

Magazines as Learning Tools

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A brief history of children's magazines

Periodicals with children as their target audience can be traced to the 18th century. These magazines were mostly published in Europe and North America, and the material consisted of morals and instructions on how to live 'good' lives. The nature of the content switched to stories, folk and fairy tales in the 19th century and the modern children's magazine and comics came into being in the early 20th century. This evolution of children's periodicals followed that of the notion of childhood in society, as well as, the recognition of the potential profit in this sector. In India, the early half of the 20th century was when children's magazines began to be published. Amongst the earliest children's magazines were *Anand* (Marathi), *Sandesh* (Bengali), *Balarama* (Malayalam) and *Chandamama* (Telugu and Tamil). From the 1970s onwards, magazines for children found a firm footing in India.

Be it about providing a print-rich environment to support language learning or the discussions in academic spheres on learning resources, magazines have always been mentioned as an important educational tool. Experiences of teachers across the globe lend credence to the idea that magazines, even comics, can be powerful learning tools in the classroom. However, much of the support for this idea is anecdotal as systematic studies of children's magazines, their uses and impact are few. In spite of being widely acknowledged as learning tools, magazines remain amongst the less-used classroom aids.

In this article, we discuss what we have gathered from a survey of literature on how children's magazines can play a role in classroom learning process. We will rely heavily on the testimonials of several teachers in our discussion. We will also talk about how *Chakmak*, a Hindi science magazine for middle school children has been used as supplementary reading material.

Why use magazines in classrooms?

Flipping through a magazine gives one an overview

of the richness and diversity in content that is reflected in its text, illustrations and design of each article. Short stories, poems, comic strips, news snippets, amazing facts, a variety of puzzles, articles, activities and contests - there is a wealth of fiction and non-fiction fare in children's magazines. There is something for diverse reading and comprehension levels. The information is also up-to-date and relevant as magazines are published at regular and mostly, short intervals. A common thread that runs through all this content is brevity – magazine articles tend to be short, manageable chunks of information. And the best part of reading a magazine is that you do not need to read it all; you can read the parts that interest you.

Some magazines focus on one broad topic (such as science, or the environment) examples of which include *Brainwave* and *National Geographic Kids*. Some others, *Chakmak*, *Kishor* and *Champak*, offer a wider range of topics for their readers. In either case, students find them attractive for the reasons mentioned above and engage with them. And teachers find them attractive as classroom aids for these same reasons and also because they can create lesson plans that fit one or a few classroom periods.

Children's magazines and learning to read and write

For the rich collections of stories and poems that these magazines offer, they can be relied upon as constants in a language classroom. Depending upon the length, complexity level, topics and genre, stories and write-ups can be used for read-alouds, storytelling, reviews and literary discussions and even theatre for various age groups.

While reading is one skill that can be practised with the help of poems and rhymes, there are intangible outcomes too. For their form, many of the children love poems and rhymes. As Prof. Krishna Kumar has said they are 'a resource of highly creative and energetic forms of language'. Poems allow a child to play with the language. Magazines bring a diversity of poems to children that may not be a

part of traditional rhyme books or textbooks. For example, in *Chakmak* we bring out children's poems not only written in Hindi but also many poems from overseas, translations of English and Iranian poems. Some of the compositions published in children's magazines have proved this for having witnessed repeatedly high energy responses by the children whenever recited. *Alu Mirchi Chai Ji* a poem (by Rajesh Utsahi) published in the first issue of *Chakmak* is such an example of a poem that became very popular. This poem has, over the past several decades, found itself in several textbooks both government prescribed, as well as private.

When used for recreational reading, magazines provide respite from the tedious reading that textbooks can often be. Attractive covers and diversity of content are probably the reasons that teachers have found that leaving magazines lying around in classrooms helps the most reluctant of readers to pick them up and peruse them. This is true even at the kindergarten levels. This is the first step towards getting interested in printed matter. Many children, especially in the early grades, find books intimidating for various reasons. Some of them have not had much contact with books, textbooks or other kinds. Others see their classmates reading easily and are not sure that they can achieve that skill. Once these children pick up magazines, printed matter does not seem as daunting. Some teachers have found that given this motivation early on, these children go on to be good readers.

