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**ESMAEEL
AZARINEJAD**

Biography

Childhood

Esmaeel Azarinejad was born in 1979 in Behbahan¹, in the southern province of Khuzestan, Iran. He attended primary and high schools in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad² Province and grew up there. Having married in 2001, he is currently living in Dehdasht³ together with his wife, seven-year-old daughter, and twelve-year-old son, Arghavan and Hossein.

His life path toward becoming active in the cause of reading is a very fascinating one. From early childhood to adolescence ages, he has encountered a variety of people who encouraged him to read more books. This background is part of the reason why he chooses to talk to children, cultivate their hope and empower them for a fruitful life through providing them deep reading opportunities.

From the age of ten to twelve, he used to go to the Cultural Center of Education⁴ in Dehdasht. There, the students performed various cultural and artistic activities during the afternoons. The center also had a small library; a disordered library with most of its books lying on the floor. One day he went to the manager there—Mr. Ijtihad—and asked him for a book that was not specifically written for his age. It was about Iran’s oil policies in the Persian Gulf. Although he returned it to the library without reading it, probably the same book and the simple act of traveling to that small library revived his desire to read and started his friendship and connection to the library and books. Such an interest in books made Mr. Ejtehad call him “the reading Kor Sheikh,” with Kor in Lori dialect

1. Behbahan is a city located in the southeast of the Khuzestan province of Iran. Khuzestan is the southwestern province of Iran, located at the shore of the Persian Gulf.

2. Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad is a western province of Iran, with the city of Yasuj as its center.

3. Dehdasht is a city in the west of Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province and the center of Kohgiluyeh District.

4. Cultural centers of education are a subset and complement to schools and formal educational institutions in Iran. These centers are established throughout the country to implement cultural, literary, artistic, sports, social and scientific programs, and activities for the development and flourishing of young talents.

meaning boy and Sheikh referring to a local tribe. Later, he asked the manager to help in the task of arranging the library and lending the books to the children.

Illuminators of knowledge and awareness

There were always people at home and in the family, who revived his passion for reading: “My father was a textile seller. We were four brothers and four sisters in the family. Among my siblings, one of my sisters was a great reader and she loved reading novels. Whenever she ordered a book, if she found the right one for me, she did not hesitate to buy it as well.”

Also, there was the family’s son-in-law, Mr. Mohammad Perma, who was a technical school teacher and always carried a book with himself when he attended their house. He usually gave books to Esmaeel and dedicated time to discuss books. Esmaeel may have read his first ever multi-hundred-page book among the books he received from Mr. Perma in those days. It was a seven-hundred-page book about Lotfali Khan Zand, the legendary king of Persia.¹ Possibly this special respect that Mr. Perma had for a child and his views was an important factor that shaped Esmaeel’s life and the way he regarded children. Esmaeel’s childhood also coincided with a period of war between Iran and Iraq. It was at this time when another acquaintance made a major impact on his interest in reading. Mr. Mohammad Reza Mohebbi was a good-natured young man who lived in their neighborhood. Mr. Mohebbi always carried a copy of a recently published

1. Lotfali Khan Zand or Lotfali Shah Zand (c. 1769–1794) was the ninth and last ruler of the Zand dynasty in Iran, who ruled between 1789 and 1794.

magazine, such as *Danestaniha*¹, and *Weekly Information*.² He was so respectful toward children. There was a seat in their alley where he sat reading the magazines, often giving copies to Esmaeel for reading.

Small Windows of Hope

During his middle school and high school years, Esmaeel attended the Grand Mosque of the city and participated in the popular religious ceremonies of the mosque. The organized of the ceremonies, Mr. Andarzian, had set up a very good library of quality reading materials in the mosque.

He attended the mosque library often, arranged the books, and read them for hours. This period of going to the mosque library had a great effect on his enthusiasm for reading more books.

Esmaeel Azarinejad recalls from his childhood and adolescence years the image of a young worker who had left formal education after high school, a boy who at the same time was a great reader and had a large collection of books. He used to encourage the children who attended the mosque to read a plurality of books.

