

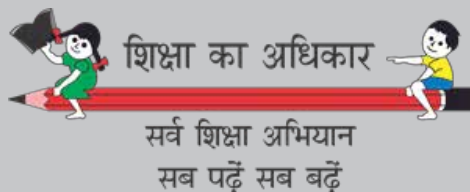
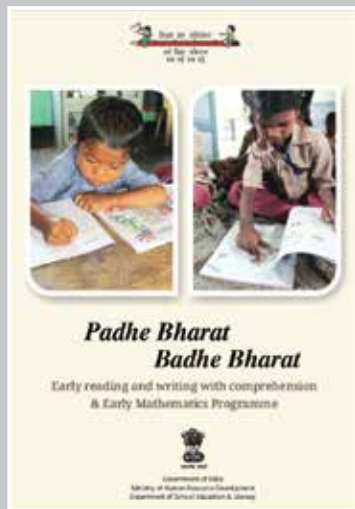


ON THE THRESHOLD OF READING

A COMPILATION OF ARTICLES ON READING

Reading is essentially a process of meaning making i.e, comprehension. Reading is an interaction between the text and the reader which is shaped by the context-the reader's prior knowledge, experience, attitude and language of community which is culturally and socially situated. The reading process requires continuous practice, development and refinement. In addition, reading requires creativity and critical analysis.

— *Padhe Bharat, Badhe Bharat*



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A COMPILATION OF ARTICLES ON READING

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एन सी ई आर टी
NCERT

राष्ट्रीय शैक्षिक अनुसंधान और प्रशिक्षण परिषद्
NATIONAL COUNCIL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND TRAINING

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FOREWORD

The early years of a child's life are significant from the point of view of learning to read and write. Teachers play an important role once the child enters school. However, very often, this crucial phase is not given due attention. As a result, children reach the end of the primary school with ill-developed reading and writing abilities. One of the reasons for such a state of affairs is the lack of proper pedagogical understanding of reading and writing.

This compilation offers perspectives and accounts of experiences of teaching children to read, and of organising a comfortable reading environment for them. The articles included in this book will provide reading material to teacher educators for generating discussion on notions and practices prevalent about reading and writing. For practising primary school teachers, it provides a perspective that will compel them to view their teaching space and time critically. It will offer them a few ideas about the use and selection of interesting children's literature.

We hope that *On the Threshold of Reading* offers a refreshing perspective on the process of reading to all readers. Comments and suggestions are always welcome to improve the material.

HRUSHIKESH SENAPATY
Director

New Delhi
December 2015

National Council of Educational
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PREFACE

It has been several years since the original book in the Hindi language — *Padhne ki Dehleez per* was published. The book was received well by teachers and teacher-educators. The book was published at a time when the discourse on reading had started to develop at the national level with the establishment of the Reading Development Cell in 2007. Over the year, the discourse on reading and writing, especially in the early years has widened and gained depth. The Ministry of Education, erstwhile Ministry of Human Resource Development has consistently recognised this as an area of concern. *Padhe Bharat, Badhe Bharat*, a document on early reading and writing with comprehension brought out by the MHRD in 2014, has highlighted the significance of understanding, reading and writing in the early years.

Our interaction with teachers, teacher-educators and other functionaries across the states brought this realisation that a translation of the book is needed to make it available to a wider audience. We hope that the book will suitably fulfill that need.

The Council acknowledges the contribution of all the authors who granted permission to publish their articles in the original compilation in Hindi.

We express our gratitude to Hrushikesh Senapaty, *Professor* and *Director*, NCERT and Suniti Sanwal, *Professor* and *Head*, DEE who guided us during the development of this book.

We dedicate this book to late Dr. Lata Pandey, who had compiled the original in Hindi.

USHA SHARMA
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The National Council of Educational Research and Training appreciates the support of Suniti Sanwal, *Professor and Head*, DEE and the dedicated and creative work by Usha Sharma, *Coordinator* and Varada M. Nikalje, Department of Elementary Education, NIE, NCERT in bringing out this much needed translated version of the book *Padhne Ki Dehleez Par*.

We also acknowledge the support we received from Mukul Priyadarshini, *Associate Professor*, Miranda College, University of Delhi, Sharda Kumari, *Senior Lecturer*, DIET, R K Puram, New Delhi, Pooja Bahuguna, *Research Scholar*, University of Delhi, Arzoo Chawla, *Curriculum Developer*, New Delhi, Shruti Pal, *Research Scholar*, University of Delhi, Shachendra Arya, *Research Scholar*, University of Delhi, Manjula Mathur, Madhavi Kumar, Arshad Ikram Ahmad, *Assistant Professor*, Jamia Milia Islamia, Deepti Chawla, *TGT*, Directorate of Education, Meenakshi Khar, *Assistant Professor*, Department of Education in Languages, Sonika Kaushik, *Senior Consultant*, Early Literacy Programme at the Department of Elementary Education, NCERT.

The Council also acknowledges the relentless effort of Nishu Jaiswal, *Junior Project Fellow* and Ritu Jha, *DTP Operator* in following up the changes in the drafts of the book and ensuring a smooth reading experience.

The contributions of Soumma Chandra, *Assistant Editor* (Contractual) and Sanju Sharma, *DTP Operator* (Contractual), Publication Division are also acknowledged.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Children have a natural desire and curiosity to read; they want to know how to read. Unfortunately, this natural innate desire is dampened and gradually, due to several reasons, neglected. Somehow schools too do not teach children in such a way as to enable them to read for culling out information, search for books, read for pleasure and become lifelong readers. One of the main reasons for this is — methods used by the teachers for teaching them how to read. It is a common practice in our schools to begin teaching or reading with memorising the letters in the *varnmala*, joining of letters into words and then sentences. Rote memorisation of letters without meaning becomes such an uninteresting exercise for the child that the fountain of their innate desire to read dries up prematurely. In fact many teachers themselves are not aware of the concept of reading and pedagogical inputs required for it. The article *What does 'Reading' Really Mean?* in the true sense will develop this understanding. The compilation of articles will throw light on different aspects related to reading.

Emergent Literacy — An Alternative Approach is another article in the compilation that highlights the existing scenario of teaching reading in schools as well as review the notions pertaining to learning to read in the early years of schooling.

Reading becomes a pleasure for children if we introduce reading to them through interesting activities. The article *Making Children Hate Reading* develops an understanding on how reading can become a pleasure.

Every child wants to read, but it is unfortunate that in our country children get hardly anything to read besides their textbooks. Can we provide children with input-rich reading environment using material available in their environment? This information is shared in the article, *A Rich Reading Environment for Children?*

Relevant books play a significant role in creating an environment for reading. The article *What should a Children's Book Have* elaborates upon the issues, such as, what should

be the content of children's books, the criteria of selecting books for children, and so on.

A well illustrated book enhances not only the pleasure of reading and enriches language; it develops children's aesthetic sense as well. The article *Picture Books — Experiences and Observations of Children* describes the experiences of children with illustrated books.

A library is the place where children can find books delineating their own world. Library gives pleasure to children. The article *The Treasure of Books — Library for Children* describes the wonderful world of books, the value of a well-stocked accessible library and gives suggestions for a functional children's library in every school.

Children lose no time to develop a love for books provided they have the freedom to select books on their own. The article *Read Books, Move Ahead* shares such experiences with readers.

It is a fact that young children face many obstacles when they are at the threshold of reading. Children who are able to cross the threshold experience the vast world of possibilities and success. Yet, there are children who have the potential but they have to return from the threshold in spite of their fervent efforts. Ultimately they are lost in the darkness of ignorance. Why do these children have to return? Is it a fault on the part of the child, the teacher or the guardians who, perhaps, are illiterate? Such questions are raised in *The Story of Ashok*.

Love, trust, and an understanding of children are prerequisites for teaching children to read. Theory and principles of knowledge alone cannot teach reading. The development of reading skills demands a close bond between teacher and children. The article *On the Threshold of Reading* attempts to make teachers more aware of this feeling.

We hope that the articles in this compilation will be helpful in developing a relevant understanding of reading and that no child will return disappointed from the threshold of reading, but will move ahead, filled with hope and dreams.

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शिक्षित बालिका
समाज की रचयिता



WHAT DOES 'READING' REALLY MEAN?

SHARDA KUMARI*

Nishi is in Class III. According to her teacher, she is learning to read satisfactorily.

Let us hear her read two lines from a prose passage:

Barsaat aane vaali thee. Shanti abhi ghar nahi aaye thee.
(It was about to rain and Shanti had not reached home as yet.)

This is how Nishi reads these lines:

"Bus kaa **ba**, rassi kaa **ra**, saraute kaa **sa**, usme **aa** kaa danda fir takli kaa **ta** banaa ba..ra..saa..t. Aam kaa **aa**, nal kaa **na**, **airi** waali maatra bana aaane, vaa kaa **va** usme **aa** kaa danda fir latto kaa **la** aur usme badi **ee** ki matra. Matlab ke **vaali** fir than kaa **tha** aur badi **ee** ki matra ho gaya **thee**. Shariife ka **sha** usme pade **do dande** fir nal kaa na takli kaa **ta**..."

What can we make out from Nishi's reading style? To read a word, she identifies the letters of the Hindi *varnamaala* which she has memorised. Then she recalls the association of letters with words memorised from a primer. She uses the same associations of letters and words to read every new word. For example, to identify **ba** in **barsaat** (*rain*), she uses **ba** of bus, **ra** from rassi (*rope*), **sa** of saraute, **aa** kaa danda aur takli kaa **ta**. Only by breaking down words can Nishi understand the word **barsaat**. In doing so, Nishi has only become familiar with decoding. It is doubtful whether she is able to engage with the meaning of the word. Can we really say that Nishi has learnt to read or that she is in the process of learning to read?

Let's take the case of Manoj who is in Class IV. He reads somewhat like this:

Ba..ra..saa..t (*barsaat*) **aa..n..e..** (*aane*) **vaa..li...** (*vaali*) hai.
(*barsaat aane vaali hai*).

Manoj reads loudly, emphasising each letter of each word separately and then reading the word as a whole unit. Can

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this style of reading be put in the category of reading? Again, it is doubtful.

Another case is that of Imraan who is in Class V. He has a different style of reading.

If he is asked to read a chapter from the textbook, he immediately turns to it and reads the entire chapter very quickly. However, if he is asked to read something unfamiliar, he is unable to do so. He is unable to recognise even the letters. What kind of reading style is this?

Let us take the case of Bhanu who has been given a text to read: *wah, daudkar bus mein chadh gayaa* (He ran to the bus and climbed in). The accompanying picture shows a child running towards the bus in order to board it. Bhanu reads this text in the following way:

/w//h//b//s//m//ch//dh//g//ya/

The same sentence is also given to Suneera to read. Whether Suneera's focus is on the picture or on the written text, this, you have to decide. This is how she reads it:

Bachchaa bhaag kar bus mein chadh gayaa.

Piyush is in Class IV. He also constructs his own text by looking at the picture and perhaps recognising a few letters or words.

Another case is that of Jaamuni, a Class V student. She can read and recognise letters and words consisting of *matras*. However, she fails to understand the meaning of the text. Although she is curious about the story, she would say, *Aap padhkar sunaao, pahle aap padhkar sunaao* (You read it out to me first). As a student of Class V, she should have been able to read and enjoy stories on her own.

All the above examples provide glimpses of various styles of reading by children. Which of them would you say is really able to read? Or, do we say, "Yes, each of them is reading after all."

First, let us try to understand what reading is. Cognitivists and linguists have expressed their views on reading in the following ways:

- 'Reading' is the construction of meaning from the written text.

