

~~Article Six~~

**Storytelling, Local Knowledge, and Formal Education: Bridging the Gap  
Between Everyday Life and School**

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Tatek Abebe and Anne Trine Kjørholt (eds.)

# Childhood and Local Knowledge in Ethiopia

Livelihoods, Rights and Intergenerational Relationships



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## Chapter 9: Storytelling, Local Knowledge, and Formal Education: Bridging the Gap between Everyday Life and School

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The gap between local knowledge and modern education, which Kresse (2009) observed in Swahili contexts, has been a challenge that children experience when they start attending schools in rural societies in Africa (Serpell 1993). The disconnection between the knowledge that children use at home and the learning activities they are subjected to in school make it difficult for them to contextualize the school lessons and understand their social environments (Staden & Watson, 2007). In this chapter we explore the potential of storytelling as a means to bridge this gap between local knowledge acquired in daily living, and the knowledge taught to children in schools. We demonstrate how storytelling, commonly used in familial contexts, can be applied in primary schools to enhance children's participation and creativity in learning. We argue that connecting the local knowledge of children to their learning situations in schools narrows the gap between classroom learning activities and social and cultural practices and values and enhances children's participation and creativity in the classroom.

African local knowledge includes oral tradition and customary practices that transmit ways of knowing in the course of everyday social and cultural lives (Eder, 2010; Kresse, 2009; Kresse and Marchand, 2009; Nyota & Mapara, 2008). Storytelling is an integral part of African oral tradition, which grows out of the lives and imaginations of the people (Finnegan, 2007; Jackson, 2005). Stories embody African local knowledge, which is, through the telling of the stories, passed on from generation to generation. Among Guji-Oromo people ((hereafter called Guji), storytelling has been a didactic practice since time immemorial (Van de Loo, 1991). The Guji believe that folktales are voices of the past that embody the lived culture and experiences of the previous generation and they transmit these lived cultures and experiences to their children (Jirata, 2011). Thus, storytelling is a means of continuation of culture.

As we learned from our field notes and personal interviews with the Guji people, adults and children engage in storytelling during the evening or night-time hours. Night is a special time when kraal and home are full and cattle and human beings rest (Wako, 1998), and this is when children initiate storytelling by asking their fathers, mothers, grandfathers, or grandmothers to tell them a folktale. The children sit around the storyteller and listen with great enthusiasm and ask questions as the story goes or at its end. The telling of stories often goes on until parents or grandparents go to bed.

Storytelling is not only a practice between adults and children; it is also a practice among children (Jirata, in press). Children tell stories to each other in different places and at different times. They tell stories while herding cattle, in schools, and at home.

As we learned from our observations in primary schools in the Gungua and Bunata Villages of the Guji people, and from interviewing teachers and students, storytelling is not well utilized in primary school curriculums; thus, is less connected to the modern way of teaching and learning. In this chapter, we aim at bridging this gap through demonstrating the pedagogical advantage of using storytelling when teaching school subjects. We address the following questions:

- Are children interested in storytelling in the school classrooms?
- In which ways do children prefer to perform storytelling in the classroom; and
- How does this contribute to enhancement of their participation in learning activities?

Through answering these questions, we will demonstrate that storytelling helps children to connect the lesson in the classroom to their everyday life outside classrooms and put the learners in authentic learning environments.

## **Storytelling as means to connect school learning activities to local cultural practices**

The use of storytelling in schools has been widely discussed, but mostly in the context of the global north (e.g., Caruthers, 2006; Davis, 2007; Edstrom, 2006; Mello, 2001; Rabin, 2011; Wright, 1995; Zabel, 1991). While there are significant cultural differences between the global north and the global south, exploring these studies can help us capture the notion of storytelling as a means of connecting school learning activities to local cultural practices. Indeed, the power of cultural practices to motivate and engage children is universal.

Studies in the global north reveal a trend in education; one in which classroom learning activities are viewed from a cultural perspective. Classroom participants are seen as co-constructors of local culture, which contextualizes the learning activity and bridges the gap between the classroom and the social and cultural realities in the immediate environments of children (Eshach, 2007). Researchers such as Lancy (2001), Kyratzis (2004), and Gentle (1984) suggested that children learn best when the teaching is flexible, contextualized, and

responding to their social and cultural contexts. As such, it bridges the gap between children's interest and the curriculum as well as the disparity between the classroom and the local culture.

