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# THE IMPORTANCE AND APPLICATION OF NURSERY RHYMES IN TEACHING PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN

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## Abstract

Nursery rhymes are generally conceived as escape literature, aimed at providing children with pleasure, while as no literary work can be definitely called escape literature and it is the readers' duty to decode the messages of literary works through analyzing the hidden layers of meaning, nursery rimes have the potential to be used for educational purposes as well. Nursery rimes as a genre of children's literature, referred to as interpretative literature, could be used to achieve several aims as teaching language to children, providing the opportunity for team work and teaching them social behavior as well as forming the basics of communication in children's mind, thus preparing them for future life. This essay considers the earlier mentioned functions of nursery rimes as well as some other items, moreover: It provides teachers with some procedures for using nursery rimes for educational purposes and tells of the superiority of nursery rimes compared with the rest of educational methods in practice.

**Key words:** escape literature, interpretative literature, nursery rimes, motivation and globalization.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nursery Rhymes are defined as simple verses, often accompanied by a simple tune, used for the entertainment and education of small children. "The origins of most nursery rimes are very obscure and are thought to be of considerable antiquity"(Cuddon, 1975). Most nursery rhymes have been handed down from one generation to another. Among the oldest are the ones related to telling time, weather patterns, tongue twisters, riddles, counting, or learning the alphabet to name some of their applications.

It is generally assumed by the public that nursery rimes are a pastime hobby, while they can be broadly used in teaching different things to children. Access to literature is an apt way to get knowledge, and to shape people's thoughts. Thus, to develop linguistic and communicative skills, one must consider that literature which brings people a good knowledge of these skills. Children's literature provides the opportunity to acquire communicative skills and understand many aspects of life. Children access these productions during the early years of their education. The aim of education using children's literature is related to creativity, play and to facilitate language acquisition. Moreover: as language is culture bound, children's literature is effective in preventing identity crisis through familiarizing children with cultural codes through the language teaching process.

As earlier pointed out, nursery rhymes have been regarded as a pastime and entertainment, while literature has a greater responsibility than mere entertainment. It is aimed at giving "pleasure as well as understanding"(Perrine, 1975, 15). Unfortunately the case of understanding has been ignored in the study of children literature, due to the public assumption, considering it as a source of entertainment, While nursery rhymes could be referred to as interpretative literature; they can teach language, team work and social behavior as well as forming the basics of communication in children's mind, thus preparing them for future life.

Nursery rhymes must be used in early childhood education since they provide young children with an exciting way to learn about counting numbers, pronouncing words, learning months' names and seasons, letters and other important concepts.

## 2. DISCUSSION

There are many reasons for the educational application of nursery rhymes. Some of these are that so many children are already familiar with so many of them. Learning facilitates when children or any one has the background, thus they become much more comfortable with their surroundings; certain words, letters, or even names seem to become self evident. Moreover, children who are familiar with nursery rhymes will often want to continue down one of many paths within the realm of literacy: they may want to continue reading the further adventures of a given character they may want to read other nursery rhymes or discover new characters or stories related but not exactly the same. They may even wish to write rhymes of their own; this is much like our experience as adults of being introduced to new people through a close old friend, and developing an independent relationship with that new friend. In the same way children become part of your social circle and make a lifelong relationship with literacy and enhance their quality of life in general.

Further, the natural rhythm and meter of nursery rhymes actually lend themselves to being read out loud which may lead to an early age familiarity with and an interest in music that might function as a source of motivation for children to learn music that provides them with pleasure and understanding simultaneously in exactly the same way as literature and arts do.

Considering the aims of children's literature, it must engage children in the process of thinking and discovering new themes in life. Despite their superficial simplicity, works written for children have the potential to help children learn through experiences: Moreover, attention must be paid to the fact that the role of children's literature in the socialization of children is accepted by educators. Leslie Kant notes the importance of early reading on attitudes and behavior in her foreword for a Schools Council publication:

It is never too soon to start thinking about the ways in which attitudes may be influenced by reading'. Most teachers would argue, it says, that apart from the acquisition of language, the major role of literature is to encourage children to explore relationships and to develop sensitivity in their understanding of their own behavior and that of others, and the images that children encounter when reading are a powerful means of shaping such thinking and behavior. If, as the Bullock Committee states, literature has a major role in encouraging children to explore relationships and to develop sensitivity in their understanding of their own behavior and that of others, then children's rhymes based on

folklore do much more than 'open vistas of beauty, adventure, and splendor in the bewildered minds of children with their mystic and dreamlike qualities. ( Anderson, 1975, p. 2)