- Reading means that one creates images of the written text, relates them with thoughts and retains them in one's memory.
- Reading is not just the recognition of letters or mere sounding out of words and sentences. It is much more than that. Reading involves the development of one's own perspective or personal understanding by comprehending the written text.
- Breaking the word into small chunks is not 'reading'. Reading means an interaction with the written text, to mould the written text as per our experiences and theoretical configurations.
- Reading is not a linear process. Rather, it includes the integration of various language cueing systems-graphophonemics (understanding of letter-sound correspondence), syntax (understanding of sentence structure), semantics (meaning of words and sentences) and the skill of making predictions.
- The important point is that reading is getting the message or the written information.

If we go by the above stated definitions of reading, we can definitely say that Nishi, Manoj, Imraan, Bhanu and Jaamuni cannot read. In fact, when we break words into smaller chunks and read in a fragmented way, the brain is not able to focus on the 'whole' text. It focuses on these smaller chunks. As a result, the brain experiences an overload of information and its meaning-making capability becomes less. When the entire focus is on breaking the code, the reader is unable to focus on meaning. Hence, it becomes almost impossible to read for pleasure.

In order to teach reading appropriately to children or to develop the ability of 'reading', it is essential to discourage children from 'decoding'. Decoding implies reading a word by breaking it into a smaller chunk and sounding out each chunk. Teaching methods such as decoding and activities based on decoding such as reciting the *varnamala*, pronunciation or sounding out the words are popular methods for teaching early reading in school.

There can be two reasons for their popularity. First, teachers may not have understood the meaning of 'reading'. As a consequence, they fail to think and use appropriate

teaching strategies to teach 'reading'. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly they feel comfortable teaching through the decoding method (However, in reality, teachers and students both have to spend more time and energy in teaching and learning 'reading' through the decoding method).

While learning to read through traditional methods, children break each word into smaller chunks. As a result, their brains have to work harder in order to get the meaning. On the contrary, good readers struggle only with limited printed graphic information at a time. They focus their eyes on a small portion of the written text, the rest is understood through prediction. Good readers do not fix their eyes on the shape of each letter or each word of a sentence. They are able to make predictions about the text on the basis of their familiarity with the shapes of the letter and words, the meaning of the text and their familiarity with the world.

It might seem that teaching 'reading' in this way must be a very complex process. But it is not. The fact is that there cannot be one perfect method to teach 'reading'. Neither it is feasible to be dependent on a single method of teaching 'reading'. Each method has its limitations, which teachers are aware of. Before we discuss the methods of developing the skill of reading, it is essential to discuss an important question- 'Why are children not able to read?' To answer this question, I would like to make the following points:

- As with all other subject classes, the language class is also all about rote memorisation, and it is difficult to learn to read by memorising the written text.
- Children are not allowed to talk or ask questions in the Indian classrooms. Little space is being given to students for 'free expression' in the classroom and it eventually becomes a huge obstacle in the process of reading.
- The endless rote memorisation of the *varnamala* kills the zeal for reading amongst children during the early phase itself.
- Textbooks do not offer a coherent view on development of reading.
- There is a huge gap between the language of the textbooks and the child's own language and experiences.

- The teacher pays too much attention to errors related to pronunciation and not on developing an enthusiasm for reading amongst the students.
- Children coming from marginalised sections, especially first-generation learners, do not feel connected to the process of learning in the school, be it the textbooks, teaching methods or teacher behaviour.
- They are not able to find a representation of their background in the school. But what does all of this have to do with reading? In fact, these factors have a deep impact on reading. Language is closely tied with one's cultural and social identity. It is difficult to engage with material which does not represent 'us' or 'our experiences'. In the process of searching for answers to this, you will understand whether the representation of one's reality in the school has anything to do with reading or not.
- Our students also fail to develop an aptitude for reading because there is a lack of interesting material both at home and in the school. Those children, who do get the desired reading material, do not get the freedom to read them, because parents are afraid that exam scores will fall if children read anything other than their textbooks. I have often seen parents snatching story books from children because they believe reading story books is not linked to getting good marks.

Firstly, in order to teach reading in its real sense, it is important to pay attention to the above points. This may result in a generation of new ideas.

Secondly, a teacher needs to understand that reading is not merely recognising letters and words, it involves making meaning from the text. Moreover, one cannot comprehend by breaking the words into smaller chunks, rather one has to connect their experience and predictions with the written text.

Thirdly, reading in school should not be confined only to reading chapters of the textbooks. On the contrary, reading involves the ability to read unlimited written and printed material found around us and to get an understanding of it. The higher order skills of language take the definition of reading even further. The real definition of reading should

include a passion for reading, enjoyment of reading literature, and the development of critical thinking skills.

In that case, can Nishi, Manoj, Bhanu and Jaamuni reach these higher order reading skills? Definitely, provided we can understand what reading is in its true sense. Accordingly, scientific methods of teaching reading should be included in the language classes keeping an eye on the diversity of the classroom.

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EMERGENT LITERACY – AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

SHOBHA SINHA*

Achieving mass literacy is an important goal in India. However, the gap between what is desirable and what we have achieved in terms of mass literacy is a cause of great concern. Although the percentage of literate people in the population has increased, the number of illiterates also continues to increase. A large number of those who are considered literate are, in fact, incapable of comprehending what they read. In spite of some progress, the overall picture is quite dismal. However, it is very important to discuss what goes on in the primary years of schooling, because this is where most Indian children make their first contact with literacy. Due to this situation, it is a major responsibility of the primary schools to help children to become literate. If the schools fail in this task, then consequences are going to be very severe for the children. Therefore, it is important to examine early literacy instruction in Indian classrooms.

In this paper, I will examine the current status of primary school literacy instruction and the underlying assumptions about literacy and learning. Subsequently, I will describe an alternative approach — Emergent Literacy.

CURRENT STATUS OF LITERACY INSTRUCTION

In schools, early literacy instruction consists of mastering the formal and mechanical aspects of written language. Children practice reading and writing letters, blending letters to form words, and then, combining words to form sentences. The basic unit with which they begin is the 'letter'. This overwhelming focus on graphophonics (shapes of letters and their sounds) eliminates meaning and any functional aspects of literacy.

An analysis of Hindi primers demonstrates what shape the reading instruction takes with this approach. Indian classrooms heavily depend on textbooks. So primers can be a good indicator of the pedagogy of literacy in the early years. An analysis of Hindi primers reveals that they are very absorbed

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with phonics (Sinha, 2000). Chapters are constructed around letters (specifically on vowel sounds). There is very limited attention on themes. So, generally the chapters begin with a list of words with similar sounds. e.g., car, *bhaat*, *sagar*, *sarkar*, *dama*, *shaam*, *talwar*, *saal*, *kaala* (car, rice, sea, government, asthma, evening, sword, year, black) are listed together on the basis of common *aa* sound (as in car) (*Shiksha Bharati*, p. 12).

Following the list of words are sentences where lots of opportunity is given to practice a particular sound. For example, a lesson based on 'O' (*vowel in coat*):

dhol bajao/chor bhagao

shor na machao

pathashala chalo

kitab kholo

bolkar padho

dekhkar likho. tote ko Ram-Ram ratne do. (*Hindi Reader*, p. 12).

(Beat the drum, scare the thief. Do not make noise. Go to school. Open the book. Read aloud. Speak and write. Let the parrot say Ram-Ram).

Due to their obsession with sounds to the exclusion of everything else, the texts are unfocused and sometimes blatantly absurd. For example, *Aam par chadh* (Climb on a mango) (*Deepu, Hindi Reader*, p.17). *Gilas sir par mat rakh* (Do not keep the glass on your head). (*Indradhanush Swar Mala*, p. 19).

These examples from Hindi primers reveal, that for the most part, the texts are meaningless and children are actually actively taught not to seek meaning. If they read for comprehension, then the experience will be very bizarre because there is no coherent text to comprehend in the first place. Children can hardly be expected to enjoy these texts. They merely practise the pattern of sounds in a very mechanical manner without the help of content.

Bal Bharati series attempts to stick to a theme in a given chapter. However, the style of writing does not make the text very readable. For example there is a lesson—

Aao, khana khao

Aao, kamla aao

Aao, Madan aao

Khana ban gaya
Meera ko saath lao
Sab milkar khana khao
Aao, Meera aao
Aao, khana khao
Mataji, dal chawal do
Lo Meera, dal chawal lo
Saag lo, chutney lo
Madan, roti lo, raita lo
Khana chaba chaba kar khao (Bal Bharati, Part 1, pp. 26–27).
 (Come eat food. Come, Kamla come. Come, Madan come. The food is ready. Bring Meera along. Eat food together. Come, Meera come. Come, eat the food. Mother, give me rice and dal. Meera take rice and dal. Take curry, take chutney. Madan take bread, take raita. Chew the food while eating).

This text uses a completely unnatural language pattern. This type of language is difficult for children because the sentences lack flow. Children use their prior knowledge of the language to read and since this type of unnatural language is never used in real life, it hinders their reading. The content, though coherent, is hardly interesting.

These texts are mostly irrelevant to children's lives and are very boring. For a child who reads these types of texts, reading will be a mechanical and nonsensical activity. As far as writing is concerned, children are asked to focus on forming letters and words and learning correct spelling. Again, they have to focus on the formal aspects of language to the exclusion of everything else.

Children's first contacts with literacy in schools is quite disheartening and demotivating. The focus of primary schools is to master the letters (*varnmala*). The schools lack focus on either functional or enjoyable aspects of literacy. Most schools (specially for low socio-economic status children) are very sordid and lack interesting literacy pedagogy or children's literature. Children may get the message from the outside world that literacy is valuable but their experiences in school negates this message.

Children subjected to this kind of teaching face a very dismal situation. Unlike oral language which they have learned and used simultaneously in a productive manner, literacy

learning is very unrewarding in an immediate sense. This is a major problem with this approach as children cannot be expected to learn something and wait to use it in some remote future. Children are told that literacy is beneficial but what they encounter in schools appears to be far from useful or enjoyable. Children want to be literate but are completely baffled by the skills that they are supposed to master. Reading is a mechanical and joyless experience for them. Since the tasks children engage in are not authentic, they do not serve any purpose and, in fact, hinder literacy development. It can be hypothesised that this type of pedagogy is closely linked to high drop-out rates in early years of schooling (Kumar, 1992).

PROBLEMS WITH THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH

In the traditional model, the underlying assumptions about the nature of reading and the nature of learning are problematic. The first problem with this approach is that reading is conceptualised very narrowly as being only decoding (finding oral equivalent of written language). Learning to read is viewed as an exercise in learning to decode. Children are expected to learn how to decode using a 'bottom-up' approach where one begins with letters, then words, then sentences and so on. Recent research has challenged this notion. Beginning with letters is problematic because it is totally abstract and hence, means nothing to a child. For a child, it is not the easiest unit to begin with. Besides, we do not process the text in a 'bottom-up' manner. Too much focus on letters distracts from comprehension. Reading is essentially a sense-making activity. However, traditional models of reading view meaning as dispensable at this stage, and not integral to reading.

The second problem with this model is that it excludes any functional use of language. Unlike oral language development where children acquire and use the language simultaneously, here they are required to wait to use it till they fully master the formal aspects of the written language.

The third problem is that this model utilises a behaviouristic view of learning. It focuses on sequential mastery and drilling. It fragments language into meaningless units for the purpose of practice. It is not holistic. This further contributes to meaninglessness.