The use of storytelling as a means of contextualizing learning in the classroom is also emphasized by Davis (2007) and Mello (2001)—both in the context of the global north. They argued that storytelling is a useful tool for promoting motivation, skills, and learning in the classroom. According to these studies, storytelling has a two-fold pedagogic value. First, it creates authentic teaching situations through which children learn naturally as the stories embody the social and cultural realities in the immediate environments of children. Second, it enriches the classroom experience with practical knowledge that is relevant to the social and cultural contexts of children. In the African context, little concern has been given to studying the potential of this cultural practice to enrich and contextualize children's learning in school settings. Only Staden and Watson (2007) discuss the pedagogic values of bringing storytelling to the classrooms. Staden and Watson (2007, p. 3) state:

Storytelling has the ability to create the right learning environment for childhood learners. All children love a well-told story. A well-told story catches children's attention and stimulates therefore a love for learning. A well-told story, like all good teaching approaches, is grounded in the encouragement of principles of active participation, critical reflection, flexibility and cultural diversity.

While storytelling is an effective and flexible way of teaching and learning, there is inadequate research and insufficient educational policy to promote storytelling in African classrooms. This gap is observable for example in Ethiopia where educational policy and practices related to primary school do not emphasize the importance of connecting learning activities in the classroom to the local knowledge of the students through storytelling. In this chapter, we use findings from studies in the global north to demonstrate how storytelling enhances children's participation and learning in school classrooms of the Guji people.

## Methodology

### *The Guji People*

This study is conducted in schools of the Guji people, who are one of the Oromo ethnic branches in Ethiopia. They live in lowland and semi-highland areas

in the southern part of the country. According to the 2007 Population and House Census of Ethiopia, the Guji population is estimated to be 1.6 million (FDREPC, 2008) and the majority of this population resides in remote rural environments and lives on subsistence agriculture, which includes livestock husbandry and crop cultivation (Wako, 1998; Beriso 2002). Twenty years ago, the Guji people were pastoralists and nomadic cattle herders (Beriso 1995). As a result of the villagization program of the Ethiopian Government in 1980s, the Guji established sedentary lives in villages and started to cultivate food crops in addition to livestock husbandry. However, livestock husbandry, mainly cattle herding, is still the main economic activity among the people.

The majority of Guji people are illiterate. Even though the contemporary rate of illiteracy among the people is not known, from our observations in three rural villages, we learned that in each household at least four out of five members cannot read and write. Illiteracy is predominantly observable among the adult population and more common among women than men (Debsu, 2009). As a result, the Guji are an oral society; interpersonal communications and transfer of information are performed orally (Van de Loo, 1991; Jaleta, 2009). In this form of communication, folk narratives—which include folktales, proverbs, riddles, sayings, myths, and legends—play a central role.

### *Participants*

The textual and qualitative data in this chapter are drawn from ethnographic fieldwork carried out in two primary schools in Guanga and Bunata villages of the Guji people. The schools encompass two cycles: the first cycle includes grades one to four, the second cycle consists of grades five to eight. In both first and second cycles, the language of instruction is *Afan Oromo* (Oromo language) except for two subjects, which are Amharic language and English language. The curriculum of the schools includes mathematics, natural science, social science, art and aesthetics, Oromo language and English language for first cycle; and mathematics, chemistry, biology, physics, social science (which include geography and history), civic and ethical education, sports, Oromo language, Amharic language and English language for the second cycle. Oromo, which is the language of the Guji people, is offered as a subject from grades 1–8. We selected the second cycle (grades 5–8) as our focus for this study for two reasons. First, children in first cycle (grades 1–4) are not competent storytellers as they, by and large; listen to stories from older children and adults. Second, children in the second cycle are competent storytellers and are able to reflect on the folktales they share with each other in the classroom. It was impractical to include children from all grades in the second cycle. Therefore, we selected one grade which was grade seven and included all children of this gra-

de in the study. The number of grade seven children included from both schools was 114; 46 of these were girls and 68 were boys. The children were between 10–14 years of age. Almost all of them came from rural areas. The two teachers who were teaching Oromo language in the selected grade also participated in the study as informants. Both were trained for two years as a teacher of Oromo language in a College of Teachers Education and taught in the schools for more than five years. Adults from different social backgrounds also participated; five parents, three local elderly men who were considered to be culture bearers, one district education officer, and the principals of the selected schools were interviewed.

