

## The magical role of books in the life of a young child.

### Introduction:

In any country, whether it is a developed or a developing one, literacy and education for children is as basic a necessity as food, water, health care and shelter. I say this because education and awareness of the world around us is empowerment. The chances of leading a more human existence rise sharply with the ability to read, write and understand the issues that face us in this workaday world. Given a situation where getting two square meals a day becomes almost a luxury, how can we talk about books for the children of such marginalised communities? You may well ask. But I am here to share my experiences and work with children from all walks of life where the advent of books in their learning spaces has led to curiosity, liveliness, enjoyment and confidence in all their interactions. Fiction and non-fiction books that are colourfully illustrated, and use language meaningfully, are very crucial to bringing about reading with enjoyment.

Children are natural learners. They also learn in multi-dimensional ways. How can we enhance this potential? Early literacy does not only mean the act or the skill of reading. It also includes impressions, creation of images, and making sense of the world around them. We are talking about young minds whose early influences can shape their impressions quite strongly. They are of course receiving messages from everyone around them but the printed word does have a stronger impact especially when they begin to read. So it is absolutely imperative that we look at the content of the book. By 'content' I include, the theme, the actual story, the nature of the characters, the language used, the imagery and the illustrations.

In an important article called "Reading is basic to democracy" published in The Hindu of January 20<sup>th</sup> 2011, Mr. Krishna Kumar says, "**The texts used for the teaching of reading should treat the child with dignity, showing respect for the child's inner drive to interpret and relate. We need texts that make children excited about the social and cultural diversity they encounter in their ethos. We also need kind and affectionate teachers who are themselves habitual readers and can encourage each child to perceive reading as a means to pursue his or her own interest.**" I would like to keep Mr. Krishna Kumar's insightful observation as the background to all that I wish to share with you.

### How do books enter the lives of children?

First, a question for us all. Do we know how to read a book? I am not talking just about the skill, but the art of absorbing the complete book. When we take in the whole of it, we are able to discover many new facets to the book. So if **we** learn how to 'adopt' a book, we can then convey or facilitate **that** quality in the child's approach to books.

If they are at school, it is **through their texts**. I have noticed that for children their text books become all-important! But these text books must be carefully chosen. I am aware that NCERT has done very good work in bringing out sensitive and meaningful texts. Can we ensure these are available and used? However, I am sure we all agree that **even if text books are good, they cannot and must not be the only sources for reading.**

Next, it is **through interesting books along with reading activities**. Indian publishers have come a long way in the quality and content of books so learn to select well. CBT, Nehru Bal Pustakalaya, Ekalavya, Pratham Books and Unisun are some of the best publishers providing inexpensive and attractive books. Katha, Tulika, Khel-Kitab, and Tara are other very good ones but their cost is higher. I will not go into details here because tomorrow you will hear more on this topic.

### **What are the mechanics of making these books accessible to the children?**

I would suggest **classroom libraries**. You can either have an open rack or tie a string and hang books on it, or use window sills or table tops or decorated trunks! I have tried all these and they work well. You can use other ideas too.

If the school is established enough to have a **small separate space for a library**, even better! But it **MUST** be an open library. No point in creating a space and making it difficult to enter that space. There must be a weekly library time given for each group or class and either the teacher of that group or a designated library teacher can conduct the session.

**An introduction to books is the first step**. It can be done in a fun way like a guided tour of a zoo or whatever children relate to. This is also a good time to talk of **care of books**. It can be in the form of a street play. Children can show the enemies of books through mime. Fire, water, dirt, insects, rats AND us humans!! They can make masks or dress up. Each can show how they spoil the books. Let the children come up with the ideas themselves. Have a hospital with emergency care. A Dr. or nurse can give the diagnosis. "Too late" or "Can be patched up but will never be the same." etc. Children will remember these concepts of care for a long time if we begin this way.

### **Having prepared the ground, how can we use these books as effectively as possible to induce children to read with interest and enjoyment?**

Let us start with the most basic and yet the most enduring.

**1. Reading out stories or excerpts from non-fiction as well.** This activity gives a child the first clue that books have wonderful 'stuff' in them. Colourful pictures add to the magic of books. Even after the initial phase, and perhaps a spurt in reading interest, continue the reading out! This time choose books that may be a bit challenging in language, expression, content and characterisation, which will not just tell them things but will make them wonder, ponder and reflect! Thus you will be helping them to move beyond their own reading level to a higher comprehension level. And by comprehension, I mean not just understanding the meaning of the text but the ability to read between the lines – Shabdon ke peeche kya hai!!

Related to the reading out is the potential for **simple reference work**. The book you read from will have many aspects to it. Can you ask the children to pick anything which they want to know more about and guide them to search in any knowledge books you might have in your classroom? These could include an atlas, a simple encyclopaedia, and other books. Now help them to look for related material, either pictures or more information.

