert, 1986). They were guided by technical interests (Grundy, 1987). Compartmentalized delivery of content focusing only on the textbooks without having any connection to different disciplines. Teachers could not engage students in their learning, have an in-depth understanding of the concept provided, and construct the knowledge resulting in demotivated students. Shrestha et al. (2022) also explained that the discipline-based approach can be monotonous, and art integration makes learning more enjoyable. However, even the integration of arts, i.e., storytelling, was only for namesake, i.e., reciting only from the storybooks, where students were only the passive listeners.

This study aims to address the need for integrating arts in the form of storytelling in teaching-learning practices at the preschool to enhance the engagement of the early graders in their learning process and to make their learning more authentic. Based on the purpose, this research revolved around the research question: How do teachers integrate storytelling pedagogy to enhance meaningful learning?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Preschool is the steppingstone of children in the journey of their learning. Thambu (2017) claimed that engaging preschoolers in a meaningful learning experience is crucial as it motivates and instills different skills and inbuilt self-trust and enthusiasm. So, it is crucial to engage the students in their learning as it will help make their knowledge more authentic. In this regard, Lekwa et al. (2019) claimed that the delivery of instruction, the extent of students' interest, and engagement in the learning activities influence the student's learning. Hence, it is necessary that the content should be of the student's interest and engage them in their content of interest. Ratih et al. (2022) claimed storytelling enhances interest and creativity and comes up with social learning and skills, and social skills are vital in early grades in order to develop good attitude and adaptability skills. Integrating stories in content helps develop not only in the cognitive aspect rather it tends to enhance critical thinking, collaboration, communication, rational and logical decision-making, and problem-solving skills, instilling moral and ethical values. Thus, Esteban (2015) considered storytelling as an effective resource to enhance reasoning skills, self-confidence and have an in-depth understanding of the content. Early graders should be facilitated to develop holistically as they are curious and willing to learn.

Khamsuk and Whanchit (2021) conducted a study with the aim of integrating storytelling as a family activity in order to promote the learning of English vocabulary for preschoolers during the lockdown of COVID-19 in Southern Thailand. This study dug out that domestic stories enhance the vocabulary of the preschoolers, and the confidence of preschoolers and can be implemented even at home by providing suitable material to parents as well. Hu et al. (2021) conducted a study to demonstrate the understanding of the potentiality of preschoolers' abstract astronomy concept, which is considered inappropriate to them and shows that the preschoolers showed momentous improvement in their understanding of the astronomy concept through storytelling merged with hands-on activities and free drawing. Similarly, Brodin and Renblad (2020) conducted a study to find out if and how reading aloud and storytelling could enhance children's communication development and found out that children were more expressive and turned out to support the development of fantasy and creativity and language consciousness and concepts.

## SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST THEORY AS A THEORETICAL REFERENT

The social constructivist theory believes that knowledge can be constructed through social interaction, and Vygotsky emphasized that one can internalize through interaction. Hence, learning occurs when learners are engaged in dialectics and constructive interaction. Vygotsky's constructivism focuses on the social nature of cognition that accelerates the group of learners in action, discussion, and contemplation. Amineh and Asl (2015) also stated that social constructivist theory presumes learning occurs effectively in collaboration with other learners. Aligning with social constructivist theory, teachers narrate the self-created stories integrating different disciplines in this study. In the process, along with narrating stories, teachers created space for interaction so that students could internalize. Students also get engaged in creating their own stories as per their understanding and interest. They share their stories with their colleagues and teachers to construct their learning and knowledge through sharing and interaction. Amineh and Asl (2015) further explained, "*Social constructivism highlights that reality is not something that individuals can discover because it does not pre-exist before their social invention of it*" (p. 14). Therefore, social interaction and the social setting make knowledge construction and meaning-making possible. Vygotsky claimed social constructivism motivates learners to achieve the mastery of their own ideas and gain autonomy and mutual understanding among the circles.

As the main agenda of this research is to explore how storytelling as a pedagogy (Al-Amri, 2020) helps learners actively engage in learning, social constructivist theory is crucial. This research explores how engagement in learning can be created through collaboration, communication, the teacher's role as a facilitator, and students as active learners to exhibit meaningful learning among students.

