

# Teaching Children's Literature: It's Critical!

Prachi Kalra | [prachikalra@yahoo.com](mailto:prachikalra@yahoo.com)

Prachi Kalra teaches in the Department of Elementary Education at Gargi College, University of Delhi. Her areas of interest are pedagogy of language, literacy and children's literature. She has recently submitted her Ph.D. on storytelling for critical pedagogy.

## Teaching children's literature: It's critical! (2nd ed.).

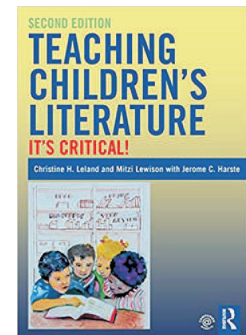
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This book brings together children's literature and its use in critical literacy for elementary and middle school children. As such, it is relevant for all those who value and use children's literature—children, teachers, teacher educators and even parents. Each chapter is developed around theoretical "principles" of critical literacy, besides offering suggestions for working with diverse learners, using technology for multi-modal reading and ideas for assessment.

The book is particularly relevant in our country because it brings into focus how children's literature can enable children to become critical thinkers. Lately, there

has been some public discourse on the value of children's literature in the school curriculum, and the need for classrooms to go beyond textbooks to support children in becoming readers and writers. However, there is less clarity on how a print-rich classroom can effectively use children's literature in a "socially conscious fashion". For both teachers and teacher educators, this book takes the discourse beyond merely making children's literature available in the library or classroom. It emphasizes that we need to focus more on dynamic print-rich classrooms which promote enjoyment of books across the curriculum, and literacy practices which enable young readers to dig deeper for meaning.

The introductory chapter focusses on the conceptual framework of the book. The authors distinguish between "real" reading and reading instruction. The former uses authentic literature with the aim of promoting enjoyment and making a personal connection with books. Reading instruction, on the other hand, pays more attention to teaching skills, finding the correct answers and remembering the information contained in the book. The chapter also presents an instructional model of critical literacy which includes personal reading, critical social practices (such as disrupting the commonplace and taking on multiple perspectives), and taking a critical stance to dig deep and become reflexive readers. The authors are careful to point out that the most important mantra for creating passionate readers is enjoyment, for which it is important to enable children to select from a range of books.

The second, third and fourth chapters focus on literacy practices that promote enjoyment of reading. Chapter 2 highlights the importance of reading aloud at home and in the classroom. The authors are careful to point out that this is not the read aloud which often happens in the classroom when children take turns to read out sections of a textbook and the teacher checks them for fluency and pronunciation. In authentic reading, when parents, teachers and older siblings or peers read aloud from a book, it enables children to develop a "readerly identity" as individuals interested in books and capable of taking multiple perspectives and responding to books in many ways. In India, as reading aloud finds greater legitimacy in the classroom, this chapter will enable teachers to select the right books to prepare for reading aloud. The authors emphasize that the most important value added by reading aloud is the element of "fun". What kills the fun of reading is the constant emphasis by the school on skills-based work-sheets, testing and teaching to the test. The chapter also includes suggestions on

follow-up activities, working with linguistically diverse children and assessing children's progress.

The next chapter underlines the importance of teaching how to read using children's literature. Children who learn to read through literature become savvy readers, who know what they enjoy reading. The authors contrast phonics-based reading instruction with emergent literacy practices to show that children who have a few books at home benefit a lot from literature-based reading instruction. A critical transactional model of reading includes the four cueing systems—semantics, syntax, graphophonemics and pragmatics or language as social practice. Besides this, a critical perspective encourages children to examine issues of power in books. This chapter also emphasizes the importance of making reading-writing connections, extending the print to include environmental print, using the Language Experience Approach and creating translingual books for diverse language learners. The authors discuss the reasons why basal or leveled readers, that are based on a formula, do more harm than good.