Perhaps one of the distinctive characteristics of Esmaeel can be seen in his discovering small windows of hope in his environment. Ordinary people and events had nourished his passion for reading and examining books and had a profound effect on his mind and soul. To him, the people on his way to reading habits are great motivational incentives: “If we offer a book or two to a person once or twice, respect her personality, this will make and remain deep in her mind. These

1. *Danestaniha* or *Things to Know* is a science promotion magazine that is published on a bi-weekly basis in Iran since 1979 and deals with the fields of science, technology, nature, and history. This magazine is the first full-color encyclopedia magazine and the most widely circulated Persian language science promotion magazine in Iran.

2. *Weekly Information* (*Ettela'at Haftegy*) is published since the early 1940s.

simple acts can change the whole life course of the person in the future. When I look back at the course of my own life, I see several people and events who were on my way. They made me Esmael Azarinejad. They made me a lover of books.”

From the mosque to the bookshop

In 1994, Esmael Azarinejad studied religious studies in a seminary in his hometown, Dehdasht, and later, in 1996, he attended Amir al-Mo'menin (AS) seminary in Tehran, where he completed preparatory studies in four years.

At the same period, whenever he returned to Dehdasht, he carried packs of new books for children. Now he was a cleric but his behavior was at odds with the official image of a cleric. Most of the other clerics and religious students carried laudatory poetries¹ and other strictly religious materials often through CDs and DVDs. Instead, Esmael usually carried the free reading materials. In the afternoons, he organized reading and discussing books.

In 2000, he went to Qom² to complete his seminary education. This was the most fruitful period of his years in education. He entered Qom University in 2003 and studied sociology for a bachelor's degree and continued his master's studies in Mysticism and Sufism at the University of Religions.

After a while, he decided to open a bookshop in his hometown, Dehdasht that had no bookshop and the people had to travel long distances to other cities to find and buy their required books. Esmael's father could provide him the required spaces for the store. Esmael himself

1. Laudatory poetries or Maddahi are usually recited in praise of religious figures and early martyrs of Islam.

2. Qom is a city located 140 km south of Tehran as is considered to be the center of religious education.

did not attend the bookshop and had a person to do the job. A variety of books were available in store for almost all subjects and all tastes. If someone was looking for a certain book, Esmaeel would do his best to find and provide the book in every possible way. But after a while, he could not support the bookshop due to a heavy loss and he had to close it. This coincided with finishing the studies and returning home.

Storytelling for village children; A window to knowledge and capacity

What happened that Esmaeel Azarinejad, a cleric in Qom to decide to return to his small hometown to read books and stories to village children?

Having tasted the pleasure and sweetness of reading as a child, his curious and inquisitive spirit was not satisfied with the activities he had been doing up to that time. That restlessness and thirst required to be quenched in other ways and through fresh sources. And this required direct company with children. At the same time that he was studying in Qom, he worked in a research center, but he felt that such activities did not have the required impact and benefit. He has never denied the importance and helpfulness of research, but he felt doing detached research would never calm his restless spirit.

This period coincided with his father's illness. All his siblings were married and they had left home and his parents lived alone at home with nobody to take care of them. His father liked the home to be crowded as ever and at least one of his children to accompany them at such an old age. Because of this need, Esmaeel negotiated with his family and they accept his decision, to leave the city of Qom and return to Dehdasht, his hometown.

Life in Dehdasht was not so easy. Living in a small 20-meter room, together with two small children and the inadequacy of his income, all made the first year of life in Dehdasht difficult for his family.

He taught in non-profit schools but received a small salary. He also

lectured in the local university on a part-time basis but the earning was not enough. The first year of life in Dehdasht passed with such difficulties.

His arrival in Dehdasht coincided with his wearing of clerical clothing. From the first days of arriving at Dehdasht, he was looking for a mosque to start his service as the Imam of congregational prayer.¹

At the outskirts of Dehdasht, there is a district known as Golzarik, a poor neighborhood with special social problems such as drug dealing and other illegal activities. Esmaeel Azarinejad becomes the Imam of congregational prayer in a mosque of this district.

