

Supporting Early Language and Literacy through Children's Literature

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Language is often taught in inadequate and unimaginative ways throughout classrooms in India today. The focus of early language and literacy in these classrooms appears to be the mechanical transfer of script knowledge to children – the endless presentation of *aksharas*, and their combinations into words, phrases, sentences, and finally, passages. Writing in these classrooms takes two forms – copy writing of *aksharas*, words, and “answers” from the board; and dictation given by the teacher to the students. Meaningful conversations and discussions rarely occur. Reading and writing are taught and learned without a sense of relevance or connect between the *word* and the *world* of the child (Friere & Macedo, 1987).

Contemporary policy documents, such as, the National Curriculum Framework (NCERT, 2005) call for a move away from rote and mechanized learning, to a more active involvement of the child, her surroundings, and her imagination in teaching and learning. The Right to Education Act (2009) calls for a library in every school that provides children with access to newspapers, magazines and books on all subjects, including story books. These are all steps in the right direction; but, for these steps to take root, teachers, first of all, need to develop understandings related to how to translate these ideas into practice; and why. Children's literature can potentially play a very important role in enriching many aspects of education. In this article, I consider how children's literature can be used to support language and literacy learning in classrooms.

Why Literature?

To understand why we need literature in early language and literacy classrooms, it is important to reflect on what we mean by terms like “literacy” and “literature”. Let us start with “literacy”. What does it mean to be a “literate” individual? If the goals of literacy education are to teach children to sign their names, or to read and write basic texts with accuracy, then, perhaps, we could continue to teach children mainly *akshara*, word, sentence and passage reading, as described earlier. And stop there. However, it is possible that there is an expanded vision of what it means to be a literate individual. In this expanded vision, it is no longer sufficient that people learn the script in minimalistic ways; we would also like them to *understand* what they're reading and writing, and its *relevance* to their lives. We would like

them to be able to *use, critique* and *navigate* written worlds effectively. If this is our vision of what it means to educate literate individuals for our society, then, suddenly, the use of children's literature in language and literacy classrooms becomes not optional, but central to the curriculum.

High quality literature refers to writing that has imaginative or aesthetic qualities¹ (Lukens, 2013). Literature does not include just story-books; as long as it meets the criteria of "imaginative or aesthetic", even non-fiction books can qualify as literature. Good quality literature introduces children to stories, ideas and issues related to their own lives; as well as to lives and worlds as yet unseen or unimagined by them. It makes available to them the collective knowledge about how individuals and communities have understood themselves and their relationships with each other, with nature, and more. Children can't be expected to live lives that they can't imagine; at the same time, they also need to be provided with opportunities to examine the lives that they currently live. Literature, therefore, plays a crucial role as both a *mirror* and a *window* to the worlds in which children live and are expected to take their place (Galda, 1998). Higher-order thinking skills, comprehension, writing for a purpose and an audience, nuanced understandings of vocabulary and syntax – are all related to rich exposure, wide-reading and deep engagement with literate discourses.

Lukens (2013) says that at its core, literature helps us to struggle with the question, *What is it like to be a complicated human being living in a complicated world?* Is such a question for adults alone? It can be argued that even children, from the very youngest ages, can be provided with opportunities to engage in deeper questions, as long as it is done in developmentally appropriate ways. This would mean that we are able to conceptualize of children as capable thinkers, as able to engage with questions and issues of significance, in partnership with the adults around them. Currently, language and literacy education in Indian classrooms is dominated by textbooks and in some cases, activity cards and worksheets. Many of these materials carry the implicit assumption that younger children are not capable of thinking about complex issues, and therefore, should be restricted to mastering the script, learning small rhymes and reading short passages that are often not notable for their literary quality or their relevance or connect with children's lives. Bringing children's literature into the classroom provides an

¹ If we stretch this definition a little, "literature" could also include oral or performative narratives that share many qualities with written work.

opportunity for teachers and children alike to have rich and meaningful discussions around topics that many young children can resonate with (e.g., friendship, human-animal relationships, family life, loss, etc.). It also provides opportunities for educators to introduce topics of societal/cultural relevance that children may not have thought of on their own. Finally, it introduces children early on to the *aesthetic* dimension of language use – language play, metaphors, art in picture-books, and so on. It allows them to consider: what makes one kind of narration more/less effective than another? How does the style of writing change across genres? And so on.