### **2. By mimicking their daily situations.**

One group sets up small shops by arranging and displaying the books in creative ways. These are the sellers. The other larger group comes in to choose and 'buy'. Sellers must call out their wares...Aaiye, Aaiye, badhiya kitab lejiye... and use two sentences to advertise their books etc. Both in "selling" and in browsing and finally selecting, children are becoming very familiar with the books.

### **3. Treasure Hunt with books.**

For this the teacher gives clues orally (initially) leading to certain books in the collection. In pairs, children try to find the right book. When they have done it, they respond to the question in the clue. There is not only the fun of the game but also the nurturing of the ability to think through the clue itself and link it to a book. Some familiarity with the collection develops, a flash of memory is activated and a sense of ownership with the books has begun. In searching for one book, they are unconsciously storing memories of other books in the collection which in turn will be awakened when needed. I have used this very effectively across the country and outside the country as well.

Some examples of simple clues:

1. Do you like colours? This book has many colours. Find it. What is your favourite colour? Why?
2. This book has the name of the rainy season. Find it. What happens when it does not rain in this season?
3. The name of this book is like the sound of water. Find the book. If you did not have water, what would happen to you?
4. This book is about a happy rabbit with a kite. Find it. What makes you happy?
5. Do you like eating outdoors? There is a book about this. Find it and tell us when you went for a picnic and what happened there.
6. A cloud is smiling because it will rain. Everyone is happy! Find the book. Do you like rain? Why or why not?
7. This is a story about a wrestler (pehelwan). It is in black and white and has no colours. Find the book and tell us why you think there are no colours in the book.
8. The king of the forest has a pain in his tooth. Find the book. Who is the king of the forest? What happens if you don't brush your teeth well?
9. This book is about a king in Manipur. He has three sons and one daughter. Find the book. Whom does he choose to be the next ruler and why?
10. The name of this book has the names of three people who are in the story. These names all rhyme with each other. Find the book. When words rhyme, what is it like? Can you give two or three words that rhyme?

As you can see from these clues, each one had a follow-up activity of speaking or writing related to the book.

### **4. Buddy reading (Padho saheli ke saath)**

Different children even in the same age group have differing levels of reading ability. So, make pairs with one advanced reader and one beginning reader. Let each pair choose a book and sit somewhere, outdoors, under or on top of a tree, some corner in the room... and leave them to this activity for at least 30 minutes. See the wonderful outcome! Maybe they can come back to the whole group and share something about the book. Make sure both of them talk!

### **5. Book Talks.**

Over the years that I have interacted with children, it is a continuing delight for me to hear them talk about books they have read. The skills inbuilt in this activity are enormous. Ability to read, to comprehend, identify the author and the illustrator, make overall sense of the book, gather the whole in their heads and tell us **about the book, not just rattle off the entire book by heart**. They also tell why they liked the book or not. Another facet is that they speak of the characters and whom they related to and why. Finally they read out a favourite passage. It could just be a sentence or two or a paragraph. Let the activity end with everyone asking questions and the teacher trying to deepen their observations. This works initially just orally and gradually with writing a brief review of just one or two sentences. It should not be done as a chore!

### **6. Using books without any script, just pictures.**

You can start by asking them to look at the whole book first and absorb the meaning through pictures. Then ask them to go page by page naming all the familiar objects. The teacher can write the names next to the pictures. After this keep making it more complex. You can ask them to connect the objects using phrases. Next level would be to make sentences for each page. Finally can they come up with their own story for the book? Photocopy one for each so that they can begin writing in their own books. Please do not make them write in their note books. It should all happen in the actual book so that they get the feel of creating a book afresh.

### **7. Using poetry to learn reading.**

This merits a separate section because poems and rhymes are the easiest way to reach a child. You can start with simple songs and poems. Hearing words that rhyme helps children learn reading faster. Make a special effort to look for books with poems and encourage the children to learn the poems by heart. Ekalavya has brought out some good ones. You can also collect traditional rhymes and poems from parents and grandparents of your children. These can be printed out and made into little booklets. The comfort level for children in approaching these familiar poems is valuable in their reading progress.

### **8. Simple craft activities related to reading.**

To strengthen the relationship between books and children, they can make book marks with drawings and a word or a sentence about books – it should be their idea.

They can also make badges to wear with some word or phrase written on it.

Each of them can make a card from KG cardboard or a little booklet with their name on it. Each time they read a book or even listen to a story they can learn to write the name of the book. As their writing skills improve, they can add the author's name and a comment of their own about the book. In time this will be a wonderful record of their reading and awareness.