## METHODOLOGY

Interpretive and critical paradigms guided this research because, in this research, the first author was concerned with understanding and interpreting the current pedagogical practices of participants and critically reflecting on the practices of the participants to transform the current pedagogical practices. This paper used qualitative research to address the need to integrate arts in the form of storytelling in teaching-learning practices at the preschool to enhance the engagement of the early graders in their learning process to make their learning more authentic. The first author believed that knowledge should not be transferred, rather, it should be constructed. Therefore, this paper considered knowledge subjective because every learner interprets it differently or per their understanding. As this research is conducted in the societal context, and participants come from different backgrounds, there are multiple realities. Hence, there is no single truth, and truth can be generated as per the researchers and context. Therefore, their perceptions, values, and beliefs are highly valued.

This study employed an action research methodology. McNiff (2013) stated that action research is about improving the practices in and through the action and reflection cycle. This study aimed at improving the pedagogical approach by incorporating arts in the form of storytelling by planning strategies, implementing, and reflecting. This study was conducted in one of the preschools of Lalitpur district, and the participants were grade teachers and students of the Upper Kindergarten. This paper used data collection tools like semi-structured interview guidelines, observation sheets, and formal and informal conversations documented with audio recordings. Additionally, participants' reflective writing was also a tool for data collection.

At the beginning of the research, the first author got consent from the participant to conduct the research and signed the consent letter. The initiation was done through need identification, observation, and informal interview. Then, the first author developed the strategies (planning), created a story integrating different disciplines and conveyed it to the teachers for implementation through formal conversation and observed the plan implementation process in the class. Then, the participants and the first author had an informal discussion regarding implementing the new pedagogical practice, critically reflecting on the procedure, and analyzing the further modifications needed in the strategies. This first action-reflection cycle continued for five days. In the second cycle, to explore the creativity and innovation of the students, the first author planned the strategy, where students themselves would create a story and share it with their peers and teachers. So, the teachers made the environment by motivating them to share their stories. The teachers and the first author observed when students were sharing their created stories. Then we reflected on our observation through informal conversation. This second cycle was also completed in five days.

The ten-day engagement in action and reflection cycle was documented by the narration of each day, and the observations and formal and informal conversations were audio recorded. Those data were coded and categorized to develop the themes aligned to related literature and theories and interpreted as per the purpose of the research. This paper maintained the quality standard aligning with pedagogical thoughtfulness and reflectivity. When the first author learned about pedagogical thoughtfulness, she further realized that it was necessary to intervene in the current pedagogical practices to transform them. So, the first author ensured the quality standard through pedagogical thoughtfulness by making readers critically reflect on their current pedagogical practices. The first author also used reflexivity to reflect current and new pedagogical practices and make the readers aware of their pedagogical practices. The first author explained the purpose of conducting research to my participant, and with the participants' approval, the research was carried out. The participants participated voluntarily as they were not coerced to participate in the research and could quit at anytime. Therefore, voluntary participation in the study was highly encouraged, and the identity was kept confidential.

## DATA ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION

The data artifacts were analyzed and interpreted based on the observation protocol developed. The first author scrutinized and transcribed the field notes taken during the observation in the form of narration. Then, the narrated field note was analyzed and interpreted based on different themes: storytelling as innovative pedagogy, students' engagement in learning, content knowledge through storytelling, and creativity and imagination.

### Storytelling as Innovative Pedagogy

During the interview with teachers regarding conveying the information for implementing the planned strategies, one of the teachers shared, *"It might be boring for the students to deliver the content through storytelling; can we do it through a game?"* She felt that stories could be boring to the students because we were habituated to listening to one-way storytelling, where teachers retell (already existing stories) the stories without any interaction and engagement of the students. She was more interested in delivering the content through a game because students get engaged more quickly in games. Other teachers immediately added, *"No, ma'am, it can be interesting as students love to listen to the stories, and I have tried it once with an English subject."* With the spirit of Peleg et al. (2017) to systematize, accumulate, illustrate, and corresponding knowledge, stories are effective tools. Hence, integrating storytelling into the content helps students gather and connect their learning.

After implementing strategies in the classroom, teachers shared their experiences regarding the effectiveness of storytelling. One of the teachers said, *"It is a really interesting way of narrating a story by integrating three disciplines at a time."* Another teacher also added, *"We can deliver three disciplines within a short period, and also, it helps students have an in-depth understanding of the content."* Teachers delivered the integrated pedagogy efficiently and in an exciting way. Awang et al. (2020) claimed that when arts are integrated into learning, it will be fun and crucial, especially in preschools. Therefore, teachers also agreed that storytelling could be an innovative pedagogy to deliver integrated content to develop intellectual abilities.