Soon he realizes that this is not all he was after. From 2013 he starts planning for children. His experience of telling stories to the children in a residential complex at Qom or his children provided early practices for such a task. He regularly bought books and reads stories to his son, Hussein. His love for children and reading to them is not something that happened overnight and has a long history. He had experienced the profound and magical effect of telling stories on the mind and personality of children. Now he felt is the time to introduce the children of the village to the mystery of this pure magic.

Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province in comparison to other provinces is a deprived province. Esmaeel wonders what is to be done to get out of this deprivation.

“I find out that the way out of deprivation is just

1. Every mosque has a clergy in charge as the Imam of congregational prayer, this is the person who is heading the daily prayers of the mosque.

knowledge and ability. I asked myself how I should start. I saw it could start with a book. A book is an approach and a tool for acquiring knowledge and ability. Whom should I start with? I saw that childhood is the best age. That's why I chose children. Where do I start? I saw that the villages are the most deprived places and the most important point of departure.”

The story of Esmael Azarinejad, the storyteller cleric of Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad villages, begins here. During this period, besides his official duty as the Imam of the mosque, he teaches in a high school and a local university. Once in a month, he travels to the villages together with one of his friends who was an ophthalmologist, accompanied by five or six other people, and he narrates stories while his companions start doing in their field of expertise.

After a while, he feels that it is difficult to encourage university students interested in reading. The atmosphere at the Azad University¹ was more of a bureaucratic atmosphere with most of the students attending the university just for an official degree. Most of them were local employees and wanted to get a job promotion through getting a degree. The school was more involved in the centralized entrance exam of universities (locally known as Konkur) and there was little space for a free reading of books and discussing them. For this reason, he leaves both the university and high school and starts going to elementary school. He gets permission from his son's school principal to teach composition at school.

Teacher of composition; Narrator of sweet morning stories at school

In 2013, he worked and studied seriously on composition for a while,

1. The largest network of non-profit and independent universities in Iran, known as Azad University or Free University. This university has been run by a team of conservative politicians.

and then he entered the school to work with children on composition and storytelling. All these activities were completely voluntary out of sheer personal enthusiasm. At school, he read composition and stories to school children and in the evenings, they would gather in the local mosque to perform various activities collectively, from storytelling and running book clubs to performing theatrical works and much more. The park in front of the mosque was a convenient space for the children to read stories. They would gather there in the afternoons for storytelling activities.

The Intersection of Mosques and Village

After a while, he feels that one session in a month is too little for storytelling in the villages and village children require much more time to be dedicated. So, he travels to the villages twice a month, and later, he finds time to travel every week to tell stories to the children. Simultaneous with these activities and commuting to the villages, some challenges emerge with some elderly worshipers in the mosque. They complained that storytelling activities and the presence of children in the mosque have crowded the mosque and that the mosque by traditional definition is not a place for children. Sometimes, after prayers, he would ask the children to narrate or perform for the old people in the mosque a story they had read. However, these actions did not have much effect on the people who protested against the presence of children in the mosque. To them, the children had turned the mosque into a theater and a narration classroom. Gradually, the number of children who came to the mosque to read stories exceeded the number of old worshipers. Some of the praying people of the mosque had raised their voices for protest and were gradually getting into a real encounter with the storytelling clergy of the mosque.

Now, Esmael Azarinejad had to decide. It was evident that things could



not continue. Either he had to leave the children or the mosque. It was such a fundamental dilemma to decide: either maintaining the silence and solitude of the elderly prayers or continuing with the noisy atmosphere of children over storytelling and other social activities. Finally, he decided to leave the mosque. Several people asked him not to leave and begged him to return. But Esmael had made his mind long ago, he had decided to choose a different path, the path toward enabling, growth, and awareness of children. He felt it necessary to start working in a new space with new tools and accessories.