EMERGENT LITERACY: AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

It is important to consider an alternative approach to early literacy development. Emergent literacy is a model which is a developmental model of learning how to read and write. It is consistent with recent research in reading and also the developmental view to learning.

First of all, extensive research in recent years reveals that reading is not merely confined to decoding. The process of reading involves the use of semantic (meaning) and syntactic (word order) cues, in addition to the graphophonic (letter-sound) cues. The reader actively constructs meaning while reading.

Secondly, research in oral language development shows that the child's language learning is not explained very well by stimulus-response models. The child learns the language by actively generating hypothesis and trying it out. Research in early literacy development shows that there are similar processes in literacy learning as well (Teale and Sulzby, 1986). Children actively generate hypothesis about written language if they are given opportunities to be in a print-rich environment. They do not have to be formally taught all the mechanical aspects of language. Observations of children's early reading and writing attempts show how this happens. Informal activities, such as, scribbling and pretend-reading yield rich data about children's hypothesis generation about literacy. The problem is that whenever children try out some literacy activity, they tend to get compared to the conventional adult usage. If we focus on what they know we will learn a lot about the hypothesis they generate.

Thirdly, functions of literacy are as important as formal aspects of literacy. Children use language and learn it simultaneously. The purposes of literacy include enjoyment and communication.

INSTRUCTIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF EMERGENT LITERACY

A classroom based on emergent literacy approach will differ considerably from a classroom based on traditional approach. Such a class will provide children a variety of opportunities to engage with literacy, and it will have different types of written material available for children to interact with. To

generate hypothesis about written language, a child needs to interact with a wide variety of written language. Hypothesis about literacy cannot be generated in a vacuum. Many Indian classrooms tend to have poorly equipped libraries and hence they rely only on textbooks. We have already seen that conventional primers are not worthwhile material for children. Therefore, it is important to invest in children's literature and make it accessible to children. Often, even when some material is available, teachers do not allow the children to use it for fear of the material getting damaged. This attitude needs to change. Children need to have access to material. They cannot learn to handle books without using them.

In addition to having an accessible library, the teacher can expose children to literature by reading aloud to them. The teacher can make a practice of reading aloud a story every day. They should ensure that children are able to see the text while they read. This would help children develop curiosity about the text, and make links between the spoken and written word.

Secondly, children need an environment which is supportive. Generating and trying out hypothesis can be done only in a non-threatening environment. One can learn a lot from adult behavior during oral language development (Cambourne, 1984). Adults do not get disturbed if a child does not speak exactly like them. They accept the child's approximations. However, in early literacy classrooms, correct spelling, correct pronunciation and exact reading are overemphasised. Children do not have the freedom to try out and be close. The way feedback is received during oral language development in the home situation, and the way it is given during the development of literacy in classroom settings differs fundamentally. During oral language development, adults first of all respond to the meaning of what the child says. While responding, they also model the conventional language. They do not reject the child's language. In classroom setting, adults tend to focus too much on the formal aspects of literacy and ignore the meaning and the child's efforts to communicate. Thus, the child rarely gets positive feedback and encouragement. This needs to change.

Finally, children should engage not with fragmented language (e.g., one particular sound) but with the whole language. Meaning should not be left out to focus only on

sounds and letters. Children should not concentrate merely on practising letters and blending words which are neither interesting nor relevant in their lives as in the traditional approach to teaching 'reading'.

Apart from exposing children to a vast variety of interesting children's literature, the teacher can try out the 'language experience approach'. In this approach, the teacher uses children's own experiences and oral language to teach reading. The teacher invites children to share an experience and writes it (as they say) on the board. After that the teacher reads it back to them. Here, the written language may not be familiar but the content is familiar and hence it gives children the support and the opportunity to make links between their own words and written representation. They realise that what they say can be written. Unlike the nonsensical, unfamiliar content of the traditional textbooks described earlier in the article, this approach allows children to see written language in a more familiar and meaningful manner. The teacher can call attention to specific letters (not overdoing it). The letters would be studied in a meaningful context, not for their own sake. According to Goodman (1986), language is easy to learn when it is natural, purposeful, relevant and is part of a real event. Language experience approach fulfills all these requirements.

To conclude, in terms of pedagogy of literacy we have to examine the current state of teaching in Indian classrooms. The overwhelming focus on formal aspects of literacy needs to be revised as it is counterproductive. In teacher training, one needs to emphasise the processes involved in learning to read and write. There is also a necessity to change the classroom practices and focus on meaningful teaching of literacy and ample use of children's literature.

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MAKING CHILDREN HATE READING

JOHN HOLT*

When I was teaching English at the Colorado Rocky Mountain School, I used to ask my students the kinds of questions that English teachers usually ask about reading assignments — questions designed to bring out the points that I had decided they should know. They, on their part, would try to get me to give them hints and clues as to what I wanted. It was a game of wits. I never gave my students an opportunity to say what they really thought about a book.

I gave vocabulary drills and quizzes too. I told my students that every time they came upon a word in their book they did not understand, they were to look it up in the dictionary. I even devised special kinds of vocabulary tests, allowing them to use their books to see how the words were used. But looking back I realise that these tests, along with many of my methods, were foolish.

My sister was the first person who made me question my conventional ideas about teaching English. She had a son in Class VII in a fairly good public school. His teacher had asked the class to read Cooper's 'The Deerslayer'. The choice was bad enough in itself; whether looking at man or nature, Cooper was superficial, inaccurate and sentimental, and his writing is ponderous and ornate. But to make matters worse, this teacher had decided to give the book the microscope and X-ray treatment. He made the students look up and memorise not only the definition but the derivation of every big word that came along - and there were plenty. Every chapter was followed by close questioning and testing to make sure the students 'understood' everything.

Being then, as I said, a conventional, I began to defend the teacher, who was a good friend of mine, against my sister's criticisms. The argument soon grew hot. What was wrong with making sure that children understood everything they read?

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My sister answered that until this class her boy had always loved reading, and had read a lot on his own; now he had stopped. (He was not ready to start again for many years.)

Still I persisted. If children did not look up the words they did not know how would they ever learn them? My sister said, "Do not be silly ! When you were little you had a huge vocabulary, and were always reading very grown-up books. When did you ever look up a word in the dictionary?"

She had me. I never looked at our dictionary. I do not use one today. In my life I doubt that I have looked up as many as fifty words, perhaps not even half that.

Since then, I have talked about this with a number of teachers. More than once I have said, "According to tests, educated and literate people like you have a vocabulary of about twenty-five thousand words. How many of these did you learn by looking them up in a dictionary?" They usually are startled. Few claim to have looked up even as many as a thousand? How did they learn the rest? They learned them just as they learned to talk; by meeting words over and over again, in different contexts, until they saw how they fitted.

Unfortunately, we English teachers are easily hung up on this matter of understanding. Why should children understand everything they read? Why should anyone? Does anyone? I do not, and I never did. I was always reading books that teachers would have said were "too hard" for me, books full of words I did not know. That's how I got to be a good reader. When about 10 years old, I read all the D'Artagnan stories and loved them. It did not trouble me in the least that I did not know why France was at war with England or who was quarrelling with whom in the French court or why the Musketeers should always be at odds with Cardinal Richelieu's men. I did not even know who the Cardinal was, except that he was a dangerous and powerful man that my friends had to watch out for. This was all I needed to know.

Having said this, I will now say that I think a big, unabridged dictionary is a fine thing to have in any home or classroom. No book is more fun to browse around in – if you were not made to. Children, depending on their age, will find many pleasant and interesting things to do with a big

dictionary. They can look up funny-sounding words, which they like, or words that nobody else in the class has ever heard of, which they like, or long words, which they like, or forbidden words, which they like best of all. At a certain age, and particularly with a little encouragement from parents or teachers, they may become very interested in where words came from and when they came into the language and how their meanings have changed over the years. But exploring for the fun of it is very different from looking up words out of your reading because you are going to get into trouble with your teacher if you do not.

While teaching fifth grade, two years or so after the argument with my sister, I began to think about reading. The children in my class were supposed to fill out a card — just the title and author and a one-sentence summary — for every book they read. I was not running a competition to see which child could read the most books, a competition that almost always leads to cheating. I just wanted to know what the kids were reading. After a while it became clear that many of these very bright kids, from highly literate and even literary backgrounds, read very few books and deeply disliked reading. Why should this be?

At this time I was coming to realise, as I described in my book *'How Children Fail'*, that for most children school is a place of danger, and their main business in school is staying out of danger as much as possible. I now began to see also that books are among the most dangerous things in school.

From the very beginning of school we make books and reading a constant source of possible failure and public humiliation. When children are little we make them read aloud, before the teacher and other children, so that we can be sure they 'know' all the words they are reading. This means that when they do not know a word, they are going to make a mistake, right in front of everyone. Instantly, they are made to realise that they have done something wrong. Perhaps some of the other children will begin to wave their hands and say 'Ooooh O-o-o-oh !' Perhaps they will just giggle, or nudge each other, or make a face. Perhaps the teacher will say, "Are you sure?" or ask someone else what he think. Or perhaps, if the

teacher is kindly, she will just smile a sweet, sad smile — often one of the most painful punishments a child can suffer in school. In any case, the child who has made the mistake knows he has made it, and feels foolish, stupid, and ashamed, just as any of us would in his shoes.

Before long many children associate books and reading with mistakes, real or feared, and penalties and humiliation. This may not seem sensible, but it is natural. Mark Twain once said that a cat that sat on a hot stove lid would never sit on one again, but it would never sit on a cold one either. As true of children as of cats. If they, so to speak, sit on a hot book a few times, if books cause them humiliation and pain, they are likely to decide that the safest thing to do is to leave all books alone.

After having taught fifth-grade classes for four years I felt quite sure of this theory. In my next class, there were many children who had great trouble with schoolwork, particularly reading. I decided to try at all costs to rid them of their fear and dislike of books, and to get them to read oftener and more adventurously.

One day soon after school had started, I said to them, "Now I am going to say something about reading that you have probably never heard a teacher say before. I would like you to read a lot of books this year, but I want you to read them only for pleasure. I am not going to ask you questions to find out whether you understand the book or not. If you understand enough of a book to enjoy it and want to go on reading it, that's enough for me. Also I am not going to ask you what words mean."

Finally, I said, "I do not want you to feel that just because you start a book you have to finish it. Give an author thirty or forty pages or so to get his story going. Then if you do not like the characters and you do not care what happens to them, close the book, put it away, and get another. I do not care whether the books are easy or hard, short or long, as long as you enjoy them. Furthermore I am putting all this in a letter to your parents, so they would not feel they have to quiz and heckle you about books at home."

The children sat stunned and silent. Was this a teacher talking? One girl, who had just come to us from a school where she had a very hard time, and who proved to be one of the most interesting, lively, and intelligent child I have ever known, looked at me steadily for a long time after I had finished. Then, still looking at me, she said slowly and solemnly, "Mr. Holt, do you really mean that?" I said just as solemnly, "I mean every word of it."

Apparently she decided to believe me. The first book she read was Dr Seuss' 'How the Grinch Stole Christmas', not a hard book even for most third graders. For a while, she read a number of books on this level. Perhaps she was clearing up some confusion about reading that her teachers, in their hurry to get her up to 'grade level', had never given her enough time to clear up. After she had been in the class for six weeks or so and we had become good friends, I very tentatively suggested that, since she was a skilful rider and loved horses, she might like to read 'National Velvet'. I made my sell as soft as possible, saying only that it was about a girl who loved and rode horses, and that if she did not like it she could put it back. She tried it, and though she must have found it quite a bit harder than what she had been reading, finished it and liked it very much.