The study included action-oriented research as part of the broader ethnographic fieldwork. The action oriented study aimed to introduce storytelling as a teaching practice in the schools. In cooperation with the teachers, a storytelling component in teaching and learning activities was implemented in grade seven in the two primary schools. The action research included three activities; namely, storytelling with children in the classroom during Oromo language sessions, observations of children's actions and reactions during the performances sessions, and interviews with the children, their Oromo language teachers, and other research informants.

The first method, storytelling in the classroom with children, followed this format: In the first week of the study period, we introduced ourselves to the school principals, observed the schools and the classrooms, and introduced ourselves to the Oromo language teachers and children in grade seven. Then, we solicited the informed consent from teachers, the school principals, the children, and their parents (whose consents were required for us to work with, observe, and interview their children). After obtaining consents from the participants, we collectively came to agreement on how to start the project in the selected classroom. We also agreed to keep the names of all participants confidential in our reporting of the results. In line with our agreement, we have not stated names of the children, teachers, and other research informants in this paper.

On the first day of our activities in the classroom, we asked the children in the class to tell us the folktales they knew. Only a few of the children raised their hands and were eager to speak. On the second day, a large number of children volunteered to participate. On the third day, the majority of the children in the class were interested in telling folktales.

In the second week of the research project, we recorded 10 folktales from 10 children in the classroom and selected three of the recurrent folktales. We prepared weekly learning activities for Oromo language on the basis of the context of the folktales; in other words, by relating the lesson to the issues in the folktales. We told these folktales to the children in the classroom and the children



listened and reacted. Again, we asked the children to tell the same folktales to each other in groups. Then, we discussed the content and meaning of the narrated folktales with the children. The discussion encompassed ideas that the children raised based on the narrated folktales and activities that we designed as part of the lessons.

In the third week, we again asked the children to tell their favorite folktales and documented eight folktales from eight children. Then, we selected two of the frequently reoccurring folktales and repeated our first week's procedure. We encouraged children to discuss issues that emerged in the narrated folktales.

In the fourth week, the children came up with a new idea for storytelling; to perform storytelling in the form of drama. We accepted and encouraged this. The children took control of the performance and our roles were limited to guiding the activities, solving any problems, and encouraging all children to partake in the storytelling. In these classroom performances, first some children came to the front of the classroom to tell their favorite folktale while the other children listened and reacted through gestures and smiles. Then, a child whose folktale was particularly liked by other children led the process of preparing the folktale in the form of drama. The child selected some children as characters depending on the number and gender of characters represented in the folktale. They performed the tale as actors and entertainers for the children in the classroom. The dramatization of the folktale turned out to be more popular with the children than the narrative version as it was more connected to the local social and cultural practices. What was interesting to us was that the children were able to translate the folktale into drama very quickly (less than ten minutes).

In the fifth week, we introduced the third form of storytelling, which was unfamiliar to the children, but which became popular as well. This form of storytelling was through drawing. We drew actions and actors in folktales in their sequences on flip charts and showed them to the children. Then, we put the children in groups of three to five, gave them charts, pencils, and markers and asked them to present any folktale in drawings. The children did these activities successfully and explained their drawings to other groups in the classroom. Explanation of the drawings was the same as telling the folktale. Thus, this activity involved a dual process: creating a visual representation of the folktale and orally reproducing it.

The remaining weeks of the study period were covered by repeated performances of the three activities: narrative performances, dramatic performances, and performances in drawing. Performances of children's interest-centered folktales, group discussions, and reflections from the children were the core activities across these three forms of storytelling.

The second method, which was continuous observation of children's activities in the classroom, was key to our data collection process. Observation of how children participated in listening to stories, telling folktales, discussions, and interpretations of folktales during narrative performances, dramatic performances, and drawings were made continuously. Differences in participation of storytelling due to gender were included in the observations. We recorded observations of children's participation using field notes and a video recorder and later on transcribed and constructed the information. The extent to which storytelling generated children's motivation to ask and answer questions, to share their views, and debate with each other was a key emphasis in the observation process.

The third method, interviews, emphasized feelings and reflections of children and their Afan Oromo teacher as well as that of other participants on storytelling and the application of storytelling for learning activities in the classroom. Unstructured interviews focusing on what the children benefited from or lost in classes where storytelling was applied as a strategy for teaching and learning were conducted with 14 children (five girls and nine boys) from our sample. Five parents, three local elderly men who were considered to be culture bearers and one district education officer were also interviewed.

