

## Making reading accessible in inclusive settings: An exemplar from India

Learning to read is a pivotal milestone in the life of all children. It opens the gateway to a lifetime of exploration and enrichment. What efforts can educators and parents make to ensure that children develop the essential skills of reading with meaning and pleasure?

Professionals working in this area in the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT)<sup>1</sup> in the Department of Education of Groups with Special Needs (DEGSN) accepted the challenge of making reading accessible for all children in inclusive settings. In this endeavour, the DEGSN conceptualised the development of reading material following the Universal Design for Learning. An in-depth engagement with the issue led to the following set of guiding questions:

*How can we promote reading with meaning and pleasure among **all** children in the early years studying in inclusive settings?*

*What is the importance of supplementary reading in the early years for children with varying needs?*

*How can assistive technologies (AT) as inclusive curriculum aids be used effectively?*

DEGSN organised a series of workshops and consultations with a multidisciplinary team of experts and practitioners at the national level. This collective attempt led to the conclusion that all children in the classroom must have the opportunity to use the same book. Also, the transaction of syllabus only through prescribed textbooks leads to disenchantment which inhibits reading for pleasure. Therefore there is a need to go beyond textbooks and highlight the significance of supplementary reading. Additionally, the use of one book for all builds a sense of confidence and camaraderie among peers, leading to inclusive societies. This can be achieved through the use of assistive technologies and incorporating principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in the books.

The adaptations in *Barkhaa: A Reading Series for 'All'*<sup>2</sup> are a result of analyses of workshops and consultations with the aim of aiding **children of varying needs** at the early reading stage. The adapted **print and digital**<sup>3</sup> versions aim to provide a multi-sensory experience to young readers. To promote collective reading, the print version has the text in print form and in braille on the same page. Realising the limitations of conventional braille, embossed invisible braille with a longer shelf life is used in the books. Often books with illustrations are considered impractical for children with visual difficulties. To dispel this myth and make illustrations accessible to all, the salient features of the illustrations are made tactile and high resolution surrounded by a black border to draw the eye in. To facilitate ease of use, the pages used are thicker and of higher quality. The booklets are put together with wire binding keeping in mind that use of staples can be dangerous for young children and that regular book binding will not allow the books to open flat for braille reading. The pages are also graded in width to allow easy page turning. Some of the other features are picture windows or flashcards to reinforce difficult words through real images, green and red dots to indicate beginning and end of sentences, arrows to go to the next page. A note for teachers and parents in Hindi and English at the end of each story helps them facilitate early reading in the classroom and at home. This note also includes an introductory note to each story to raise curiosity, clarify certain concepts and motivate children to read. Parents and teachers are expected to read this note aloud to the children.

All these features are retained in the digital version which is accompanied by a how to use section. In addition, the introductory note for each booklet is incorporated in audio-video format. The audio-video note is also available in sign language. The digital version can be accessed on computers, mobile phones, lap tops and tablets.

These small adaptations in existing learning materials without changing the essence of the original material are a leap into the future. They provide guidelines for future and lead to a foundation for inclusive schooling that embraces differences and leaves no child behind.

<sup>1</sup>NCERT is an autonomous body working the area of school education in New Delhi, India.

<sup>2</sup>The original *Barkhaa: A Reading Series* is a culmination of the efforts of the Department of Elementary Education (DEE), NCERT.

<sup>3</sup><http://www.ncert.nic.in/departments/nie/degsn/NCERTBarkhaseries/Start.html>