

**IMPACT OF READING ON THE ENHANCEMENT OF
COGNITIVE SKILLS AND CREATIVITY IN CHILDREN**

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Abstract

Child development is closely tied to cognitive abilities, communication skills, inventiveness, and the capacity to conceive and share ideas. It has been noted that children who engage in reading from an early age tend to have enhanced cognitive functions and experience better mental well-being as they approach their teenage years. However, the interest in reading among children is waning due to the allure of digital gaming and the use of various electronic devices. This article delves into the effects of reading on children, arguing that it develops empathy, curiosity, knowledge, and social skills. It further explores how different genres and themes in children's literature play a role in enhancing imagination and cognitive skills.

Keywords: *Child Psychology, Cognitive abilities, Imagination, life- skills, Mental health*

Reading, speaking, writing, and listening are the four skills that are essential for developing effective communication. While the learners acquire speaking and listening through exposure to the environment in which a certain language is used, writing and reading are developed consciously by caregivers, parents, and teachers. "Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man"(Bacon, 2014, p.159) is true for children and early learners as much as adults. Familiarization with reading begins in its earliest stages with picture books, which children are exposed to by their parents. Bedtime stories not only build a bond between the parent and the child but also create a world of imagination and fantasy for children inhabited by their favourite characters from fairy tales or mythology. They learn language skills, acquire the ability to empathize, feel the characters' pain and joy, and build their own little world. The significance of reading cannot be over-emphasized, but it is imperative to mention its long-lasting impact on the development of children into adolescence and young adulthood. However, with the onset of digital entertainment and parents' busy schedules, reading aloud to children has been replaced by audiobooks or animated shows on television. It is not uncommon to see young children playing with mobile phones and iPads and juggling with smart television sets; they are adept with these devices without being taught to do so. Such exposure of children to these devices is inevitable, but an alarming matter of concern is their lack of touch with the world of books and the richness of lifelong learning that reading can offer.

Reading is the process of constructing meaning from written texts. It is a complex skill requiring the coordination of a number of interrelated sources of information. Children learn to associate letter patterns with the respective phonetic sounds by active listening and through repeated

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narration of the same story; this leads to word recognition and the ability to comprehend the meaning of text. Research studies have identified how reading aloud by parents leads to reading habits in children that foster a love of books and storytelling. This is, however, not a standard practice, as it is determined by the culture and the environment to which the learner is exposed. Its development is influenced by the necessary exposure given by the parents at home, the education imparted in kindergarten and early grades, and opportunities and social support for developing effective skills during their growing years. Text comprehension depends upon a reader's prior knowledge, experience and attitudes; meaning is constructed by linking what he reads to what he knows.

The environment provided by the parents at home is crucial in children's development of reading as a skill and a hobby. Formal school teaching further enhances children's ability to read and comprehend. Gradually, their vocabulary builds, and they learn to formulate their thoughts in sentences and not merely through gestures or monosyllables. However, it is disheartening to see how, despite its life-long impact, the curriculum in most schools in India is not designed to develop reading as a skill which needs to be cultivated for a child's cognitive, imaginative, and overall development. It is a life skill that determines a child's success in school, life, and professional development. NEP 2020, in India, reiterates the importance of the following skills:

Reading, writing and numeracy are always believed to be the foundational skills; without being able to read, write well and do basic calculations a child cannot progress in the education system and eventually in life... A good foundation of literacy and numeracy skills has a positive impact on the learning of the child in senior classes and also develop a child's interest in learning. Lot of efforts have been taken at national and state levels to help children and teachers in developing a strong foundation of language and mathematical skills at early stage (*National Education Policy 2020*)

Education is an investment in the human resource. Investment in education is necessary for the development of a society, a country's self-reliance depends on the building of its citizens, for which education at the basic level and the vocational and advanced levels plays a crucial role. (*Investment in Education - an Overview*). Psacharopoulos (1982) also emphasizes the same idea:

Human capital is created and the quality of human input in production is significantly improved by spending on education. This is why countries, particularly those with low per capita incomes, invest such a large proportion of their budgets on education— and why, when the state does not, individuals do. It is highly rewarding, both to society and to the individual. It is difficult to measure all these rewards; many, such as the benefits to society of a better electorate or a more informed consumer body, though tangible, are quantitatively elusive. But the measurable

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evidence alone is sufficient to demonstrate sizable financial rates of return to investing in education (p.39)