Magazines also encourage children to write. Teachers have felt that the stories and other articles children read in magazines give them ideas for writing. They even use the pieces in magazines as models for writing. Magazines often encourage readers to write to the editor and send in their answers to puzzles and contests for a prize.

***Chakmak* as a supplementary tool**

Chakmak, a children's science magazine, was conceived in the early 1980s by the Eklavya Foundation as supplementary reading material for middle school children. The need for such a magazine emerged from the experience of those running Eklavya's Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP) in schools in Madhya Pradesh.

In those initial years, *Chakmak* was sold in the many rural government schools of HSTP at subsidised rates. Children loved reading the magazine and sent in questions, poems, art, stories, and anecdotes

because right from the beginning the magazine has reserved several pages - *Mera Panna* for contributions by children. The November issue to commemorate Children's Day for many years, were entirely *Mera Panna* issues.

In this way, *Chakmak* encouraged the penmanship and the curiosity of children and helped them express themselves on paper by not using conventional standards of what constituted 'good' art or 'proper' writing. The creativity and thinking of a child, her need to say her piece was the yardstick for finding room in *Chakmak*. There was no 'one' Hindi that was deemed acceptable and the diversity of languages and styles was not tampered with. What this did for the confidence of children in these schools, many of who were first-generation learners can only be imagined.

Mera Panna pages are often the first ones that children read in the magazine. They cover a variety of events revolving around the daily lives of children and in a variety of versions of Hindi. As a society, we are still far from an acceptance of home-languages and dialectic variations of the child in formal settings, even in the classroom. This is despite the fact that such acceptance can play a significant role in deciding a child's engagement in the classroom process and their retention in the school system. Initiatives such as *Mera Panna* may thus, play a significant role in this much-needed assurance for children.

In the early years of *Chakmak*, teachers also discussed the various articles in the magazine in their classes and attempted some of the activities, such as those in *Apni Prayogshala*. They gave constant feedback to the editorial team of *Chakmak* that helped keep the magazine relevant and useful as an educational tool. Over the years, the science content in *Chakmak* decreased and another change was in its readership – from being primarily read by children in Hindi medium government schools to having a larger proportion of those in English-medium, private schools. Today, *Chakmak* is still being used in schools, libraries and activity centres at various organisations, but largely for the interactive columns that have children write to us or send us their artwork.

Kyun-Kyun is a column that was started over a year ago. In this column, we ask children to respond to questions that range from why we fart to their views on what is considered work and who all in their families should be paid for it. Questions also include ones such as, why does a standing cycle fall,

who in their family do they think of as having the most freedom and why, and if they wanted to make someone disappear who would that be and why. Questions such as these that make children observe things around them, reflect on them and approach the answer from different perspectives is after all, what marks the beginning of most scientific and philosophical enquiry.

We also have a column developed by the Nature Conservation Foundation that encourages children to go outdoors, observe and connect with their natural surroundings. Topics focus on groups of animals or plants (monkeys, bamboo) and on concepts (mimicry, sounds around us). The response to these is limited, perhaps underlining the need for us to work with schools so more of them take up these activities with their students to help them connect better with nature.

Overall, while the content of *Chakmak* acts as a mirror for its readers to look into the world today, it is most definitely a window for us adults, to peep into the worlds of children, to know what they think about, what bothers them, and how they look at the world around them.

The potential of children's magazines including those such as *Chakmak* as tools or sources of learning is great. However, they are amongst the ones less explored as pedagogical support. No doubt there are other unorthodox learning tools that do not find a place in orthodox classrooms, like movies, film posters and advertisements. Today, as we talk about and support the need for a variety of learning materials, as we acknowledge the diversity in students' learning styles and preferences, we should add magazines as well as all these other forms to the pool of pedagogical tools that we use.

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