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## CRITERIA FOR SELECTION AND EVALUATION OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

**B**ooks play a critical role in the process of helping children learn to read. There is need therefore for exposure to and involvement with good books. Books help children to relate learning to read to their lives. When books are made available to children, they seek books and their reading improves. They also explore the world in an infinite variety of ways. There are accepted ways to look at and judge books to be used in classrooms. These will be the focus of this chapter.

### SELECTING GOOD BOOKS

In evaluating a book experts often seek answers to many questions. They include, for example, if the book is fiction, do the events arise naturally out of a character's qualities or does the action seem forced?

Is the plot interesting and well constructed? Is the book's subject within the child's comprehension? Is the book's format appropriate in terms of page, size, the style margins, and spacing? Is the style of writing distinctive and interesting? Do illustrations complement the text in both design and subject matter?

Similarly, books to be selected for the child should be books that generally match the child's age. Experts prefer to rate books by grade. It is believed that there is a more uniform reading achievement level among children of a certain grade than among those of a certain age. Some experts prefer to rate children's books on the basis of age. To them the age level best reflects a child's interests and emotional and social development.

Book reviews often include some recommendation on age or grade level. Age or grade level often covers a long period. An example of age recommendation might run from years 6 through 9, and a grade recommendation from kindergarten through third grade.

The various elements that are important in determining the age or grade level of a book include sentence length, difficulty of vocabulary, difficulty of concepts, amount of repetition, and the nature of the subject matter. In book selection first and foremost, consider the plot carefully. Examine to see if the plot is orderly and presented in a good tempo. It's easy for you to see children abandon books in which the plot

drags and they are forced to wait for something to happen. To the child action must be immediate.

Also of importance is that the characters should be honest and credibly consistent. Believable characters have weaknesses as well as strengths and need to be in keeping with earlier development. Themes for good children's books should nourish the mind and the emotions of the readers. Worthy ideas presented through literature transmit attitudes and contribute to the reader's developing value system.

Settings in contemporary books are frequently more psychological than social. Yet, both types of settings are worthy, with one at times enhancing the other. Style of writing helps children to learn about written language and can contribute to the book's readability style in the manner in which the author uses language to clothe ideas. It influences comfortable movement through print.

Illustrations in children's books should support the text, and delight to eyes and heart. They should inform the reader of worlds real and imaginary. Good illustrations present true feelings without sentimentality.

Vocabulary load and the concept load are important considerations. What is important is the rich language well used that increases reading ability, by stretching the mind and helping to develop ideas.

When selecting books of information, scope and sequence should be considered in the selection. Books should cover what they purport to cover. They should

provide a clear sequence, which helps make the content clear.

Select books that will delight children, make them giggle, surprise them, comfort them and please them. Do nothing to select a story that will destroy that pleasure. Evaluate each book for its imaginative qualities. Many little books and some big books use a formula like that of predictable books, but they lack real literary quality. They may be easy to read and include repetition, but they're dull. To test for literary merit examine the language and content of each story.

Ask yourself whether the story contains natural language and familiar speech patterns that children can predict, or whether instead it has a contrived controlled test. Sometimes even good authors of children literature do not succeed in creating books with literary merit. Margaret Mahy, an award-winning author for whom people have a good deal of admiration, wrote these unnatural lines in her *Good to the Beach*.

Up, Up, Up  
Out, Out, Out  
In, In, In  
Off, Off, Off

An example of a passage read in a very dramatic fashion, but is still not the way we talk.

Listen to the language Mahy uses in a trade book titled *17 Kings and Elephants*

Seventeen Kings and forty-two elephants  
Going on a journey on a wild wet night  
Baggy ears like big umbrella plants  
Little eyes gleaming in the jungle light.

This language is not predictable and is too difficult for emergent readers to attempt on their own, but it isn't too difficult for them to enjoy. It is important to read aloud both books like this one that will stretch children's imaginations and predictable books that they can attempt on their own.

Remember that each book must be evaluated on its own merits. Keep these three questions in mind, when doing that:

1. Does this book provide delight and pleasure in reading?
2. Does it have the imaginative quality of literature?
3. Is it written in natural uncontrived language?