During the spring she really astounded me, however. One day, in one of our many free periods, she was reading at her desk. From a glimpse of the illustrations I thought I knew what the book was. I said to myself, "It can not be," and went to take a closer look. Sure enough, she was reading 'Moby Dick', in the edition with the woodcuts by Rockwell Kent. When I came closer to her desk she looked up. I said, "Are you really reading that?" She said she was. I said, "Do you like it?" She said, "Oh, yes, it's neat!" I said, "Do not you find parts of it rather heavy going?" She answered, "Oh, sure, but I just skip over those parts and go on to the next good part."

This is exactly what reading should be and in school so seldom is — an exciting, joyous adventure. Find something, dive into it, take the good parts, skip the bad parts, get what you can out of it; go on to something else. How different is our mean-spirited, picky insistence that every child get every

last little scrap of “understanding” that can be dug out of a book.

For teachers who really enjoy doing it, and will do it with gusto, reading aloud is a very good idea. I have found that not just fifth graders but even ninth and eleventh graders enjoy it. Jack London’s ‘To Build a Fire’ is a good read-aloud story. So are spooky stories: ‘August Heat’ by W. F. Harvey and ‘The Monkey’s Paw’ by Saki (H. H. Munro) are among the best. Shirley Jackson’s ‘The Lottery’ is sure-fire, and will raise all kinds of questions for discussion and argument. Because of a TV programme they had seen and that had excited them, I once started reading my fifth graders William Golding’s ‘Lord of the Flies’, thinking to read only a few chapters, but they made me read it to the end.

In my early fifth-grade classes, the children usually were of high IQ, came from literate backgrounds, and were generally felt to be succeeding in school. Yet it was astonishingly hard for most of those children to express themselves in speech or in writing. I have known a number of five-year-olds who were considerably more articulate than most of the fifth graders I have known in school. Asked to speak, my fifth graders were overcome with embarrassment; many refused altogether. Asked to write, they would sit for minutes on end, staring at the paper. It was hard for most of them to get down a half page of writing, even on what seemed to be interesting topics or topics they chose themselves.

In desperation, I hit on a device that I named the Composition Derby. I divided the class into teams, and told them that when I said, ‘Go,’ they were to start writing something. It could be about anything they wanted, but it had to be about something: they couldn’t just write ‘dog dog dog dog’ on the paper. It could be true stories, descriptions of people or places or events, wishes, made-up stories, dreams - anything they liked. Spelling did not count, so they did not have to worry about it. When I said, ‘Stop,’ they were to stop and count up the words they had written. The team that wrote the most words would win the derby.

It was a success in many ways and for many reasons. The first surprise was that the two children who consistently wrote

the most words were two of the least successful students in the class. They were bright, but they had always had a very hard time in school. Both were very bad spellers, and worrying about this had slowed down their writing without improving their spelling. When they were free of this worry and could let themselves go, they found hidden and unsuspected talents.

One of the two, a very driven and anxious little boy, used to write long adventures, or misadventures, in which I was the central character: 'The Day Mr. Holt Went to Jail,' 'The Day Mr. Holt Fell into the Hole,' 'The Day Mr. Holt Got Run Over', and so on. These were very funny, and the class enjoyed hearing me read them aloud. One day I asked the class to write a derby on a topic I would give them. They groaned: they liked picking their own. 'Wait till you hear it,' I said, It's 'The Day the School Burned Down.'

With a shout of approval and joy they went to work, and wrote furiously for twenty minutes or more, laughing and chuckling as they wrote. The papers were all much alike; in them the children danced around the burning building, throwing in books and driving me and the other teachers back in when we tried to escape. In our first derby, the class wrote an average of about ten words a minute; after a few months their average was over twenty. Some of the slower writers tripled their output. Even the slowest, one of whom was the best student in the class, were writing fifteen words a minute. More important, almost all the children enjoyed the derbies and wrote interesting things.

Some time later I learned that Professor S. I. Hayakawa, teaching freshman English, had invented a better technique. Every day in class he asked his students to write without stopping for about half an hour. They could write on whatever topic or topics they chose; the important thing was not to stop. If they ran dry, they were to copy their last sentence over and over again until new ideas came. Usually they came before the sentence had been copied once. I use this idea in my own classes, and call this kind of paper a Non-Stop. Sometimes I ask students to write a Non-Stop on an assigned topic, more often on anything they choose. Now, (Winter 1969) my students at Berkeley do about ten to fifteen minutes of this

private writing in almost every class — and I with them. We all find our thoughts coming much faster than we can write them, and ever more so with practice. Many students have said they enjoy this very much. Once in a while I ask them to count up how many words they have written, though I rarely ask them to tell me; it is for their own information. Sometimes these papers are to be handed in; often they are what I call private papers, for the students' eyes alone.

The private paper has proved very useful. In the first place, in any English class — certainly any large English class - if the amount students write is limited by what the teacher can find time to correct, or even to read, the students will not write nearly enough. The remedy is to have them write a great deal that the teacher does not read. In the second place, students writing for themselves will write about many things that they would never write on a paper to be handed in, once they have learned (sometimes it takes a while) that the teacher means what he says about the papers' being private. This is important, not just because it enables them to get things off their chest, but also because they are most likely to write well, and to pay attention to how they write, when they are writing about something important to them.

Some English teachers, when they first hear about private papers, object that students do not benefit from writing papers unless the papers are corrected. I disagree for several reasons. First, most students, particularly poor students, do not read the corrections on their papers; it is boring, even painful. Second, even when they do read these corrections, they do not get much help from them, do not build the teacher's suggestions into their writing. This is true even when they really believe the teacher knows what he is talking about.

Third, and most important, we learn to write by writing, not by reading other people's ideas about writing. What most students need above all else is practice in writing, and particularly in writing about things that matter to them, so that they will begin to feel the satisfaction that comes from getting important thoughts down in words and will care about stating these thoughts forcefully and clearly.

Teachers of English — or, as some schools say (ugh!), Language Arts — spend a lot of time and effort on spelling. Most of it is wasted; it does little good, and often more harm than good. We should ask ourselves, ‘How do good spellers spell? What do they do when they are not sure which spelling of a word is right?’ I have asked this of a number of good spellers. Their answer never varies. They do not rush for a dictionary or rack their brains trying to remember rules. They write down the word both ways or several ways, look at them, and pick the one that looks best. Usually they are right.

Good spellers know what words look like and even, in their writing muscles, feel like. They have a good set of word images in their minds and are willing to trust these images. The things we do to ‘teach’ spelling to children do little to develop these skills or talents, and much to destroy them or prevent them from developing.

The first and worst thing we do is to make children anxious about spelling. We treat a misspelled word like a crime and penalise the misspeller severely; many teachers talk of making children develop a ‘spelling conscience’, and fail otherwise excellent papers because of a few spelling mistakes. This approach is self-defeating. When we are anxious, we do not perceive clearly or remember what we once perceived. Everyone knows how hard it is to recall even simple things when under emotional pressure; the harder we rack our brains, the less easy it is to find what we are looking for. If we are anxious enough, we will not trust the messages that memory sends us. Many children spell badly because although their first hunch about how to spell a word may be correct, they are afraid to trust it. I have often seen on children’s papers a word correctly spelled, then crossed out and misspelled.

There are some tricks that might help children get sharper word images. Some teachers may be using them. One is the trick of air writing; that is, of ‘writing’ a word in the air with a finger and ‘seeing’ the image so formed. I did this quite a bit with fifth graders, using either the air or the top of a desk, on which the fingers left no mark. Many of them were tremendously excited by this. I can still hear them saying, ‘There’s nothing there, but I can see it!’ It seemed like magic. I remember that

when I was small I loved to write in the air. It was effortless, voluptuous, and satisfying, and it was fun to see the word appear in the air. I used to write 'Money Money Money,' not so much because I did not have any because I liked the way it felt, particularly that *y* at the end, with its swooping tail.

Another thing to help sharpen children's image-making machinery is taking very quick looks at words — or other things. The conventional machine for doing this is the tachistoscope. But these are expensive, so expensive that most children can have few chances to use them, if any at all. With some three-by-five and four-by-eight file cards you can get the same effect. On the little cards you put the words or the pictures that the child is going to look at. You hold the larger card over the card to be read, uncover it for a split second with a quick wrist motion, then cover it up again. Thus you have a tachistoscope that costs one cent and that any child can work by himself.

Once when substituting in a first-grade class I thought that the children, who were just beginning to read and write, might enjoy some of the kind of free, nonstop writing that my fifth graders had. About forty minutes before lunch, I asked them all to take pencil and paper and start writing about anything they wanted. They seemed to like the idea, but right away one child said anxiously, 'Suppose we can not spell a word?'

'Do not worry about it.' I said. 'Just spell it the best way you can.'

A heavy silence settled on the room. All I could see were still pencils and anxious faces. This was clearly not the right approach. So I said, 'All right, I will tell you what to do. Any time you want to know how to spell a word, tell me and I will write it on the board.'

They breathed a sigh of relief and went to work. Soon requests for words were coming fast; as soon as I wrote one, someone asked me another. By lunchtime, when most of the children were still busily writing, the board was full. What was interesting was that most of the words they had asked for were much longer and more complicated than anything in their reading books or workbooks. Freed from worry about

spelling, they were willing to use the most difficult and interesting words that they knew.

The words were still on the board when we began school next day. Before I began to erase them, I said to the children, 'Listen, everyone, I have to erase these words, but before I do, just out of curiosity I'd like to see if you remember some of them.'

The result was surprising. I had expected that the child who had asked for and used a word might remember it, but I did not think that many others would. But many of the children still knew many of the words. How had they learned them? I suppose each time I wrote a word on the board a number of children had looked up, relaxed yet curious, just to see what the word looked like, and these images and the sound of my voice saying the word had stuck in their minds until the next day. This, it seems to me, is how children may best learn to write and spell.

What can a parent do if a school, or a teacher, is spoiling the language for a child by teaching it in some tired old way? First, try to get them to change, or atleast let them know that you are eager for change. Talk to other parents: push some of the ideas in the PTA; talk to the English department at the school; talk to the child's own teacher. Many teachers and schools want to know what the parents want.

If the school or teacher cannot be persuaded, then what? Perhaps all you can do is try not to let your child become too bored or discouraged or worried by what is happening in school. Help him meet the school's demands, foolish though they may seem, and try to provide more interesting alternatives at home — plenty of books and conversation, and a serious and respectful audience when a child wants to talk. Nothing that ever happened to me in English classes at school was as helpful to me as the long conversations I used to have every summer with my uncle, who made me feel that the difference in our ages was not important and that he was really interested in what I had to say.

At the end of her freshman year in college a girl I knew wrote home to her mother, 'Hooray! Hooray! Just think — I never have to take English any more!' But this girl had always

been an excellent English student, had always loved books, writing, ideas. It seems unnecessary and foolish and wrong that English teachers should so often take what should be the most flexible, exciting, and creative of all school courses and make it into something — that most children can hardly wait to see the last of. Let's hope that we can and soon will begin to do much better.

A RICH READING ENVIRONMENT FOR CHILDREN

LATA PANDEY*

Last week, when I was travelling by bus, I noticed a young child sitting with his mother, next to my seat. Throughout the journey, whenever the child saw any poster or hoarding, he tried to read it. When he successfully completed a sentence, his face shone with joy. This joy came with the realisation that he could read.

We come across such instances quite often. As soon as the little ones cross the doorway of their homes, their eyes dart everywhere. Coloured pictures or any printed material attract them and they try to read. The children feel immense happiness and joy when they can understand the meaning of text with the help of pictures. Each and every child has an urge to read. Even though the child may have never been to school, they try to read through prediction#. Children can read even without a full knowledge of letters. They capture images of letters and words in their mind, which help them read. The famous psycho-linguist Frank Smith writes:

Once a lady went to a departmental store with her child. He looked at each board and said the name of the section. He went towards the toy section and without looking at the toys told his mother, “that is the toy section”. The mother asked, “How did you know that this is a toy section?” The child said, “I read it on the board”. The mother was surprised because the child had never been to school and he did not know the alphabet. How did the child read? Then the mother realised that the image of the textual material of each board had been captured by the mind of the child. He could recognise letters and words as images and thus ‘read’ whatever was written. If they can read any textual material without previous knowledge of letters, it is a positive indication of children’s interest in learning to read. Children have a natural desire to read. However, this disappears within a few days of entering the

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school. The reason for this is the non-availability of interesting reading material at two places, i.e., in school and at home. The sad truth is that children do not get a print-rich environment in their surroundings.

Our schools do not provide interesting reading material to children. Most teachers consider textbooks as the only medium to help the child to learn reading. Teachers who teach language generally do not go beyond the textbooks when they organise teaching-learning process for reading. Most of the teachers are not aware that giving maximum opportunities for reading is a prerequisite of learning to read. A print-rich environment around them can play a major role in helping them learn to read. Merely sounding out the printed material of the textbooks is not reading. Reading in actual sense takes place when children can read and make meaning of the written and printed material from their surroundings and not just from textbooks. The key to reading is the skill of prediction. This includes predicting, connecting the printed words to its meaning and examining one's own prediction about the text. Therefore, there is a need to search the source of such material and to create print rich environment at the right place. What can be a more appropriate place for creating print-rich environment than the walls of the school and the classrooms? When colourful printed material is displayed all around, children will notice it. The material should, of course, be according to the child's interest.

Quite often classroom walls are either bare or loaded with preaching. Such material are miles away from a child's understanding and interest. Walls with preaching message on them will not provide an intimate and familiar environment for the children. Naturally, such sentences do not attract the children's eye despite regular exposure.

School libraries can play an important role in generating interest in reading among children. Only a few primary schools have libraries, and these libraries too have an extremely limited collection of books. Quite often, the books are beyond the interest and understanding of the children of Classes I and II; and sometimes children of Class V. Once I visited a primary school. The headmaster was reading. He told me that the book had been bought for the school library. During

the conversation I came to know that the school had spent ₹ 500 on the books for library. Even though the books were not relevant for the children they were written by established authors.

The books had not been bought considering their appropriateness for children.

Secondly, in many schools, there is no separate room for the library. Books which are purchased for students are mostly kept in an almirah. The opening of these almirahs becomes an occasion of celebration as they are rarely opened because most schools have a perception that teaching means only completing the syllabus. Books kept in libraries are not given to children to read. Also, children are not permitted to take these books home because the books may be damaged. Students of Classes I and II are never allowed access to books because teachers believe that the children do not have the ability to read.

The culture of reading can only be developed by making printed and written material available all around the child. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) -2005 appreciates the importance of a print-rich environment as one of the strongest tools for reading. Illustrated books and children's magazines can be strung in a corner of the class, at an accessible height. Children can touch these books whenever they want, may open these books and read whenever they please.

There should be enough printed material in and around the classroom. NCF-2005 also supports the use of reading material other than textbooks for children. The exposure of children to printed material in their surroundings is essential. Due to the increasing culture of television, children coming from educated families too, hardly show interest in reading story books at home. In certain cases even those children from families whose family members are illiterate do not have resources to read at home. Similarly, the children coming from remote areas, have almost no exposure to any type of reading material.

While interacting with a participant from Rajasthan during a workshop, I came to know that finding a daily newspaper is difficult in certain areas. It is hard to come by any print for a few miles. A similar situation exists in several remote areas in

our country. For a child growing up in such situations, how can we expect the child to develop any interest in reading without any exposure to printed or written material.

A print-rich environment has a favourable influence on children who are differently-abled. A rich reading experience makes up for the inability to participate in certain activities. I know a differently-abled child who spends most of his holidays with newspapers and books. He has a very rich collection of hundreds of newspapers and books to which he adds new material everyday, like the morning newspapers and some other new books at his home. He tries to look at and read his collection on a regular basis and learns something new every day. He establishes a dialogue with his parents, siblings and relatives on the basis of this material. Through the world of books and newspaper he keeps on developing his general knowledge regarding politicians, actors, great personalities and on many other subjects of his interests.

These examples are enough to tell us that each child has a passion for reading. The poem written by Sri Damodar Aggarwal *Koi Laake Mujhe De*, magnificently describes the child's passion for reading:

*Koi laake mujhe de
Ek chutti wala din
Ek achhi-see kitaab
Koi laake mujhe de.*

Prediction is an important reading strategy which allows children to use information from the given text such as title, pictures, etc., to anticipate its meaning.

WHAT SHOULD A CHILDREN'S BOOK HAVE?

KAMLESH CHANDRA JOSHI*

In recent years, Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) have shown an interest in publishing picture books for use as supplementary text material for children of primary grades. New material with illustrations are being developed for children with attempts to make them accessible to them. Furthermore, workshops are being organised wherein children's literature as well as aspects related to the creation of such literature are discussed.

An organisation that runs a library programme for children and publishes children's literature organised a workshop to deliberate on various aspects related to children's literature. Issues and concerns regarding children's literature and its creation were shared, with a consensus developed on some issues. The present article is based on these deliberations.

INDICATORS OF A GOOD CHILDREN'S BOOK

Perhaps it is difficult to arrive at a fixed framework for children's books. The very first challenge discussed in the workshop was the indicators of a good book for children. Participants came up with myriad views, such as, children's literature should have lots of illustrations, content should reflect their immediate environment, animal characters should be present in the stories and poems, stories should have a happy ending, text should use large font size and so on.

After the discussion, the participants' attention was drawn towards the fact that there are already many books in the market, which have already incorporated the points raised in the discussion. The question is, can any piece of children's literature be labelled good or bad merely on the basis of the above indicators? Perhaps we need to consider another crucial aspect of children's literature — the image of the child in our minds and how this is represented in children's literature.

In further discussions, it was felt that it is essential to highlight an image of the child in children's literature, which

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takes into account the child's voice, thoughts, imagination and critical ability. This would enable children's literature to depict inherent values such as the child's ability to take independent decisions, think rationally, logically, etc. An example of this is Premchand's story *Idgah*. This story, on one hand highlights the child's sensitivity towards his grandmother and on the other, it brings forth the ability of the child to take independent decisions and stand by them. In the story, Hamid strongly puts forward his logic in favour of buying a *chimta* (a pair of tongs) and ends up purchasing it for his grandmother, while his friends buy different types of toys. This important, inherent value in the story needs to be understood.

Similarly, the main character Valli, in the book *Bus ki Sair*, published by National Book Trust [NBT], New Delhi, demonstrates the simple curiosity of a child travelling on a bus. She answers the queries of the bus conductor as well as the fellow passengers using spontaneous and disarming logic. The presence of a young girl's thoughts, logical ability and curiosity, in the story, is a novel kind of social value.

The NBT publication, *Kajri Gaay Jhoole Par* is yet another example of a story, in which, the child's emotions are depicted through the character of a cow. In this story, the cow wants to abandon her routine tasks and experience the freedom of swinging on a swing.

One indication of a good book could be to see how children are represented in the book. In the many children's books available in the market, it is generally seen that while the characters are children, animals or birds, their actions reflect adult like thoughts and rationality.

To understand indicators of children's books, let us explore some more books. Take for example, the book *The Woman and The Crow*, a folktale published by the Children's Book Trust [CBT]. There is a constant repetition in the narration. The device of repetition enables children to predict who the old woman will approach in order to get her *chapati* back. A story by Tara Bai Modak, *Kheera Khaoon Kachar-Kachar* also uses the device of repetition. Such stories are found to be popular with children.

Children also like incidents and experiences from childhood. *Life with Grandfather*, a book published by the

CBT, is one such example. Incidents of childhood unfold in this book naturally. Children see themselves reflected in these incidents and enjoy relating them with their own experiences.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ILLUSTRATIONS

During the discussion on illustrations in children's literature, the concern shared was that illustrations should be dynamic rather than static so that children should get a sense of action. Something of this quality can be seen in the illustrations in *Mahagiri*, a book published by the CBT, particularly the expressions on the face of the elephant. Some other books known especially for their illustrations are — *Didi ne ki Bunaayi*, *Chaudah Chuhe Ghar Banane Chale*, *Kajri Gaay Jhule Par* — all of them published by the NBT, New Delhi, *Paaji Badal* published by Scholastic India, etc. In all these books, not only the illustrations are important, but they also enrich the content of the book. They facilitate an exploration of the finer details and encourage the reader to go beyond the printed text. In addition, children who struggle to read are encouraged to understand the story with the help of the illustrations and add new dimensions to the narrative.

STEREOTYPICAL CHARACTERS AND LANGUAGE

During the discussion on good books for children, an issue that came up was that most characters in books come across as very stiff and unreal and reflect adult perspectives in thought and action. Due to this, the stories fall into a rut and do not adequately reflect children's authentic experiences.

Generally, the characters of the stories are very flat due to which it is very obvious who is the hero and who is the villain. The hero of the story finds solutions for every problem and wins in the end. Most book and magazines for children are replete with such characters.

In the light of the issues discussed above, it is important to break stereotypes currently found to be prevalent in children's literature, both at the level of language and content. At the level of language, for children, it is said that sentences should be simple. However, if words from the children's local context appear naturally they should not cause any problem or difficulty. It is also necessary to ensure that the language does not appear to be contrived. If words are used in

authentic contexts, then the children can guess the meaning of unfamiliar and difficult words from the context of the story. In stories written by Gulzar for children such as *Paaji Badal*, *Boski ke Panchatantra*, *Boski ke Brahman*, *Potli Baba ki*, etc., one has examples of traditional story-telling, using authentic language including Urdu vocabulary. These factors enrich the stories greatly.

One of the points that emerged during the discussion on folktales and stories from the *Panchatantra* was that these were not written keeping children in mind since when they were written, there was no tradition of writing exclusively for children. Moreover, the content of these stories very often centre on themes which cannot be considered appropriate for children. For example, several folktales are built around the theme of man-woman relationship. Additionally, one often needs to be acquainted with the local context to understand and appreciate folktales. Most folktales have been created through the oral tradition. In many of them there is an attempt to resolve problems of every day life using one's imagination. Some folktales deal with the stories of creation, for example, How was the world created? One should not expect any logic or a scientific view of things from such stories since they have not been written from this perspective. While reading folktales with children, they should be asked for resolutions, other than those suggested, to the problems raised in the story.

Heroism is another dominant characteristic of folktales. The main character of these folktales is usually a powerful and brave man who uses his masculine strength to solve problems. Themes dealing with ghosts, witches, magic, miracles, thefts are often found in folktales. These were a part of the social reality of that time. Similarly, forms of social discrimination may also be found in folktales. Therefore, it is necessary that we have a clear perspective that helps us choose and decide which folktales we would like to use with children and for what purpose.

During the discussion about comics, it became apparent that this is a contemporary or modern medium, which allows for a finite space for illustrations. Hence, it does not accord much scope for the creativity of the illustrator. It is also observed in comics that while events take a sudden leap, corresponding thoughts are absent. The format of comics does not allow

for much autonomous thinking or independent visualisation by children. While it is necessary to be acquainted with the format of comics it is also important that children be exposed to a variety of reading material other than comics. The format of comics, can be used for creating good stories for children.