This leaving of the mosque back in 2014 and the start of touring villages becomes a great start for the path that he has taken since then, a path he continues today. So, he travels to less populated villages every night, the villages with no clergy where the mosques are deserted or closed and there are no old men and women to either be disturbed by work or disturb the work. He starts gathering the children and reads stories to them in these villages. This is while he has to teach six or seven hours a day at school. In his leisure time, reads stories in the suburbs of the town in the mornings, and in the afternoons, he has reading programs for village

children. During these six years, during holidays, weekends, and summer holidays he travels to the farther villages and runs more reading programs for children during the longer stays. These are the villages that are often located in mountainous regions, difficult to cross, and very difficult to access.

The Story, the Ball, the Color

But what is the story of this brand name for storytelling activities in the village? Esmaeel Azarinejad believes that reading and telling stories is the best tool for children’s intellectual development. He has a strong belief in the idea that we can make the world more beautiful by developing the skills of children. “Reading books and telling tales is a good excuse for me,” he told *The Guardian*. “My aim is their intellectual development so that they have a beautiful world and be able to develop skills. I have a slogan, which says the story, ball, color. The story will make their minds and world beautiful; the ball is playing sport and being healthy, and the color is about painting schools or their libraries.”

He tries to provide a suitable space and context for children to develop their creative instincts. He avoids direct education and helps to develop children’s skills and abilities through telling stories and engaging children in various real and imaginary activities.



Designing Activities for Children

One of the outstanding features of Esmael Azarinejad is his openness and avoidance of any external criterion or prejudice in his selection of books for children. He chooses books without religious presuppositions or regardless of whether the author of the book is foreign or Iranian, religious or non-religious. His main criterion in choosing a book for children is what he calls the “quality of the book.” That is, the book should enable the reader in one way or another and to result in the intellectual or skill development of the child.

Esmael’s activities for children are not limited to reading books. Using any available facility, he carries out any activity that promises to develop a capacity in children in any field. For example, on one of his trips to a village, he found it suitable to screen the Golden Palm Award-winning Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami’s “Two Solutions to a Problem” for 15 children. By showing this four-minute film to children, he tried to introduce children to such important and valuable concepts as problem solving and friendship.





Reconciliation with Nature and Renovation of the Culture of Storytelling

In one of the storytelling activities, he asks the children to write a story with five words: oak tree, dry river, grandmother, goat, and lizard.

In his selection of texts and contents for the activities, he tries to attract attention toward the idea of nature and the tangible elements of the living environment. For this, he asked them to think about the issues and challenges of the environment: “They have oak trees in their living area and rivers. I wanted to talk about the fact that their river may dry up in a near future.”

Through storytelling for children, Esmael hopes to empower and encourage them to develop, write and narrate their own stories. As a workshop task, he asks them to write their grandparents’ stories and to narrate those stories to their fellows and friends.

For every storytelling activity, Esmael designs a special worksheet with calculated questions. He uses the concepts introduced

within the book for designing these worksheets and after reading books to children, asks the children to answer the questions. Such tasks are doing group and reading-related activities and asking the children to answer the questions in the worksheets proved to be great methods for enhancing children's reading, text comprehension as well as broader social and intellectual skills. The purpose of designing these worksheets is to deepen children's understanding of the concepts of the book and to provide a context for dialogue about the story. There are numerous activities that he performs besides reading stories with children as they have proved to develop children's skills in a diverse area. Esmael has a keen eye for finding the proper activities

the children are interested in. Most of these activities are social, artistic, and cultural activities that were already practiced in villages including painting, making handicrafts, making dolls, performing shows and dramas, playing a variety of local and new games, etc.

Activity in the form of a popular campaign

Azarinejad the reading promoter acts as a volunteer in all his social and storytelling activities. He pays part of the cost of the storytelling activities for the children through his income and the main part of the expenses are covered by the contribution of donators; he is specifically reluctant to demand or accept any form of centralized budget for his activities.

نام و نام خانوادگی (یو) نقول اسم کتاب کلاس چهارم روستا شهر دینوری
سجاد ذی شهاب کمان اشفاق دینوری

۱. در کتاب ماهی رنگین کمان و یک اتفاق دیگر، ماهی ها چه ویژگی داشتند؟ ماهی ها رنگ داشتند.
هر کدام یک رنگی جزو خندان و بقران رو برت خود داشتند.