Education is the cornerstone of a country's growth and prosperity. As the Government of India has outlined in NEP 2020, there is an urgent need to revamp the educational system right from the foundational years, which can be achieved by working at five levels: Curriculum Revamping; Pedagogical Innovation; Restructuring of the Teacher Education Program; Revisiting Assessments; Administrative Support

This paper argues that adequate attention needs to be given to developing reading skills in young children, apart from writing and numerical skills, so that they are geared to becoming lifelong learners who exhibit natural curiosity to learn more, ask more questions and learn to find answers through reading. As an English teacher, I have noticed that there is an alarming need to sensitise young students about the need to read more extensively and not rely solely on distilled information received through social media and hearsay so that they can have a worldview which would enable them to make more informed choices and decisions in life. And the need to develop reading as a habit and a hobby needs to be cultivated right at the beginning of a child's education from the formative stages.

Children's Literature

Children's Literature includes folklore, fantasy, culture-specific mythology, ballads, rhymes, and picture books that explain scientific concepts such as the animal kingdom, the universe, and the planets. Stories have travelled through time to enrich generations with values, beliefs, imagination, and creativity. "Children's literature still plays a crucial part in education as it provides knowledge and entertainment, representing a typical example of "edutainment"" (Pulimeno et al., 2020) "As an area of research and teaching, children's literature encompasses all genres, formats and media, all periods, movements and kinds of writing from any part of the world" (Reynolds, 2011, p.2). This form of literature has received significant academic thrust as it is the first form of discursive knowledge that children are introduced to. There has been an increased awareness among parents about picking and choosing appropriate literature for young readers.

Children's Literature is one of the earliest ways through which young readers hear and read stories. Stories help to build vocabulary and attitudes, reflect the structure of society, and mirror past and present cultures. Retellings of traditional tales expose and critique the original stories to interpret the world as per the evolution of ideas and identities. For example, a traditional fairy tale may represent a hapless princess who waits for the charming prince to rescue her from some magic spell or evil entanglement. However, a modern retelling of the story may give the female more agency and power; they may be more action-oriented and display decision making. Such a shift is deliberate and prompted by the changing ethos of a culture that values independent women.

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According to Reynolds (2011), Children's literature contributes to social change through a dialogue between the old and the new ways of thinking, leading to the ideas of equality and inclusion in young minds. It is a rich source of cultural transformation and can potentially raise generations that are well-informed, sensitive, and aware of the world around them. "A good story makes a connection with the reader. The characters become almost as real to children as people they know. Stories have tremendous power. They reach children's hearts and minds and help them understand themselves and the world in which they live" (Feeney & Moravcik, 2005, p.20). Pulimeno et al., 2020, explain the idea in detail:

It is known that stories by reproducing fictional situations that match with children's real problems allow them to feel comfortable and safe in difficult circumstances, ensuring emotional security and providing healthier ways to deal with internal struggles, life adversities and stressors. Story-tales compensate what young people may lack, by presenting them positive patterns of behaviours and constructive models through the characters they could identify with. (p.13-23)

The form and format of children's literature have undergone a massive shift with the emergence of new media, such as games and programs available on mobile phones and other digital devices. Stories have been adapted for film, television, and the radio; literary characters or superheroes inspire a whole array of toys, stationery, and clothes. The seemingly innocent toys and stories for children are culturally coded and academically constructed for children's consumption. Parents are responsible for giving their children the necessary exposure and encouragement to learn to read from a young age and not equate reading with a tedious task and the pressure of securing high marks at school. These days, children are made to join multiple hobby classes, including sports, abacus classes for numerical skills, music, and dance classes to keep them creatively engaged. Somehow, reading remains an underestimated skill, though it has been found in multiple studies that children who read for pleasure at a young age grow up as happier and more confident adolescents with the ability to articulate and express ideas and a natural tendency to enquire and be curious about the world.

Cognitive Abilities in Children

Cognitive ability refers to mental capability which involves reasoning, problem-solving, planning, abstract thinking, comprehension, and experiential learning (Gottfredson, 1997). Children are never too young to be read to. In fact, some mothers start reading to their children before birth (Marshall, 1988, p.19). Studies indicate that unborn babies hear their mothers and react to their voices (McElroy, 2013; Vogteline et al., 2013). Spending quality time reading with children develops warm parent-child bonding and improves children's chances of success in school. Regarding the value of reading to children, Marshall (1988) asserts:

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Unfortunately, not all parents read to their children on a regular basis. First, not all parents read. Also, some parents must work more than one job, leaving little time to read to their children. Others have the time and ability to read aloud yet do not see the advantages—both affective and cognitive—of reading to children (p.19).

