

Ways to Improve a School Library

Kamlesh Chandra Joshi

Many teachers have made various efforts to ensure the effective functioning of their school libraries. This article presents a brief account of some of these efforts. It also describes certain changes seen in students' reading and writing habits as a result of these initiatives.

When looking at a school library, it is natural to wonder how effectively it is functioning and how it can be improved. There are many administrative and academic aspects to understand this. For example: how many and what kinds of books are available in the library; how many students visit it regularly; how well students use the books; the teachers' perspectives on children's books and their use; and so on. Along with this, the effectiveness of a library is also reflected in the activities conducted among students, the presentation of books, their upkeep, the availability of space, and so on. It also depends on how much time teachers are able to devote to the library.

Teachers in some government schools are actively working to improve and strengthen their school libraries. During my conversations with some of them working in schools in Udham Singh Nagar, they shared several important ideas regarding better library management and making libraries more impactful.

Teachers' preparation

Teachers working to strengthen their libraries said that they participate in sessions related to library development as part of their preparation. They discuss related topics among themselves to develop a deeper understanding and interact with experts in children's literature and libraries. In addition, they regularly read good children's literature and quality children's magazines. These include books, such as *Bus ki Sair*, *Nanhe Karamkalla*, *Nanhe-Munne Geet*, *Barasta Tarbooz*, and *Nanihal mein Guzre Din*, and children's magazines, like *Chakmak*, *Pluto*, and *Cycle*.

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Figure 1: Children sitting together and happily reading storybooks.

Teachers hold in-depth discussions among themselves on the themes, events, characters, illustrations, and perspectives emerging from these books. They also discuss what kinds of, and which books would be appropriate for students of different class levels.

Some teachers continue to reflect on questions such as: How do students learn to read? How can their curiosity for reading and habits of self-study be nurtured? What can we do to help students become good readers? For this preparation, they have collectively read and discussed teacher-oriented books, such as *Padhne Ki Samajh*, *Padhne ki Dehliiz Par*, *Bachhe ki Bhasha aur Adhyapak* and *Padhna Likhna Seekhne Mein Kitabon ka Mahatwa*. They have also read several articles, such as *Kya Kya Ho Ek Achhi Kitaab Mein*, *Kahani Kahan Kho Gayi*, and *Padhne Ki Aadat*, in order to build a deeper understanding in this direction. All this preparation has helped them develop a perspective for working with students and managing an impactful library.

Teachers shared that such efforts have created among them a willingness to read and understand children's literature. One teacher mentioned that they also joined Eklavya's *Library se Dosti* course, and as a result, they have been able to work better in their school and support fellow teachers in using children's literature. They mentioned that this encouraged them to continue to manage the library alongside other responsibilities at their schools.



Figure 2: Students reading out from their textbooks.

Reading period

Several teachers shared that they have set aside a specific time in their schools during which students come to the library, pick books of their choice, sit and read. During this reading period, teachers observe students reading and occasionally interact with them. Some teachers also sit and read alongside students. (A detailed article on

this was published in *Pathshala Bheetar aur Bahar*, Issue 16, June 2023.)

Selection of books

Teachers said that adding new books is necessary to keep the students' interest in the library alive. Students who have read most of the books more than once begin to lose interest and need new books. However, school libraries have limited budgets. Sometimes, books provided by the education department are not suitable for primary-level students. In such situations, teachers take initiative and procure books through their own sources.

Among the books are not just books of stories and poems but also informational books, books that help understand one's surroundings, travelogues, diaries, creative prose, books on making things, puzzle books, dictionaries, and so on. In addition to this, they also take care to arrange *Big Books*, picture books, and poetry posters for younger children. Some teachers have also included books in English, along with Hindi.

Through mutual discussions, teachers also became familiar with the 'Parag Honour List' of children's literature and have begun procuring books from that list as well. A significant observation is that once teachers experience the energy that comes from a well-used library, they continue to procure books for students from time to time and keep enriching their libraries. Some teachers even visit the World Book Fair (New Delhi) to buy books for their schools and their colleagues.