۲. ماهی ها با ماهی راه راه بازی نکردند چرا که کسی با ماهی با بازی کردن که
بوی که نقره ای در چشمش با شکر یک بوی که نقره ای
دندان

۳. علت این که ماهی رنگین کمان پولک های نقره ای خود را به ماهی ها بخشید چه بود؟ بخاطر این است که آن ها چشمش با هم بود و با هم آشنا می شدند ماهی ها با هم بازی می کردند تا حالا شده دوستانت نگذارند با آنها بازی کنی؟ نه

چرا؟ چون ماهی بعضی از ویژگی های آن ها را داشتند و با هم
چه احساسی داشتی. احساس می کنم.

چه کردی؟ کم کم با آن ها با هم دوست شدم.

۵. به نظرت وقتی ماهی ها گذاشتند ماهی راه راه با آنها بازی کند، ماهی راه راه چه با خودش گفت؟
این پولک در چشمش با هم بود و با هم آشنا می شدند ماهی ها با هم بازی می کردند تا حالا شده دوستانت نگذارند با آنها بازی کنی؟ نه

۶. در این داستان چه کسی شجاع بود؟ ماهی رنگین کمان و ماهی نقره ای.
چه کرد که شجاع بود؟ از بسورای بیرون اومد و از ماهی ها خواست که ماهی ها با هم بازی کنند.

۷. در کدام تصویر ماهی ها متحد و با هم بودند؟ در تصویر اول و دوم.

با هم بودند و با هم بازی می کردند تا حالا شده دوستانت نگذارند با آنها بازی کنی؟ نه

آن تصویر را پشت برگه نقاشی کنید

قصه رنگ توپی
برای کودکان سیزده ساله



He has never lost hope in all this, and the shortcomings or poor facilities have never prevented him from taking the path he has taken: “There’s a sense of hopelessness, there are financial difficulties, but I haven’t lost my hope,” he said to *The Guardian*. “My hope is these kids, so long as I can encourage them to read books, I’ll remain hopeful. So long as I see kids with books in their hands, hope will be there.”

Interactive Reading

Esmaeel Azarinejad considers reading to be the only path of village children to knowledge and power. His approach to reading books with children is based on the active participation of all children, even engaging their families in the reading process and asking them to perform various activities as they may like. In this pattern, the child has an active role in reading and considers herself the main and most active audience of the book. Azarinejad strengthens children’s critical thinking skills by asking deep and fundamental questions



and introducing them to the deeper and more profound layers of the text through conversations with children during and after reading.

One of the characteristics of the storytelling activities of Azarinejad is the insistence on the active participation of children in various activities that are discovered and designed according to the needs and interests of children themselves. According to him, rural children are weak in reading, and that storytelling and reading aloud is a good starting point that can lead to developing and strengthening their reading skills.

The development of storytelling children

Azarinejad's storytelling activities in the last six years have had a great and feasible impact on children. He believes that there is a big difference between someone who has read a book and

someone who has not read the same book: “They keep returning and asking for more books and participation in reading programs, this means they are welcoming the move. Real and effective education does not need to be in haste and rush. Sometimes we see the effect of these reading activities years later. Very much like the impact that different people had on my life.” Therefore, a more accurate assessment of the extent and quality of his storytelling activities can be measured at least a couple of years later. When these children reach adulthood and the seed sown in their minds blossoms and grow in knowledge and power: “I see how oak trees break the boulders of the Zagros mountains, they germinate and they are a blessing for the people of my home for centuries. This simple observation does not let me be disappointed with my storytelling children.”

Rose Meets Mr. Wintergarten

“I traveled to a village and read a story to the children. The next year, when I visited the village again, I saw a boy who remembered in detail what we had read before. He said, ‘Mr. Azarinejad, do you remember last year you read *Rose Meets Mr. Wintergarten*¹ for us?’”

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1. An internationally acclaimed book by Bob Graham translated into many languages including Persian.