They can make their own illustrations for a book they read or a story they heard. All these are ways to strengthen the relationship and bonding with books.

### **9. Translations.**

This can be done at various levels from a first learner to a slightly more advanced child. Take a book with a known story or one you have told them so that they are very familiar with the story. It can also work with non-fiction. Then depending on the level of the child, ask them to translate words, then sentences and so on until the whole book is done. Let them do their own illustrations and 'Jadu Mantar', a new book is born!! You can try whichever is easier for them. From English to Hindi or from their mother tongue to Hindi and so on. If you show them bi-lingual books, they can see how it is done and then try on their own. Nothing is beyond children' capacities if we nurture them.

### **10. Adaptations.**

This is meant for more advanced learners. They can choose a story they like, or any book with information, or a how-to book. Then they adapt the content to a simpler level which is then accessible to a younger child.

### **11. Making books or becoming writers and authors:**

This seems to be the most popular activity judging by the experience of many teachers and librarians. A series that became a hit for children I interacted with, was, "A day in the life of...". From reading or looking at these, the next step came easily. Children in pairs can select a person they see every day doing a job. The teacher asks the children to say what they would like to know about these people and helps them to generate questions. Armed with these questions the whole group goes to each person. The pair that is responsible for the book can ask the questions. The teacher can take down the answers to ease the process. When all interviews are over, the whole group returns to the classroom and each pair is helped to make a book with the information, draw pictures or even take photographs with a simple camera. So the children plan the format, write the content and put in visuals and make a cover. The books are ready!! This project can be done over a month or two to facilitate total immersion. This is just one example of a book. Children may come up with other ideas that can be taken up.

One idea that worked with young children was to combine as a group to make a book about their teachers! Each child took on a teacher, or helper and interviewed them. The book was made with one page from each child and became a school document!

### **12. Reading independent of classroom spaces:**

As the children grow confident in reading and handling books, I would strongly suggest they be given books to borrow and take home. While we accept that home involvement may not work, it would be good to try sending books home for the child to show to siblings, parents and grandparents to spark an interest in reading. This worked very well with a school group in Guddahatti in Karnataka, which came from a very low-income background. It was also a success with the village schools near our own school, Centre for Learning. This will ensure continuity and an extension of reading in their daily lives not just at the school. It is also essential to recognise that reading is not restricted to a time and space. Once the child makes a start, it can and will extend to reading signs in the street, while shopping, and even at home.

### **13. Books which invoke a sense of pride in the children:**

There are many interesting stories about tribal children and children from marginalised groups which have been brought out by Tulika and others. Even though the content of these books may be above the reading level of the young learners, it would be very good to read them out or tell them the stories to give them a sense of self-esteem. Well known books are “Basava and the dots of fire,” “Surangini,” “Doosri, the other one,” “Sona’s adventures,” “Festival of Eid,” “Etoa Munda won the battle,” “Kali and the water snake,” “Suresh and the sea,” “The why why girl,” “the Toda and the Tahr,” and others.

### **Conclusion :**

Almost any reasonably written book can be used in one way or the other in a classroom situation **but** there are some that are very special. The theme or the author or the illustrations make them so. We must learn to recognise and acquire such books. This is not some mysterious or magical power! It comes from exposure and familiarity and results naturally in discernment. Themes that awaken gender sensitivity, care for the elderly or the weak, concern for nature and animal life, awareness of the differently-abled, and many more such issues that children will face in their daily lives. The benefit of reading such texts, talking about them and using them to deepen understanding and care, is paramount.

Many people have said to me that children of marginalised communities cannot be touched or reached through methods that are generally used in mainstream education. I beg to question that. As I see it, all children have very similar responses and learning patterns. The teachers are all very committed, perhaps even more than in other schools, because you have chosen to work in this sector. The gap lies in economic and social factors which come in the way. But even a little can go a long way, so with careful selection and use of resources, books can enable children to enter the wider world in many exciting ways.

### **A few tips to look out for:**

- 1. Help children to read often and make it enjoyable. As soon as you see the child tiring or losing interest, stop! Pick it up again later.**
- 2. Read out to children - they will hear more new words. Explain new words rather than replace them with familiar ones.**
- 3. Make sure children name things they see around them. Let them talk, not just listen.**
- 4. Point to words as you read. Let the child turn the pages.**
- 5. You know you are on the right track when there is a comfortable empathetic relationship between you, the teacher, and the child.**

I do hope that these very simple and practical ideas will help the children take off on a vigorous early literacy programme. Remember, you are the conduit and must help make it happen! I also hope you will add your own ideas and send them to me so I can share them with others. In this way the circle keeps expanding to include many more children.

**Thank you for inviting me to speak on this theme which is very close to my heart!**

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