These kinds of opportunities develop skills, attitudes and knowledge-bases that are central to the expanded vision of literacy that aims to develop literate individuals who are capable of navigating, using, and critiquing written worlds effectively.

What Kinds of Literature are Suitable for Young Children?

Having established the importance of children’s literature in the language classroom, I turn next to the question of what kinds of literature are suitable for young children. There is clearly no objective or “correct” answer to this question. But, first, we would need to develop a common understanding of what we mean by “children’s” literature in the first place. How is this similar or different from “adult’s” literature? There is no clear line of demarcation between “children’s” and “adult’s” literature. In fact, historically, cultural narratives were often shared by adults and children alike. In Indian villages, folk tales, drama, and storytelling performances of various kinds did not distinguish amongst the audience on the basis of their age. Themes that would be considered “difficult” for young children to handle in contemporary societies, such as, violence, sex, death, and loss, were a routine part of many of these sagas. In the West, some of the most enduring “children’s books”, such as *Gulliver’s Travels*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and so on, were not written with children in mind. The commercialized category of “children’s literature” is a relatively recent advent, dating no more than about 200-250 years in the West; and is even more recent in India, becoming somewhat visible in the last 50-60 years. Of course, there are exceptions to this. The original Panchatantra tales were supposedly written exclusively for the education of three princes in approximately the 3rd century B.E. But, consciously creating (and marketing) a sizable body of texts marked as “children’s literature” is connected to a certain modern conception of children and childhoods that separates it from adult life; as well as to access to modern means of printing and distribution, located within a modern economy.

Therefore, when we ask the question: “What kinds of literature are appropriate for young children?”, we need to take as a starting point, the understanding that the conception of who a child is, and what is “appropriate” for a child at a given age are highly subjective considerations that shift across cultures and time.

Next, let’s take up the related question of: Should literature that is selected for very young children (say, Classes 1-3) be different from literature that is selected for older children (Classes 4 and up)? Anyone who has worked with children will agree that all books will not work equally with all age-groups. You cannot read a 450 page novel with complex themes and dense vocabulary to a six-year old, and expect rapt attention from her. Certain developmental considerations will have to be kept in mind while selecting children for younger children. A few of these are discussed here (not exhaustive list).

- ***Length.*** Assuming a slightly shorter attention span for younger readers, we would choose shorter texts and stories for young readers.
- ***Illustrations.*** Picture-books where illustrations and texts together create a narrative, would be a very good choice for younger readers.
- ***Language.*** Should be rich, but accessible to the young child. Some difficult vocabulary can be present, but too many of such words, or very complex syntactic structures can be avoided initially.
- ***Context, Theme and Range of Topics.*** Topics and contexts presented can move gradually from the known to the less familiar. It is important to introduce children both to known and less known worlds; but, themes, characters, etc. can be selected to resonate with young readers.
- ***Engaging Style.*** It goes without saying that the style of the book should be engaging and inviting to young readers and listeners.
- ***Variety of Genres.*** Even the very youngest readers should be introduced to a variety of genres, including, poetry, realistic fiction, fantasy, non-fiction (informational) books, and so on. It is a mistake to believe that informational books are only for older readers. Even two and three year olds would love to see picture books of animals, know the sounds they make, and so on. Six and seven year olds are ready for even more in terms of information.