What kind of books lead to critical literacy in children? In chapter 4 the authors answer this question by underscoring the importance of "books about social issues, multicultural experiences and international stories and global events" in the reading corner. Such books invite conversations about fairness and justice and question the positioning of "otherness". They are springboards for digging deeper into social issues and perspectives. In this context, the authors also discuss the relevant issue of "authentic" multicultural literature. However, what is missing is the equally valid issue of the literary qualities of multicultural texts; besides being authentic, they must also tell a good yarn to engage the reader. The chapter does not discuss this. There is a list of sources

of multicultural literature and suggestions for graphic novels and books on Afghanistan, to give an example. The authors recommend the use of bilingual books for linguistically diverse children.

Chapter 5 discusses how older children (5th Grade onwards) can be invited to linger in the text, to dig deeper for meaning as they understand different perspectives. The authors are careful to point out that besides socially relevant texts, any kind of children's literature including fairytales can offer opportunities for critical language study. The chapter offers many suggestions on how readers can be encouraged to unpack texts, look for counter-narratives, challenge stereotypes and read against the frame of the text. Most importantly, this chapter describes how literature discussions can become more inclusive, with the teacher sharing interpretative authority with students.

The next chapter elaborates on conducting discussions around literature. Literature circles can be made more inclusive through partner reading, open-ended questions and by assigning different roles to children. The most crucial aspect of Chapter 6 is its description of text sets—a set of books and other resources to explore a specific topic. Children become "text analysts" by challenging the neutrality of the text sets and analyzing how they provide different perspectives on the same topic. Since literature studies can have several critical literacy goals, the authors discuss ten goals and classroom practices which can enable teachers to achieve these goals.

In the 7th Chapter, the authors extend literature circles across the curriculum to ensure that students are not merely passively receiving information. As students conduct focussed studies into various topics, they devise creative ways to take action on the in-depth inquiries that they have conducted. Author and illustrator studies and genre studies

enable students to become "detectives" and dig deeper for meaning making.

Chapter 8 elaborates on the process of "transmediation" to connect language with other forms of knowing, such as art and music. This chapter is particularly relevant in recent times when multi-modality has extended the borders of literacy. There are several vignettes, which explain how digital, spatial, visual, musical and dramatic modes of responding to literature enable children to have their voices heard. Process drama, for instance, can really invite students to step into the text and enact alternate interpretations.

Chapter 9 is particularly relevant in the Indian context, where the teaching of stories and poems serves the instrumental purpose of passing down morality or teaching discrete skills of language. The authors point out that complex books on social issues lead to amazing conversations in class. Teacher self-censorship (sometimes because the book belongs to a popular genre such as the supernatural, or if it is on a "difficult" subject such as caste) of books can under-estimate and silence students into passivity. It is important to have lots of books that include popular genres and series, and even dull books. First, it is important for the teacher to know how to use these books. Second, teachers should not act as "book police", but should negotiate with the children to get them to read great books. The final chapter describes 66 literature response strategies in detail, with the materials and processes involved in implementing them. For instance, the section on big books describes their value in the emergent literacy classroom and suggests how teachers and students can create them from their favourite books. Each chapter in the book ends with suggestions on further reading for teachers, a chapter-wise bibliography and a list of children's literature cited.

This book is highly recommended for teachers and teacher educators who value the use of children's literature in the

language classroom, and would like their students to think critically and question the everyday world around them.

# Language and Language Teaching (LLT)

## Objectives

Published twice a year in January and July, Language and Language Teaching (LLT) reaches out to language teachers, researchers and teacher educators on issues and practices relevant to language teaching. The primary focus of the publication is language pedagogy in elementary schools. LLT proposes to establish a dialogue between theory and practice so that practice contributes to theory as much as theory informs practice. The purpose is to make new ideas and insights from research on language and its pedagogy accessible to practitioners while at the same time inform theorists about the constraints of implementation of new ideas.

## Guidelines for Submission of Manuscripts

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3. Word limit including the reference, abstract and a short bio note is as follows: Articles: 2500; Interview: 3000; Landmark: 3000; Book Reviews: 1500; Classroom Activities: 750; Reports: 1000.
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8. Single quotes should be used throughout the article. Double quotes should be used only within single quotes.
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