

# Review Article

## Krishna Kumar on Reading

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Krishna Kumar (1986) begins by defining what reading is. He espouses exposure to books even before children can decipher the alphabet. According to him, unless a child makes sense of what he/she reads, and relates it to something else, one cannot call it reading. He defines reading as “a process of finding meaning in written words” (Kumar: 1986).

This compels us to reflect on the current scenario in our classrooms, where the early years resound with rote recitation of the alphabet and a choral repetition of the story, breaking every word. One is forced to reflect about how little children learn and whether the individual letters of the alphabet mean anything at all to a child.

To make the initial teaching of reading meaningful, Kumar (1986) advises teachers to begin with books and NOT flash cards/charts or other such aids, as ultimately the child has to be able to read. He adds that it is the context-embedded experiences, exposure and immersion to culturally and age appropriate children’s literature that forms the basis for reading to take place. Kumar (1986) recommends a list of 20 books in English and Hindi, of which Eric Carle’s *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* is one such book. Rich in visuals, this simple text with its universal appeal, kindles the child’s curiosity and makes for an exciting engagement with print. After all which child would not want to see what happens to the fat “grub” as it breaks open its cocoon, and then goes on to become a butterfly! One cannot agree more with Krishna Kumar when he endorses the use of the story as a bedrock

for language development. Stories help build bridges in our multicultural classrooms. They make learning enjoyable and contextual and allow for a natural expression and operation of language.

### **How Should the Reading Process Happen?**

Krishna Kumar (1986) emphasizes that the story should be read to children as they sit around the teacher in groups of 10, so that they are able to see the book as the teacher reads it. Further, the style of reading has to be flowing and with expression, more in the manner of a relaxed storyteller. This naturally calls on the teacher to have a fair degree of ease with the story. While one is in total agreement about the story circles that have been part of children’s growing up years, in print rich homes and also where oral traditions thrive, the small groups of 10 that Kumar advises poses a real situational challenge in country such as India where the ground reality is that there is almost always a higher teacher to student ratio of almost 1 to 40 or 50 in low income schools, especially in those that are privately run. Krishna Kumar has not talked about using the big book format and shared reading in such situations, which in my experience would perhaps be more apt.

### **What is Shared Reading?**

Shared Reading is an interactive, enjoyable and a co-operative reading activity based on the bedtime story experience. Ideally, the text used

for this activity is in a large format or a big book. Don Holdaway (1979), aware of the power of reading stories to children, developed the concept of Shared Reading in New Zealand in the 1960s. He exploited the use of Big Books as a method of teaching reading, which has raised literacy standards across the world.<sup>1</sup>

The stress on syllabi and too much instruction on how to read interferes with the child's natural ability to acquire literacy skills. For many students, learning to read becomes a struggle, a task to be completed rather than an activity to be enjoyed. Consequently, children have little motivation and lose interest. This struggle is compounded for a child who is from a less privileged home, for a child who learns English (as a case in point) as second language, and for a child with special needs.

Acquisition of reading skills can be as natural a process as learning how to speak, when a tolerant, encouraging and stimulating environment to engage with print is created. The Shared Book Approach, with its motivating, non-competitive and non-threatening environment does just this. '[S]haring does not mean having each student "take turns" in reading the book aloud. Rather, the adult reader shares the enjoyment of reading by facing the book towards the children and allowing them to participate in the reading as the adult reads the text in a fluent, expressive and enthusiastic manner'<sup>2</sup>. The following process highlights some elements for a successful "Shared Reading" experience<sup>3</sup>:

### **Step 1: Pre Reading**

Read and talk about the title and illustration.

Point and talk about the author and the illustrator.

Ask children to guess about the story based on the cover.

### **Step 2: Reading the story**

Read with enthusiasm and expression.

While reading, pause and invite predictions from the children.

You may ask some questions to gauge their comprehension.

### **Step 3: Post Reading**

Listen in a relaxed manner to the children's reaction.

Ask the children what their favourite parts of the story were, if there was anything they did not like.

Ask children if they have had similar experiences like the characters in the story, would they have acted in the same manner or differently.

Let the questions be open ended, this gives children an opportunity to speak and share their own opinion.

### **Step 4: Reading the story again**

This time, you may leave out words from the story for children to fill in; point to the word without saying it. Choose words that are dramatic and often repeated, like Oh! Plop! Gosh!

Make flash cards with words/ sentences from the story for the children to match.

Engage the children in an activity related to the story, it could be drawing, craft, or clay modelling or drama. Let the child be free to express in any manner he/she is comfortable with.

Some children may want to write or even copy, the spellings need not be accurate.

(Remember what the child creates is an expression of his/her interpretation of the reading experience.)

Help children label. Their drawing can have caption in form of sentences written out as they share about it. This will help children to see the connection between the spoken and the written word.

Sometimes children may come up with simple rhymes or a text after a reading session. These can be compiled into big books or small books, and added to the library.

At the end of the session, the children can be encouraged to look through their favourite story books as well as the one that has been read. The idea is to generate interest and curiosity with regard to books. Moreover, when children hold and read a book, it often makes them feel like they are “members of the club of readers”.