## **TEACHING POETRY**

You have to make poetry come alive by acting poetry out. You can write poems for children. When you write for children, it gives you the opportunity to speak to young children. When we teach children poetry by the performance method we give them poems to perform and put them in front of an audience of peers. An effective way to introduce poetry is to teach them to perform it.

The first step in the process is to select poems that will entertain a young audience. The formula for good poetry is sound + story + character = fun. Children love poems that fit the formula.

a. **Sound:** A child's natural facility for language is driven by the joy of sound. Lyric poetry is, however, the sound of language at full power. Children love rhythm; rhyme, alliteration, assonance and all other devices poets use to make the words feel good to say.

b. **Story:** Telling stories is the most effective way to communicate ideas. Professional speakers use stories to hold their audience. Using poems to tell stories will draw the attention of a child more effectively than the words.

c. **Character:** Poems are compelling when they have real characters who experience the feelings of real children. Children like adults are often lonely and confused. They like to connect with others who feel like they feel, and they want to understand their feelings.

In literature children meet characters whose circumstances and feelings are similar to their own. They feel they are not alone. The characters become important because children see themselves in what they say and do. This is the heart and the essence of literature. When you select poems with real characters, you can be certain that in addition to giving children what they like, you will have given them what they hunger for, and often what they desperately need.

Characters inhabit poems in two different ways, and one is significantly more powerful than the other. There are poems in which the voice that recites the words is the character.

## **How to Help Children Perform Poetry**

Poems are verbal art, encouraging children to perform poems is an effective way to introduce them to poetry. The process begins by selecting poems that are performable. Help children perform painlessly and well with fun. Let them start by making a promise.

Oral recitation has four basic elements. They are: facial expression, voice inflection, body movement and timing. When a child makes the right face, everything else falls in place.

□ Try this exercise by asking a child to make a sad face by drooping his eyes, pouting your bottom lip, tilt you head to the side, and say, “I am not very happy”.

□ You will see that the voice body and timing will tend to follow your expression.

□ Try to defy nature by making the same sad expression. Try to say “I am very happy” in a cheerful voice. You will find that it is very hard so sound happy when your face is sad.

Conduct the search on what a poem means and how to perform it by asking a single question: what face should I make when I say these words? Then make the face and say the words. A child gets real happy about exploring her potentials if she is able to make a face, recite a line of poetry and, the audience responds.

A performance is like a racecar, guided by a steering wheel and driven by an engine. The performer is the steering wheel; the audience is the

engine. Every good performer needs a good audience. They had been responding with their faces to my every word and now they were giggling with delight as the total effect became apparent.

Children in a poetry performance are no longer a “class”; they are an audience. They are equal partners in the performance. Avoid spending whole classes on poetry. Poetry sessions should be short. Always leave them wanting more.

### **Step 1: Teacher Performance**

Perform with full expression. Become the character. Be a little kid. Remember that you are a model. Your performance will license your students to perform. Always evoke applause at the end of your performance. When you teach your class to be a good audience, you create a performance – friendly environment. A dramatic bow at the end of the reading will tell them to clap for you. If they still don't respond, clap for yourself; if they still don't clap ask them to clap for you. By applauding for you, they learn to applaud for each other.

### **Step 2: Group Performance**

Recite single phrases with full expression and have the children as a group mimic your performance.

As they repeat the lines, watch their faces, react to them with smiles, and laughter, and stimulate applause at the end. At the beginning, try to avoid choral reading of whole poems or long passages. Continuous choral reading forces children into



expressionless singsong recitation and defeats your purpose.

### **Step 3: Short Individual Performance**

Volunteers can perform a poem for the class. Encourage them but be careful not to force a child prematurely into a pressure situation. Choose three or four children and have each perform a single line or short passage. Recite the line with full expression and let child perform after you. Reward each line with applause. This is a big step. It takes courage for a child to go in front of a class, especially for the first volunteers.

### **Step 4: Individual Performance**

Keep in mind that it may not be a good idea for every child in the class. As the children are members of the audience, they are full participants in the process. They should feel free to volunteer to be performances whenever they'd like. Its good to memorize the poem but the performer should always have the text of the poem in hand.