YOUNG READERS

During the discussion about books for children between the ages of three to six years, it emerged that children are familiar with a narrative (story) structure before they come to school. The reason is that most children listen to stories at home from their parents, grandparents or some elders. With this exposure they develop a sense of narrative structure, which is strengthened when they start reading story books, resulting in a pleasurable reading experience. There is a long list of such books *Laalu Aur Peelu*, *Heera* published by Ratnasagar; *Aam Ki Kahani*, *Mendhak Aur Saanp* published by the NBT; *Bhaalu Ka Bachha* published by UNICEF, Lucknow; some picture books such as *Main Bhee*, *Rusi Aur Pusi*, *Chuhe Ko Mili Pencil*, *Naav Chali* published by Eklavya, Bhopal, to name a few, which children love to read. Children are generally not very interested in books predominantly dealing with concepts such as *Mez* or *Ghera* published by Ratnasagar because they lack a story grammar (structure).

Picture books can create an interest in reading in children between the ages of three and six. Unfortunately we do not have a robust tradition of publishing picture books for such young children. Well-crafted picture books can use only pictures to develop and narrate a story. What is of essence in picture books is the quality of pictures such that a child is easily able to piece them together in the form of a story. The illustrator plays a crucial role in the creation of picture books. In our country, on the other hand, the objective of publishing pictures in picture books is primarily that of enriching the text.

WHAT KIND OF BOOKS?

It is observed that young children often empathise with animals and birds. Animals and birds are a familiar part of children's context and many of them are domesticated or owned as pets. Children enjoy stories in which they see bird

and animal characters in their every day activities and fun and games. Stories with animals and birds as their central characters are of two kinds — one in which they are shown to act like human beings, in the second kind of stories they behave in accordance with their natural animal instincts. Both kinds of stories are appropriate for children. Young children want stories with happy endings because they want to believe ‘all is well with the world’ and if it is not, then they want constructive and creative solutions that will make everything ‘well with the world’.

Young children also like stories in which the same events are repeated. Some examples of such stories are — *Rusi Aur Pusi*, *Naav Chali*, *Main Bhee*, etc. A careful examination of such books reveals that they contain activities of interest to children as well as repetition of incidents appropriate to the levels of children’s thoughts. Children also enjoy the incorporation of short, (two-three line) poems in such stories. As an example, I recall a story in a textbook in which the squirrel is depicted as hardworking and the crow as lazy. Every time the squirrel asks the crow to accompany her for work, the crow repeats the refrain, *Tu chal main aataa hoon, chupdi roti khata hoon, hari daal par baithaa hoon, thanda pani peeta hoon*; the refrain enables the child reader to grasp the narrative structure (story grammar) and enjoy the story. Stories can also be kept open ended for children in which, one kind of ending may be provided with the possibility of children exploring other alternatives or developing the story as per their individual inclinations.

This workshop also underlined the need to actively use supplementary texts along with textbooks in the language classroom. The Position Paper by the Focus Group on Language of the National Curriculum Framework–2005 lays great stress on the importance of using supplementary books. This will help develop a new perspective with regards to language teaching.

PICTURE BOOKS — EXPERIENCES AND OBSERVATIONS WITH CHILDREN

KAMLESH CHANDRA JOSHI*

Engaging children with picture books with the purpose to enhance their linguistic expressions is considered to be a fruitful activity. Apart from enabling the children to experience the varied linguistic aspects, such activities also facilitates them in exploring their visual experiences. It also helps them in taking the story forward through prediction, imagination and relating it to real life experience. This is almost similar to how we tend to associate our daily experiences with any book, picture or film and try to give them a new meaning.

It is important that we inculcate a habit of reading pictures among children. At the same time, such books need to be used regularly with children. There should be discussion and activities related to the pictures. However, we cannot presume that the children would start responding and expressing as soon as they start viewing the pictures. In our experience when such picture books were shown to children for the first time in different areas (tribal areas, madarsas, primary schools or children living in slums), they looked at the pictures in isolation as photographs but were unable to link them together. Perhaps, this was because they had never been exposed to such picture books.

We found encouraging results when we started using such picture books on a regular basis with small children at one of our non-formal education centers. The children started relating to these books, identifying these books on the basis of pictures and visuals and also started linking their own experiences with these books. One day Inderjeet, a child coming to our centre regularly, was explaining to his fellow student the contents of a book titled, *Mendhak aur Saanp* (The Frog and The Snake) published by the National Book Trust, New Delhi: “*Itna mota saanp, mendhak kitna chhota hai. Abhi saanp mendhak ko kha jayega.*” (Such a fat snake, the frog is

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so small. Now the snake would eat up the frog.) Then he turned the page over and said, "*Mendhak paani mein raheta hai. Yeh dekho saanp aa raha hai.*" (The frog lives in water. Here, see the snake is coming to eat the frog.) It is evident from such responses that Inderjeet understands the difference between 'big' and 'small', he can predict about what is going to happen and he can relate his own world with the book.

Likewise four-year-old talking Guddu was also talking about the book titled "*Yeh hai ped*" (This is a Tree.) In his local dialect he was saying, "*Ped mein aam laga hai, tode ke khava jae.*" (There is a mango on the tree. One plucks it to eat it.) Simultaneously, he was also miming the act of eating a mango. In the same book, looking at a picture of monkeys sitting on a tree, he was saying, "*Ped par bandarva beith hain, sare ko mar dalo.*" (Monkeys are sitting on a tree, kill them all.) Then he started beating the air as if he was killing the monkeys. Here, it is clear that the pictures in the book offer a context for the imagination of the children where they can associate their own treasure of experiences with them and exposing the children to these books on a regular basis so that they may be able to share their imaginations, observations and experiences. Such conversations also give space to the logic of children. All the above aspects are important in developing language skills.

Similarly, when picture books were introduced in the context of reading, we observed that for these children, textual material in the book implied reading it word to word, whereas looking at the pictures was a different and an independent activity. They did not think that the pictures in the book could actually support the text. This was because they had no prior experience of relating with such books. It was noticed that when the children attempted to read the books they got enmeshed in the textual content and made no efforts in relating it to the pictures. This aspect came to the fore when these books were used with rural primary schools.

With regular use of these books and constant opportunities, the children began to make efforts to relate the pictures with the text which helped them to understand the text better as well as learn new words. To initiate the process many interactions were required with the teachers for developing their understanding on how to learn reading. Simultaneously,

they were constantly supported within the schools in selecting material and how to use them with children. It is only then that this task could be accomplished. Such processes also helped the teachers in understanding the significance of enabling the children to talk about the pictures for learning reading through picture books. The teachers also realised that for children to read and develop an understanding of letters, words, *maatras* (ligatures) and sentences, it is important to interact with them about their various experiences, stories, lessons and pictures so that the children can relate, imagine and converse and comprehend what they have read .

We also got an opportunity during subsequent classroom observations on reading by children and in understanding how they comprehend meanings and predict. For example, one day during an observation in Class II of a school, it was observed that a boy named Virendra was reading a book titled *Mahagiri* published by the Children Book Trust, New Delhi. He was facing some difficulty in reading the word *dhwaj* (flag) and its meaning. During observation, it was noticed that when he looked at the adjoining picture closely he understood its meaning and while interacting he revealed the meaning of *dhwaj* as *jhanda* (flag). Such experiences were also observed during the use of other text material.

While working with the primary school children, it was also observed that the pictures encourage children to connect themselves with the emotions of the characters. They begin to pay more attention to the minute details. Whereas otherwise their focus is somehow more on knowing the end result of the story. I would like to quote here from a book by Devi Prasad, a noted educationist and cultural exponent. The book, *Shiksha ka Vahan: Kala* published by the National Book Trust, New Delhi, highlights the importance of pictures in picture books and states, “The pictures in a book apart from enabling an experience of the subject matter in a book serve as visual stimuli. Ordinarily it is believed that by representing a text as a picture, its role is over. But it is not so. Pictures have a language which words do not have. And in situations where words are unable to express, pictures take over. Pictures are more related to visual perceptions. As such, they should complement the text material rather than represent it. Wherever the text material can be supported and where the

shortcomings of the text can be overcome by a picture, they should be included there.” (page 134)

Some books like, *Chaudah Chuhe Ghar Banane Chale* published by the National Book Trust, New Delhi has detailed illustrations. Such illustrations offer an opportunity to children to observe the pictures closely. A detailed discussion on this can be initiated with the children. Likewise, some other books like, *Russy aur Pussy* published by Eklavya, Bhopal has a creatively illustrated cover page. It offers an opportunity to create curiosity among children to know who Russy is, because the cover page depicts a cat which is Pussy. Another example is of *Norbu ke Naye Joote* a book published by Tulika, Chennai, where the cover page only depicts the tail of a monkey. It stimulates the imagination of children to guess the animal to which the tail belongs. Such cover pages create curiosity among children. To quote the famous author of books for children, Edward Ardizzone, “We should not disclose too much to the readers. In my opinion the best part of a character is that which is hidden somewhere.” The same thing can also be said to be true for illustrations.

Some of the picture books offer many opportunities for interactions and initiate conversation with children. For example, *Aam ki kahani*, *Chaudah Chuhe Ghar Banane Chale*, *Mendhak aur Saanp*, *Kajri Gaaye Jhoole Par*, *Pagla Aam*, *Shera aur Mithoo*, *Ek dost Saamp*, *Lalu aur Peelu*, *Lal Patang*, *Lalchi Bachhiya Gulabo*, *Roopa Haathi*, *Muniya ne Paya Sona*, *Pyaasi Maina*, *Sonali ka Mitra*, etc. While exploring with these books it has been observed that the children understand through the medium of pictures, the pictures too enrich the story. These pictures provide a fluidity that addresses the emotions of the children. At the same time, this can open up interactions with children that help in enhancing imagination and creativity among them.

The textbook series, *Rimjhim* published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training, (NCERT) New Delhi, can be included in such a list of books. In these books, apart from the content, many interesting illustrations have also been included that offer ample opportunity for children to converse. All these illustrations depict specific local contexts—urban or rural. Apart from this, the illustration in the books have borrowed from different kinds of paintings from various

regions of the country – *Madhubani* from Bihar, *Warli* from Maharashtra or *Pattachitra* of Odisha. Discussions can also be initiated with children about these styles. This helps the children to identify with their culture, at the same time it also develops an ability to appreciate various art forms.

While working with children it was learnt that any discussion initiated on the picture books should not be limited to factual matters. Rather it should be much more, taking their imagination, and thought processes to new heights. It can also be observed that the greater the opportunities provided to children to observe pictures, the greater the ability they would develop to analyse and discuss books. However, a discussion on the picture books is generally limited in its scope to the fact that children ‘like’ these books and teachers visualise it as an activity that merely ‘needs to be done’. It does not reflect on how the children are responding and why. How is it related to their cognitive development? Whereas, along with the children, the users of these books also do need to develop an understanding on such aspects.

The importance of illustrations in picture books cannot be undermined. If there are no pictures books, children may not find them as interesting. For example if the book *Paaji Badal* authored by Gulzar (Scholastic, India) or *Norbu ke Naye Joote* and *Rang Pasand Larka* (Tulika, Chennai) do not have pictures, then the stories alone may not be able to generate much curiosity. Yet, ancient stories, folk tales, etc., in which description plays a central role, can be narrated to children and their interest can still be sustained without any pictures. As such, it also appears that in some instances picture books fulfil the need of detailing and dialogues in the story and therefore children relate with it.