Azarinejad has both talent and power in his storytelling skills and working with children. He believes that it is God's grace and the work of his own family that has caused him to act on such a noble cause. Much of his storytelling skills have been acquired through deep studies and discussions together with many experts in the field of children's books, he has always benefited from the guidance and advice of experts, and he has strengthened his skills through attending several educational and research events and workshops.

Educating Teachers, Empowering Families

In the suburb of Dehdasht City where Esmaeel is active, some complex social problems exist and almost every family and every child in a way or another, is struggling with one form of a social problem. One of the most fundamental problems of such deprived areas is the low motivation of teachers to raise their level of knowledge and skills with new educational approaches. They are often unfamiliar with creative teaching approaches, even not conscious about reading, and with poorly developed imaginations. Esmaeel believes that genuine and deep change and reform can begin at the level of the individual. Therefore, he endeavors to find an effective and friendly relationship with teachers to introduce them to the importance of reading skills and the proper approaches toward doing activities with children. He has set up a virtual network for continuous communication with teachers, through which he sends them lesson plans and receives reports on their activities. In these reports, teachers write the definition, necessity, and feedback of activities: "In the virtual workshop with teachers, I try to first enlighten the teacher's heart, to show how one can love oneself and to



discover the real capacities that are nested within the self. The teacher should be able to create beauty in his or her own life. Only after such a discovery, this cycle can continue its own life to make love pervasive.”

He believes that an important factor that increases the motivation of the teacher is the very consciousness and skills they have on their task. The fact that the teacher should be familiar with the skills to communicate with children to know how to engage the students in various activities to see their development and growth and find material and spiritual satisfaction.

Azarinejad strives to identify creative and capable teachers, provide them with appropriate resources for skills development, and constantly encourage and empower them. Sometimes he organizes workshops for teachers where new books and approaches are introduced.

Esmael Azarinejad believed that at the local level there are enough human resources but they need cultivation and empowerment. Most of these people migrate to larger cities, while if they are educated and become conscious of their capacities and the needs of their communities, they will stay and work for the development of their towns and villages.

A low level of family literacy is the other challenge facing the villages of these areas. In most villages, parents happen to be illiterate. Therefore, the

participation of whole family members in reading programs for children is an effect Azarinejad is searching in his activities. Engaging local communities through reading activities has enabled Esmaeel to empower family members, especially mothers. Besides increasing families' awareness of the importance of children's reading, educating illiterate or low-income families, and also supporting the low-income and disadvantaged people through local entrepreneurship programs, are among the results of this approach. He has often encouraged low-income mothers and heads of households to produce local dolls, create decorative artifacts, or teach their children indigenous arts to maintain their respect, self-esteem, and independence, and at the same time to contribute to their children's education.

Many young mothers in rural and deprived areas are illiterate and families are more concerned with financial problems and basic requirements of life than they are with reading or intellectual development. Those families who are well off and do not have financial uncertainties usually do not emphasize reading and its impact on the child's development. Esmaeel asks the families, especially the mothers, to read stories and engage in cultural and creative activities with their children. Encouraging mothers to do educational and cultural works with their children is a difficult task. So in every village Esmaeel visits, he arranges a friendly meeting with the parents, talks to them,



and engages them in the identification of problems and the search for solutions.

He has encouraged many rural women to make decorative artifacts. This is usually a local art that is on the verge of extinction. He buys their handicrafts and asks them to teach their art to their children. In a tweet, he reported, “She is the mother of four and the head of the household. She is illiterate and may not know the meaning of creativity, but she is creative. Every time he sends decorative artifacts, I enjoy the diversity and beauty of her works. Today I told her I will buy your next products provided that you teach this art to your children and you work together.”

