



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Cognitive Development Through Indigenous Stories And The Role Of Oral Storytelling In Cultural Learning Within The Garo Community Of Meghalaya

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Oral storytelling is an important cultural tradition that serves as a means of transmitting messages, values, and heritage across generations. This process has enabled indigenous storytelling to preserve and pass on cultural knowledge over time. Indigenous stories form a vital part of a child's cultural identity, as they are deeply connected to the traditions, history, and language of specific communities or regions. Stories that reflect a child's own culture and environment play a key role in shaping their understanding of social norms, promoting cultural awareness, and supporting language development. Through learning and engaging with these stories, children are not only captivated by stories but also immersed in their cultural surroundings from an early age. Moreover, indigenous stories provide meaningful opportunities for cognitive growth, offering a rich linguistic and intellectually stimulating environment that builds essential skills for school readiness and future learning. In alignment with these ideas, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes the importance of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) to ensure quality education for all, particularly for socio-economically disadvantaged children. The policy aims to reduce inequalities and promote holistic development, including social, emotional, and cognitive development to prepare well-rounded individuals who can contribute positively to society and national progress. This vision aligns with Goal 4 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 2030), which underscores that equitable access to education is essential for achieving sustainable development. Additionally, the policy recognizes the significant role of culture in shaping development and its close connection to various aspects of national life.

Keywords: Indigenous stories, Oral Storytelling, Cognitive development, Cultural Learning, Garo community

Introduction

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 highlights the essential role of culture in human development and its close connection with various dimensions of national life. Similarly, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2022 emphasizes that the school environment and local culture should be actively integrated into the educational process to make learning more meaningful and holistic. The NCF introduces the concept of “Panchakosha Vikas” or “Five-fold Development”, which focuses on nurturing the physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and moral dimensions of a child. This approach ensures that early childhood education remains effective, locally relevant, and rooted in India’s diverse and vibrant cultural traditions. Within this framework, oral and indigenous storytelling emerges as a powerful educational tool. Storytelling, a long-standing tradition in many communities, serves not only to entertain but also to transmit values, beliefs, and cultural knowledge across generations. By listening to and engaging with indigenous stories, children gain a deeper understanding of their own culture, language, and environment, which strengthens their sense of identity and belonging.

From a cognitive development perspective, indigenous stories offer rich opportunities for mental growth. The narrative structure, vocabulary, and moral reasoning embedded in stories stimulate language acquisition, memory, comprehension, imagination, and critical thinking. As children interpret characters, events, and moral lessons, they learn to analyze, predict, and problem-solving skills that are foundational for academic learning and everyday reasoning. Moreover, these stories promote concept formation and cultural cognition, helping children make sense of their surroundings through familiar and contextually relevant experiences.

In line with the goals of the NEP 2020, integrating indigenous storytelling in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) not only supports inclusive and equitable learning but also bridges the gap for children belonging to the marginalized sections by using culturally meaningful and accessible learning materials. Thus, embedding indigenous stories within early education ensures that cognitive, linguistic, and cultural development progress in an integrated manner, nurturing well-rounded and culturally grounded learners.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to explore the role of indigenous stories and oral storytelling in enhancing the cognitive development among children within the Garo Community of Meghalaya.

Justification of the study

The justification for this study lies in the persistent educational challenges in Meghalaya, where despite policy reforms and expanded access to schooling, issues of low literacy, high dropout rates, and cultural disconnection remain significant. The dominance of a Western-centric curriculum that neglects indigenous

knowledge and languages has led to limited engagement and underachievement among tribal learners. The National Curriculum Framework (2022) highlights the need for culturally responsive and locally rooted education, particularly in early childhood care and education. In this context, integrating culturally responsive pedagogies, grounded in local traditions, community life, and experiential learning can provide a meaningful and inclusive framework. Such an approach not only supports cognitive and linguistic growth but also emphasizes cultural identity and continuity, thereby justifying the study's focus on using indigenous educational models to enhance early learning outcomes among the marginalized Garo community of Meghalaya.

Methodology

The present study was conducted by using Qualitative research methodology.

Research Question

In what ways do indigenous stories and oral storytelling play a role in enhancing the cognitive development among children within the Garo Community of Meghalaya?