By witnessing the enhanced students' engagement, interaction, and effectiveness of storytelling based on multiple disciplines, teachers' perception of storytelling, the way of narrating stories, and content delivery changed. Anastasiadis et al. (2018) claimed that storytelling helps young minds enhance in-depth knowledge and understanding of integration. Consequently, teachers were willing to welcome storytelling as an innovative pedagogy for delivering the content as they experienced the students having a more profound knowledge through storytelling. I believe teachers are the core agents who initiate the implementation of innovative pedagogies to develop the citizens required for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is the perception of the teachers towards storytelling as an innovative pedagogy that will initiate its implementation. Change is impossible until and unless teachers are unwilling to adopt innovative pedagogies (Luitel & Dahal, 2020).

### Storytelling for Students' Engagement in Learning

While students were engaging in giving correct or incorrect answers, teachers were motivating them by providing different rewards like thumbs up, heart, big clapping, etc., to encourage them to participate in the interaction and question-answer session. For instance, if a student provided the correct answer, she replied, *"Great, so here is a thumbs up for the correct answer."* If a student provided an incorrect answer, she responded, *"Wow, I appreciate your effort, and here is a big heart for trying."* Duran and Duran (2004) stated that students' engagement should be motivational to create desire among the students to generate interest in the upcoming topic. Thus, teachers were able to motivate the students to engage them in their learning.

Teachers claimed that this strategy gives us a hint to explore further integrating different disciplines in a single story to engage students in their learning. Therefore, through storytelling, teachers can create different stories to engage them in their learning,

which will help them make their knowledge more authentic. In doing so, students will be more responsible for their learning. Also, it will help them to master their learning.

During the observation of the implementation of the strategies, students seemed to be actively engaged in their learning. Teachers tried to engage the students by posing different storytelling questions to access their prior knowledge. Duran and Duran (2004) explained that through the students' engagement, teachers could assess their prior knowledge to identify possible misconceptions regarding their content knowledge. Similarly, teachers were making the storytelling more interactive by asking different questions to engage students more actively. As Vygotsky claimed, knowledge is constructed through interaction; the higher the interaction, the higher the knowledge construction. Sjöman et al. (2021) stated that contextual factors like interactions and teachers' responsiveness can influence the course engagement needed to scrutinize in advance. Therefore, teachers' motivation and interactions with the students make their learning environment more engaging.

### Content Knowledge Through Storytelling

While observing the implementation of the storytelling approach by integrating three different disciplines and asking students different questions related to the content, students could answer the questions related to different disciplines. They were also able to connect the story to real-life experiences. For example, when the teacher was telling the story, where dinosaurs needed different materials to be placed in the different rooms of his house, students could answer the materials needed for the dinosaur by connecting with their parts of the room. Cross (2017) explained that when an arts-based instructional approach such as storytelling is included, it helps develop an in-depth understanding of the content knowledge. Therefore, teachers claimed that the storytelling approach will help students develop a deeper understanding of the content.

Furthermore, one of the teachers surprisingly stated, "*It's amazing that through a single story, we were able to provide content knowledge of three different disciplines.*" For instance, there were English, mathematics, and social science content in a single story. Malinović-Jovanović and Ristić (2019) explained that integration is concerned with bringing the natural connections of different curriculum areas together to help learners make sense of the world, thereby helping learners acquire various knowledge, skills, and attitudes for their holistic development, which also provides teachers with prospects to develop different teaching approaches. She further claimed, "*I have tried to connect only one discipline with the story, and we have to be creative enough to develop the story to integrate different disciplines.*" Malinović-Jovanović and Ristić (2019) claimed that preschool teachers should be specialists in their subject and the wide-ranging teaching field. Thus, teachers realized the necessity of being creative to deliver the content differently for deeper understanding and knowledge of the students.

Additionally, in the second phase of implementing the strategies, students were expected to develop the stories based on their subject matter. For instance, one of the students explained,

"I have two eyes, and I see things with my eyes. I have one nose, and it helps me to smell. I have one tongue, and with the help of it, I can taste my food. I have two ears and hear my mum's voice with them, and my skin helps me feel."

The student here reflects on his understanding of the sense organs and their function, along with integrating the counting of the sense organs.