- **Readability.** If the goal is to have children read these books *independently*, then readability becomes an important factor to consider. However, my recommendation is that we not mix up two different purposes together: (1) to give children exposure to good literature; and (2) to teach them to read independently. If we design children's books based largely on readability considerations, then, the literary quality of the language, narration and illustrations will get severely affected. Rather, we should be prepared to *read literature aloud* to young readers, until they are able to read it for themselves. In the United States, publishers distinguish between "early readers" that are used for teaching children to read independently, from "authentic children's literature". Early readers are designed with readability in mind; children's literature, on the other hand, is created by authors and illustrators who are trying to bring "real" or "authentic" literature to children. Both are important in the early language classroom, but it's best to keep these overlapping categories somewhat separated in our minds and in our classroom practice.

In addition to these considerations, teachers should also *avoid* literature selections that contain weak themes and plot; poor or inappropriate language; biases and stereotypes; and poor quality illustrations and production (NCCL, 2012).

Literature and the Teaching of Morals and Values

Should literature be used to teach children morals or values? Again, there could be varied answers to this question, but here, I will present my viewpoint. I believe that children's literature should play a similar role in the lives of children, as adult literature plays in the lives of adults. Do we, as adults, read literature to learn values? This is possibly not the first thought on our minds when we select books for our own reading. We select books based on interest, availability, theme, author, and various other factors. However, once we finish reading a book, do we learn something as a result of having read it? Most probably, yes. If, as stated earlier, literature helps us to grapple with the question, "*What is it like to be a complicated human being living in a complicated world?*", then, having engaged with a good piece of literature will often leave us enriched in terms of our thinking. Likewise, if we help children to engage meaningfully with high quality literature, it will no doubt enrich their thinking and their lives, but this need not mean that we select literature primarily for the morals or values it conveys. Rather, we could select literature for the potential that it provides for rich thinking and meaning making around

complex issues. As the Guide to Good Books (NCCL, 2012) reminds us, “There is a need to realize that many groups – and their world-view and perspectives – are often ignored in children’s literature. . . . Moral development does not take place simply by being told what is right and wrong, but by being given the opportunity to think about the issue. The collection of books in the library, as a whole, should therefore reflect diversity - different kinds of environments, peoples, events, issues and points of view” (p. 8). Therefore, the aim should be to create an understanding of the human condition through close observation, discussion and commentary; rather than to create black-and-white understandings about “right” and “wrong”.

Learning to Read and Reading to Learn

Can literature be used to support children to “learn to read”? Or, should it be used primarily to teach children to “read to learn”? I believe that this is a *false distinction* created by educators who subscribe to a narrow definition of what it means to “learn to read”. In the expanded definition of literacy that was discussed earlier, learning to read always involves reading to learn. There is no separation between the two. When a child comes to school for the first time, especially a child who is a first-generation school-goer, this child needs to learn not just the mechanics, but also the larger culture of literacy – literate attitudes, values, knowledge and skills. Why should a small child invest so many hours of her life learning to master the written word? What is her interest in doing so, what is its relevance to her life? All of this is a part of “learning to read”, in fact it is a part of “learning to become a reader”, of developing a *literate identity*. Well-chosen and well used literature can help young readers develop a sense of connect with the written word, and with written worlds. It can help children understand the structure of a narrative, of different types of narratives. It can help them understand how language can be used in a variety of ways, for a variety of purposes. It can help them to develop “concepts of print” (Clay, 2000) – how to hold a book; where to begin reading; which direction the print moves in; etc. All this is a part of “learning to read”, and literature can, indeed, support these extensively. Of course, it will also include “reading to learn” – about cultures, places, people, time, and so on. What it will not include is – learning to decode the script. Mastering the script is a very important part of the early language and literacy curriculum. Teachers could follow a “block” approach in planning their language class, where they spend dedicated time teaching children to master the script; they could also use small, easy readers during this time to

give students practice with reading connected texts. It is best that teachers not try to use literature to teach script-level knowledge; in the process, neither will the script be mastered; nor, will the literature remain of sufficiently high quality!

Using Literature in the Classroom: Bringing it All Together

The renowned American educator, Louise Rosenblatt famously said, “Our business seems usually to be considered the bringing of books to people. But books do not simply happen to people. People also happen to books. A story or poem or play is merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols” (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 62). In this last section, I will briefly outline some simple ways in which teachers can bring their students to books, and help them to transform the inkspots into meaningful symbols.