## **REALISTIC FICTION AND THE REAL WORLD**

The most important and basic response to a story is emotional. Literary experience can be described as a transaction in which readers bring to their interpretation of text a whole set of understanding from their own lives – giving to the text as well as receiving from it if you will – and in that way construct meaning from the story. A story may evoke

laughter, wonder, sadness, curiosity, fear, and another may invite a reader to have a genuine interaction with the characters and the events in their lives. Also important is awareness of literary elements and critical judgments of the story's quality or of characters' behaviour.

When characters captivate children, it enables them to have vivid memories of the story that can serve as a basis for judging other literature. Children tend to share and relate such emotions and hopes to their personal lives. Children should be encouraged to study the characters. Encourage them to think about what the author did to develop those characters in such an interesting way. Try and bring the children together in groups of four or six members to discuss questions they raise as they read or hear the story, or to talk over questions you ask them. For example, students should talk about problems the characters are trying to deal with. Let them share favourite parts of the stories and ask questions that would enable them to infer, make judgments, and get the main idea of the passage. Children can work together to create a list of questions. For example, suppose you are trying to write a description of someone you have just met but you need to know more about that person, what questions would you ask?

## **A FOLKLORISTIC APPROACH TO TEACHING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE**

Our school curriculum has often been criticized for their lack of relevance to both the learner and the

society. Educational planners of our programmes feel that the only thing relevant to our learners is what is unfamiliar and also far-fetched, thus the use of printed texts that are foreign based with foreign linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Even though children literature is a neglected area in Nigeria, it's important to note that one's experiential background is of scholarly value in his daily learning task. Textbooks that are written in foreign language with unfamiliar backgrounds may only militate against the development of creativity in children. For a meaningful children's literature programme, children's folksongs, folk narrative tales, games and other forms of verbal arts should be encouraged.

The Nigerian child comes to school with an already fairly well built vocabulary of Nigerian folktale. He knows how to tell simple stories and has been listening to so many. He engages himself in traditional games, some of which go along with songs. He engages in riddles. All these contribute greatly to his vocabulary development and creativity. The educational values of folkloristic approach to children's literature have been found to range from speech training to team spirit, social and emotional development. Africa folklores entertain the African Child. It also incorporates both moral and didactic elements.

In most African countries, children share the same cultural background with the adult world as they imitate it in their play activities. The folk tradition

provides a good forum where children express their creative potentials. Such verbal artistic performances could include:

- Children's songs.
- Children's oral tales
- Riddles
- Traditional dances.

### **Children's Songs.**

Children's songs should be purposeful and could be classified on the basis of their functions as well as their sources, which include traditional religion, adult folktales and poetry. Children songs could be grouped under the following:

**a. Education Songs:** Songs that enhance the cognitive development of the child. These ranges from vocabulary development to moral, social, emotional and spiritual development. Some of these songs are composed to ask questions and answer them.

**b. Lullabies:** These are children's songs that are used in soothing a child to sleep. Adults or parents could compose them. It is believed that the invocation of these images compels the child to sleep. This category of songs could include those that advise the mother to hurry home, as the child is thirsty, hungry and crying or is dying of hunger.

**c. Experimental/Historical Songs:** They do not differ much from educational songs, except that they

might focus on particular historical incidents. They also include songs that convey particular experiences that are true to life.

**d. Games Songs:** These provide a socialization forum for children of varying backgrounds. Game songs play a significant role in children's daily and future lives. Some of the games help them in building the knowledge of numeracy. They are known as number games. These games and the songs that accompany them create an opportunity for creativity and mastery of number systems. Skills that are enhanced through this include:

- Communication skill.
- Self-expression skill.
- Social awareness skill.
- Leadership skill.

Such songs that involve children sitting down and counting legs help children to learn about leadership, number system, tolerance and obedience to rules and regulations.

