

# Importance of literature to literacy

Saktibrata Sen and Simmi Sikka<sup>1</sup>

"Children will overcome all sorts of linguistic obstacles...if the alternative world of the story is one that is desirable and comprehensible."

- Aidan Warlow<sup>2</sup>

Narratives have been an intrinsic part of human civilizations since time immemorial. For centuries, humans have often used the power of narratives, as a prime expression, to transmit an idea down the generations, build up an identity, or to give insights to their existence. It is because of the episodic memories that define in many ways how we see ourselves, build our identities and our narratives of what we are.

Once human societies invented the writing systems, the task of reading came to the forefront amidst controversies and concerns, when an overall emphasis on orality gave way to written texts. But stories, still maintained their position of being core to the human heart, an inexplicable way in which we see and understand our larger selves.

Since humans are natural storytellers, many studies suggests that, processing information predominantly through narrative pathways comes naturally to us.

This is just why amidst our recent concerns with literacy, where we are so seriously discussing underachievement in literacy and systemic solutions to those, that we must be discussing children books. Variety of meaningful texts or literature, not as a 'good to have' but as a 'must have', should be included in the basic minimum provisions for literacy acquisitions.

Now, how should books for early readers look like? Is a commonsense approach enough for selecting good books for early readers? Or while creating books for this level, are there things that we need to keep in mind?

Well, it will be good to articulate, at the beginning of these questions, our beliefs and positions on how children learn to read. We must acknowledge that literacy is a process of meaning making, where the meaning is initiated through an interaction with the text and gradually, as an independent reader, the search for meaning can go beyond the confines of the text. Thus, Literacy needs to straddle two pathways in our brain, namely the orthographic and the language domains, that too simultaneously.

Psycholinguistic research indicates that meaning is not simply transmitted, but is constructed by the reader when he or she interacts with the text. Therefore, a reader's background, past experience, and purpose, are important in constructing meaning.

Children's literature builds on background, past experience, and interests of the learner. The literature suggests that the use of children's books in the reading and language art curricula has many benefits. First, the use of children's literature has been shown to facilitate language development. It also has positive effects on reading achievement, as well as on the acquisition of reading skills and strategies (Minardi, 1994).

This means, that depending on how children negotiate with the written word, based on the complexity of the language and the complexity of the orthography, there has to be a variety of texts in the classrooms. Stories or real texts, not only help children learn the mechanics of reading, but also motivate them to read a little beyond their levels of 'reading'. And thus, a variety of texts in the classroom must be an integral part of a child's literacy journey.

Stories in various writing styles and literary genres exposes early readers to a substantial range of language uses, which implicitly gives their language skills meaningful contexts and dimensions. Variety of rich text not just gives opportunities to enhance their linguistics, but also overlaps and intersects with areas of cognition, visual literacy, critical-logical thinking, problem-solving, metacognition and many more.

<sup>1</sup> Room to Read India Trust

<sup>2</sup> Editor, The Cool Web: Pattern of Children's Reading

Children's literature encourages both high-level thinking and learner involvement, important in motivating students to read (Heald-Taylor, 1989).

The skills that children are learning while reading stories, of evaluating, analysing and processing one's understanding of text, then can be applied to any content they encounter in the future. These skills become their long-lasting understandings for acquiring any new knowledge or learnings.

Books are a mirror that reflects the self, community, cultural heritage, their history and help children build their identities along with a sense of belonging. They are also a window to other cultures; encouraging acceptance of diversity in people, their feelings and viewpoints.

Children develop empathy, socio-emotional intelligence, creativity and imagination. Reading varied texts pushes them to think deeper, develop their own opinions, make choices, but most importantly it allows them to accept some difference in opinion. Their acceptance of diversity and understanding of inclusion initiates children's personality development and interpersonal skills in this increasingly global world.

So, how should books for early readers look?

Narratives, for beginning readers, that rely more heavily on visuals than text encourages formative interactions with literature. The pictorial nature of the stories for early readers, like wordless and picture books, can be an excellent tools for teaching comprehension reading strategies, at the initial stages of literacy acquisition.

Wordless picture books can be effectively used to build a positive reading experience among emergent readers. "Wordless picture books are excellent stimuli for oral and written language" (Norton, 2010). When exposed to wordless books children are able to analyse the visuals and develop their own interpretation of the story, strengthening their cognitive functions, ability to form opinions on their own and to express themselves through language in summarising the storyline.

Picture book communicate stories through a series of visual with minimal text. Unlike other narratives, the text in picture books is undetailed and is dependent on the accompanying visuals for specific meaning and import of the story and the plot. It is often assumed that pictures are easier to interpret than words, but even the simplest of picture books requires complex interpretative skills wherein understanding of text, as both verbal and visual language, is important to comprehend the storyline.

Although picture books may seem fairly simplistic, they still can have all the elements of a good literature. Telling stories in ways children can understand might mean distilling various concepts and ideas down to their essence, but the messages that these books carry can still be complex and meaningful. Simplicity in diction, language and writing style, as children are learning to read, might be a necessity, but the subject or topic that they deal with can still have depth with all the emotions, expressions and conflict.

In early years, children's interaction with visually rich reading material seems to give them the reason, meaning, pleasure and motivation to the process of reading. Reading skills and habits of reading are more likely to be sustained when children are motivated and are enjoying the process of reading.

It is thus imperative to ensure a collection of books, for each stage of the continuum, that allows children to progress from simple to complex texts with appropriate challenges as they progress through various stages of their reading skill development.

The recommended collection of books for young readers should be very carefully selected.

Narratives, especially some of the traditional stories and folktales, which contain age-old stereotypes and inaccuracies about history or certain cultural groups can be very damaging in perpetuating stereotypes if we are not careful in choosing the books for our classrooms and libraries.

Quality children literature should find its way into the hands of early readers, which is able to satiate their curious and imaginative minds. Books that let children explore the world through fiction, fantasy and imagination, allowing them to relate these to their own lives, reflect on them, and also deepen their understanding about the realities around them, past or present. Learn to negotiate available information to build their identity, deal with their situation or problems, build on their knowledge, form opinions, interpret and interact with the world. Stories that can expand their horizons, introduce them to worlds they may have never seen or heard of, visit new places, meet different people and cultures.

Research has shown that we learn best in the languages we speak most fluently. (MIT Linguistics Prof. Michel DeGraff, 2015)

Children, in early years, are able to communicate and learn better in their native language. Given the multicultural and multilingual environment in our classroom, an ideal book collection should ensure books in children's native languages. Narratives in their languages and cultures will facilitate participation from all children. They will also support in children transiting smoothly from native language to the language of instruction.

Literature has the power of building positive experiences and personal fulfilment, where children pick up many things subliminally while reading through a story.

Effective use of literature with appropriate pedagogic methods, to enrich linguistic abilities and meaning making among young children, has immense possibilities which still needs to be explored to its fullest potential.

## References

- Katherine Sublett Minardi (1994). *Using Children 's Literature: An Approach to Teaching Reading*. University of North Florida
- Donna E. Norton (2010). *Through the Eyes of a Child: An Introduction to Children's Literature*
- Heald-Taylor, G. (1989). *The Administrator's guide to whole language*