Margaret Marshall (1988) lists the benefits of reading in children, some of which include escaping into a fantasy world, cognitive development, vocabulary building, familiarity with life situations through stories, improved attention, becoming aware of feelings and emotions and learning how to cope with these, growing awareness about their heritage and other cultures, increased ability to memorise by learning to recite rhymes (p.20).

Psychologists have defined the development of 'personhood' as a "continuous relational context in which infants and young children develop their earliest understandings of who they are, who others are, and how to relate to other people" (Damon et al., 2006 p.24). Personality development in a child takes place by participating in shared activities. A chapter by Ross A. Thompson (2006) encapsulates how the conceptual foundation of thinking and understanding occurs in childhood and develops as one grows. Thompson explains this further:

If early childhood establishes the foundations for the development of social cognition, moral judgment, and self-understanding of the years that follow, then relationships and other influences experienced in the early years set the context for the growth of an empathic, humanistic orientation toward others, balanced self-concept, capacities for relational intimacy, social sensitivity, and other capacities conventionally viewed as achievements of middle childhood and adolescence (p.25)

The foundational childhood years are crucial in developing cognitive abilities that gradually develop through observation, parent-child bonding, and socialization with adults and peers. Storybooks provide a very congenial avenue for developing the necessary warmth and cosiness that bring children closer to their parents.

Young children can process the stories they hear "because their inquiries about animals, people's beliefs, or God provoke the conversations that inform them, and as they attempt to juxtapose their current conceptions with what they learn" (ibid., p.40). Children's comments and queries lead to conversations and discussions through which they develop a deeper social and emotional understanding. Children like to imitate adults and are often seen impersonating caregivers as they play with their siblings or with toys and dolls. They narrate the same story during their playtime, and it is fascinating to see how their stories also adhere to the logical sequence of what they heard; they even imitate the tone, articulation, and expressions, hence displaying the power of 'learning by doing'. Children also acquire social skills, learn to regulate emotions and behaviour, gain self-

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confidence, build trust in others, and develop social and emotional understanding and well-being. Hearing a story in a group at school helps to build a sense of comradeship in children and gives them a common ground for sharing feelings, reactions, fears, and joys. Children's literature is very crucial for the development of the child as a social being, and it could be introduced in the form of books, animations, and films. Reading storybooks leads to developing a key life skill which has far-reaching benefits throughout their lives.

Creativity and Imagination

Frank Serafini and Lindsey Moses (2014) opine that reading allows children to develop their imagination and creativity, which an otherwise standardized method of teaching and evaluation dampens. Reading books helps children develop a sense of wonder and amazement that can last throughout their lives. The images of characters from fairy tales, like Cinderella and Rapunzel, remain deeply etched in children's minds, like the rhymes they learn at school or the roles they may enact of their favourite models from the books they read. Such experiences become a part of their memories of a happy childhood and help to kindle their creativity and imagination. Reading aloud triggers their curiosity and develops their ability to visualise the images they read about in the books. Reading for pleasure also allows them to lose themselves in the books, relate to the character's adventures, trials, and excitement, and enjoy the hilarious situations they find themselves in. It becomes sheer enjoyment when children discover books that support their creative abilities and amuse them with funny incidents.

Dere (2019) maintains that creativity is essential for the preschool curriculum. Creativity is the "procedure to create original things" (p.652), and teachers play a key role in sharpening this ability by engaging the learners to imagine and explain their ideas through various activities. Children's individual responses should be appreciated in an inclusive environment. This builds their creativity, power of imagination and confidence. "Activities such as play activities, drama activities, and early literacy activities also improve the creativity. In addition, it can be said that the rich stimulating environment that is created in the class and that supports creativity affects the creativity of the children positively." (Dere, 2019, p.653). Creativity can be encouraged in children in a supportive environment, using suitable educational processes, books, and study material.

Reading a variety of works available in the form of Children's literature, picture books, stories or watching films adapted for young children triggers curiosity in children and provokes them to ask questions, which should be encouraged, as it is a sign of a curious mind that wants to know more and more. "The individual must have the freedom to explore ideas, question, and construct meaning. If learning is to be a process of inquiry, then it must focus on questions, not just on answers. Learners must be

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free to follow new leads and to question public knowledge. They must have an opportunity to explore questions, as well as to construct and confirm resolutions collaboratively” (Suparmi, 2014, p.221).

