

**A SAGE
Whitepaper**

Is there a reason why reading as a habit is dying?

Teaching-Learning Resources for School Education

Books That Worm into You: Children's Literature for Elementary Classes

INTRODUCTION

In Indian families, parents are heard warning their children not to waste their time reading materials other than their textbooks. However, as a nation we also love to complain about the death of the reading habit. Many children grow up listening to this refrain, "You can read all the novels that you wish to read once your career is made". The implication, of course, is that reading fiction or literature is a waste of time. But it is also an acknowledgement of the power of a good book to draw us in. The chapter begins by attempting a definition of children's literature and then goes on to describe some of the genres and the role played by children's literature in opening a window to the world for children. The focus is the classroom and the relevance of children's literature in the development of literacy in children. Most examples cited here are drawn from student teachers' use of children's literature in the elementary classes where they intern in a teacher education programme.

In a highly competitive world where intelligence and merit are measured by marks or grades, it is, perhaps, understandable that parents would want their children to keep their noses inside their textbooks. However, this also means that children grow up without the humanising power of good books. Moreover, in order to make children lifelong readers who pick up books because they enjoy reading, it is important to catch them young. Deferred read-ing habits will not make readers out of adults!

In most Indian schools, the textbook continues to be the voice of authority and often the only text available for reading inside classrooms. The language classroom also treats the text-book as content that needs to be 'covered' during one academic year, than as a compilation of children's literature offering possibilities of interpretation. Given this context, it is imperative for teacher education programmes in India to offer a course in children's literature. One such programme is the four-year Bachelor's in Elementary Education (B.El.Ed.) degree offered by the University of Delhi. In the second year, student teach-ers read, discuss and analyse children's literature in order to see its connection with literacy and reading for pleasure. In the third and fourth years, when student teachers intern in schools, they discover the power of using good children's literature to enable the students in their elemen-tary classrooms to become readers, writers and critical thinkers. As a teacher educator in the B.El.Ed. programme, most of my classroom insights and anecdotes are based on student interns' experiences with children's literature in the classroom. As a result, this chapter focuses more on children's literature in the classroom and less on the literary qualities of the texts.

WHAT IS CHILDREN'S LITERATURE?

A broad definition of children's literature would include reading material written especially for children and in which children are often protagonists. It covers a whole range from alphabet and number books to novels and encyclopedias published for teenagers or young adults. But then, again, children's literature often forms the guilty pleasure of many an adult!

Not all books written about children are children's literature. The themes or concerns raised in the book might not be appropriate for children even if the protagonist is a child. For instance, *Lord of the Flies* (Golding 1954) is a novel about a group of boys marooned on an island, but it is definitely not a children's book. Similarly, Premchand and Tagore have written several stories with children as central characters, but the concerns in them are mainly adult. For a piece of writing to qualify as children's literature, the concerns and ideas touched upon in the book(s) need to appeal to children, whether or not the protagonist is a child. For instance, ghost stories or comics appeal to children because they are thrilling even when the central character is an adult.

Good children's literature might be simply written but not simplistically written. In fact, many popular children's books are quite complex, but they appeal to the emotional and cognitive sensibilities of a child. A good book evokes powerful emotions in children. It gives children windows through which they can examine their own lives and concerns. Good books enable children to see how others live and also, perhaps, to realise that the concerns of others might not be very different from their own.

Today, children's literature is written specifically for children. However, many books that children have found enjoyable were not always written for them. For instance, *Gulliver's Travels* (Swift 1726) was a political satire but has been read as an adventure book by many generations of children. On the other hand, many children's books, such as *Winnie the Pooh* (Milne and Shepard 1926), have been valued by adult audiences as well.

While children's literature has age-appropriate themes, it often has the same literary qualities as literature written for adults. It is as much an art form. Many children's writers argue against a separate categorisation of children's literature. Other than keeping age-appropriateness in mind, many writers for children have said that they do not always keep in mind that they are writing for children. At this point, it would be important to keep in mind that children do not write children's literature and what they read is also often selected by the adults around them—parents, teachers and librarians. Hence, it is crucial to reflect on what the children bring to the books that they read or have read aloud to them.

Particularly in the context of young readers, children's literature does not include created textbooks to teach decoding or graded readers.

Since notions of childhood have changed, a chronology of children's literature has become more problematic. It is only in the previous century that children came to be accepted as people with their own distinct needs and interests. Children are no longer perceived as half-formed men and women. Childhood is seen as a distinct period with its own cognitive, emotional and social needs. As a result, the purposes and practices of children's literature have changed over a period of time. For a long time, children only had access to material that was written largely for adults. For instance, when second-year students of B.El.Ed. conducted a survey of what children were reading in the upper primary classes (ages 11 to 13), they found that many children read magazines, such as *Sarita* or *Grihshobha*. This was the only reading material they had access to. The notion of children's literature is relatively new in India.