## The Beginning of Formal Education

According to our informants, the first primary schools were established in villages of the Guji people in the mid of 1980s. The Guji people were excluded from modern education, initially because of their way of living. Before 1985, the Guji people were nomadic pastoralists who moved from place to place in search of grass and water for their cattle. They did not settle in permanent villages, as they do today. Second, Guji people value their traditions and ancestral knowledge and for a long time, they did not attach any importance to modern education. As a result, during the feudal regime that ruled Ethiopia from 1930 to 1973, schools were not introduced in the Guji area (Beriso, 1995). However, the socialist regime of Ethiopia, which was known as the Derg regime and which was in power from 1974 to 1993, introduced schools among the Guji people as part of its villagization program. Informants asserted that the Derg regime discouraged the nomadic lifestyle; it settled the Guji people in villages and established primary schools in a few villages as a means of transforming the people. According to the research informants, even though the schools were established in a few villages, an insignificant number of Guji children attend them as they gave little value to it. It was in 1993 that schools were widely introduced in the rural villages of the Guji people. As a result of the changes in

the policy of education (Ministry of Education, 1994), the Guji people came to understand that modern education is a useful instrument for development. The participants emphasized that the first and most recognized reason for Guji people's change in perception of formal education was that education in the primary school started to be offered in their native language—Afan Oromo (Oromo language). Oromo language became also the main language in the workplace. The introduction of the modern administrative systems at local levels and the expansion of Christianity also made reading and writing more important. Reading and writing letters for local administrators and reading and understanding the Bible for followers of Christianity were seen as important abilities. Thus, parents became more motivated to send their children, and sometimes themselves, to school.

In the present context, there is one primary school in each village of the Guji. The maximum distance between a home and school in a village is three kilometers. Primary schools are administered by district education departments and each school has one primary school principal trained in school leadership. Curriculums and textbooks for the subjects in primary schools are prepared by the Oromia Regional State one of the nine regional states in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The curriculum in the first cycle includes subjects such as mathematics, natural science, social science, art and aesthetics, Oromo language, and English language. The second cycle encompasses subjects like mathematics, chemistry, biology, physics, social science (which include geography and history), civic and ethical education, sports, Oromo language, Amharic language, and English language. Teachers in the primary school's first cycle have been trained for one year as teachers for all subjects, those in the second cycle have been educated for two years as teachers of a specific subject.

Ethiopian children, including the children of the Guji people, enter school at age seven. Most of the children in primary schools are between seven and 15 years of age. However, there are children who enter school later and stay in primary school even though they are physically grownups. Children from both sexes attend school, but we observed that boys outnumber girls at all grades in primary schools.

## **Storytelling: Not an integrative part of the curriculum**

In the books and learning experiences of Oromo language students, little attention is given to storytelling. Very few folk narratives and riddles in Oromo language were included in students' books of the Oromo language subject. In

Oromo language grade seven textbooks, for example, over 15 learning texts are included, only two of which are folktales. The other texts embody global and contemporary issues that are disconnected from the immediate social and cultural realities of the children. To make matter worse, the teachers tend to disregard the few folktales included in the students' textbooks because they perceive them to be of no educational value. The teachers feel that children are more interested in new and unfamiliar issues and stories. The following conversation with an Oromo language teacher is an example.

**Researchers:** Do you use storytelling as part of your lesson in the classroom?

**Teacher:** I rarely use it. I use it only when there is free time.

**Researchers:** There are some folktales included in the curriculum. Don't you use them?

**Teacher:** I use them rarely. I use other texts instead. I use texts about issues that are new to children.

**Researchers:** Why?

**Teacher:** Because children can learn folktales from home. In school, they have to learn something new.

This teacher made a distinction between academic teaching and moral teaching, including through storytelling, conducted in the free time. Although he noted the potential of storytelling in enhancing children's motivation for learning and for connecting values and moral standards, he gave less attention to using it in the classroom.

## Introducing storytelling as learning practice

An integral part of our fieldwork was action-oriented research aimed at giving children possibilities to perform storytelling in the classroom. We introduced storytelling as part of the children's local knowledge and everyday play practice as an activity to improve the learning contexts for children. The children performed storytelling in three ways: narrative, dramatic, and pictorial. The narrative and dramatic ways of performances were recommended and introduced by children and the pictorial one was introduced by us (the researchers). In the organization of the narrative and dramatic ways of performance, children played central roles and we continued as listeners, supervisors, and observers as shown in the continuing discussions.