**e. Deterrence Songs:** These ridicule a child who has engaged in a scandalous act. For example, a child that steals is ridiculed. The child might be asked or forced to hold the stolen materials if he is caught red-handed. The children then sing and lead the culprit round the entire neighbourhood. He could be forced to join in singing like in the Tiv community. The child is thus exposed to public shame as he is forced to walk

round the place, while others throw all sorts of odd materials on him. The moral implication is that the fear of exposure to such a shame forbids many other children from engaging in such immoral behaviour.

f. **Occasional or Special Purpose Songs:** The songs could include seasonal songs on particular subjects. These are songs for the Christmas masquerades, which is an imitation of the adult world. It could be songs children sing to imitate animals e.g. birds. Children derive pleasure in singing and imitating birds.

g. **Religious Poetry:** As a poetic practice children's songs are an innovation that has been introduced by adults as part of the church activities. We have in churches religious songs centred on Biblical stories and teachings. For example, dance drama, which entertains at Christian gatherings. Many religious activities are designed for the socialization of the young ones. Such youth activities also promote social development and enhance the acquisition of virtues.

**Children's Oral Tales:** These have to do with folktales. Story telling is a verbal art form that is generally loved by children. The art of story telling is first acquired from adults who use this forum to teach morals. Children's verbal art forms change in line with those of the adults. Children's tales are usually very short and simple and may try to establish a

relationship. As children graduate from telling short and simple stories, they move to telling longer narrative tales. Those who have been found to be fluent and creative enough may take part in adult story-telling sessions.

**Riddles:** These are used to interpret natural phenomena. This is learnt from the adult world. In this art form, a child gives a riddle to which he seeks answer. Riddles enhance the cognitive development of children. They help the children to acquire the knowledge about their environment. Whenever they fail to give the correct response the giver of the riddle does so with pride. Some riddles have simple meaning, other have deeper proverbial meaning.

**Traditional Dances:** The skills of dancing are acquired through games and largely from the adult world. Some learn it through imitation and some are taught the skill by their parents and relations. They also learn at play times.

## **TEACHING FOLKLORES (REALISTIC FICTION) IN THE CLASSROOM**

The most important activity to do with realistic fiction is simply discussion in order to share with the students, inviting them to become an interpretive community of readers who make and share meaning with each other and with the teacher. After the students have read or listened to a book, invite them to talk about their reactions to it. To stimulate thinking, you might ask open-ended questions such as these:

- Why did the main character respond the way he or she did to the conflict in the book? What could he or she have done instead?
- How might the main character's experience have been different if he or she had not been from a parallel culture?
- Does this book remind you of any other books? In what way?
- What does the title mean to you?

In order to focus attention on literary elements or the author's craft, you might ask the following kinds of questions:

- How important is the setting to the book?
- What difference would it have made if this book had been set in another time or place?
- In what ways is the main character the same at the end as he or she was at the beginning of the book?
- How is he or she different?
- How has the author helped you to get to know the characters? Or helped you envision the setting?
- Who is telling the story? What effect does that perspective have on the way the story unfolds?

## **INTERACTION WITH INFORMATIONAL BOOKS**

A greater volume of informational books for children is being published each year, and the range of subjects these books discuss is becoming increasingly



broad. Teachers can therefore make selections from the list available. Some suggested ways of teaching some specific topics in books.

Children and teachers who watch news programs and read materials about current events will find much to discuss and to learn from. Many children are interested in animals. We could talk of dangerous animals. Numerous fine books on animal conservation are available to use as resources.

The teacher can ask children to conduct research to identify species of animals that are dangerous.

You can teach about the zoo. For example, say how zoos contain little more than animals in cages. You can invite a staff member from the zoo to come and speak to the children about the zoo's policies.

Children at different ages often develop consuming interests in certain topics. It is wise to take advantage of such interests and promote investigation of these topics in class projects.

## **BOOK EDUCATION**

Books we know are very expensive. We also complain of lack of enough literature materials for reading. When we talk of reading, we often complain of the fact that reading materials are not available. These reading materials include:

- Text books
- Story books – fiction, narrative expository, etc.
- Newspapers
- Magazines – comic, fiction or real life stories.

- Notes copied in class or formed during private reading.

Reading is always associated with books or print. Such books are written to communicate information and ideas to people around the world. Books form part of transfer and preservation of histories and culture of people. Through books one is able to conserve, preserve and restore valuable items that are necessary for reading instruction.

There is an increased awareness of the need to protect, preserve, and conserve materials by researchers, collectors, educators and librarians. This calls for the necessity to educate teachers and students on how to take care of books.