Children's literature has seen tremendous growth in the last few decades in India. More and more publishers are getting into publishing for children, but it does not always mean that what is being published is of good quality. Children's literature has seen a tremendous journey from purely moral tales to more contemporary stories which focus on the complex realities of children's lives. From tales about immigration to urban poverty to dealing with disabilities, children's literature is addressing a number of realistic and authentic themes.

Another, more recent, goal of writers for children is to bring pleasure to the reader. Many of them write to bring to children the thrill of reading for pleasure. Why should only adults read for pleasure and children only read to learn and become better (more moral) persons?

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE CLASSROOM

Reading is one of the most important goals of schooling. We expect children to be able to understand or make meaning from the texts in the classroom. Several studies in India, however, have indicated that a majority of children cannot read at their grade level. A part of the problem lies in the complexity of the task of reading. After all, reading is a cognitive process which is made visible or accessible in the form of very discrete behaviours.

For instance, reading aloud fluently or being able to tell the meanings of difficult words is often regarded as ‘reading’. In other words, the problem lies more in how reading is understood and assessed in the classroom. Students often complete comprehension activities but do not learn to construct meaning. A story or poem in the textbook is hardly ever about the reader. We believe that the text is complete in itself and, hence the entire focus is on the text. As teachers, we ‘explain’ the story or poem to make sure that students have understood the ‘right’ meaning. We ask questions, such as “what is the author trying to say in para 3 or stanza 2?” forgetting that, in most cases, it would be impossible to know the intention of the author. All we can possibly know is what we make of the text as readers.

Moreover, in the classroom, there is a lot of emphasis on the literary qualities of a text. For instance, we assume that reading a poem is an additive process—if students are able to identify all the similes and metaphors and are able to explain them, then they have ‘got’ the poem. This is how we ‘kill’ the poem or story in the textbook. After all, a textbook can also be regarded as a compilation of children’s literature—stories, poems, essays and biographies. As a result of the textbook culture in India, access to books beyond the textbook is still rare.

Most classrooms do not have a reading corner. In fact, many schools do not even have a functional library. In schools which do have a library, books are often kept locked up in cup-boards out of fear that they would be lost or damaged. Even in the best privately run schools, libraries allow children to choose only from a small selection set aside for a class by the librarian. Students do not get to choose a book for themselves, thus preventing them from taking decisions or developing their own taste in reading. Some schools and teachers require students to write a book report to check if the book has been read. Alternatively, teachers might set aside a list of books that need to be read by everyone in the class. Generally, these are ‘classics’ that schools might want children to be familiar with. In real life, we do not pick up a book to read for any of these reasons. In fact, these seem to be sure shot ways to kill the desire to read! We read because we want to make sense of ourselves and the world around us.

LITERATURE OFFERS A WINDOW TO THE WORLD

Language teachers often feel that students do not take their subject as seriously as maths or science. Apart from several other factors responsible for this situation, one significant factor is that literature is not always accorded its due importance. Literature does not seem to have any ‘practical’ outcome. This argument ignores the fact that as human beings we love telling stories. Stories enable us to understand the world around us. While most uses of language enable us to participate in the events around us, certain uses of language enable us to stand aside and become spectators of our lives. In other words, stories enable us to live events through someone else’s eyes. In fact, a story draws children in precisely because they can adopt a spectator’s distance from it. They are free to enjoy it as a non-participatory activity, even if it is a tragedy. Hence, children’s literature enables children to become reflective participants and spectators. Let us consider an example to illustrate this. Sometime ago, I was reading aloud a poem titled ‘Vova’ to my eight-year-old niece, Laima. The poem tells the story of a small boy who gets mad every time if things do not go his way during play. He goes red in the face and walks off in a huff, breaking off with his friends. Laima enjoyed the poem and laughed at how Vova’s friends cure him of his sullenness. On meeting a few days later, Laima pointed to her younger brother and said, “Yeh Vova hai. Sara time ladta rahta hai. (He is Vova. He keeps fight-ing all the time).”

The story of Vova had enabled Laima to recount, interpret and examine the behaviour of her brother and formulate her own response to it. She got the opportunity to step back from the immediate fight to try and comprehend what was happening. Laima brought her own experiences to bear upon the poem she was listening to.



About the Editor & author

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