## Narrative: Children as tellers and listeners

Narrative is the traditional ways of performing folktales among children of Guji people. It involves telling and listening; one child is the teller, the others are listeners. The teller explains the characters and their actions in the order of events in the folktale from beginning to end. A teller uses words, gestures, and voices to tell the actions in an authentic manner. A teller imitates the character's actions, voices, and behaviours and in order to do that, she or he uses certain means of communication to add to the beauty and artistic quality of the performance. The children in the classrooms we observed, for example, listened to the narration and mimicked the characters accurately. We noticed that children gave their attention to the telling-child and expressed their feelings through laughter, smiling, and facial expressions. When the teller made an error, imitated the characters wrongly, or forgot events, the listeners helped him or her and brought the story back on track. The following is an example of such a storytelling activity. Most of the children in the classroom knew the folktale, which was narrated first, then performed as drama. The folktale was narrated as follows:

Once up on a time there were two men who were neighbours (*olla*) who had agreed to cooperative work (*agooda*). The names of the men were Gowwee and Qaroo. One day while they were working on Gowwee's farm, Qaroo told Gowwee that he could kill his own wife and bring her back to life by kicking her buttocks. Gowwee replied, «I don't believe you! How can you do that?» Qaroo assured him that he would show Gowwee the next day at lunchtime. After finishing the day's work, Qaroo went back to his home and had his dinner. Then he called his wife and told her that the next day, he would come with Gowwee at lunchtime. He killed a hen and collected its blood in a small bag. He gave the bag with blood to his wife and told her, «tomorrow at lunch time, put this on your neck and sit on the chair and wait for us. When I come and cut this bag, you have to fall down and pretend to be dead. Then, when I kick your buttocks, you stand up and sit back down on the chair.» The wife accepted the order from her husband. After working on Qaroo's farm the next morning, both Gowwee and Qaroo came to Qaroo's house for lunch. Before having lunch, Qaroo was going to demonstrate his magic ability to Gowwee by killing and bringing back to life his wife. When they entered to the house, Qaroo's wife was sitting on a chair. Qaroo said to Gowwee, «Look how I can kill my wife and also bring her back to life.» He took a knife, went to his wife, and rubbed the knife against her neck. She fell down and blood flew from her neck. Qaroo

said, «Now, look how I return her to life.» He kicked her buttocks and she woke up. Gowwee was impressed by the ability of his friend. He wanted to try this with his own wife. After the day's work, Gowwee went home. After having his dinner, he called his wife and said, «Now, I want to kill you and then return you to life.» His wife was scared and asked, «Why and how you do that?» He replied, «I want to show you my magic ability and bring you back to life by kicking your buttocks.» After some resistance, his wife agreed. He told her to sit on a chair. Then, he took a knife and cut her neck. She fell down and blood flew from her neck like a river. After a while, he kicked her buttocks to return her to life. He kicked her again and again but no response from her. Then Gowwee ran to the home of Qaroo to tell him what had happened. He told Qaroo that he tried to kill and return his wife to life like him. He killed her and kicked her buttocks but she did not wake up. Qaroo replied to Gowwee, «Don't try to be like others, be yourself.» Gowwee understood that Qaroo had fooled him and started crying for the loss of his wife.

When the child narrated this folktale, the children in the class were quite focused. Some of them were laughing at the foolish actions of Gowwee and others were shocked by the destructive act of Qaroo. All children in the class listened to the teller attentively and enthusiastically and expressed their views about the characters and events in the folktale without reservation and fear. They argued for and against the views of their classmates by connecting their ideas to the realities in their everyday social environments. The pedagogical implication of these developments is that storytelling provided these children with contexts in which they could listen, understand, reflect on their views, argue for or against the views of others freely, and connect the tale to realities in their environments. This is supported by Staden and Watson (2007, p. 3): «the purpose of storytelling as a teaching approach is to impart children the skill of active listening.»

## **Dramatization: Children as actors**

In dramatizations of folktales, impersonation of characters and demonstration of the actions and events are fundamental. The children played the roles of the characters in the folktale. Dramatization of folktales is not common in the culture of the Guji people and it is not a traditional way of storytelling. It was initiated by the children themselves. In a dramatization of a folktale, actions could be more contextualized and the local ways of life and values could be mirrored. The children could relate the actions in the folktale to the real situations

and ways of life of the Guji people and placed the folktale in the context of their local social and cultural environment. In other words, through the dramatizations, the social and cultural contexts useful for understanding of the folktale became overt and observable. Thus, the performance became more complete and meaningful as shown through the folktale presented in this chapter.