Documenting Reading Activities

Esmaeel Azarinejad is very active on such social networks as Instagram and Twitter and shares his experiences of reading for children. His narratives of his reading activities with the village children are very simple and indeed intimate. They are far away from stereotypes and spectacular pretensions. By narrating these activities, he proves the effectiveness of telling stories to children, and by doing so, he invites others to this benevolent and useful movement. His followers on social media often welcome these narratives and encourage and support his effective activities. Also, publishing and displaying his reading activities is sometimes accompanied by critical dialogues and criticism from the audience, as Esmaeel wears official clergy clothes and does not hide his Islamic adherence, albeit a more dialogic and human version than what is represented in mainstream media. This persistent social media presence has shown to be useful as it both shows the results of reading promotion to a wider audience and attracts



the attention of benevolent people for a donation. The media presence of Esmael also creates unprecedented spaces and opportunities for social dialogue over the methods, approaches, best practices, effects, and general philosophy of reading promotion. Esmael has always welcomed critiques and opinions and in his uniquely dialogic ways has participated in open debates and dialogues as he considers these spaces as a ground for the growth and development of his promotional activities. In these social media presentations, Esmael has his approach as he puts the main focus is on displaying children's activities. He shares paintings, artwork, and handicrafts that are created by children with his audience on social networks. His followers in these social media are a diverse range of people, from experts and activists in the field of child education to audiences who follow his activities in villages out of sheer personal interest. The general feedback is often positive and encouraging. He has also recently launched a podcast channel to share his experiences in telling stories to village children.

The Richest Children of the World

Esmaeel Azarinejad believes that deprivation is not a lack of facilities or money, it is a lack of thinking and creativity that marks real deprivation. He sees proper creativity and planning as the way to escape deprivation and promotes a new approach to educating children in disadvantaged areas by focusing on activities that develop and sustain children's thinking and creativity. This is an approach that is based on respect for the basic human value of children. He avoids receiving cash donations and provision of direct helps to children and their families. Instead of giving stationery or various toys to village children, he devises new approaches toward empowering them to produce local toys using the available facilities. He believes that a rich child is the one who has a storytelling parent. It is a very valuable task for parents to company their children when they depart to borrow books.

Besides, Esmaeel is a passionate activist on repairing and developing rural schools. Sometimes he helps the children to paint the schools to any color they desire and to engage them in school repair campaigns.



Friendship with Nature

In his activities for children, Esmaeel Azarinejad tries



to reconcile children with their natural environments. He believes that land art can foster and develop children's creativity. The child becomes creative with the facilities she or he has at hand and also through carefully designed group activities. According to him, nature is God's most important creation and it is the best platform for education. Nature can inspire creativity, imagination, and a sense of exploration in children. In one of his group activities, he took the children of the village to the mountains to sit in front of the mountains and paint the scene.

Special Library for Children

Esmael Azarinejad has recently set up a special library for children in Dehdasht. In this library, quality books are available to children, and specially designed worksheets are provided with each book. The library also supports reading promotion activities in rural regions.

The mobile library unit visits different villages daily and there are programs for easy circulation of books among the children. The

worksheets of each book are embedded within the book. After the children fill the worksheets, they are carefully scanned and the profile of reading activities of every member is digitally stored.



Candidate of 2018 Popular Face

Formula One, an Iranian television program, nominated Esmael Azarinejad as one of the eleven popular faces of the year in 2018. The purpose of this program is to honor cultural activists and individuals who have been involved in humanitarian and cultural activities.

The judges and the selection committee of the candidates of the popular faces of the year first registered 2,000 influential social figures and then, through two levels of judging arrived at a list of 200 people. The jury consisted of a diverse range of individuals, including artists,

athletes, film and television actors, writers, politicians, sociologists, psychologists, and social activists, who carefully reviewed the portfolios of individuals. Finally, 11 finalists were chosen for the popular vote. Esmael Azarinejad was one of the 11 nominees for the Popular Face Award of the Year for his extensive and creative volunteer actions in the field of education and storytelling for children.



