Transformative Role of Children's Literature in Foundational Literacy: Moving Beyond Access to Meaningful Engagement

Pooja Bahuguna

Abstract

Children's literature plays a significant role in shaping the early reading experiences of young learners. In contrast to textbook-driven instruction, which often emphasises rote learning, literature provides rich narrative contexts that support the development of literacy across cognitive, emotional, and imaginative domains. While recent policy frameworks like the National Education Policy (2020) and the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (2022) have successfully prioritised physical access to books through reading corners and class libraries, this article posits that access alone is insufficient for foundational literacy development. It argues that the true pedagogic value of children's literature does not reside in its mere availability, but in its situated use within dialogic, responsive, and critically informed classroom practices. Additionally, it argues that the transformative potential of literature emerges only through the dynamic interaction between the reader, the teacher, and the literature. Grounded in Vygotskian socio-cultural theory, meaningful engagement with literature serves not only as a critical catalyst for developing foundational literacy but also cultivates a sustained, lifelong commitment to reading.

Keywords

Children's literature, engagement with literature, foundational literacy, National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) 2022

Introduction

Reading in the foundational years should be an enjoyable, engaging, and a meaningful experience. During these formative stages, learners begin to develop a relationship with print, language, and literacy, an association that shapes both their academic trajectories and emotional engagement with learning. Consequently, children's literature has increasingly been positioned as central to literacy education and valued for its potential to facilitate meaningful encounters with literacy and the world (Sinha, 2000; Freire & Macedo, 2005; NCF, 2005, NCF-FS, 2022). Narratives, poems, and other literary forms do more than entertain; they actively immerse young readers in the world of print while contributing to the development of fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory (1978) provides a compelling framework for this approach, emphasising that language and cultural tools, such as books, mediate learning and cognitive development. As a cultural artefact, literature offers a scaffold through which learners can engage with complex ideas and emotions in developmentally appropriate ways. However, the assumption that mere access to high-quality texts automatically ensures literacy development is problematic. The impact of children's literature is contingent upon how it is enacted within classroom contexts (Cambourne, 2000; Goodman et al., 2007). This article posits that literature is insufficient without intentional mediation; the interaction between the text, the reader, and the teacher determines whether literature functions as a transformative educational tool or remains a passive resource.

Children as Emergent Meaning-makers

Children are natural meaning-makers who essentially and actively make sense of the world around them, including the world of print. It is not solely contingent upon the decoding of letters and words, but is profoundly shaped by their previous experiences, sensory perceptions, and interactions with adults. They approach reading as a process of meaning-making, even before they learn formal literacy skills. I would like to illustrate this point with some personal experiences and anecdotes from my teaching career in and out of schools:

Anecdote 1

A young girl picked up a novel that had a character named Shiva. On the cover was an image of the Hindu deity Shiva holding a trishul, a trident. On seeing the image, she excitedly said, "Mummy, isme Shivji ki kahani hai na?" (Mummy, this has a story of Lord Shiva, right?). She, then, turned the pages and began pretend-reading aloud, "Shivji, Bam Bhole, Bam Bhole…" mimicking chants associated with the deity. As she continued, she read the next page as, "Om Namah Shivay, Bam Bhole," before closing the book and announcing, "Padh liya!" (I have read it).

Anecdote 2

In another instance, a child held a strip of medicine and looked closely at the print on the packaging. She read aloud: "Bachhe dawai nahi khate, isliye ye kadvi hoti hai." (Children do not take medicine because it is bitter in taste). When gently corrected and told that medicine is meant to make one feel better, she looked again at the cover and pretended to read: "Isse khake mera cold theek ho jata hai." (My cold gets better by taking this).

These instances vividly illustrate how young children approach text with curiosity and a desire to connect print to their lived experiences. Such interactions are early forms of comprehension. Even without conventional decoding skills, children demonstrate that they are already thinking readers, interpreting and responding to texts in personally meaningful ways. These moments are foundational to later reading development and show the importance of nurturing emergent literacy through a rich, responsive environment, and children's literature helps create it.

Children's Literature as a Mediator of Literacy Development: The Theoretical Landscape

The integration of children's literature in early classrooms marks a pivotal shift from mechanics-based instruction to a holistic, meaning-centred approach. Historically, reading was viewed as a mastery of isolated skills under the assumption that these discrete unit skills, such as decoding, would eventually coalesce into reading. However, seminal research in the late twentieth century (Durkin, 1978; Teale & Sulzby, 1986; Sinha, 2000; Goodman et al., 2007) challenged this fragmented view and repositioned reading as an active, socio-cognitive process of meaning-making. Contemporary perspectives, grounded in the constructivist

and socio-constructivist theories, now highlight the significance of early interaction with literature in shaping a child's literacy development. Children develop reading abilities not in isolation, but through guided and shared experiences with adults and peers around meaningful literary content.