As suggested by the children, dramatic performance was done subsequent to the narrative performance. In line with number of characters in the folktale that was acted out, four children were selected to play the different roles. Two of the four children were girls and acted as wives. The boys represented the two male characters: Gowwee and Qaroo. Prior to the folktale, the children prepared the setting. The children brought objects (props) that signified two different houses and farmlands. The two girls played working in the houses, as wives, and the boys played the roles of working on the farm as husbands. They used props such as a coffee pot, fire-pit, plates, water containers, chairs, and tables. The boys also used farm tools that the Guji people use for cultivation. After having set the stage, the four children began acting the folktale.

Early in the morning, the wives in both houses woke up and cleaned their houses. Gowwee's wife roasted coffee and prepared it for drinking. The neighbours, Qaroo and Qaroo's wife, were called to drink. After drinking the coffee, Qaroo and Gowwee went out to work on the farm. On this day, they went to Gowwee's farmland (*fichaa*) carrying their farm tools on their shoulders. They reached the farmland and started digging the ground. They sang work songs (*Gelelle*) while they dug the ground. After working for some time, they were tired and took a short rest. While resting, they had the following conversation:

**Qaroo:** I want to tell you something. Do you know that I can kill my wife and bring her back to life?

**Gowwee:** I cannot believe this. How can you do that?

**Qaroo:** I cut her neck with a knife. When she dies, I kick her buttocks and she wakes up.

**Gowwee:** Can you really do that?

**Qaroo:** Yes, I can do that. I will show you tomorrow at lunchtime.

**Gowwee:** Okay, let us work now.

They dug the ground and sang Gelelle. When it was lunchtime they went back to Gowwee's home for lunch. On this day as they were working on Gowwee's farm, Gowwee's wife prepared lunch. She cooked everything and prepared coffee. Gowwee and Qaroo, putting down their farm tools, entered the house for lunch. The wife greeted them from a different room where she was preparing coffee and food for lunch. After a while, she brought them water to wash their hands. Then she served them coffee. After Gowwee and Qaroo had coffee, the wife brought in lunch, invited them to eat, and went back to kitchen to prepare the second round of coffee. While they ate she prepared the coffee. When they finished eating, she collected the plates and served the second coffee. After eating and drinking and resting, they went back to the farm and worked until night. When it was evening, they thanked each other and went back to their own homes. After reaching his home, drinking coffee and eating dinner, Qaroo killed a hen, collected its blood in a bag and had the following conversation with his wife.

**Qaroo:** Tomorrow at lunchtime put this bag on your neck. When I rub a knife against your neck, you have to fall down and pretend to be dead. Then, when I kick your buttocks, you have to wake up.

**Wife:** What are you saying? Why and how will you do that?

**Qaroo:** I will do that to show my ability to Gowwee. When I kick your buttocks you have to wake up.

**Wife:** Okay, I will do that.

**Qaroo:** At lunchtime, sit by the table and wait for us.

In the morning, Qaroo's wife woke up early, cleaned her house, and prepared coffee. After they drank their coffee as usual, Qaroo and Gowwee left to Qaroo's farm. They worked on Qaroo's farm until noon and went back to Qaroo's home for lunch. Qaroo's wife had put the bag full of blood on her neck, sat on a chair and was waiting for them. After reaching home and entering it, Qaroo had the following conversation with Gowwee.

**Qaroo:** Now, I can show you how I can kill my wife and return her to life.

**Gowwee:** I want to see that. Please, show me.



**Qaroo** took a knife and rubbed it against the neck of his wife. Blood flew from her neck and she fell down.

**Qaroo:** You see how I killed her? Now look, I can wake her.

**Gowwee:** Do that please.

Qaroo kicked her buttocks and she woke up.

**Qaroo:** This is my wife alive. You see how I killed her and returned her to life?

**Gowwee:** Yes, I saw it. You have the ability to kill and awake people.

**Qaroo:** Yes, you are right.

Gowwee was impressed by what Qaroo did and wanted to try it with his wife. When he came home, he had the following conversation with his wife:

**Gowwee:** I want to kill you and when you die, I will wake you and return you to life.

**Wife:** What do you mean?

**Gowwee:** You will not die forever. You will die for a moment and then I will return you to life.

**Wife:** (scared) Why and how you do that?

**Gowwee:** I want to check that I can kill and wake a person. I will kill you by cutting your neck and wake you by kicking your buttocks.

Gowwee asked his wife to sit on a chair. When she sat on the chair, he took a knife and cut her neck. She fell down and blood flew from her neck. After a while, he kicked her buttocks to bring her back to life. There was no response from her. He kicked her again. No response. He kicked her again and again, no response. When she refused to wake up, he ran to Qaroo's home and met Qaroo at home. They had the following conversation.