In spite of the common idea regarding the nursery rimes as a pastime and entertainment, psychologists believe that playing is one of the best ways in teaching children. As nursery rimes include rime, rhythm and are capable of being chorally song, danced to and role played, not only do not they tire children, but also they motivate them to learn more. "One of the weaknesses of traditional teaching methods lies in making them reluctant to learn, the second weakness is that they teach and examine children's performance individually and in most cases meaningful learning does not happen"( Sadri,1989, 132). As far as nursery rimes are used as the means of instruction these weaknesses change to strength points. While children are intuitively playful, they enjoy reciting songs and in some cases they even ask parents' cooperation that indicates the depth of their enthusiasm.

Nursery rhymes could be used to teach different aspects to children as teaching them communication and social behavior. Teaching of nursery rhymes not only helps the kids to speak properly, but also helps them express their feelings by making facial expressions and gestures. So this is the first step in which we teach our kids how to express their feelings without using formal ways of communication. Also it is a well known fact that in some cases, "informal means of communication are more reliable and helpful in communication than the formal means of communication" Muskeg, 2002, 58). So we can say that nursery rhymes are not just like a mere pastime, but it is really very important in developing children's communication skills and developing their manner of expressing themselves and communicating what they mean from their early life.

Moreover, teaching children nursery rhymes and making them recite in front of public can increase their confidence. Singing nursery rhymes to your children from a young age has been shown to improve language skills to such an extent that it gives infants a head start in school. This benefit is understandable when you consider that even before babies can understand the words being spoken, nursery rhymes can help demonstrate the rhythms, patterns and sounds of speech. Later on, learning nursery rhymes helps kids expand their command of words and learn basic number skills; moreover, it gives them the confidence to express themselves through speech.

In the past, nursery rhymes were used by parents and elders to teach spiritual and religious issues to their children. Nursery rhymes could also be used to make a child familiar with the traditions and culture of the society in which they live.

Opie (1977), an expert in the study of children's culture divided children's songs into those taught to children by adults, which was part of a traditional culture they saw as nursery rhymes, and those that children taught to each other, which formed part of the independent culture of childhood. "A further use of the term is for songs written for the entertainment, or education, of children, usually in the modern era. In practice none of these categories is entirely discreet, since, for example, children often reuse and adapt nursery rhymes and many songs now considered as traditional were deliberately written by adults for commercial ends"( 1977, pp.21-22).

Moreover Ricks gives two reasons for the important influence of children's literature, mainly nursery rhymes on both adults and children: the first their direct and simple language and the second their greater opportunities to evade censorship through allegories and metaphors, although the rhymes are about and for children, they are also protests against ignorance and cultural barriers to gaining self knowledge.

children literature deals with powerless individuals, especially children, who not only share the poverty of their parents, but must struggle to survive physically and mentally in a society which has long ignored their vulnerable natures. The style and vocabulary employed in such rhymes, reflect everyday speech. Works of children literature then, are about and for children: they are also thinly coded protests against mass poverty, cultural issues and ignorance to name a few. (Zaps, 1983, p. 167)

Thomas Ricks considers nursery rimes as an allegorical tale of the ways to achieve knowledge and consciousness of the dynamics of society. Thus, to be of practical benefit, children's literature must be a bridge between the "blissfully ignorant and innocent world of children, their dreams and sweet imaginations, and the dark world of the adults whose consciousness is drowned in bitter and painful truth and in the hard social environment" (Abd El-Sadek, 2001, 1) The child must cross this bridge and venture into the world of adults with awareness and armed with light in hand. It is in this way that a child can contribute to the improvement of social ills, an important aim, possible to be achieved if children are allowed to find about their world through personal investigation in addition to being provided with values which enable them to independently deal with the various moral and social problems in society, especially those problems they are most likely to be encountered with as adults.

Hence it must be pointed out that, in line with the potentials and duties defined for children's literature, nursery rimes possess the potential to motivate children to learn how to explore relationships and develop social skills enabling them to understand the shortcomings of their own behavior and that of others through comparisons, leading to the knowledge of self, though in a small scale, compatible with this stage of children's life. The inevitable fact remains that children's literature can do much more than opening vistas of beauty, adventure, and splendor in the bewildered minds of children with their mystic and dreamlike qualities.