Storytelling and Cognitive Development in Indigenous Contexts

Storytelling, as a pedagogical tool rooted in culturally responsive and experiential learning, offers a powerful framework for holistic and inclusive education in the foundational years. Within indigenous contexts, storytelling serves not only as a medium of entertainment but also as a dynamic process of meaning-making that connects children to their cultural heritage and lived experiences. Indigenous stories rich in familiar characters, settings, and moral lessons help children internalize knowledge rather than merely memorize it, thereby strengthening comprehension, reasoning, and memory. According to Iseke and BMJK (2011), listening to indigenous stories encourages children to interpret their own experiences through cultural narratives, promoting reflective thinking and identity formation. Sium and Ritskes (2013) further argue that storytelling challenges dominant notions of knowledge and redefines learning as a self-anchored and participatory process. Similarly, Smith (1999) highlights that storytelling allows communities to represent multiple truths, maintaining the storyteller's authority and authenticity. From an early age, children in indigenous settings engage actively as both listeners and narrators (Pellowski, 1977), developing skills in language, imagination, and critical thinking. Recent studies in early childhood education also affirm that integrating indigenous storytelling into classroom practice supports cognitive development by enhancing attention, memory recall, narrative sequencing, and problem-solving (NCF, 2022; UNESCO, 2023). Thus, storytelling, particularly indigenous storytelling, functions as both an educational strategy and a cultural practice that nurtures intellectual growth, emotional understanding, and cultural continuity among young learners.

Cognitive Development through Indigenous Stories and the Role of Oral Storytelling in Cultural Learning among the Garos of Meghalaya

Storytelling in indigenous societies functions as both a cultural practice and a cognitive learning process. Within these communities, stories do more than entertain. They act as an oral form of pedagogy that guides intellectual, emotional, and cultural growth. Scholars such as Smith (1999) describe indigenous stories as living archives that carry moral values, social norms, and collective memory. As children listen to, interpret, and later retell these narratives, they engage in cognitive activities that strengthen memory, attention, language development, and imaginative reasoning.

In marginalized settings, oral storytelling becomes a powerful system of culturally responsive education. It supports the development of empathy, ethical thinking, and social understanding by allowing children to experience multiple perspectives through characters and events (McAvoy, 2002). These experiences encourage reflective thinking and moral judgment, which are essential for higher levels of cognitive development. Storytelling therefore bridges home culture with early learning experiences, creating a familiar and inclusive space for intellectual growth.

Within the Garo community of Meghalaya, storytelling is deeply embedded into daily life and cultural tradition. Stories such as Dokgipa, Katchi, and Chu Gitsham are shared during communal gatherings, festivals, agricultural rituals, and rites of passage. These narratives introduce children to the ecological landscape, social expectations, and moral teachings of their community. Through active listening in these sessions, children learn to organize events in sequence, understand symbolic meanings, and interpret the implications of actions, which strengthens skills such as attention control, auditory processing, and inferential reasoning.

Before the expansion of Christianity in the region, Garo storytelling reflected the worldview of Songsarek, the indigenous belief system rooted in a deep relationship with nature. Creation stories and heroic narratives featuring figures like Tatara Rabuga, Saljong, and Pa Togan Nengminja shaped children's understanding of human responsibility, ecological balance, and collective identity. Tales about spirits and mythical beings encouraged children to think critically about cause and effect, interdependence, and the consequences of human behavior on the natural world. Such stories foster ecological awareness and systems thinking from an early age.

The settings in which storytelling takes place also contribute to its educational value. Spaces such as the Nokpante, the traditional bachelor dormitory, and fireside gatherings during festivals function as communal learning environments. These spaces encourage children to observe, listen attentively, ask questions, and participate in group dialogue. Repetition of stories helps strengthen working memory and verbal expression,

while the interpretation of moral lessons promotes analytical thinking and evaluative judgment. Imaginative participation nurtures creativity and the ability to think in abstract terms.

The oral tradition is also a means of preserving language and cultural resilience. Storytelling in Mande Ku'sik, the Garo language, ensures that children grow up with a strong sense of linguistic identity, enabling them to conceptualize and express knowledge in their mother tongue. This supports cultural continuity and reinforces the value of indigenous knowledge systems in early learning.

In the broader context of Garo society, storytelling reflects their matrilineal heritage, ecological values, and spiritual beliefs. Themes related to inheritance, family responsibility, and the influence of women are evident throughout many narratives. Well-known stories like the origin tale of Saljong or the narrative of Jajong Kadoram, where a father builds a bamboo ladder to the moon, serve both as imaginative explanations of natural features and as lessons about human relationships and consequences. Heroic tales of Pa Togan Nengminja preserve historical memory while instilling pride in cultural identity.

Today, although traditional storytelling faces challenges due to urbanization and the shrinking use of indigenous dialects, several initiatives are working toward its preservation. Universities, researchers, and cultural organizations are documenting folktales and conducting studies on Garo oral literature. Community-driven projects such as The Forgotten Folklore Project are adapting stories into child friendly formats, while contemporary Garo authors, artists, and filmmakers continue to reinterpret traditional narratives in modern media. These efforts help sustain storytelling as a vibrant cultural and educational practice.

Indigenous storytelling in the Garo community demonstrates how oral traditions can nurture cognitive development while preserving cultural identity, moral values, and ecological understanding. Recognizing storytelling as a meaningful pedagogical tool allows education systems in marginalized communities to become more inclusive, culturally grounded, and aligned with the lived experiences and wisdom of the people they serve.

