

# Bella's Story and its Implications

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Have you read any children's books lately? You may say, "Well, children's books are only for children." I would say otherwise.

For the past few years, I have been invited to teach a small group of teachers English weekly. In one of the sessions, I used a story entitled "Bella -- the cow who thought she was a hen" as a major discussion topic with the aim of broadening the teachers' perspective on the power of storytelling and savoring the richness of each story character, and most importantly, making connections to their lives.

The story began with a cow called Bella, which lived on a farm where there were only hens. She thought she was a hen. She pecked grains of wheat and tried to stand on one leg. But the way she acted had annoyed the hens.

Bella obviously had a misconception of her own identity, which led to her depression.

I attempted to probe the teachers' thinking on the issue of vulnerability in school life with a few questions: "Have you come across any situations in which you misunderstood something or you were misunderstood? How did you feel about it? Did the truth come out ultimately?"

These questions are not foreign to teachers, whose daily task is to communicate with students, parents and colleagues. Whether every message can reach the audience effectively is per se a tall order. Misunderstanding can arise when both parties fail to get hold of each other's perspective. I have seen teachers weeping when students showed disapproval of being given difficult test questions. Likewise, I have seen students misunderstood as "bad guys" when in fact their behaviour was influenced by their miserable family background.

I did not mean in any way to counsel or

heal the teachers through the discussions. However, their enthusiasm about sharing, the mutual trust among them and their recognition of their own feelings have engendered a group dynamic powerful enough to enable them to see the connections between a children's story and their own life stories.

The story went on again ... One day, a little wolf's parents asked him to bring back a hen, but he did not know what hens looked like. He climbed over the wall and landed on Bella's back. Bella told him that he was the biggest one in the world. The wolf hit her on the head with a stone, heaved her onto a wheelbarrow and set off for the forest.

I challenged the teachers again: "What is your image of a wolf? What do you think of the little wolf?"

Adjectives like "ferocious", "dangerous" and "cunning" were all on their list. Interestingly, when describing the little wolf, they said he was "naive," "simple," and "honest," which showed a marked difference from their image of the wolf.

The rationale behind the two questions was to make the teachers aware of their mechanism of thought: owing to our own upbringing, social and cultural values, we are unconsciously shaped by our usual way of

thinking -- our stereotypes. When teachers have stereotyped ideas about naughty students or students with special education needs, how would their teaching be affected, sometimes even negatively?

Bella's adventurous story did not end here. As the story revealed afterwards, Bella's only friend, Plato, would come to her rescue and, after all the twists that followed, she finally discovered her true identity.

In those three sessions, we enjoyed the story as well as the inspiring issues brought upon by the underlying messages.

Children's stories could be as enriching as any of the "Chicken Soup for the Soul" stories for both teenagers and adults if they care to identify the overt and implied messages.

