

## EDUCATION

# Why the literature curricula in schools fail to instil the love of reading

**AYAZ KADER**

When I was in the sixth grade, English Literature was my least favourite subject. Our syllabus was oriented around the classic *The Scarlet Pimpernel* by Baroness Orczy. Although the novel is considered to be a literary masterpiece consisting of strong themes and historical allusions, the way it was presented to us created a distorted perception of the subject.

Our exams and quizzes focused on recalling specific incidents from the book, encouraging rote memorisation over genuine engagement. This standard practice strips literature of its wonder, often discouraging a true appreciation for reading.

A standard school literature course should have the primary objective of instilling the love of reading in students. However, forcing students to memorise poems and remember every trivial detail of a book essentially purloins the fun out of it. This phenomenon is, quite possibly, one of the primary contributors to the decline in reading interest. When students sit down and read the novel they've been assigned, just to look for a specific answer for their homework, the act of reading is reduced to extracting "value".

Reading is not natural to the human psyche. Our brain repurposes existing brain circuits, like hearing and vision, to make up the information being taken in while reading. Therefore, most authors narrate a story in a way that is

better suited for an immersive experience. It is constructed in a manner that allows the reader to form vivid images in their minds. If anything, having the readers retain minute details is not an objective that authors aspire to with their work. However, in schools, there is a heavy emphasis on the latter.

As a result, students don't feel inclined to read for fun, especially if they haven't been doing so from an early age. What is more concerning, particularly in this day and age, is that human attention is easily captured by an endless stream of stimulating content. With reading being riddled with all sorts of hurdles, a lot of young individuals are possibly being deprived of the opportunity to expose themselves to a world full of rich and fantastical texts.

Moreover, when they relate reading to school assignments, it becomes an experience devoid of pleasure. It becomes a strictly utilitarian task, one which readers partake in exclusively for the sake of academics. Sure, if students read by themselves outside the school syllabus, they may develop an affinity for reading. But this is hardly the case because schools obviously have a great influence on younger minds.

So, what should be done?

Literature curricula exclusively focus on "canonical books" like classics, which every student is required to study. But if the goal is to make reading fun, focus should shift away from retaining details about the book and author. Instead,

classroom discussions should revolve around open-ended interpretations and analysis of the text, where each student uncovers the text in their own unique way.

In fact, one of the greatest mistakes is forcing interpretations upon students even though they may not find them relatable. If readers are granted the opportunity to engage with novels, then the arbitrary details that they were previously forced to remember are replaced with aspects of the book that resonate with them. Not only does this empower their voice, but it also allows young readers to navigate and grasp the central themes of a text by themselves, instead of being told what to think.

Similarly, exam questions should move away from a comprehension-based format. Questions should test engagement instead of rigid memory retention. For instance, questions like "Describe what the character does after discovering the secret" may be replaced with more subjective ones like "What action of the character did you find most captivating? Discuss in your own words".

Beyond developing reading comprehension and critical thinking skills, reading can also encourage readers to find out more about themselves as well. By seeing themselves in a character or aspiring to the virtues that they sense in their favourite heroes, it could instill values such as resilience, ambition, generosity, integrity, and nobility. It is precisely through fiction that we can begin to imagine a better version of ourselves as well as the world around us.



ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN