

Interpretive Approach to Library Assessment.

An interpretive approach to library assessment emanates from close observation, reflection, and a sound understanding of the intent of a library interaction with children. In my view this approach can be used beneficially with children in any environment or system where there is a commitment to the elements mentioned earlier. In other words, *where* there is a deep understanding that each child is an individual with different learning styles and abilities, *there* will be a watching and a learning for the librarian.

Some of the key questions to ask regarding assessment might be:

1. Why do we wish to measure?
2. What do we wish to measure?
3. Once we have the information, what do we intend to do with it?

Clarity on these questions will lead us naturally to 'how to measure.'

As a child journeys through reading, there are markers along the way which can inform the educator about the child's understanding, deepening engagement and discernment of the written and the spoken word. In the environments where I cared for the library and its users, movement and growth in reading complexity along with making meaning both direct and implicit, were the key factors I looked for. Resistance or hesitation to read were some of the main hurdles I faced in my 30 years as a library educator. I will share how I perceived these aspects and how my own strategies and/or fortuitous circumstances conspired to help overcome these seeming barriers.

A few preliminary comments: It is true that my experience was mainly with middle class children coming from homes with educated parents and who were by and large, comfortable with their reading skills. There were also smaller numbers in each group I interacted with. However for the last 5 or 6 years I have been working more closely with children from a range of backgrounds, languages and income groups and *prima facie*, I do not see a problem with the methods I used being acceptable and valid in these situations as well. An observation one may reflect upon is voiced by Kamala Mukunda, author of "What did you ask at school today?" In an article, where she refers to assessment and evaluation practices at a small school called Centre for Learning, she says, "The insights into learning that form the basis of our decisions are also real and true. In fact, over the years, people have often told us that understanding our reasons for doing things in a particular way helps them clarify their own thinking about education. And who knows where that may lead?"

I will broadly categorise my assessment approaches into three main segments.

1. Preparation for assessment.

Process of familiarity with the children's abilities and taking **pre-emptive action.**

2. Continuous assessment.

Tools used for regular monitoring and **mentoring** of children's reading patterns.

3. Assessment leading to librarian's learning.

Methods for tracking 'tortoises,' (slow readers) 'bulls,' (raging readers) and 'burros' (resistant or hesitant readers) and devising **individualised strategies** to spur them on.

1. Setting the stage for Assessment: Pre-emptive action:

To recognise slow and hesitant readers and give them more attention right at the start. If the gap between them and the other more ready readers widens, it gets harder and harder to woo them and win them over. So finding time for a one-on-one interaction to identify specific difficulties and above all to convey no sense of judgement or superiority is necessary.

Strategies:

- Having a word with the class teacher and other teachers, mainly in art and craft and sports to gain more insights.
- Trying to find interest-specific or relevant books to start an interest in reading.
- Talking to parents to clue them in to gentle ways of encouraging reading. (if parents are literate and are readers)
- Asking the child to make her own reading-rate and reading-content predictions and letting the child see for herself whether they were realistic, optimistic or pessimistic. (Much can be learnt by the library educator in this exercise.)
- Having a buddy to read with her during the library time but book is chosen by the slow or hesitant reader.
- Taking help from the children through book repair, book sorting and arranging, selection for display, creating new book jackets and making book marks. Each of these actions has a possibility for awakening the child's interest besides making her feel a valued member of the group.

2. Continuous assessment.

Tools and methods used in interaction with children:

- Story-telling: A good deal can be learnt during this activity about the child's level of comprehension, engagement etc, especially if there are pauses to note the attention level of different children and some simple questions asked (not about the specific story but some aspects related to the story.) Examples can be given.

- Browsing: Watching a child's ability to navigate the collection, select interesting material and settle down with something to read, is a tremendous way of learning about the child's growth and movement in library awareness.
- Treasure Hunt: This activity affords the library educator plenty of scope to observe the child's level of awareness and familiarity with different kinds of books and their locations. A treasure hunt is done by the librarian for the children, and as a return engagement, children ask for their chance to set the hunt for the adults! Much scope for observation and noting down.
- Book Auction: Attracts all children by the varied nature of the session. Children's comprehension of the game and their familiarity and interest in the kinds of books being auctioned can easily be gauged.
- Book Chats: This is after the child has actually read a book and talks about it. The librarian can immediately see what level of understanding and engagement there has been during this chat as well as by the questions that follow from all the participants.
- Book Selection and Purchase: Taking children to book fairs and book stores is an invaluable experience both for the children and for the librarian. This can be done from as young an age as 7 years. Their level of comfort among many kinds of books, ability to focus on the task at hand and demonstrate the beginnings of discernment for quality, value and price are all good pointers for assessment.

Information gained from careful perusal of borrowing records:

Earlier I had a card system where each class or group of children had a small box where they would place the book cards when they borrowed books. This enabled me to quickly go through the cards to get a picture of the child's reading. Too much, too little, not much variety, not adventurous, too simple, too advanced ornothing being read! Generally intervention was possible without strict measures, with a suggestion here and there or even a reading challenge. This worked remarkably well but the ground for all of this to happen was a strong bond of friendship and relationship between the child and the adult and a complete knowledge of books available in the collection and outside.

When the system was computerised, the record keeping became easier, but the same method of keeping track of each individual child's reading and movement, or lack of, was followed.

Two important prerequisites for this system:

1. At the end of each week I documented into my diary a quick review of each child's reading. If the numbers were too large, I would divide this into two days. Total time taken would be about an hour. Just notes were made. Alternatively or additionally, as I awaited the children's boisterous entry into the library for the period, I would take a quick glance through their cards or borrowing records. So I was ready to meet each child with that awareness for possible action.

2. At the end of each year or term, library reports were written by me for *every* child to be read by the teacher, the parent and the child herself, for understanding of where she is in terms of her journey in reading and making meaning. These reports were written by referring to the notes made about each child. The reports also covered what had been done with each group, thus providing an assessment of the librarian as well!
3. **Assessment leading to learning for the librarian.**

The importance of tentative assessment:

An inherent aim of assessment is to bring about supportive action. Therefore it is essential to hold assessment with a light grip because many times we have seen that children take quantum leaps in short spaces of time and the assessment seems out-dated. I would like to share some examples in this regard.

Manushi was with me in the school library from age 6. Her father is an artist and seemed to have unknowingly conveyed a lack of importance in reading seeing it as second-hand! As a result, Manushi struggled with the skills of reading and became more and more resistant and defiant when books were suggested even for leisure reading. The two of us had a silent struggle for a number of years which soon developed into stances taken by each of us. I was sure she was a lost cause as far as books went and she was sure I was a hateful librarian. Two more years went by and I was feeling increasingly uncomfortable at the breakdown in relationship. Then came the breakthrough! In our school we have community work each morning where children are assigned to different spaces for work. I had noticed that she was a meticulous cleaner and so I secretly asked that she be put into the library cleaning group. Then followed days in the library with shining floors. I moved her to dusting shelves and slowly I saw a change. From just mechanically dusting books, I noticed her opening a book and getting absorbed in it. More and more books were being looked at and less and less books dusted. But I could not care less! Until the day when she came up to me to ask, "This book looks very interesting. Can I borrow it?" We hugged and the book was taken home. She did not become a voluminous reader but was a very discerning one. Always knew what she wanted and the choices were excellent. As a senior student her choice of place to study was the library!

Pramod always had a ready answer when a book was suggested to him. No way. You can't get me to read. And so on. One day he apparently missed the bus home. Next morning when I reached the library, a beaming Pramod greeted me. "Aunty, you don't know what fantastic books you have. You must read this book, "White Fang" by Jack London. I discovered this book when I got left behind and spent the whole evening reading it."

Sanjay was an avid sports player and felt strongly that reading and sports were mutually exclusive. When I went to the Table Tennis room one evening he looked askance at me but he was red in the face when I beat him completely! Next day, I saw a face peeping into the library. "Yes, Sanjay?" "Aunty is there a book in the library that I will be able to read?" That was the beginning of a slow but sustained relationship between Sanjay and the library!

Ayesha was a slow reader and therefore avoided the library. But she had a passion for animals and my ploy was to reach out by reading out animal stories to her and others until she was ready

to try a simple book. I asked her to come in after lunch and we would read together for a while. Her parents too were roped in to help her get over her inhibitions by reading out a few pages to her after which she read a few pages. So after a record where there were huge blanks against her name, her page of borrowings slowly began to fill, so much so that in a year or two she was hounding me to get more books by a classic writer of animal stories which was a challenge for me.

Priya was wonderful with her hands and seemed to feel that the library was an alien space. I invited her to display her craft in the library. Gradually as teachers and other students recognised her abilities, I could see that she felt welcomed to the library. She began by glancing at some craft books. Gradually as her comfort level in the library grew, she began to try other books until now she tells me how valuable it was that I did not give up on her.

These examples are true and did not happen according to a set of strategies I had tried. They happened serendipitously. So the point is that in assessment, one has to keep room for such small miracles. As a librarian these instances showed me never to give up on a child and to try very different spaces to make contact.

Conclusion:

An assessment rubric created by the library educator can help clarify the aims and follow-up action of such an exercise. One of the pre-requisites of creating such a rubric would be that the library educator is in close contact with the child's growth and reading patterns. He must also have a wider picture of the vital role played by reading and reflecting, for children from a young age. In the words of Krishna Kumar, *"children have a natural drive to explore and understand the world; hence, reading should give them the opportunity to make sense of printed texts from the beginning. 'Making sense' as an experience involves relating to the text, generating a personal engagement and interpretation. If children are not encouraged to relate to the text, or if the text they are given has little meaning or relevance, the outcome will be a crude kind of literacy, which will remain isolated from their intellectual and emotional development. If this wider meaning of reading is applied to make an assessment, our system of primary education will arouse far greater concern than children's test scores in achievement surveys do."* From the article "India's primary schools are museums where old teaching methods are carefully preserved."