Findings

The findings of the present study are briefly discussed in the points given below:

1. Storytelling serves as an important teaching tool

The study shows that in indigenous communities, storytelling is a central part of how children learn. Stories are used to teach life lessons, guide behavior, and introduce children to the knowledge and wisdom of their

community. Through these stories, children learn how to think critically, solve problems, and understand their cultural world.

2. Children develop cognitive skills when they listen to and retell stories.

Traditional stories strengthen children's ability to remember details, pay attention for longer periods, and understand the structure of language. When children retell stories, they practice organizing events, using new vocabulary, and expressing ideas clearly. This process also stimulates imagination, helping them picture scenes, characters, and emotions.

3. Storytelling nurtures empathy and moral thinking.

Through characters and events, children are exposed to different feelings, motives, and situations. They learn to understand the emotions and perspectives of others, which supports empathy. Many stories carry lessons about right and wrong, fairness, kindness, and responsibility. These lessons help children develop moral judgment and ethical thinking.

4. In the Garo community, storytelling is woven into everyday life and cultural practice.

For the Garo people, stories are shared in homes, during festivals, during farming activities, and during community gatherings. These stories teach children about their cultural roots, social expectations, and the roles they play within their families and community. Storytelling becomes a natural way for children to learn about who they are and how they are connected to their environment.

5. Listening to stories improves children's reasoning and understanding of cause and effect.

As children follow a narrative, they learn to connect events in sequence, recognize symbolic meanings, and understand how characters' actions lead to specific outcomes. This builds their ability to think logically, interpret messages, and make inferences based on what they hear.

6. Traditional stories promote ecological awareness and responsibility.

Many Garo stories highlight the deep relationship between people and nature. Myths about creation, animals, forests, and spirits help children understand ecological balance and human responsibility toward the environment. These stories encourage systems thinking, teaching children how different elements of nature depend on one another.

7. Storytelling spaces support strong community based learning.

Places like the Nokpante, the traditional dormitory for boys, and fireside gatherings during festivals provide natural learning settings. These places allow children to watch elders tell stories, ask questions, and participate in conversations. Such communal learning environments strengthen confidence, curiosity, and active listening.

8. Repetition of stories strengthens memory, language, and moral understanding.

When stories are repeated during gatherings and rituals, children hear the same ideas many times. This repetition helps them remember details, improve language expression, and reflect on the messages in the stories. Over time, they develop the ability to think more deeply, analyze situations, and understand values such as honesty, bravery, and cooperation.

9. Storytelling in the Garo language preserves culture and strengthens identity.

Sharing stories in Mande Ku'sik, the Garo language, helps children grow up with a strong sense of cultural identity. It ensures that the language, traditions, and wisdom of the community are passed on to the next generation. Children learn to think and communicate in their mother tongue, which supports both cognitive development and cultural pride.

10. Community efforts are helping to keep storytelling alive despite modern changes.

Although urbanization, new lifestyles, and the decline in the use of indigenous dialects challenge traditional storytelling, many groups are working to preserve it. Researchers, universities, cultural organizations, and community projects are documenting stories and adapting them for children. These efforts ensure that storytelling remains a meaningful source of learning, cultural continuity, and community pride.

Implications of the Study

The significance of the present study are discussed in the points given below:-

1. Schools can use storytelling as a natural way to teach children.

Since storytelling already plays a strong role in Garo life, teachers can build on this practice to teach lessons, introduce new ideas, and help children understand their cultural background.

2. Storytelling can be used to strengthen memory, attention, and language skills.

Teachers can encourage children to listen carefully, retell stories, and participate in discussions, which supports language development and improves their ability to remember and organize information.

3. Story based activities can help children develop empathy and moral values.

Stories that show different emotions, challenges, and choices can teach children about kindness, fairness, respect, and responsibility in a gentle and meaningful way.

4. Classroom learning can connect better with children's home culture.

Using local Garo stories in education can make learning more familiar and relevant, helping children feel seen, valued, and understood within the school environment.

5. Teachers can use stories to improve children's thinking and reasoning skills.

Exploring how events unfold in a narrative can help children understand cause and effect, make predictions, and think more deeply about consequences.

6. Indigenous stories can be used to teach environmental lessons.

Garo myths and nature based stories can help children learn about ecological balance, human responsibility, and the importance of protecting the environment from an early age.

7. Schools can create storytelling spaces to support community based learning.

Setting up corners or group areas where children can listen, share, and ask questions can recreate the communal learning found in places like the Nokpante or fireside gatherings.

8. Repetition of stories can strengthen learning and values.

Teachers can retell stories during different lessons or activities, helping children build stronger memory, understand moral lessons, and develop their ability to speak confidently.