Usually while using picture books with children, most of the time the subject of discussion is focused on what effect they are having on children in terms of their oral language skills, observation and analytical abilities. It may be said that the picture books are seen to have a limited role. However, the pictures need to be used towards enhancing aesthetic sense. It becomes imperative to reflect on another quote from Devi Prasad’s book mentioned earlier, “Wherever a picture may be — framed on the wall or in a calendar, in an album or in a book — from the angle of aesthetic sensitivity it should be good.

Its objective should be to develop good taste. Appreciation for art is an important aspect of life and as such pictures given in books have a specific role to play. It is thus important that whatever pictures are given in literature for children, they should be aesthetic from the artistic viewpoint.”

To conclude, it would be appropriate to say that picture books play a significant role in learning and teaching of children. This helps in enriching their language skills and at the same time they can also help to inculcate the habit of reading good literature and also importantly develop aesthetic sensitivity through these books, an aspect that has been missing in school education. It needs to be addressed.

READ BOOKS, MOVE AHEAD

V.V. SINGH*

There was no period allotted for library in the time-table for Classes III to V and hence we took a decision in the staff meeting to add one period every week which was adjusted on Saturday. After this, one period was slotted for library in the time-table of all classes. The work was assigned to a teacher who took a lot of interest in the whole process. With great enthusiasm, the teacher organised the available books towards the east direction of the junior school. Besides this, she selected some books from a senior school which were suitable for children up to Class V with lots of effort. And with the help of the librarian, all the books were transferred to junior school.

In the library period, all the students of each class started going to the library. The almirah would be open, children would look at the books and would get one book of their interest to be issued. The teacher would write name of the book and name of the child, etc., and at that time other children would sit and read the magazines. Now, the need to increase the number of magazines up to 30–35 was felt so that each child could get to read the magazines. Apart from magazines, picture books were also kept and children took special interest to read them. Books would be issued to children on a weekly basis. Magazines and picture books were not supposed to be issued, therefore, children had to sit there and read them.

In the next phase, an arrangement for class library was made. For this purpose one desk was added in every classroom. Forty to 50 magazines (which included old issues as well) and picture books were kept there. In every class, one student was assigned the duty of distributing magazines and picture books among the children in free time and in the next period students had to come on their own to submit the books to expedite the process of the work. The leader of each class was also given an individual lock. Gradually children's interest

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started increasing. A few children instead of taking interest in reading would behave mischievously much to the unhappiness of rest of the other students. Very soon a situation emerged where children went directly to the principal and complained that they were not able to procure books when the leader is absent. The matter was sorted out after a discussion with the staff by deciding to appoint two leaders instead of one. Another key (of the lock) was handed over to the second leader so that there should be no obstacles in this arrangement.

Then we decided to increase the number of magazines seeing an advertisement in one of the magazine which offered all previous issues at half the rates. Seven sets of available books were ordered at half rates. Now the class library was very rich.

By the end of that session efforts were also made to identify which class was running short of how many magazines or picture books. Out of seven classes, three classes, were not short of even a single book, in one or two classes the shortage was negligible. In one class, we found that it was short of 13 books. Their disappearance was a matter of concern for us. In this class the number of hostellers was a bit high. After some enquiry it came out that when these children read the books and as some portion of the story remained unread they used to take that book along with them to the hostel. They would be apprehensive whether they would get back the same magazine the next day or not. Their intention was not to steal the books but they did not want to return the books before finishing them. Some of the hostellers brought back some of the books and magazines and informed us that those books were found lying at different places. It also emerged that hostellers wanted to read during their free time in the hostel too. One set of books was therefore also kept over there. It was a matter of satisfaction that children had started taking real interest in reading. However, still they were more interested in reading magazines and picture books and not other books.

In the next session the teacher- in-charge showed the new books that were bought recently to the students. During the assembly she also told them briefly about the books. As they came out of the assembly, some children showed their interest

in these, books and wished to get them issued. One more experiment was done. In the library the books were displayed on a table and shelves for two days. Children were asked to see all the books and note down the name of the books which they wanted to read in the order of preference.

Children's interest was increasing continuously. In order to motivate them, the class teachers started to ask during the class discussion about the books the children had read in the last few days? What all did they like? Which story they liked and why? Often students were asked to narrate the story they had read.

Since I was teaching Hindi to both the sections of Class V, therefore I motivated the students to maintain a copy or a diary by the name of *Mera Sangrah*, and start copying poems, quotations or any part of some prose which they like most during the reading. Also on the last page of the notebook they should also make a list of the books they had read. I showed my own collection to them. Some of the children did get motivated by this but it is very difficult to say that all the children did the same.

According to *National Curriculum Framework-2005*, literature can also enhance children's creativity. Children can also be motivated to write something on their own after listening to any story, poem or a song. They should be encouraged to mix different mediums of creative expression with each other.

Both the teachers and students need to be encouraged and enabled to use libraries as a medium of learning, pleasure, and engagement. The school library should be conceptualised as an intellectual place where teachers, students and the community come in search of deep meanings and imaginations. Cataloging of books and other arrangements should be developed in a way that children can use the library independently.

Generally, in schools new books would be purchased before the end of session. We decided to do it in between the session. Bookstores from the city were invited to come and put their stalls in schools. Children were informed that they should see all the books and give a list of the books to the library leaders which they wish to order for the library. Leaders would send

the list to the teacher-in-charge. Those who want to purchase the books can also do so. A group of students visited the book fair classwise with their teachers and some of them purchased books. Children gave the name of the books of their choice to the group leader and in this way we achieved the success in developing interest in books and their active participation in purchasing of books.

THE TREASURE OF BOOKS — LIBRARY FOR CHILDREN

RAMESH DAVE*

Children who develop a love for books, feel a hunger for books in the same way as they feel hunger for food. Many a time, when they get a book of their choice, they forget even their hunger for food for some time.

As far as the question of libraries is concerned for some unknown reasons, it is assumed that libraries are meant only for students of higher classes. In previous days, there were small libraries in some middle schools but they also had books of higher level. Plays such as *Andher Nagri Chaupat Raja* were available in almost all the libraries. Along with the poems for children, the books of famous poets of Hindi literature such as Maithili Sharan Gupta, Sumitranandan Pant, Jai shankar Prasad, Suryakant Tripathi Nirala, Harivansh Rai Bacchan, were also available. Some religious books such as *Ramcharit Maanas* were also available. No one would raise questions on religion or secularism and no one had any objection on moral stories. Books like *Panchatantra*, *Hitopadesha*, *Vikram Betaal*, *Singhaasan Battisi* were available in libraries in those days. Even today people buy these books.

Some big libraries did exist in high school or higher secondary schools which would mostly stock subject specific books at the secondary level. There would be a librarian whose task was to issue the books. If a school did not have a librarian, a teacher would do this work. However, primary schools did not have a library in the past nor do they exist in present.

One does not know why educationists did not bestow the right to read books to young children in their childhood. There were no good books nor libraries. Neither were there any opportunities in school or society to read books. A girl or a boy had to confine herself or himself to textbooks only. The period of childhood which is full of curiosity, enthusiasm and a time of learning, was wasted on only one textbook.

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How did this kind of understanding of child psychology develop among schools, teachers, educationists and those who managed the education system? How did they not imagine a good, organised, decorated and inviting library for children which would be for their choice and pleasure? During the freedom movement, people would go door to door and collect magazines from different houses, but after independence schools, society and books all three got separated. Why has this been so?

When Gijubhai Badheka opened *Baal Mandir* for the first time, he first of all tried to change the negative image of schools. Firstly, by teaching language, math, history, geography, grammar and stories, etc., through a play approach, he proved that teaching can take place even without using a textbook. Secondly, he made the school a space free from fear. He was such a wonderful teacher that children started calling him a mother with a moustache. Does any teacher today give such an immense love to children? If we do not even learn to love children, how will we teach them the lesson of love and how will we connect them with books of love?

Children's books are not merely reservoirs of words or sentences. Books have fairies, elephants, horses, lions and rabbits. Children run after a butterfly and squirrels in books; they listen to the sound of the cuckoo, the song of the wind; they inhale the aroma of flowers and eat sweet and sour fruits. Sometimes they swim in the river, and climb up the mountains depicted in the books. Sometimes, an ocean described in the book beckons them and sometimes they start counting the stars in the sky illustrated in the books. Children see and feel the light and heat of the sun and the moon in the books. However, their textbooks do not open all these to them. A library for children is required for this purpose. Gijubahi also made a house of books for children apart from a toy house. He made such an arrangement for sitting down and accessing books that children could themselves select the books of their choice and go through it. Later, Gijubahi would conduct a game for children based on, what they had read, in such a way that each boy and girl used to be eager to share whatever they had read.

The books, which have been organised in the almirahs of the library and have not been read, are covered with a layer of dust in schools and colleges. The teacher, principal or headmaster who gives education to children from books, they themselves hate the books the most. Just because they are teachers, they think that they have gained all the knowledge existing in the world. If teachers do not read themselves, how can they have love for books? The teacher who does not read, does not connect themselves with books, neither enhance their knowledge, they become rude and sometimes cruel. The joy of their life gets vanished. The well-known librarian Ranganathan used to say that, “the library is like a temple in an institution and books are like gods and goddesses in that temple. The god of any library turns into a stone if nobody talks to her or him. Books invite us and they want to interact with us. They want to unfold themselves in front of us. Listen to the heartbeats of history in books, listen to the sound of movements of earth, observe the trembling of the earthquake, and see the science laboratory. What is not available in books?” Whatever exists in our lives is there in books too.

It is sad to say that school, in most cases, works on a system of fear. Books know how to convert that system of fear into the world of love. If the religion of education is knowledge, then the means to acquire the knowledge is books, and worship of knowledge is books. Books teach us to fight against injustice, show us the path to freedom from exploitation and slavery, and make us to respect work and labour. They are games as well as toys.

If children get a chance to experience a world of love born from books in primary schools themselves, then the whole world will be perceived by children as a book. They will swing in books, go on a journey in books and become a detective or a ghost in books.

Many developed countries have made libraries for children. Once in a village — Kallis Plain in Australia, a nurse brought a bird to her home. The bird looked like a partridge with the face of a frog. The bird had fallen from a tree. The nurse nurtured the bird and took care of it. One day she took the bird to a school and showed it to the children. The children were filled

with curiosity. They started touching that bird. The teacher asked the students to measure the height and weight of that bird. Now, neither the teacher nor the nurse knew the name of the bird. Then the teacher said, "Fetch the world encyclopedia on birds from the library". Some students rushed and brought the encyclopedia of birds. When they found on their own the bird of the same shape, size, colour and frog like mouth in the bird encyclopedia, they were so elated with their discovery that they started reading it out to their teacher and identified that the bird was 'frog mouth'. They shared some of the information which was even unknown to the teacher and the nurse also.

In this way, a book became the teacher of a teacher. A library is our teacher too. Things that we do not know are taught to us by books.

But from where do we bring books in such a large number to schools? Even if we get these books, where do we keep them? and will we be allowed to use them? Will we be given the opportunity to read the books on our own will?

Why should students not be given an opportunity to read books? Let the books arrive first, the space will be created automatically and the opportunity will be there. And not just you but the entire village, colony, city will be able to come here and read. They can also take books home, if they wish so.

This is a very good library. Here books are brought from society, city or shops. People carry a big bag and go from door to door to distribute books to children. In this way a library reaches out on its own to the children. When books will reach out to you on their own then, not only you but your family members will also definitely read.

One room can be allotted for books in a school which can be used as a classroom during school hours and as a library after school hours. If children wish to, they can read books during school time as well.