In a multilingual community like Nigeria, that is a developing country with socio-economic status where reading culture is hardly promoted, a few school age pupils come to school with a fair knowledge of books while majority come to school without any idea of what books are, what they are meant for and how to take care of them.

Nixon and Roberts (1994) in conjunction with some classroom teachers developed and tested about ten rules for looking after books. These rules are used both as activities for teaching reading as well as a means of teaching children how to take care of books. In teaching the rules the teacher is required to do so by telling a story. The story goes this way:

**TITLE: BOOKS CAN'T SPEAK**  
The ten rules for looking after books are:

1. Wash your hands before you touch books.
2. Don't eat or drink while reading.
3. Don't break the spine of the book.
4. Don't lick your fingertips to turn pages.
5. Don't mark or write in books.
6. Don't cut or tear pages.
7. Don't bend the corners of pages.
8. Carry books in a plastic bag.
9. Don't lose books.
10. Keep books in a safe place.

## **BOOKS CAN'T SPEAK**

Moses brought home a book from the school library. It was a beautiful book about animals. Moses was very excited. He wanted to read the book right away.

Moses sat outside the house with the book in his lap. "Please, please, wash your hands before you open me!" the book wanted to say. But books can't speak.

Moses' hands were dirty and they made dark marks on the pages. Moses didn't even notice. He started reading the story.

The book was new and the pages were hard to turn. Moses put a finger in his mouth. "Please, please, don't lick your fingers to turn my pages!" the book wanted to say. But books can't speak.

Moses' wet finger made an ugly mark in the corner of the page.

Moses didn't even notice. He was enjoying the story. There were some words in the story that Moses did not understand. "May be I can ask my older sister what these words mean", thought Moses.

But his older sister was not at home. Moses wanted to remember which words he wanted to ask about, so he got his pencil.

"Please, please, don't make marks in me! Use a piece of paper instead!" the book wanted to say. But books can't speak.

Moses made circles around the words he did not know. Then he went on reading the story. The story was very funny. Moses read for a long time. After a while he felt hungry. He looked for a stick to put in the book in order to mark his place. "Please, please, don't do that! The stick will scratch my pages!"

Can't you use a bookmark instead?", the book wanted to say. But books can't speak.

Moses went inside the house and got some bread and jam. Then he came out and picked up the book again. "Please, please, put me away! You'll get jam all over me!" The book wanted to say. But books can't speak.

Moses read and ate his sandwich. Soon the book was covered with sticky jam. Some pages got stuck together. Moses didn't even notice. He went on reading the story.

Then Moses' aunt came to visit. Moses liked his aunt. He got up and followed her into the house.

"Please, please, don't leave me here alone! It's not a safe place for me!" The book wanted to say. But books can't speak.

Moses' baby brother was playing outside. He saw the book lying on the ground. He was very curious. He had never seen a book before. He picked it up by the covers and bent them back. Snap! Went the spine.

"Ouch! That hurts! Please, please, don't break my spine!" the book wanted to say. But books can't speak.

The baby didn't know what the book was for. He thought it might be nice to eat. He put the book in his mouth. 'Please, please, don't eat me!' the book wanted to say. But books can't speak. The book didn't taste good at all. The baby dropped it and went on playing.

A dog came by and saw the book lying on the ground. He came closer to inspect it. The book was open on a page with a picture of a cat. 'Wuff, wuff! A cat! I hate cats! I'll get this one!' Barked the dog. "Please, please, don't tear out my pages!" the book wanted to say. But books can't speak. The dog grabbed the book in his teeth and tore out the page. Then he ripped it into little pieces.

Suddenly it started to rain. The dog ran to hide. He left the book lying on the ground. "Please, please, will someone take me inside? I am getting terribly wet!" the book wanted to say. But books can't speak.

Inside the house, Moses was talking to his aunt. His aunt stayed until the rain stopped.

"I must go now", said his aunt. "You can go back to your book, Moses"

"My book! I forgot about my book!" cried Moses.

He ran outside. The book was lying in the mud. The rain had made the pages wrinkle and swell. Some pages were torn out. There were dirty marks all over the book.

