

Library: An Important Central Point of Elementary Schooling

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Children learn better if they are given independent opportunities to learn in schools. They become a part of the learning process of knowing the world around them through their own experiences and various types of creative activities. They want to connect with everything that attracts them in any way, provided there is no interference in this process. Since they are curious by nature, they want to know everything about any new, unique or strange thing that they find. *Why does this look the way it does?* They are curious about the appearance, shape and nature of things. This curiosity leads them to learn more. Problems arise when, knowingly or unknowingly, we ignore their curiosity. Perhaps this stems from our own ambiguity of what we think they need to know.

Eklavya started a project in some government schools of Dewas, Ujjain, Hoshangabad, Harda and Betul in Madhya Pradesh in which we operated libraries. My experience of running an active and creative library tells me that children learn a lot through it. It will not be an exaggeration if I say that a good library can teach a child everything that is important for becoming a good person—a place where children learn and help each other. They get complete freedom to invent anything that they want. They bring in their own life stories into the discussions and fabricate new stories based on the stories they have read in the books. All the

experiences that they gain from their surroundings are woven into these stories. Then, in a completely engrossing and joyful manner, these stories are shared with the others. A person who has not heard them cannot believe how delightful they are! A library is an interesting and fascinating space where children make friends with books and construct their knowledge freely. This robust relationship plays an important role in developing their capacities in reading, painting, drama, puzzle-solving, sports, craft and other activities. In our library project, children also get involved in the process of issuing and returning books, their maintenance and several related activities. Teachers and older volunteers, mostly students from the secondary-school level, help them with these chores.

In our experience, many interesting things came up while working formally with children in school libraries. Students had several fascinating experiences while they were engaged in writing for the wall newspaper and they wrote vividly about them, all of which are examples of their creativity. It is very important to provide more opportunities for reading-writing activities to enhance the linguistic skills of children so that they can express their points of view freely and move forward in search of paths that satisfy their curiosity. We believe that the true objective of education should be to help children become a part of the learning process within their classrooms as well as outside and learn from their surroundings with the help of the teacher.

There is a need to emphasise the importance of how a teacher can make children's knowledge-construction process an active and creative one. As the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 also suggests, 'The school library should be conceptualised as an intellectual space where teachers, children and members of the community can expect to find the means to deepen their knowledge and imagination...'

This idea is all the more valuable because new research studies in the field of education all over the



Rahul Aniya, grade VI, Village Borkheda, Dewas



Wall newspaper prepared by children

world emphatically show that children themselves play a very important role in constructing their knowledge. We cannot teach them much by ignoring their experiences. There should be attempts to develop their connections with their lessons, based on the level of their understanding and while this can be achieved to some extent through the curriculum, to a great extent the connections are made through the world around them.

The main objective of a library is to expose children to literature beyond their curriculum, create an interest in reading and writing so that they can develop a good command over language and are able to participate in knowledge construction themselves. To be able to do this, the environment in the school should be such that it creates interest in learning through various creative activities and develops leadership ability in children.

Another objective of the library is to encourage children view the world from their own perspective. Our focus through the library project was mainly on reading and writing activities so that children can use books to enrich their linguistic abilities both written and oral and the library could become a centre for all the above-mentioned creative activities.



Amit Sahu, Grade VII

Eklavya's experience of operating libraries in government schools made us realise how much children can learn through a library. Here, in their own words, are the children's views: Jaspal, Grade VII, Gayasur village: I learnt to read from the books of Eklavya's library. I would take a book, read it in hiding so that no one would know. Then, I gradually learnt to read. Earlier, I did not know how to read at all.

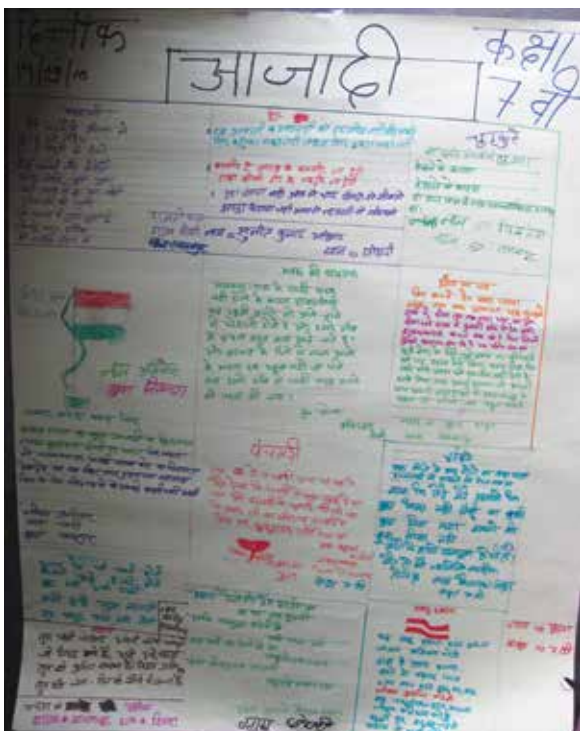
Govind, Ramkumar, Jasman, Rakesh and Braj Mohan, Dapka, Pipariya said that they used to read with a lot of hesitation before (the library was introduced). It would take them a long time to read and they would stumble on each word, break the words into letters to read. Gradually, they learnt to read. By reading the stories from the library books, again and again, they got into a habit of reading. Then, they learnt to think before writing and also learnt to draw pictures from books.