List of Activities

Media Presences

- “Let’s be a candle in the dark,” Interview With *Avaye Khair Mandegar Quarterly*, first issue, summer 2018.
- Attendance in the TV program “It is virtual,” April 2016.
- Attendance in the TV program “Now, the Sun,” 2018.
- Attendance in the TV program “Questioner” on “Challenges of Achieving Educational Justice,” Summer 2019.
- Interview with the Instagram page “Cabina, Center for Innovative Children”, April 2016.
- Interview with “Sar” collection, affiliated to the National Museum of Science and Technology of Iran, on “the role of fiction in child development,” summer 2020.
- Interview with “Jedaal” Internet TV, November 11, 2020.
- “Activities After Storytelling,” interview with Zir Gonbad Kaboud” (Under the Blue Sky), autumn 2020.
- “Let’s Read Fiction,” Dialogue With Ser’a Instagram page, September 2020.
- Participation in the roundtable of the Quarterly Research Journal of Children and Adolescent Literature, Fall 2020.

Selected Educational Workshops

- “Effective educational methods and books and reading for children and adolescents,” popular cultural group “Messenger of Smile,” summer 2019.
- “The Role of Stories in Raising Child Inquiry,” a virtual education course in New Word, New World Cultural Institute for teachers and parents, winter 2020.

- “Storytelling, the key to fostering the religious sense of children and adolescents,” a virtual educational workshop in collaboration with the National Institute of Public Libraries and the General Directorate of Public Libraries of Sistan and Baluchestan, Fall 2020.
- “The Role of Fiction in Learning Life Skills,” a workshop in Hamgram Koodak Cultural Complex, Fall 2017.

Attending conferences, festivals, and public events

- Attendance and presentation of experience in the “First International Conference on Peace and Conflict Resolution,” Faculty of World Studies, University of Tehran, 2019.
- Attending and presenting in the virtual conference “Education is the path to empowerment” School of Sustainable Development, Sharif University Policy Research Institute, May 2016.
- ‘The Darkness Around,’ Lecture at the TEDx event of Allameh Tabatabai University, December 19, 2020.

Awards and recognitions

- Honored in the 21st International Storytelling Festival, Center for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, 2018.
- Celebrated in Center for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, September 2017.
- Finalist in List of Candidates by Jury of ‘Formula One’ TV Program to select the Popular Face of 2018.
- Honored in The Third Festival the Reading Promoters of the Ministry of Culture, 2016.

Notes and Articles

- The Faith of Aboutaleb (AS), Journal of Islamic Theology, 2006.
- Globalization, Moballeghan Magazine, July and August 2005, No. 68 (10 pages—from 104 to 113).

- The Qadianiyeh Sect (Ahmadiyya), Islamic Theology, Summer 2004— Issue 50, ISC (8 pages—from 148 to 155).

Reflection of Activities in The Media

- Interview with *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/28/iran-cleric-Esmaeel-azarinejad-bringing-joy-of-reading-poor-children>
- Story of promoting reading in deprived areas; A religious student who reads stories to children, Mehr News Agency, June 4, 2017. <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/3992602/>
- Interview with Slogan of the year news site <https://shoaresal.ir/fa/news/152512/>
- Mashreq Conversation with Mullah Storyteller of Twitter; 29 March 2019. <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/946952>
- The Religious student who left Qom, the religious students' Announcement, February 2, 2019. <http://www.agahitolab.ir/post/109>
- Interview with Iran Online News Website on the Occasion of Festival of Bibliophile Villages, <http://www.ion.ir/News/405189>
- Minister of Education appreciates Esmaeel Azarinejad, Khabar Online News Agency, November 23, 2020. <https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1446811/>
- Graduate of the University of Religions; Innovative in Publicity, University of Religions, December 3, 2018. <https://urd.ac.ir/fa/cont/8331>
- Interview with Paprika Podcast, Episode 17 <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/id1364972672?i=1000435886574>
- Interview with the Religious Student who left Qom, Shafaqna News Agency, November 19, 2018. <https://fa.shafaqna.com/news/663162/>
- The Storytelling Religious Man (Esmaeel Azarinejad), Saeed Gholampour, *Kheimeh Monthly*, No. 127 (October and November 2018).
- This Isn't Just a Mullah, Insaf News, September 29, 2016, <http://www.ensafnews.com/131307/>
- Azarinejad: School textbook has become thinking-oriented, but not all of our teachers are like this, Pana News Agency, August 23, 2019. <http://www.pana.ir/news/948937>

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