**Gowwee:** (sounding terrified) Qaroo, Qaroo!

**Qaroo:** What is wrong with you? What happened to you?

**Gowwee:** My wife has refused to wake up.

**Qaroo:** What?

**Gowwee:** I did with my wife what you did with your wife. I cut her neck and she fell down. Then I kicked her buttock to return her to life. But she remained dead. I could not bring her back to life.

**Qaroo:** I am sorry Gowwee. I did that to teach you that you have to be yourself. Do not imitate others. Do what you know and act in the way you know. You have lost you wife in order to be like me.

**Gowwee:** [sobbing] Au!!!!!!!. I lost my wife. Au!!!.

Through the dramatization of the folktale, the children related to and enacted the everyday social and cultural lives of the Guji people. The gender based labour divisions in households and cooperative work and social lives as neighborhood traditions were made clear through the performances. This performance showed that in Guji society, cooking food, preparation of coffee, serving food, cleaning the home, and fetching water are women's (wives') work. Working on farms and the cultivation of food crops are men's (husbands) work. The performance also reflected that cooperative work and the lunch and coffee social times are valuable traditions among Guji society. The folktale mirrored the social and cultural realities of the children and increased the authenticity and artistic quality of it. The children performed every action in their own time and used their personal preferences. They also instructed us, the researchers, how to perform folktales in a classroom. From the reactions and motivation of the children, it was clear that dramatic performance is more interesting for children than narration.

Even though both dramatic and narrative ways of performances were useful in the contextualization of lessons and enhancement of children's participation in classroom learning activities, the dramatic performance enabled the children to relate folktale characters' actions to their own way of life. In other words, the performance mirrored their real life.

## **Pictorial: Children as artists**

Drawing was the third way of engaging with of folktales in the classroom. This way of presenting folktales was not initiated by the children but was introduced to the children by us (the researchers). We divided the children into groups and provided them with paper, pens, and pencils and asked them to draw the above

folktale on the paper. It did not take the children long to draw the characters and their actions from beginning to end. Even though the artistic ability of the children varied, all the children were successful if one asked them to draw. As in the dramatic performance the children related the characters and their actions to their personal, social and cultural environment. When it was difficult to show the action of a character or characters in drawing, children explained it in words. Even though it was an activity introduced by us, the children showed an interest in it and were eager to draw their folktales.



Children on drawing

Drawing permitted each child to contemplate and interpret a folktale individually. It also permitted two or more children to sit together and draw a folktale in cooperation. Thus, drawing the folktales suited both individual and group based learning activities. Children relied on a range of strategies and techniques to draw the tale, and showed the ability to meaningfully understand and organize events and ideas in a folktale through drawing. Presentation of the folktale in drawing helped the children use ideas from a written or oral text in a new and meaningful way. This exercise in turn enhanced the children's skill and ability to understand and reproduce lessons in their own meaningful ways.

## Perspectives of children and teachers

After participating in storytelling activities in the classroom, children shared their views on storytelling activities in the context of school. The teachers also reflected on the relevance of storytelling in facilitating students' participation in classroom learning activities. The children expressed that they learn storytelling from their parents and elder siblings, and that they engage in storytelling with other children while herding cattle. This shows that the children were very familiar with storytelling. However, only telling the story (i.e narrative performance) was practiced in those contexts. The children knew that narrative performance was an intergenerational and customary way of storytelling among Guji people. A child (a 13 year old boy) compared the telling of stories to acting them out and said, «A folktale is more interesting when it is performed through drama than narrative. It is in dramatic performance that our folktale can reflect our culture.» Another child (a 12 year old girl) also expressed the perception that the narrative way of storytelling is archaic and less attractive and does not encourage creativity. Another child (a 13 year old boy) also preferred acting out folktales to the narrative method. According to this child, dramatic performance encourages children's creativity and interest for performing folktales. In this way of performance, not only one, but many children act as tellers. As it involves not only speaking but also acting (includes doing and behaving), it enables children to easily demonstrate the actions and behaviours of characters in the story, thus making the folktale more meaningful. In drama, according to the children, one can demonstrate one's own social and cultural realities as contexts for understanding meaning of a folktale.

Thus, children's interest for the dramatic way of performance emerged from the fact that dramatic performance involved not only telling but also acting. Through acting, the teller can demonstrate behaviours and actions of characters in a folktale. On the side of the listeners, the dramatic performance appeals to the sense of hearing and observing actions and behaviours.