Vygotsky's (1978) notion of tools for mediation is particularly relevant here. Literature functions as a mediating tool that facilitates both social interaction and cognitive development. Through stories, children learn not only vocabulary and syntax, but also complex emotional and ethical ideas, social norms, and problem-solving strategies. As Yaden et al. (1989) observed, young learners naturally transition from a focus on illustrations to a deeper engagement with narrative content and word meaning, which demonstrates that literature provides children with foundational knowledge about language, print conventions, and narrative structure, while also developing their inferencing and interpretive skills.

Yet, the pedagogical potential of children's literature is not inherent in the text alone; it is contingent upon intentional mediation because the classroom literacy environment includes not only physical resources but also social and psychological interactions that shape learning (Sailors & Hoffman, 2010). As Cambourne (2000) notes, while a print-rich environment is necessary, literacy development is driven by meaningful interaction, through discussion, questioning, dramatisation, and reader-response, which amplifies comprehension and strengthens children's ability to construct meaning from texts.

This phenomenon was visible during a shared reading session of the Hindi poem 'Baadal Bhaiya Bahut Hua'(a poem about a child's playful plea to the clouds to stop the endless rain), in a Grade 2 government school classroom.

Anecdote 3

When a student spontaneously extended the line "jaaye kahaan, kahaan par khelen, ghar mein phase" (where should we go, where can we play, we are stuck inside the house) with "mummy papa ki daant sunein" (we end up getting scolded by our parents), they demonstrated a sophisticated use of inferential thinking grounded in lived experience. This spontaneous extension was both creative and contextually accurate.

Later, when the poem read: "Sooraj dada…" (capturing the child's eager request to the sun to be bright so the day can begin with light and play), many children eagerly predicted: "dhoop khilao!" (give more sunshine). Their responses closely matched the actual line, "dhoop khilayein" (give more sunshine) and reveal how young readers use clues from familiar words, rhythm, and context to anticipate meaning.

These moments highlight how literature supports:

- Inferential thinking: Children use prior knowledge to predict what might come next.
- Language development: Exposure to poetic and expressive language enriches vocabulary and comprehension.
- Aesthetic reading and personal connection: Children relate text to their lived realities, making reading meaningful and memorable.

Such engagements with literature also show that literary texts are not passive reading materials; they are dynamic spaces where young readers construct meaning, test ideas, and express emotions. Therefore, the integration of children's literature into classrooms must go beyond mere exposure. It should involve well-designed opportunities for students to question, dramatise, predict, retell, and respond. These activities not only support fluency and comprehension but also cultivate higher-order thinking, empathy, and a lifelong connection to reading.

Policy Perspectives: NEP 2020, NCF-FS (2022), and the Centrality of Literature

National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, and the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS, 2022, p. 15) have recognised foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) as critical preconditions for all future learning. These documents stress that literacy development must begin with the creation of joyful and engaging learning environments, and they identify children's literature as central to this effort. Literature is not merely a supplementary resource—it is positioned as a primary medium through which literacy is cultivated in the early years. The policies call for a shift away from passive, decontextualised reading tasks towards interactive and meaningful engagement with language. They recommend a rich variety of texts—stories, rhymes, poems, and picture books—as developmentally appropriate materials that resonate

with children's lived experiences. Multilingualism is also a key focus. The documents emphasise the importance of offering literature in children's home languages and regional tongues, recognising the role of familiar language in building early reading skills. Culturally rooted texts allow learners to see their own lives and identities reflected in books, and foster a sense of belonging and motivation to read. However, these benefits can only be realised through intentional pedagogy that promotes interaction, response, and reflection.

In this context, the teacher's role becomes crucial in creating literacy-rich experiences where children are invited to talk about texts, ask questions, imagine alternatives, and see themselves as readers. Without these scaffolded interactions, children may struggle to develop the interpretive and reflective skills required for deeper literacy. Hence, the primary role of the teacher is to encourage and engage young learners in reading for pleasure and meaning. By believing that reading literature is an enjoyable and reflective activity, teachers help students form emotional and cognitive connections with books. Literature becomes not just a tool for language acquisition, but a space where readers construct personal meaning, engage with characters, and experience new worlds.