Using nursery rhymes provides teachers with the opportunity to teach children the experiences of other cultures too. They can even introduce the history of other civilizations in a language that even little kids can understand due to the fact that rimes are easily remembered. Of course, teachers can still concentrate on the ancient rhymes that have delighted children belonging to one culture, but to introduce them to a multi-cultural world from pre-school, nursery rhymes could be considered as one of the best teaching methods.

## 2.1. PREPARING CHILDREN FOR FUTURE LIFE

Many parents read nursery rhymes to their children on a daily basis as they believe them to be suitable sources of education. Yet, some believe nursery rhymes do not have the potential to prepare their children for the real world. Of course most parents do not deem it necessary for their children to be prepared or exposed to the many complications of life. One of the problems is that when children are in preschool or kindergarten they are still read nursery rhymes to and treated as kids. Of course there is nothing wrong with that since they are still very young, but when they reach

the first grade they are suddenly expected to act like adults. This can be very difficult to do when they have not been properly prepared.

On the other hand most parents feel that there is nothing wrong with reading a few nursery rhymes to their children. Some nursery rhymes are very helpful when it comes to helping your child learn to read. This is a tool that many parents have used for years. It is important that one takes the time to prepare their children for what they would be expected of, once they attend school.

Some educators are determined to remove nursery rhymes from the school curriculum without considering the effects. Such educators must remember that kindergarten is supposed to be a fun experience for children, and they must avoid putting too much pressure on children at this stage, otherwise it would have a negative effect on them and make the first expression a bitter one that would remain in their minds even to the old age. To avoid such negative influences attention must be paid to the fact that this is exactly what nursery rhymes or other genres of children literature as fairy tale stories do. They help add fun into children's educational programs at kindergarten and pre-school and thus making the learning experience an enjoyable one, but educators should keep in mind that it is not the schools primary responsibility to teach children the difference between fact and fiction or fairy tales and real life. Parents need to remember that it is their own responsibility to educate their children and make them aware of the above facts gradually as they grow. The bottom line when it comes to whether or not nursery rhymes give children a false impression of life really depends on what the parents think and what they do.

One of the most important reasons for doing nursery rhyme activities with children is that it can help them learn to read later on in life. The reason for this is that nursery rhyme activities encourage parents to read to their children which in turn will show the children how enjoyable reading is. But nursery rhyme activities are also good to help children to read later on in life because they teach children about words that rhyme basically through the sounds of the words children will become enthralled with nursery rhymes.

Another reason that doing nursery rhyme activities with children is a good idea is that they will help children memorize the nursery rhymes through repetition. Most nursery rhyme activities require children to repeat them for several times which helps children memorize those words, moreover, children would quickly learn how to recognize certain words, sight words and the correct pronunciation of words, thus they would be ahead of their classmates when attending elementary education.

Moreover, doing nursery rhyme activities with children is good as they teach them a variety of skills. The types of skills they will be working on will depend on what nursery rhyme activities are being done, but regardless of the type of activity they will still be helpful. Doing physical activities will develop their gross motor skills, such as running, jumping, balancing and such similar activities. Other activities will require them to develop fine motor skills such as cutting and pasting, placing things in order and so on.

Parents are required to know that it mustn't be left to teachers and academics to do such activities, rather as parents they are expected to provide supplementary activities at home and try to involve children with such activities. At this point a question may come to the mind regarding what to choose for children, but regardless of what nursery rhyme activities they are doing with children it is always good to do them with children because they will help children grow and develop properly. Many activities require a variety of skills from children and by doing these activities with

children parents encourage their children to develop these skills. An important issue that is bound to the parents' duties is to provide accurate and scientific information about the world to their children. They should give them values which enable them to deal with and evaluate the various moral and social problems in the ever-changing conditions and circumstances of society.

Careful attention must be paid to what to choose so as to help function as a bridge between the colorful, ignorant and innocent world of children, and the world of the adult whose consciousness is drowned in bitter and painful truth and in the hard social environment. The child must cross this bridge and venture into the world of adults with awareness and armed with light in hand. It is in this way that a child can successful in their future social life.

In fact as earlier quoted it is "never too soon to start telling our children", so one must start reading nursery rhymes to children when they are three to four months old. Reciting nursery rhymes to children will help them understand the grammatical structure of language and learn to read easier in future. Several studies have been done on nursery rhymes that have proven that nursery rhyme activities really do help children understand the language.