Reading Aloud. Reading Aloud should ideally be an integral part of the daily routine of classrooms. Read Alouds provide an opportunity to introduce children, from an early age, to high quality literature, without worrying about the readability of texts. It also helps create a space in the classroom for productive TALK and discussion around the books, ideas and stories shared. Children are often discouraged from talking in many Indian classrooms. Research, on the contrary, suggests that classrooms that are rich with productive talk around shared ideas, create conditions for children to develop their oral language, vocabulary, comprehension and literary engagement and appreciation. Reading Aloud permits teachers to show how good readers read texts: with expression and intonation; pausing and re-reading when confused; looking ahead or predicting what’s going to come up next; and so on.

Literature Discussions. Whether you read aloud books, or, have older children read them by themselves, it is important to set aside time to develop literary appreciation in the classroom. This can be done through literature discussion time. During this time, we can stop and discuss a text that we have read previously in extended ways. For example, we can analyze the plot; or the characters; or the setting; or the theme of the book in detail. We could discuss the relevance of the book to children’s lives. Or, we could help children to analyze, critique or respond to the text in a number of ways. Young children can respond to the text verbally, or through art, drama, or early, invented writing attempts. Teachers should be aware that there are no “right” or “wrong” responses to texts; children should be allowed to express what they are really experiencing in response to a given text – even if it is disinterest or dislike.

Writing. Writing instruction should be a part of every early language and literacy classroom. Currently, we teach children only to copy-write, spell, and form *aksharas* perfectly. We forget to teach them how to compose in a variety of genres for a variety of audiences and purposes. When composition finally makes an appearance, it does so in higher grades, in highly formalistic forms, and far removed from the child's own desire to express or communicate. The alternative to this is not "free writing", where children are encouraged to write "anything" based on their imagination – without any guidance or feedback from the teacher. Rather, the alternative should be guided writing. To guide the writing of young children, we need to (a) expose them to good models of writing; and (b) free them from the burden of correct spellings and good handwriting while expressing themselves. Spellings and handwriting need to be taught, but not simultaneously with expression; other time slots can be found to focus on these. But, where will we find good models of writing to expose children to? Why, literature, of course! When teachers read aloud and discuss literature with children, they can also dedicate time to analyzing the writing of some of these texts. How did the writer hold our attention there? Build suspense here? Use language to convey mood? And so on. Techniques discussed in class can be used to create pieces of shared writing – where several children (and the teacher) work together to create a single piece of writing; children can also be encouraged to write independently (using art and invented spellings) with guidance and feedback from the teacher. Children can express what they feel about a text; or, they can change a part of the text (for example, the ending; or the point-of-view); or, they can use elements and techniques discussed to create a completely new text. The possibilities are endless!

Integrating Literature with Content Area Instruction. Thematic units can be created, such that, literature related to a certain theme can be read by the class, and linked to content area learning in, especially, EVS. Literature is always *about something*. That "something" can usually be linked quite usefully to the EVS curriculum, for example, study of a particular culture; or, history (e.g., the lives of children a 1000 years ago); or science content (e.g., about weather, seeds, etc.).

Reading Independently. Teachers should also create quiet "reading" times in their classrooms on a weekly basis. An effort should be made to provide children with books of varying kinds (to suit different interests), and varying difficulty levels. Even if young readers cannot independently and correctly read the books, they should be encouraged to leaf through the

books, examine pictures, engage in talk with their friends around what they're seeing, and also be encouraged to take these books home and share them with family and community members. Teachers can ask children to narrate/read stories to willing family members; and also to collect stories from home (family or community folklore, etc.) and bring them back to school. This will encourage not just the reading habit in children, but also serve as a useful channel for building rich and meaningful home-school relationships.

These are just a few ideas for using literature to support early language and literacy instruction; I am sure there are many more. You (the teacher) will discover many such ideas as you work with and experience the power and joy of literature in your classroom, and in the lives of your students!!

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