From Exposure to Engagement: Guided Pedagogical Practices that Support Literacy

As discussed above, creating a literature-rich environment goes beyond stocking bookshelves. Effective foundational literacy instruction requires guided pedagogical practices that bring literature to life. Thus, teachers become facilitators of literary engagement, creating opportunities for children to interact meaningfully with texts through reading aloud, shared reading, dramatisation, storytelling, and art-based responses. The following are a few actionable measures to create meaningful engagement with literature-

Environmental Print– Environmental print, such as signs, labels, packaging, and posters, offers authentic and functional literacy experiences (Khosa, 2025). Children naturally interact with print in their surroundings, attempting to read messages on tickets, posters, or medicine wrappers.

Anecdote 4

I met a 6-year-old boy while travelling in a DTC bus with his mother. He saw his mother buying a ticket. He took the ticket from his mother and kept looking at it for a while. Then, he asked whether the name of the place was mentioned on the ticket that they were going towards.

This way, reading environmental print enhances children's own natural exploration of print in their world. These spontaneous encounters reveal how meaning-making precedes formal decoding and underscores the need for classrooms to be rich in authentic print materials. Classroom strategies can include labelling objects (e.g., "Water Bottles Here"), setting up message boards, and creating "walls of words" from children's own experiences. Such practices promote not only word recognition but also functional literacy and social connection.

Reading Corner and Response Activities—A thoughtfully designed reading corner serves as more than just a physical space. It provides children with the autonomy to select texts and engage in independent exploration, and the development of the reading-like behaviours essential to emergent literacy. However, the true efficacy of these spaces lies in the response activities that follow the reading experience, which shift the focus from simple recall to deep meaning-making. By scaffolding these encounters, teachers move children beyond passive consumption and invite them to interpret, question, and connect with literature. For instance, after reading a story, the teacher may ask children to draw their favourite scene and explain why they chose it, or draw beginning-middle-end and narrate the story in their own words. In another activity, children could be invited to imagine an alternative ending and share it with peers. Additionally, children can be encouraged to write simple letters to their favourite character or to the author, expressing their thoughts about the story and suggesting a different ending. Such activities not only deepen engagement but also foster perspective-taking and creative expression. Overall, these structured engagements transform the act of reading into an interactive, reflective process, positioning reading as an interactive and reflective process where children actively construct meaning rather than passively receive it.

Storytime Every Day: Read-Aloud Sessions—Dedicated daily read-aloud sessions can shape children's literacy attitudes. Story reading sessions allow children to immerse themselves in narratives, build

vocabulary, and understand text structures. In a large group setting, the teacher can read the book in an engaging manner that captures the attention of all the children. Later, the teacher may revisit the story with smaller groups, pointing to each word while reading to support word recognition. To personalise the experience, the teacher can invite each child to select their favourite page, and then read it slowly, pointing to one word at a time to encourage focused attention.

Storybook Preview— Storybook Preview is an interactive strategy where children explore a book by browsing through its pages and discussing the pictures. During this process, the teacher supports vocabulary development by labelling objects, actions, or events that capture the child's interest, while also responding to the child's comments and questions. Children often make personal connections with the story. Let us check the following anecdote.

Anecdote 5
While previewing the book *Adiyal Gaay* (A Stubborn Cow), a child remarked, "maine bhi sadak pe ek gaay ko dekha tha" (I also saw a cow on the road).

This provided an opportunity for the teacher to ask follow-up questions, such as how the presence of the cow on the road affected motorists or cyclists, linking the child's experience to the theme of the story. Teachers can also use open-ended prompts like "What do you think is happening here?" to encourage prediction and discussion. The key to this approach is that the adult listens attentively and responds meaningfully to each child's individual contributions.

Predictive Reading— Predictive reading invites children to anticipate what might happen next in a story, which sparks curiosity and active engagement. This simple yet powerful strategy encourages children to use clues from the text and illustrations to make logical guesses (Bahuguna, 2023). It turns reading into an interactive experience, fosters deeper comprehension and encourages young readers to think critically and creatively about the story.

Read, Repeat, Retell— Deepening Engagement with Stories—Reading, repeating, and retelling stories is a powerful literacy practice that supports language development, comprehension, and memory. When children hear a story multiple times, they begin to recognise patterns in language, predict events, and connect ideas from text to self. Retelling

the story in their own words enhances comprehension. It transforms passive listening into active listening and reading.

Storybook Celebration—Storybook Celebration involves children engaging with a storybook through meaningful and enjoyable follow-up activities that connect to the book's central themes. These activities, such as art, cooking, science experiments, or dramatic play, not only deepen comprehension but also help children relate the story to their own experiences. For example, after reading 'Rupa the Elephant', children might dramatise scenes from the story or write a letter to Rupa about how she might feel about her friend's kindness.