9. Teaching in the mother tongue can support both learning and cultural identity.

Using Mande Ku'sik (Garo language) in storytelling and classroom activities can help children express themselves better and stay connected to their cultural roots while learning new concepts.

10. Collaboration with community elders and cultural groups can enrich education.

Inviting storytellers, elders, or local artists to share traditional tales can help keep indigenous knowledge alive while giving children meaningful learning experiences that build pride and identity.

Barriers to Integrating Culturally Relevant Practices in Meghalaya's Diverse Classrooms

The following are some barriers to the practice of culturally relevant pedagogy:-

1. Linguistic Diversity

Schools in Meghalaya typically consist of students who speak different languages, including Garo, Khasi, Jaintia, and Bengali. Using storytelling in a single indigenous language may restrict comprehension and limit participation among children who are not native speakers. This can lead to unequal learning opportunities and difficulties in integrating culturally grounded pedagogy for all students, as language is both a medium of instruction and a carrier of cultural knowledge.

2. Cultural Heterogeneity

Multi-ethnic classrooms bring together students from diverse tribal and cultural backgrounds, each with their own oral traditions, folklore, and moral frameworks. Designing a curriculum that is meaningful and culturally relevant to all groups is challenging. Teachers must balance respect for each culture while ensuring inclusivity, which requires deep understanding and careful selection of stories that resonate across communities.

3. Curriculum Constraints

State and national education systems often prioritize literacy, numeracy, and standardized learning outcomes over experiential or culturally grounded pedagogy. This leaves little room for indigenous storytelling or other culturally responsive methods, forcing teachers to either compress storytelling activities or align them superficially with mandated content, potentially undermining their cognitive and cultural impact.

4. Teacher Preparedness

Many educators may lack formal training in indigenous oral traditions or the pedagogical strategies needed to integrate them effectively. Without familiarity with local stories, moral themes, and cultural contexts, teachers may struggle to facilitate storytelling in ways that enhance cognitive skills, ethical reasoning, and cultural identity, limiting the effectiveness of this pedagogical tool.

5. Resource Limitations

There is often a scarcity of teaching materials, such as storybooks, audiovisual aids, or digital content, that authentically represent Garo or other indigenous narratives. The lack of resources makes it difficult to implement storytelling activities consistently or to adapt them for students from diverse backgrounds, particularly in schools with limited funding or infrastructure.

6. Balancing Cultural Relevance with Assessment Demands

Standardized assessments emphasize measurable academic skills, such as reading comprehension or arithmetic, while undervaluing experiential, oral, or culturally embedded learning. Teachers face the challenge of demonstrating learning outcomes through formal evaluation systems while maintaining the depth and authenticity of indigenous storytelling pedagogy.

7. Religious and Historical Influences

Historical shifts, such as the spread of Christianity among the Garos, have altered traditional narratives and rituals. Some pre-Christian stories may be less familiar or sensitive to certain students, creating tensions when integrating them into the curriculum. Teachers must negotiate these differences carefully to respect cultural and religious sensibilities while preserving the educational value of indigenous stories.

8. Student Engagement Across Cultures

Children from different cultural backgrounds may vary in familiarity, interest, or connection to Garo stories. Ensuring engagement requires teachers to adapt storytelling methods, provide context, and draw parallels with students' own cultural experiences. Without such adaptation, some students may feel excluded or disengaged, reducing the overall effectiveness of culturally relevant pedagogy.

9. Integration with Modern Pedagogy

Merging indigenous storytelling with modern teaching methods, such as digital tools, structured lessons, and textbook-based instruction, requires careful planning. Teachers must ensure that the cultural essence and cognitive benefits of storytelling are not diluted, while still meeting curriculum standards and learning objectives. Balancing tradition with modern pedagogical strategies is a persistent challenge.

10. Sustainability of Indigenous Knowledge

Traditional storytelling often relies on elder narrators and traditional meeting spaces or festival gatherings. In school-centered or urbanized contexts, access to these elders and spaces may be limited. This raises concerns about continuity, preservation, and accessibility of cultural pedagogy, especially for younger generations who may have fewer opportunities to experience traditional storytelling directly.

Conclusion:

Indigenous storytelling plays an important role in supporting children's cognitive, cultural, and emotional growth, especially in marginalized communities such as the Garos of Meghalaya. Through oral narratives, children strengthen their memory, reasoning, language abilities, and higher-order thinking, while also developing a sense of cultural identity, moral awareness, and connection to their natural environment.

Storytelling offers meaningful, experience-based learning that helps preserve language and indigenous knowledge across generations. Although challenges such as linguistic diversity, curriculum pressures, and limited resources continue to exist, incorporating culturally responsive storytelling into early education shows strong potential to create inclusive, holistic, and engaging learning experiences that connect traditional wisdom with modern educational aims.

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