Drawing folktales was interpreted by children as an exercise they could accomplish, memorizing and putting the actions in the folktale in chronological order, and then creating images of the events not only in sequence but also in creative ways. The children emphasized that this helped them develop their ability to express ideas in drawings.

In general, children interpreted storytelling as a way of connecting their social and cultural traditions to classroom learning activities. The following example is taken from the conversation with a 13 year old boy.

**Researchers:** What do you think about this session (the storytelling sessions)?

**The child:** I like to learn in such sessions. Not only me; we all enjoy it.

**Researchers:** Why do you think you like them?

**The child:** When I learn through storytelling, I don't get bored and tired. I am fresh and attentive through the sessions. Storytelling is attractive and it can help me learn through what I know [the context with which the student is familiar].

The children noted that storytelling appeals to their interest and emotions for two important reasons. First storytelling represents the social and cultural realities with which children are familiar. For example, the *gelelle* (group work on farm), the *gelelle* (work song), the gender based labour divisions, and the coffee and meal customs of the Guji were represented in the folktale included in this chapter. These contexts were familiar to all children and helped them connect the outside classroom reality to learning activities in the classroom as expressed by the children. Second, the manners and actions of the characters give children pleasure and excitement. The trickery act of Qaroo and foolishness of Gowwee in the above folktale, for example, caught the attention of the children and made them enjoy the session in which the folktale was performed. The children expressed that storytelling in the school classroom was useful as it enables them to learn through doing.

The teachers expressed that they observed a huge change in the children's participation. One of the teachers stated,

I am surprised that children who have been shy and reluctant even to speak in the classroom are actively participating in these storytelling activities. I learned that storytelling is an effective way of learning Afan Oromo and can make a real change in children's motivation for learning activities.

This demonstrates that not only the children but also the teachers understood that storytelling creates a context in which learners willingly engage in discussions among each other about various issues, actions, and characters in the story. Storytelling in the classroom avoids mechanical ways of learning and develops smooth, natural, and unconscious ways of acquiring knowledge (Davis, 2007; Wright, 1995; Zabel, 1991).

## Discussion

Our work demonstrates that children are very interested in storytelling activities. As the analysis in the chapter reveals, folktales are among the most popular forms of children's narratives and are of great significance in language and literacy development as well as in the contextualization of learning activities for children. They are particularly important to children because they help them understand their world and share it with others. Folktales enhance children's participation and learning, and enable teachers to learn about their students' cultures, experiences, and relationships. Through performing stories in the classroom, teachers and children create friendships, mutual understanding, and an environment for cooperative and meaningful learning.

Children can be involved in many different storytelling activities. We explored three storytelling activities: narrative, dramatic and drawing. When a folktale was told by a child, in the narrative performance, all children in class paid close attention and expressed their feelings by smiling, laughing, or nodding their head. When classroom activities were given in relation to a folktale told in the class, the children were strongly motivated. This was different from regular school activities according to the teachers, when children were less focused and engaged. Dramatic performance really caught the attention of children and motivated them to participate. Drawing also encouraged all children to engage in learning activities. When children reproduced and performed folktales in their own ways in the school classroom, storytelling became a powerful way to enhance their participation in learning activities and became an important tool for their social and cognitive growth.

Our study reveals that through storytelling in the classroom, children can increase their participation not only in speaking, and listening, but also in visualization of ideas in their learning activities. Children with experience in hearing and telling folktales are eager to create their own tales which is similar to what Davis (2007) and Caruthers (2006) discussed in the context of the global north. We argue that the critical thinking skills, vocabulary, and language patterns of children can be enhanced through use of storytelling in the classrooms (Zabel, 1991). The enhanced motivation and participation of children shows that affording children an opportunity to engage with folktales through narration, drama, and drawing in the classroom is an effective pedagogical tool. In addition, storytelling by children offers a glimpse into the social and cultural context of children. Children's interest in folktales is rooted in the fact that folktales connect children to their own social and cultural background and involve moral imperatives such as victory of virtue over vice, reward for hard work, kindness, respectfulness, and helpfulness (Staden & Watson, 2007; Bartel, 2010).

In general, collaborative storytelling in the classroom, in all three discussed ways, motivates children to actively participate in learning activities. We conclude that storytelling is a child-friendly and effective means of teaching and learning for not only language subjects but also other subjects such as mathematics, chemistry, geography, and more.

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