Language Experience Approach (LEA)—Personalising Reading Through Experience—

The Language Experience Approach (LEA) is a powerful instructional strategy that links personal experiences with reading and writing (Kaushik, 2019). Rooted in the socio-cultural theory of learning, LEA capitalises on children's lived experiences to generate meaningful, customised reading materials. In the form of group experience narratives, co-constructed narratives are based on field trips, classroom events, or personal anecdotes.

The steps in LEA typically include:

1. A shared experience (such as a story, trip, or event)
2. Discussion of the event with the teacher guiding the conversation
3. Dictation by children and transcription by the teacher
4. Shared reading of the written text, followed by re-reading and response activities

In this approach, the teacher plays a crucial role as a mediator and facilitator, guiding children's thoughts through open-ended questions and helping them articulate their experiences. The texts created through LEA are inherently meaningful to children. When children read what they have co-created, they experience a sense of ownership and success. By connecting reading-writing, such practices affirm that reading is about meaning-making and affirm every child's voice and experience as central to literacy learning.

Towards a Literate, Joyful, and Reflective Classroom Culture

Children's literature, when meaningfully integrated into pedagogical

practices, serves as a transformative catalyst for foundational literacy development. Its role extends beyond decoding skills to nurture reading fluency, critical comprehension, creativity, and emotional expression. When children engage deeply with texts through discussion, dramatisation, prediction, and personal reflection, they begin to experience reading as a joyful exploration of language and life. Hence, it is argued that the mere presence of literature is not enough. Pedagogic practices such as reading aloud, storybook preview, predictive reading, LEA, and the use of environmental print reinforce the idea that literacy is not a solitary act but a social and situated process. In conclusion, if we are to realise the vision of a literate, joyful, and reflective classroom culture, literature must be woven into the fabric of everyday classroom life, not as an add-on, but as the very heart of language learning. Through thoughtful engagement with rich texts, children are empowered to become empathetic, confident, and lifelong readers who become capable of understanding both the written word and the world around them (Freire & Macedo, 2005).

References

Bahuguna, P. (2023). Anumaan lagana—Pathan-paathan ki ek mulyavaan yukti. *Bharatiya Aadhunik Shiksha*, *44*(1), 20–25.

Cambourne, B. (2000). Language, learning and literacy. In A. Butler & J. Turbill (Eds.), *Towards a reading-writing classroom* (pp. 6–9). Heinemann.

Durkin, D. (1978). What classroom observation reveals about reading comprehension instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *14*, 481–533.

Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (2005). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. Routledge.

Goodman, D., Flurkey, A., & Goodman, Y. (2020). Effective young beginning readers. In *Critical issues in early literacy* (pp. 3–16). Routledge.

Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development. (2020). *National education policy 2020*. https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf

Kaushik, S. (2019). The language experience approach: An invitation to talk, read and write. *Language and Language Teaching*, *8*(2), 43–48.

Khosa, M. (2025). The effects of a print-rich literacy environment on developing early reading skills in the foundation phase classroom. *Reading Psychology*, *46*(4), 331–359. https://doi.org/10.1080/02702711.2024.2447243

Kumschick, I. R., Beck, L., Eid, M., Witte, G., Klann-Delius, G., Heuser, I., Steinlein, R., & Menninghaus, W. (2014). Reading and feeling: The effects of a literature-based intervention designed to increase emotional competence in second and third graders. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *5*, Article 1448. https://

doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01448

National Council of Educational Research and Training. (2022). *National curriculum framework for foundational stage*. https://ncert.nic.in/pdf/NCF_for_Foundational_Stage_20_October_2022.pdf

Sailors, M., & Hoffman, J. V. (2010). The critical dimensions of classroom literacy environments. *The Reading Teacher*, *64*(1), 38–47.

Sinha, S. (2000). Acquiring literacy. *Seminar*, *493*.

Teale, W. H., & Sulzby, E. (1986). Emergent literacy as a perspective for examining how young children become writers and readers. In *Emergent literacy: Writing and reading* (pp. 7–25). Ablex.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.

Yaden, Jr., D. B., Smolkin, L. B., & Conlon, A. (1989). Preschoolers' questions about pictures, print conventions, and story text during reading aloud at home. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *24*, 188–214.

Pooja Bahuguna *is a Foundational Literacy and Numeracy Mentor in the Department of Early Years, Shiv Nadar School, Gurugram. Her areas of specialisation are Foundational Literacy, Reading Comprehension and Reading Research.*

pooja_bahuguna@yahoo.com