Similarly, another student showed her understanding of the articles. She showed each material and added the correct articles in front of the materials like, "*This is an umbrella, this is a ball, this is a dog, and it barks, this is a guitar, and this is an eraser.*" She related the things available at her house with the articles. One of the students even showed different things to be kept in the other parts of the house. She explained,

"This is the kitchen, and we cook food here. There are cups, plates, a rice cooker, a refrigerator, etc. This is the living room. We stay here, and there are television, aquarium, sofa, carpet, and pictures. This is a bathroom, and we bathe here. There is soap, tap, bathtub, towel, shampoo etc. This is my bedroom, and we sleep here. There is a bed, sofa, fan, pillow, bed sheet, etc."

This showed they had developed a deeper understanding of the content provided through storytelling.

As learners, we have been educated mainly in the lecture-based method, where the "banking model" was highly preferred to deliver the content knowledge, and students, as passive listeners, just deposit knowledge to their heads. Manandhar (2022) claimed that the banking model is a teacher-centered approach, where teachers are considered a depot of knowledge and students as passive bodies that do not know anything and have no authority to question the concept. However, when implementing the storytelling approach in the class, teachers claimed that students could grasp the content knowledge easily and quickly as their concentration was fully on the story. Along with this, I witnessed that while the teacher narrated the story and made the storytelling more interactive by posing different questions, students could answer them immediately. For example, students can easily answer questions about the use of articles "a" and "an" with their words.

In my opinion, while delivering content through storytelling, students can easily grab the content knowledge and connect it with real-life experiences. For this, teachers should be creative enough to create multiple ideas to deliver content in multiple ways to understand the content knowledge better.

### Students' Imagination & Creativity in Storytelling Pedagogy

In the first phase, students were asked to tell their own stories. Therefore, students came up with their own imagination and creativity by connecting the story with real-life experiences. One of the students imagined,

“Once, a coronavirus came. That coronavirus was so small, and because of that coronavirus, most people suffered from colds. So, all the people stayed inside the house and had healthy food. Therefore, the coronavirus could not enter their house. The coronavirus said bye-bye and went to his home.”

This student imagined the end of the coronavirus. He related it to real-life experience. Awang et al. (2020) stated that when students are exposed to real-life scenarios, it enhances their curiosity about life. Similarly, another student imagined,

“There was a father tiger. He loved his baby very much. He used to feed him whatever he liked. Once, when they went to visit, the baby was missing. When the mother tiger came, she did not find the baby, and she was worried. Then she went to the hospital and found that the baby was with the father tiger. Then the father tiger, mother tiger, and baby tiger went to their house happily.”

Cross (2017) claimed imagination is more crucial to knowledge. Therefore, while narrating students' own stories, they were in a different world, the world of their own imagination, which is very prominent for a child's intellectual development. Anastasiadis et al. (2018) explained that stories as innovative pedagogies are implemented to help both students and professionals imagine innovative ideas. A teacher shared, “*Their imagination and creation of stories were beyond my expectation, and I realized that through storytelling, students were excited and way too expressive.*” Teachers realized that incorporating storytelling in content enhanced their creativity to create stories out of their imagination.

As a child or an adult, whenever we listen to a story, we find ourselves in the story imagining ourselves as one of the characters of the story or creating an image of the incident or happening of the story in our mind. Herranen (2020) stated that every human being can be creative as their mind is furnished with imagination. Therefore, when observing the students listening to the story the teacher narrated by the teacher, the first author assumed that every child in the class was imagining, or they were detaching themselves from this tangible world to their imaginary world as the first author witnessed them concentrating on the story.

## LESSON LEARNED

Through data analysis and interpretation, we found that storytelling is about reading story books aloud and can serve as an innovative pedagogy. Storytelling as an innovative pedagogy can be used to deliver content knowledge to learners. This study revealed that storytelling can not only incorporate a single discipline but also integrate different disciplines or content within a single story. While doing so, learners can develop an in-depth understanding of a single discipline and multiple disciplines. In delivering integrated content through storytelling, students can imagine and connect it with real-life experiences. Therefore, this study emphasized storytelling as a powerful tool to gather and connect knowledge of the students to enhance their engagement in learning.

This study further found that students' learning will be more authentic when they get engaged. This study is conducted in the periphery of the preschool. We found that in the case of preschoolers, teachers need to create a suitable environment for the students to get engaged. Different questions in the middle of the story, aroused by the teachers, allow students to interact and engage in their learning. Through this, we realized that this develops the students' feeling of ownership towards learning, which is crucial in their understanding. Similarly, this study found that motivation for students to get engaged in learning is another prime factor that helps create a desire to learn among the students.