Through their exposure to multiple situations in the storybooks that children read, they learn about problem-solving skills and the ability to persuade through reason and rational arguments. They also get inspired and motivated by following the examples of their favourite characters in the books they read. Parents are often found citing examples from myths and stories that children can relate to, it encourages them to do better and to emulate the values that the characters exhibit. A wonderful fantasy world is also created in the child's mind as fantastic descriptions of an imaginary world trigger their imagination. It inclines them naturally to imagine and express it through drawing or writing or by narrating their tales to their peers, parents, or siblings. Learning, therefore, takes place in a conducive environment, and it remains a fun activity and not a tedium that children would avoid. “Imagination is a cognitive process used to generate new ideas from old, not just in the service of creativity and fantasy, but also in our ordinary thoughts about alternatives to current reality...Imagination makes new things out of old parts. It is an act of generating, from bits of old knowledge, new ideas, and new possibilities” (Kushnir,2022).

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), the Russian Psychologist best known for his work on psychological development in children, defines imagination as:

Any human act that gives rise to something new is referred to as a creative act, regardless of whether what is created is a physical object or some mental or emotional construct that lives within the person who created it and is known only to him...The brain is not only the organ that stores and retrieves our previous experience, it is also the organ that combines and creatively reworks elements of this past experience and uses them to generate new propositions and new behaviour. (pp.7-9)

Vygotsky identifies two distinct types of activities through which human thoughts are manifested. One is reproductive, in which an individual uses traces of memory of previous experiences to create something, “our brain proves to be an organ that retains our previous experience and facilitates the reproduction of this experience” (ibid., p.8). and the other is combinatorial or creative activity, which includes “activity that results not in the reproduction of previously experienced impressions or actions but in the creation of new images or actions” (ibid., p.8). The brain not only retrieves previous experiences but reconfigures past experiences and uses them to generate new ideas. Vygotsky further defines imagination as: This creative activity, based on the ability of our brain to combine elements, is called imagination or fantasy in psychology...In everyday life, fantasy or imagination refers to what is not actually true, what does not correspond to reality, and what, thus, could not have any serious practical significance. But in actuality, imagination, as

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the basis of all creative activity, is an important component of absolutely all aspects of cultural life, enabling artistic, scientific, and technical creation alike (p.9).

Children can combine elements from their experience of life through their reading to produce something new. They combine the old in new ways which, according to Vygotsky, is the basis of creativity and imagination.

There is an increased awareness of the impact of reading on the mental framework of children, and it is important that multicultural education should be imparted in schools. "Inclusion of characters and stories from other cultures in textbooks, and even school integration policies are attempts to make schools places where tolerance, patience, appreciation, and friendship among children of different backgrounds and cultures are fostered" (Razinski & Paddock, 1990, p.576). Literature has the potential to change minds and people's hearts. The authors further elaborate: Literature presents readers with new worlds, new ideas, new options - stuff to reflect upon and to use to better themselves as people, as well as readers. In the context of an environment that promotes interpersonal caring, the development of prosocial behaviors and attitudes, selflessness, and citizenship, teachers and children can use literature to explore and act upon their cultural values and beliefs (p.577).

Conclusion

Children's literature is most worthy of serious attention as a literary form. People read these books while their minds are still impressionable, and it has a long-lasting impact on future generations' attitudes and belief systems. It has become one of the key areas of academic research because "concurrent with the rise of women's studies and cultural studies, children's literature has been making its way back into the halls of academic respectability in the last thirty-five years" (Nel, 2008, p.23).

In recent times, Children's literature borrows from multiple disciplines, encompassing issues like ecology, gender, class, race, and colour. It informs the readers about facts pertaining to history, culture, geography, the universe, and the animal kingdom. Picture books also give children a sense of art and aesthetics. It helps them to understand themselves and others better, making them more empathetic and sensitive to people around them. They learn to appreciate human differences and, through group learning, adopt pro-social behaviour. Representation of children in stories also helps children develop an enhanced self-concept and pride in themselves. It can be concluded that exposure of suitable literature to children aids their growth as self-reliant, independent, responsible, and empathetic adults. It builds their imagination and creativity and enables them to live fuller lives as children and adults because reading as a skill and a hobby ensures lifelong dividends. As parents and teachers, it is essential to give children a suitable environment so that their innate

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abilities are sharpened, and education aims at the holistic development of children right from their formative years.

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