But where will the books be kept?

Thin and small books can be hung on strings. Children will see themselves and will select them. As for the big books, either book shelves or pocket boards can be made or with the help of the community, some books shelves can be made. But this has to be done by us only. No government will come and do this work. But if society and school collaborate, then government will not be required for many tasks.

If school is up to Class VIII or X, then this task can be even simpler. All the junior and senior students can develop their own library collaboratively and teachers can support them. Even children on their own can manage to operate that library.

The first task is to begin the work rather than complaining or doubting. This is a common tendency among us that we start complaining before initiating the work. And that is the reason schools are not only homes of fear but also the station for doubts and complaints where a teacher acts like a police inspector.

When your library will be your reflection, it will have your dreams as well as your reality. It will have the joy and enthusiasm of the adolescents and their free spirits. You bring the books and books will call you. The country in which books and culture is alive, that country can never be ignorant.

How to read these books, think about it!

THE STORY OF ASHOK

KRISHNA KUMAR*

Ashok wanted to be educated. Nobody from his family had been to school. His father, a farmer with a very small piece of land, was illiterate. Ashok persuaded his mother and eventually his father, to send him to a primary school in a nearby village.

In Class I, the teacher taught him the alphabet. For weeks she made the students learn the sound of each letter, and then its shape. She helped children who had difficulty in forming letters by writing with them, holding their hands. In school there was a small, overused blackboard. It was so dusty with chalk powder that it hurt the eyes to read what was written on it. From August to September, this blackboard was covered with letters of the alphabet. Children copied each letter from it several times. Finally, in this manner, Ashok learned the whole Hindi alphabet.

Then the teacher turned to the textbook. Which had a letter on each page with a word and a picture. For example, next to 'c' was written 'cat'.

Ashok knew right from the beginning that 'c' meant 'cat'. Therefore, he was very happy when the teacher started to teach him words by adding letters— c,a,t combined to be cat. From his point of view, c itself was cat. The teacher did not have the time to understand his point of view. I cannot say if she even knew that Ashok had a point of view. Anyway, since Ashok had been saying the word written next to the letter, she assumed that he was beginning to learn how to read.

In this manner, Ashok learned the words accompanying each letter. He had already learned how to make letters. He was very happy with his progress at the end of Class I. When he went to Class II and was asked to read a book, he read like this:

'C' for cat, 'a' for apple, 'r' for rose and pronounced 'car' as 'cat'; without making the connection between the word 'car' printed on paper and the actual 'car' they know.

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The teacher got annoyed with him for reading like this all the time. After Ashok's every attempt to read, she would say to him: "Listen carefully to the other children and read like them". Ashok listened very carefully to the other children but he could not understand where he was making a mistake. He felt that the others read exactly like him and wondered why was the teacher so upset with him. Fortunately, the teacher got mad at some other children too, so he did not feel totally isolated. Somehow, he got through Class II too. He gave up his habit of identifying every single letter as a word; of saying 'c' for cat. Now he read by combining letters and vowel sounds. **t h e** and read it as /t//h//e/ not **the**
p u t as we read **but**.
c o u l d as **culd**.

The teacher rarely asked Ashok to read. Generally, the children sitting near him on the mat read the whole chapter, but Ashok did not feel sad about it. He had memorised one whole poem. While lessons were being revised during the final weeks of Class II, his turn came to read this poem. He read it without opening his book. Ashok was happy that he could read without even looking at the book. But the differences between him and his teacher's point of view were becoming sharper.

Class III started. Many children from Ashok's village had stopped going to school. There was pressure on him to quit, but he remained firm about going to school. He wanted to finish school soon and start making money. The teacher had told the class several times that the children who continued progressing in school would become important people later on and would earn a lot of money.

But his problems started right from the beginning of this class. A new subject geography was introduced. Ashok could not understand anything about his geography textbook. On the first page of this book was written "Our district is uneven and rocky... It is situated a little above the tropic of cancer... Its construction is like that of a plateau." Many children in the class had learned to read fluently. They stood up and read, and then copied the lesson in their notebooks. When Ashok tried to read slowly, the teacher would become impatient. It was same during science lessons also. In a month, the teacher got so fed up with Ashok that she stopped saying anything to him. Her anger and impatience, which had tied Ashok to her

until this point, changed into indifference. Ashok felt that the teacher did not care about him any more. After Diwali vacation he left the school.

A few years later, a survey was held in that district. Two representatives from the State Educational Research Board came with several lengthy forms. The purpose of the survey was to find out the reason for the high drop-out rate in primary education. The people conducting the survey selected several villages and went and interviewed the parents. In this manner, they collected information about several hundred children who had dropped out of school.

I knew that an educational survey was going on. When I found out the purpose of the survey, I decided to give up my laziness and go to the surveyors with my questions. They had finished their work and were in a hurry to leave. I asked them to show me Ashok's data sheet as I was curious to know how Ashok's case would be represented in the national statistics. The surveyors were reluctant to pull out one particular data sheet from the hundreds they had. When I mentioned my position and my degree, they agreed to find Ashok's father data sheet. As I read the sheet, it was written that Ashok had dropped out of school to help his father, because of the family's economic situation. He was counted in the category of children who dropped out because of the "Family's economic situation". Ashok was declared a child labourer.

The tears in my eyes alarmed the surveyor. He asked, "Is this child related to you?" I said, "No, but I know him very well. I feel that you did not understand his case very well." The surveyor said, "Well, how can one possibly understand every individual case?" Then he changed the topic and asked me, "You live in Delhi. Tell me, when will the New Education Policy be implemented?"

ON THE THRESHOLD OF READING

LATA PANDEY*

Learning to read is one of the biggest challenges for children who are on the threshold of reading during early literacy. This has been so for many ages. For young first generation readers, this task is even more challenging. The process of reading is not something that is complex in itself but the uninteresting and tedious teaching strategies and the abiding faith in that make reading more complex and difficult than it needs to be.

Reflecting on the episodes below may well lead one to think—can we entertain the hope for the children on the threshold of reading today, that they will in times to come be able to cross this threshold and experience the expanse of the world that lies beyond?

EPISODE-1

Twenty years ago, one of the members of the National Council on a visit to a school asked a child to read out something. The child immediately responded by asking – “Should I read from the book or without the book?” (Kitaab se padhoon ya bina kitaab ke?).

EPISODE-2

Recently, a Class II student was asked, “Can you read?”

The girl answered immediately, “yes.”

The girl was then asked, “What would you like to read?”

“You can ask me to read anything you wish”, the girl replied confidently.

The girl was provided with a Class I textbook but that confident girl could not read even a single word properly.

The two episodes occurred 25 years apart. Times have changed, years have passed, however, in the context of reading, the situation remains unchanged. Many teachers consider transacting the textbook and completing the syllabus as the beginning and end of their responsibilities. They rarely try to find out or care whether the child has really learnt to read or not. Are they able to understand or comprehend what

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they read? It is basically due to this that our schools are not able to inculcate a pleasure in reading, which in turn could help children grow into lifelong readers.

Reading is a skill, which, if developed well in a child, will stick life long. Reading could be one of the most pleasant or enjoyable activities in the world for a child. They would enjoy looking for and reading new books. Upon finishing one book they would want to read another one.

The child would continue to think about the characters and content even after they have finished reading the book and they would stay with the child. They would eagerly look for someone to share and discuss about, the book. Once ignited, the passion for reading is likely to become a lifelong one.

However, today's education system has failed to generate such a passion for reading amongst children. For a child who is starting to learn to read, the most discouraging aspect is not being able to learn to read. On taking admission in a school, a child feels exhilarated on being able to read the first sentence; her eyes sparkled and confidence is reflected on her face – "Yes, I can read". On the other hand, if the child is unable to experience the joy of being able to read even a single sentence, her confidence is shaken. The child begins to find reading a very difficult task, which they feel, they will never be able to learn. The child would like to resolve this problem — the inability to read — however, the lack of confidence does not allow the child to do so. As the child struggles between ability and inability, her anxiety grows and as a consequence learning to read becomes an even more difficult task. Often when a child is unable to learn to read in the first three to four months of Class I, teachers label and declare the child dull. In addition to facing the jeers of peers who can read, the child also gets scolded at home for not succeeding in learning to read a single sentence despite going to school for months. "You've been going to school for months, yet you cannot read a single sentence properly. It is useless to send you to the school". Being rebuked and reprimanded at both school and home, the child loses all confidence leading to a virtual break down. The fear associated with not being able to read assails the child. The child feels helpless and abandoned, so much so that the child does not want to go to school anymore and wishes to drop out.

Children who are unsuccessful in learning to read in the initial grades, that is, Classes I and II are unable to make up for this later. Often teachers believe that it is a waste of time to pay heed to a child who is not able to read properly or whose pace of learning is slow because the child will anyway never be able to learn to read. When a child is discouraged and demoralised from the moment of entering the school, the confidence shaken, what hope can there ever be of this child being able to learn to read anything?

As a result of efforts being made under *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan* (SSA), a large number of children are taking admission in the first standard. There are many welfare schemes for children in the education system such as mid-day meal, free uniforms and textbooks, etc.

Several in-service teacher-training programmes are organised every year with the objective of improving quality of education. Despite all this, the data on children's achievement is far from satisfactory. A major reason for this is children not experiencing adequate levels of love, trust and a sense of belonging in school. For children to be able to learn to read in the true sense, it is imperative that teachers realise that more than any theoretical knowledge, learning to read has to be based on a foundation of love, trust and a sense of belonging. Without these, no theory of knowledge can help teach reading.

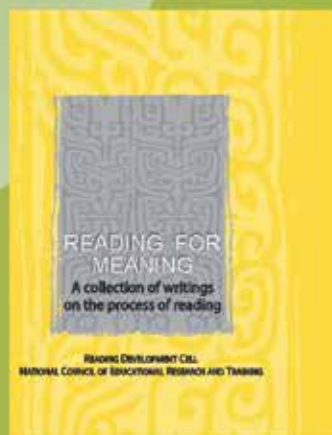
Love, trust and a sense of belonging are essential pre-requisites that cannot be given to students under any educational scheme. Neither can these be arranged from somewhere nor can they be bought. The person who can manage to bring these things to the act of teaching is the real teacher. Only through the ability to generate trust, love and a sense of belonging in a child, a teacher can foster the skills of reading in a true sense. Along with showering love, and placing trust in the child, the teacher needs to relate with a sense of belonging such that the child feels they have someone to call their own in the school. Every child should experience a teacher's care and attention to the needs and requirements. The children should feel that the effort being made is indeed for them.

The skill of reading demands that, a sense of belonging be established between a teacher and a student. To teach reading in the first grade, several different kinds of activities

are required that can help build trust and foster a sense of belonging. These activities call for a connect between different mental, physical and emotional attributes. To be able to learn to read well it is essential that every child receive adequate personal attention from the teacher—may be a short but quality span of time when the child has the complete attention of the teacher. In this scenario, learning to read would become easier for the child.

No other skill can develop the qualities that the skill of reading can develop in a child. It may even be said that it is the skill of reading that is the basic prerequisite for all other skills that are essential for the development of a human-being. When a child learns to read, it builds self-confidence. This growing self-confidence, in turn, will help further refine the child's personality. And this will only be possible when the child receives the support of the teacher.

It should therefore be the main concern of all those in education or associated with education that the young ones who are on the threshold of learning, filled with dreams and boundless hope, are not discouraged and demoralised and forced to drop out.





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एन सी ई आर टी
NCERT

राष्ट्रीय शैक्षिक अनुसंधान और प्रशिक्षण परिषद्
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