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PRIMARY EDUCATION

Making classrooms playful

by **Musharraf Tansen**

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THE minister of state for primary and mass education at a recent consultation of the Campaign for Popular Education has outlined a direction for primary education. Classrooms should become more playful, child-centred and rooted in storytelling. The idea reflects a wider understanding in education that children learn better when they are engaged and emotionally involved in learning. The difficulty is not in agreeing with this direction, but in translating it into classrooms that are already overcrowded, under-resourced and often short on teacher support.

The important issue is how they can be made workable in conditions that are far from ideal. This requires a shift in teaching approach more than an expansion of infrastructure. Play and storytelling are not dependent on expensive materials. They are basic human ways of learning and communicating that can exist even in simple settings.

Play-based learning is often associated with toys, structured learning kits or specially-designed classrooms. In practice, it is less about materials and more about participation, interaction and imagination. When students are actively involved in learning rather than only listening, the classroom naturally becomes more engaging.

In many government primary schools, class sizes often exceed 50 students, which makes structured activities seem difficult. Even then, small changes in teaching methods can shift classroom dynamics. Group work, peer learning, role play and movement-based activities can be introduced within regular lessons without additional cost. Language lessons, for an example, can include word games and storytelling sessions while mathematics can be taught through counting exercises using simple objects like stones, sticks or even classroom participation.

The change required here is less about adding new tools and more about moving away from a strictly lecture-based model. When students are allowed to engage with what they are learning, both attention and understanding tend to improve.

The role of the teacher becomes central in this approach. In a play-oriented classroom, teaching is not limited to delivering information. It involves guiding activities, shaping interaction and creating space for participation. This shift requires adjustment, particularly for teachers who have been trained in more traditional, examination-focused systems.

Teacher training, therefore, needs to focus on practice rather than theory alone. Classroom-based demonstrations, peer learning opportunities and mentoring support can help teachers gradually adopt interactive methods in their own settings. Exposure to workable examples matters more than abstract guidance.

It is also important that teachers should feel their efforts are recognised. When they see that participatory methods improve engagement and learning, they are more likely to continue using them. Over time, small experiments in teaching methods can become part of regular classroom practice.

Play-based learning does not depend on specialised materials. Many useful teaching tools already exist within the local environment. Stones, leaves, bottle caps, paper and everyday household objects can be used for counting, sorting, language practice, and simple problem-solving activities.

Students can also be encouraged to bring simple materials from home, which helps create a sense of involvement in the learning process. Classrooms themselves can gradually become more interactive spaces through student work — drawings, charts and written exercises displayed on walls can turn the room into a shared learning environment.

Community involvement can also strengthen this approach. Parents and local community members can contribute stories, songs and local knowledge that connect classroom learning with everyday life. This makes education less abstract and more grounded in the environment children grow up in.

Storytelling naturally fits in with the context, where oral traditions remain strong. It does not require materials or technology, only time, attention and willingness to connect lessons to narrative.

Stories can be used to introduce topics, explain ideas or make abstract concepts easy to understand. A story can help to frame a moral lesson, make a historical event more accessible or simplify a scientific idea. Over time, storytelling can become interactive, allowing students to ask questions, predict outcomes, or contribute their own interpretations.

Using local stories and familiar experiences makes this even more effective. When children recognise elements of their own lives in what they hear, learning becomes more relatable and easier to retain. A story-based classroom does not only involve listening. It also involves speaking and creating. When children are encouraged to tell their own stories or share experiences, they develop confidence, language skills and creativity.

This can be done through small group activities in large classrooms. Each group can develop and present a story, making the process manageable while encouraging collaboration. In multilingual settings, children can begin in their home language and gradually move into Bangla, which helps inclusion while supporting learning.

Such practices also reinforce a simple idea: children are not just receivers of knowledge. They are participants in it.

For such approaches to last, they need to be reflected in the curriculum and assessment systems. If textbooks and syllabuses continue to prioritise memorisation, classroom innovation will remain limited. Curriculum design should encourage interaction and creativity. Assessment systems should also move beyond written examinations alone, including classroom participation, group work and creative tasks as part of evaluation. Without alignment between curriculum, training, and assessment, reforms tend to remain partial and short-lived.

Making primary classrooms more playful and story-driven is not an abstract goal. It is a practical shift in how teaching is understood and delivered. It does not depend primarily on large investments, but on changes in method and mindset.

Pilot initiatives in selected schools could help to test approaches and build practical models before wider implementation. Feedback from teachers and classrooms would be essential in refining these methods over time. The direction is ultimately about more than pedagogy. It is about how children experience learning itself. If implemented with care and consistency, it could move primary education closer to a system that is not only more effective, but also more connected to the realities of children's lives.

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