Ramkumar, Dapka: When library books were not available, we were shy to read aloud. Now, I read out in the class, confidently.' He learnt to read in two and a half months and now he can also read the textbooks properly. Now I understand everything.

Jagdish Prajapati, Borkheda: I could not read fluently before but now I have started reading library books slowly. I read more stories but have also read books that provide information. These instances suggest that children gradually, but permanently, get connected to the world of books. It was clear from the manner in which they reeled off the names of the books they had read that they had enjoyed the books very much. Regular use of the library has brought regularity in their habit of reading.

A sure sign of their curiosity being nurtured is from the fact that they are brimming with joy and enthusiasm. Their interactions with us were more spontaneous and cordial than before they began using the library. It did not seem like they were talking to a teacher but was like they were talking to a friend. As some children said, 'Sir, you listen to us and even if we do mischief, you do not scold us. You teach so many things that we like very much.'

The important outcome of using a library is that now children have gradually started moving towards the process of writing. They have also realised that writing and painting are delightful and interesting. These children exude excitement and enthusiasm. They have also become more confident. Perhaps the main reason for this is that when we were trying to make them write their experiences, we accepted the different types of compositions that they wrote, just as they were. We did not critique them. Instead, we praised their work and patted their backs. That is the reason that these children have always been enthusiastic about doing any creative work. Whenever and whatever they wanted to do, they had the freedom to do it. And if they did not feel like doing something, they were free to not do it. There is very little scope for this kind of freedom in our school system, but if diligent and persistent efforts are made, they can open doors to various creative possibilities in government schools too. This is the experience I gained from working with them.



Sona Ahirwar, Grade VI

Babita Jaiswal, a middle-school teacher from Ponasa village, Dewas, told us, 'Children have read a lot of your books. Whenever I was alone, I would give them library books after they are done with their homework. This has increased their interest in reading. Many children have read most of the books and are asking for more.'

Children from schools of Gayasur and Bolasa, (Dewas), Semaliya Nasar and Munja Kheri, (Ujjain), Dabka, (Hoshangabad) and Silpati and Bhunnas, Shahpur, (Betul) said that their teachers also read library books and took them home too. Out of these thirty eight children, thirteen told us that their siblings and other family members read books at home. The children of three villages in the Ujjain area shared that their teachers read books and then make them play games and do activities based on those.

One child who spoke for the rest, said this about the library project, 'If we do not get books, we cannot learn to read fast, make toys, write, read good stories, learn dialogues or puzzles. We learned reading and speaking because of books. When we learn something with interest, we enjoy it and are able to learn easily. We compose songs from stories as we walk through the forest. We learnt to draw new pictures, to play, to know the good from the bad. The story *Guddi* taught us not to take a bath or wash clothes in the river or pond as this makes the water dirty. The wall newspaper helped in developing the habit of writing fast.'

Another one requested, 'Please get more good books because Papa reads them sometimes.' Yet another proudly proclaimed, 'I told my brother that treatment for snakebite is available. There is a book in the school library which tells us all about it. My brother asked me to get the book for him to read.'

One can observe the variety in these experiences of children. They are making connections actively with various library books. This has greatly increased their vocabulary, which is evident from their conversations. They have started to understand that even if somebody does not teach them, they can still learn many things on their own with the help of books. When children learn through books, their happiness knows no bounds. They share it with us and with their teachers in school.

How do children know which book they will like or which they should read? Most children replied that they like to see the title and if they do not like it, they browse through a few pages, and if it is good,

they read it, otherwise, they put it back. At times, they decide from looking at the pictures in the book. Obviously, the plot of the book, the language, its pictures, design and layout, etc. play an important role in making them pick a book. Coloured picture books get preference.

Now that the regular activities of the library are in place and seeing our interactions with the children and the teaching methodology in the classroom, there is a considerable change in the attitude of the teachers towards the children. One can see a positive change in their behaviour. Teachers have started giving out government school books to the children. This was not the case before. The teachers have started showing interest in acquiring knowledge by reading literature other

than textbooks. While teaching a lesson from the textbook, they are also including children's experiences, which means that the classroom transactions are being carried out with the active involvement of the children.

Teachers are also moving towards the process of understanding the theory which is based on child-centric education so that the class can be conducted better. This may lead to the understanding that not all the children will be precisely at the same ability level, that they also differ in the ways that they are able to understand. Is this not an indication of a significant change in thinking? As the NCF 2005 states, a teacher should take up the role of a guide and not just a transmitter of knowledge. Only then, can she or he prove to be a better teacher.

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