Organisation of books

Teachers emphasised that the way books are arranged and presented in the library affects how students access them. When books are visible and within reach, students can choose them more easily. Towards this, teachers adopt different methods according to their circumstances. Many teachers have taught students that returning books and keeping them in the correct place is important, and students have begun doing this. In some schools, students have taken the responsibility of organising the library and managing its functioning.

How students develop a connection with books

Teachers shared several experiences of how students connect with books, emphasising that books should not remain limited to the library. They also use books from the library in their classrooms. Based on discussions with teachers and classroom observations, some aspects of building students' connection with books are presented below.

Use of books in the classroom

Teachers mentioned how they connect library books with their lessons and use them while teaching. For example, while teaching class V lesson *Nanha Fankar* from the Hindi textbook *Rimjhim*, which focuses on Emperor Akbar's humility and his openness to learning from ordinary people, teachers also used the book *Shehenshah Akbar Ko Koun Sikhayega?* Similarly, for the poem *Cheenti* in class III textbook, discussions were held by linking it with the book *Cheenta*, published by Eklavya.

I also observed that discussions around textbook lessons often included references to children's literature. This was a deliberate effort to connect students with children's literature and help them see the lessons in a broader perspective. This showed that books that were earlier limited only to issuing and returning were now being used both for the joy of reading and as part of planned teaching.

Regular observations and conversations with students

Teachers began paying attention to students who were borrowing books and those who were not. They sometimes spoke with students about the books to understand whether they were reading them or not. Through this process, teachers could understand the type of books each student enjoyed, and this helped them in recommending books to students.

Activities based on books

To enhance students' interest in books, teachers started conducting activities based on them. These included teachers reading books aloud, selecting stories and having students perform role plays, narrating stories using puppets, and asking students who could read to narrate stories from their favourite books, and so on.

The most important observation was that teachers began planning discussions around books and initiating conversations with students accordingly. Plans were seen around books, such as *Chhutki Ullee*, *Mitwa*, *Khush-Khush Kachhua*, *Nilofar ki Muskaan*, *Panchhi Pyara*, *Budhiya ki Roti*, *Mahagiri*, *Kyun-Kyun Ladki*, and others. In expanding students' exposure to books, it was also observed that, besides poems and stories, teachers

gave students opportunities to read puzzle books and activity-based books.

Motivation to write

As mentioned earlier, teachers gave students opportunities to orally express what they had read. They gave them the opportunity to create new stories and poems and encouraged them to write down their own experiences. Teachers sent these experiences to some of the children's magazines, and some of the students' works were published. This motivated them to continue reading. Some older students also began writing book reviews.

Summary

Through conversations with teachers and observations of school libraries, it became clear that with effective library management, teachers could understand that reading books impacts not only students' language development but also their overall personality. Not only does it strengthen their expression, but it also increases their confidence and enhances their ability to understand different things. Teachers felt that students who read books perform better in other subjects as well. They also observed that books made it easier for them to discuss many issues, including discrimination based on caste, gender, language and region, which may be difficult to address directly but could be explored through stories and books. They realised that to build meaningful understanding around books, careful planning is required so that meaningful discussions with students can take place. They also felt the need to read good children's literature themselves and continuously develop their own understanding in order to do this effectively.

To run a school library well, it is necessary to think holistically. At the core of this will always be the aim of nurturing good readers and building students' bond with books. Alongside this, teachers managing libraries must keep strengthening their understanding of children's literature. For this, it is important that they cultivate their own habit of reading and continue discussions with colleagues on the selection and use of children's books. Only then will they be able to manage school libraries effectively.

Translated from Hindi. Translator: Pragma P Vetter: Simran Luthra



Kamlesh Chandra Joshi was with the Azim Premji Foundation in Udham Singh Nagar for 17 years and has been associated with the field of primary education for three decades. He has worked extensively with teachers at the primary level on language teaching, school libraries, teacher training, and related areas.

Contact: kamlesh.joshee@gmail.com