While Krishna Kumar urges the teachers not to ask any question after the storytelling session, I do not fully subscribe to his view. What he perhaps means is that one should avoid mining for information or facts from the story. However, if one of the aims of language and literacy education is to engage critically with the text, then this must begin in the early years, and children can be encouraged to discuss their lived experiences in a sensitive manner. This will help children to build connections with the text, within the text and between the text and the world.

Krishna Kumar (1986) highlights the plight of how “the alphabet method”, and the “look and say” methods have evolved without any knowledge of the reading process. He makes an ardent plea that if children get an opportunity to immerse themselves in a book that is being read to them with expression and enjoyment, their familiarity with the pictures and the story will motivate them to try and read the book themselves. It then falls upon us as teachers to ensure that any phonics/drills must be done only after the story has been explored fully.

### **Poetry**

Kumar (1986) also discusses how poetry can make a wonderful contribution towards developing reading skills. According to him, regular exposure to poetry helps the children to familiarize themselves with basic language patterns. The 3 R’s of children’s poetry: rhythm,

rhyme and repetition help to build the skills of anticipation and prediction, which are the key to reading.

I could not agree more with Krishna Kumar. As infants, our first exposure to language is through the lullabies that our mothers or other adults sing to us. Morag Styles, Professor of Children’s Poetry, states:

Children’s responses to poetry are innate, instinctive, natural—maybe it starts in the womb, with the mother’s heartbeat? Children are hardwired to musical language—taking pleasure in the rhythm, rhyme, repetition and other patterning of language that are a marked feature of childhood.

According to Steinberg (Mckim and Steinberg, 1999):

I see children who are labeled “non-readers” standing up and reading what they have written or what someone else has recorded for them. I see children whose first language is not English wanting to find new words for their poems, feeling freer to mix the music of two languages.

Krishna Kumar’s views on poetry are endorsed by Fox (2001) who states that “Experts in literacy and child development have discovered that if children know eight nursery rhymes by the time they are four years old, they are usually among the best readers by the time they are eight”.

In an online resource “Why do children love poems?” the author suggests that rhymes are important for the language, cognitive, social, emotional and physical development of a child. We are further told that “[c]hildren are able to learn new words easily due to the rhythmical structure of the stanzas. Recitation also helps in voice modulation. Helping children understand rhyming is one key skill of phonemic awareness” (Block & Israel, 2005). Poetry aids

children in helping identify patterns and through patterns they recognize sequences.<sup>2</sup>

The power of poetry to make emotional connections and heal is only too well known. As Robert Frost would say, “Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words”

However, Krishna Kumar does caution us to choose children’s rhymes with care and recommends traditional rhymes.

### **How to Read Poetry**

Krishna Kumar and Children’s Laureate Michael Rosen’s thoughts (n.d.) seem to corroborate the following: The best thing you can do with poetry is just enjoy reading it together with the children. This has to be the starting point. According to Rosen, just before play time or home time, you could gather the children together and say “Hey listen to this” and read them a poem.

Most importantly, Rosen (n.d.) recommends that the teachers should ask open-ended questions. Some examples of such questions are: Does this poem remind you of anything you’ve ever done? Does this poem remind you of anything you’ve ever seen on TV, film, play or music? If you could ask a question from any object/thing in the poem, what would you ask? Pool every answer. Try and get every child to say something. Treasure what each child says. Put the answers down on big sheets of paper so that the children understand that you value what their thoughts and feelings.

Find poems that move you, interest you and amaze you. Share them with the children. Enthusiasm for poems is infectious.

My personal experience in working with children in both the use of prose and poetry has been immensely encouraging. In fact, the Shared Reading Methodology is an intrinsic part of the VIDYA reading program. My work in this area

has been with Sangeeta Gupta, who has studied under Sir Don Holdaway, Father of Shared Reading. Together we have nurtured the practice of Shared Reading at VIDYA ([www.vidya-india.org](http://www.vidya-india.org)). The Reading Corners in our Beyond School Program, be it in the local community or in school are vibrant places where teachers are actively engaged in promoting reading. The reading corners have in their collection exciting, age and culturally appropriate titles, both in the native language and English. Children read and are read to with enthusiasm, sometimes by peers and sometimes by teachers. As for poetry, it has become a part of our organization, especially when we discovered the joy that it unleashed when teachers and children celebrated it. In fact, our Annual Children’s LitFest in 2016 resulted in a book of poems in three languages English/Hindi/Marathi, written and illustrated by the children of VIDYA. This book comprising of thirty poems is an ode to the joy of learning as we commemorated three decades, and is aptly titled “My Voice, My Verse”, for children’s voices must be heard.

Finally, I would like to conclude by saying that “The Story/Poetry/Art” is here to stay, for indeed all children shall have their way!

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### **End Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> For some of the evidence one may visit <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/literacy/readingviewing/Pages/teachingpracshared.aspx> Accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

<sup>2</sup> The paragraph draws from the content given in “Why do children love poems?” at <http://timbuktu>.

me/blog/why-do-children-love-poems/Accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2017.

<sup>3</sup> The format and the ideas shared in Step 1 through 4 are largely borrowed from <http://readingtokids.org/ReadingClubs/TipSharedReading.php>

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