The song-like rhythmic patterns found in nursery rhymes will draw the attention of a child to the structure of the language. It is important to participate in nursery rhyme activities because it will help children develop an awareness of the syllables and sounds that make up the words they are being read to. When reading nursery rhymes to children it is important to sing or clap along with the rhyme. Clapping will help the syllables stand out better and children will be able to easily identify them.

Nursery rhyme activities also allow children to develop language skills by making them more aware of different words used in their language. They will be able to distinguish between minimal pairs, For example, reading nursery rhymes with the word "cat" will help them associate the word as hat, rat, pat etc., but once being read, repeated and practiced enough children will know they are completely different things.

Reciting nursery rhymes on a regular basis will help children learn the rhythms of speech and intonation. Nursery rhymes help children make up the grammatical structure of their language and they will learn how to place an emphasis on certain words or phrases. For example, the nursery rhyme "Itsy Bitsy Spider" reads "the itsy bitsy spider climbed up the water spout" and later "down came the rain and washed the spider out." By placing an emphasis on the last two or three words of the sentences, children will begin to recognize speech patterns and language structure. They will quickly learn that emphasis is used in every day language. For example, we place emphasis on the end of a question and we also place emphasis on a sentence where we are excited. Even pausing between sentences is another form of emphasis. Have children pick out conversations where people are placing emphasis on certain sentences. This can be a great activity to do as a family.

Nursery rhyme activities also teach children how to say consonant sounds clearly. For example, the nursery rhyme "Hey Diddle Diddle" has the letter "d" repeated several times. When children read this rhyme aloud, they need to make the appropriate sound for the letter "d", causing their brain to use different tongue movements to place an emphasis on different parts of the words. It helps children learn how to properly enunciate and become more fluent in their speaking skills. If a child has speaking problems, nursery rhymes are a great way to help them pronounce sounds they have trouble with.



I have had children bursting out of their skins after introducing a new poem, to tell me about all the patterns and rhymes they can see within that poem. It's amazing to observe, before you know it they are talking about patterns within words everywhere - it's great. (Haggard, 1981, p. 52)

Thus as the language acquisition forms in children's mind, it is usually accompanied by thinking and learning about culture as language is culture bound and in close relation with thought. This way the more children learn about a language the more they are prepared for thinking as a way for future needs for independent decision making so as to be able to survive in the global sphere and avoid otherness.

## 2.2. METHODOLOGY

An important question raised at this point is why and how to teach children to improve children language skills. Nursery rhymes actually help to improve children language skills. Teachers will aim to develop students' linguistic abilities with an emphasis on an additional language as a means of communication. They would develop students' linguistic abilities within an integrated program of speaking, singing, listening, reading, writing and entertainment. Thus practitioners are expected to:

- Use role-play and improvisation in meaningful situations in order that students can practice and develop confidence in their linguistic ability.
- Develop an integrated program using the literature and culture associated with the language; for example, songs, nursery rhymes, poems, myths and legends, customs, stories etc.,
- Provide a supportive, positive environment to encourage students to explore, experiment, and take risks in all aspects of language learning.
- Provide an environment which encourages students to strive for excellence.
- Provide students with opportunities to apply their skills, knowledge and experience in increasingly more challenging and demanding situations,

Provide meaningful activities and learning situations in order to encourage students to understand that the effective use of language is a valuable life skill.

## 3. CONCLUSION

Nursery rhymes have been regarded as a pastime and entertainment, while we all know that literature has a greater responsibility than mere entertainment. It is for pleasure plus understanding. Unfortunately the case of understanding has been ignored in the case of children literature. As earlier discussed due to the fact that nursery rhymes are a genre of children literature that can be used in teaching a variety of subjects to children, they are no more escape, rather interpretative literature, they can teach language, team work and social behavior as well as forming the basics of communication in children's mind, thus preparing them for future life.

Nursery rhymes must be used in early childhood education for years as it provides young children with a fun and exciting way to learn about math, letters, opposites, position words and other important concepts. But there are other reasons that we should do nursery rhyme activities with our children, not just the fact that doing those activities with our children will help teach them certain concepts.

As the above reasons indicate nursery rhymes could not be merely considered as fun, rather they are for providing pleasure and understanding. While teaching as a formal or as what is being customarily done in schools are in most cases faced with a negative attitude from the students side as the books or the teachers may not be interesting, teaching through nursery rhymes has the benefit of making students interested, moreover; for most of the students the first class is like the first impression to adults, so an interesting one will encourage the students to continue education with enthusiasm, rather than reluctance.

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