Finally, this study revealed that imagination is not possible within boundaries. Preschoolers can imagine beyond their imagination and expectation. Therefore, we found that developing imagination power and creativity among students is crucial among preschoolers because different innovations and inventions are possible only through imagination and creativity. Similarly, integrating storytelling in delivering the content enhanced students' creativity to create their own stories out of their imagination. In doing so, I realized that students were attaching themselves to their imaginary world by leaving the real world behind.

## CONCLUSIONS

Traditionally, storytelling is viewed as reading story books aloud as a break from delivering content via lecturing. While reflecting on the first author's school's pedagogical practice, the teachers have also been practicing the same to some extent. Students rarely seemed engaged in their learning. Though some of the hands-on activities were provided, they were guided by the teachers. Additionally, storytelling was limited only to the storybooks and circle time. This results in disengaged and unmotivated students. This will ultimately lead to a lack of interest in their learning among the students. However, introducing the storytelling approach as an innovative pedagogy to deliver integrated content enhanced their engagement, creativity, imagination, and deeper understanding of the content. **Table A1 in Appendix A** shows activities.

The teachers delivered the integrated content through a storytelling approach. In the process of narrating the story, teachers even created an environment to get students to participate in the interaction, which helps them engage in their learning. Teachers time and again paused the narration, checked their prior understanding and went on adding the part of story. As students got engaged in interaction, they developed a sense of ownership towards their learning, which is vital to authentic learning. This enhanced their engagement. Similarly, students were allowed to create their own stories out of their imagination in the first phase. Students narrated stories out of their imagination, even connecting with their real-life experiences. This opportunity for the students enhanced their imagination and creativity.

Furthermore, in the second phase, when students were given opportunities to explain their understanding, students were confident enough to demonstrate their knowledge and experience. This engagement of students in their learning motivates and inspires students to learn. Therefore, storytelling is an innovative way to deliver integrated content by engaging students to make their knowledge more authentic and master their learning.

### Implications

Making learners engage in their learning to authenticate their knowledge is challenging for teachers or educators. However, many teachers or educators have been trying to engage learners in their learning. Therefore, this study will benefit all the teachers struggling with the inability to engage students in their learning process. Similarly, most teachers limit storytelling to reading story books aloud during their leisure time or as a reward to motivate students. However, this study will help teachers or educators realize that stories can be integrated into delivering content to give learners an in-depth understanding. When teachers deliver the content to the student through storytelling, students can deeply understand the content and further imagine and think creatively and critically. While doing so, students get opportunities to engage in the learning process to make their learning authentic or master their learning. Additionally, this study will benefit trainers and educators in shifting the perception of storytelling from reading story books aloud to storytelling as a pedagogy for engaging students among the teachers. Furthermore, this study will help the curriculum developer to develop the curriculum by integrating storytelling as an innovative pedagogy.

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## APPENDIX A

**Table A1.** Activities

<b>Day</b>	<b>Activity</b>
Day 1	Rapport building, oriented the research issues, developed different strategies for the implementation of storytelling pedagogy to enhance students' engagement in teaching-learning practices in preschool.
Day 2	Share the developed strategies related to engaging students through storytelling with the participant.
Days 3, 4, & 5	The developed strategies was implemented in the class and observe the implementation of new strategy without interfering feeling and responses to what is happening, describe the physical setting, record the act, activities and events and document the conversation of by taking the descriptive notes.
Day 6	Write a reflective journal by analyzing descriptive notes and critically reflecting the whole observation.
Day 7	Informal conversation with the participant regarding the implementation of the strategies and get the critical feedback of the participant and record this informal conversation. We transcribed and analyzed this recorded informal conversation.
Day 8	As per the reflective journal and transcribed informal conversation with the participant, we further critically analyze the plan and make modification on the strategies.
Day 9	Convey the modified strategies to the participant to implement further in the class through informal conversation.
Days 10, 11, & 12	Observe next strategies being implemented in class and take descriptive notes, physical setting, activities, events and conversation.
Day 13	Write a reflective journal by analyzing descriptive notes and make a critical reflection of the whole observation and find the differences in first and second observation.
Day 14	Informal conversation with the participant regarding the second phase of implementation of the strategies, get the participant's critical feedback, and have communication about the differences in the first phase of implementation and second phase of implementation. This informal communication will be recorded. Then, we transcribed and analyzed this recorded informal conversation. Finally, we compile all the data.