Moses picked up the book. "Oh, what a shame! I can't even read this book now. It's good for nothing. Tomorrow I'll go to the school library and get another book", said Moses to himself and he tossed the book into the rubbish bin.

The book wanted to cry. But books can't cry either.

Do you think Moses should get another book from the school library?

These ten rules can be taught to achieve two basic objectives namely:

- First, as an aspect of reading instruction.
- Second, to help children take good care of their books.

### **Activities for Telling the Story “Books can’t Speak”**

You could design a poster to suit the various sections of the whole story. The poster should be designed in such a way that you could easily stick the various drawings of the characters in the story. For example, you will require drawings of aunt, dog, baby, bread, book etc. As the story is told, you place the different characters on the spaces provided on the poster.

Another activity that could be very interesting is dramatization. Children could be made to act and role-play the story step by step.

Note that the story should be taught in a language that the children understand. Ask the children to say what is in the picture. Then tell part of the story in a lesson, using the pictures to illustrate the story. Choose only one or two rules for looking after books to teach the children in a lesson. Do not encourage chanting the rules, but teacher can role-play and ask children to say what he or she is doing. Ask the child whether it is the right way to treat books. Show the drawn picture of the rule, and ask the children to demonstrate the rule.

# **HOW TO MAKE YOUR OWN STORY BOOK**

Follow these step by step:

## **Step One Read the story aloud**

Read the story to a friend, or let a friend read the story to you to see if it sounds good.

## **Step Two Make out the pages**

Make out what writing (and illustrations) you want on each page.

## **Step Three Plan each page**

Plan each page leaving spaces for the drawings and pictures. Do all the writing and number each page as you go.

## **Step Four Illustrate the book**

Do the drawings yourself or use pictures that you have collected. Cut them out and paste them in the spaces you have left open.

## **Step Five Make a title page**

The title page should provide the name of the story, your name as the author and an interesting picture from the story.

## **Step Six Make a cover**

It is similar to the title page and should be so attractive that people will want to pick up your book and read it. Use thin cardboard folded in half.



### **Step Seven Collate the pages**

Put all the pages in the right order. This is called "collating"

the pages. If the pages are not in the correct order, your story won't make sense.

### **Step Eight Put the book together**

Put the pages inside the cover. Staple or sew the book together. You can also glue the pages in, but this can be more difficult and messy.

### **Step Nine Read and display**

Read the story to a friend or to your family. Ask your teacher to display the book in the classroom or in the class library for others to read.

## **STORY WRITING**

- Set the scene or setting.
- Introduce the characters.
- Start the action.
- Introduce the problem.
- Solve the problem.
- Conclude.

## **DISPLAYS AND DISPLAY BOARDS**

- Display areas such as boards, tables and interest corners can be set up very simply and at very little cost.
- The creation of a flexible arrangement of visuals, verbal and concrete objects provides the potential for learners to interact with the

materials as often as desired and at their own rate.

- The ability to see pictures, objects and models in attractive displays creates an interest that words alone cannot accomplish.
- Involving the learners in the collection of the materials and in the creation of the display is meaningful and exciting to them as it appeals to their natural urge to collect and explore.
- Displays brighten the classroom and set the scene for more effective learning by creating an atmosphere which promotes interest and reading, by focusing attention on a particular topic or theme.
- They help the learners to think visually, to initiate discussion and to communicate information accurately.
- They can be used to present information, display work completed by the learners, give instructions and encourage participation, giving an overall view of the topic.
- They afford opportunity for pupil participation, for review and for evaluation.

### **Setting up the display**

- First determine your objective, as the display is not merely a decoration.
- Ask yourself what you hope to achieve with your display.
- The display should focus on a topic or theme and be relevant.

- The amount of information will depend on the educational level of your target audience.
- Make a very brief summary of the topic and decide what needs to be simplified or emphasised.
- Decide what pictures would be useful and what items or objects you could use to make it more attractive and interesting.
- Plan the layout in rough first, keeping a focus point in mind.
- Make it attractive.
- Lettering is important and should be easy to read.
- Information should flow and be easy to read – left to right, top to bottom.
- Keep the display interesting – change it regularly – don't allow it to become stale.
- Most of all, **KEEP IT SIMPLE!**