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## Promoting Language and Literacy Development through School Libraries

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There is a lot of evidence that giving children access to books has a great impact on their language learning and literacy development. It goes without saying that the school library does more than just promote language development. The library can become a community space that all members of the school 'community' - teachers, students or parents - feel is theirs. It becomes a social space for children and their teachers to meet, collaborate, research, learn, share and relax. However, in this handout, we will be focusing only on the role of the school library in promoting language and literacy development.

Having said that, it is well known that when they have access to interesting books that they can understand, most students read them; and when they do, their vocabulary, grammar, writing style, and knowledge of the world improves (Krashen, 2014).

However, giving children access to high quality and interesting books that are easy to understand is only one part of the teacher's job. Good language teachers and librarians should not just bring books to readers, but should also bring readers to books. They should cultivate a love for reading in children, and help them cultivate the reading habit. They also need to help children develop the skills for reading and thinking about the books they read. They can learn these skills, which help them understand the text, in the language classroom. In the library, the teacher could get them to think about and connect with the text they are reading, to question and critically analyse it, and to aesthetically respond to the text, then to learn to apply reading and writing to their own lives.

This handout is designed for language teachers and librarians who already have access to a library, but would like to learn how to use it better. Here we suggest activities to liven up the library for different age groups. For guidelines for setting up a library and to understand the principles of an Open Library, please refer to these documents<sup>1</sup>.

### **1. Read aloud – (3 years or older)**

*Purpose* – Read aloud helps develop listening and observation skills. It also develops fluency and gives the children a sense of what a story is.

The teacher models reading aloud and what it involves. Pausing often to ask questions during the read aloud helps the children pick up nuances of 'thinking as you read'. This is an opportunity to help the children understand all the processes involved in critically engaging with a text.

*Process* – Choose a book that is suitable for the age group you are reading to. It can be a simple short story or a chapter book, depending on the group.

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1. <sup>1</sup>Baird, Nicola (2012). Setting up and Running a School Library. Heinemann.
  2. Mukunda, Usha (2012) Manual for an Open Library (unpublished) - Please reach out to [eli@tiss.edu](mailto:eli@tiss.edu) for copies of these.

Have your group seated comfortably in a place they like. It could be inside the library, or in the shade of a tree in your school.

Start by saying how enthusiastic you are about reading the story with them. Hold up the book, mention the title, author and illustrator.

Take some time to look at the book's cover and ask them questions like –

- What do you think this book is about?
- What does the title suggest?
- Who do you think it is about?
- Do you think it is a happy story or a sad story?
- Why do you think so?

Even as you read the story, pause and reflect. Ask questions like–

- What do you think will happen next?
- What do you think about this character(s)?
- Do you relate to what just happened?
- What would you do if you were in such a situation?

As you near the end, pause for another discussion. Most stories create some suspense. Ask the children to guess how the story will end and keep the suspense alive.

After you read out the end, again ask them how they would end it if they are the authors. Ask them about how they felt about the story. Did they connect to any of the characters?

*All children might not be enthusiastic, patient listeners. Sometimes, children go off on a tangent and ask irrelevant questions. We need to be patient so that they slowly begin to enjoy the sessions. Let's not be dismissive. Instead, ask such children to choose a book you could read aloud. Also find out what topics or genres they enjoy and include those so they begin to like the activity.*

*Ideas for extension –*

- Ask the children which story that you read to them they would like to enact as a play. Discuss the story and come up with a script as a group. Use chits to pick characters. Involve the children in costume designing, mask making and overall direction.
- After a few sessions and once the children begin to enjoy the activity, get them to take turns and read aloud too.
- Encourage the children to re-read the books you have read aloud and to have book talks where they share their experience of reading the book with a larger audience at school.
- Conduct a quiz related to the stories you have read during these sessions.

## **2. Storytelling – (All age groups)**

*Purpose* – Storytelling is an important part of many cultures: it allows one generation to pass on stories to the next. In the classroom too, storytelling builds a bond among the participants when they connect with the stories.

*Process* – This activity can be conducted in many ways. All you need is a good story, some enthusiasm and preparation by the teacher/librarian/community member. The audience will enjoy it and, when encouraged, also want to actively participate.

*Ask the children to bring a collection of stories from their families to the library. You could make this an activity that involves the community. This is also a great opportunity to support writing among children who can write. Those who cannot write could have an adult or an older child work with them as a scribe. Once you have a few stories, you could use them to make props, puppets and charts with the children.*

### **3. Signing in (3 – 6 years)**

*Purpose* – This simple activity encourages children to recognize their lines, dots or anything they scribble as writing! Acknowledging any gesture with a pen/pencil/crayon/brush as an act of writing helps develop writing skills and builds confidence in the children. With time, they understand that writing has a purpose. This activity also develops fine motor skills in very young children.

*Process* – Put up a sheet of paper with attractive pictures at the entrance of the library. Also keep some colour pencils/crayons/sketch-pens/sparkling coloured glue/paint there. Ask very young children to sign their names as they enter the library. Make this a ritual for membership, and use different materials on different days. Recognize this as real writing.

*Initially, children may find this a little hard. Encourage them to ‘act’ like they are writing and show examples of similar ‘writing’ by other children. If some children know the alphabet and write the first letter in their name, appreciate them too! Even a drawing that represents the child is a signature! Let the children know that every mark they make counts.*

*Ideas for extension* –

- Keep a tray with colourful sand at the entrance of the library and ask the children to sign on sand.
- Place pots of paint and have children dip their finger and make an entry on a block of wood/canvas/cloth.
- Make library cards for checking out books and hand each child a card with his/her name and photograph. Ask him/her to copy the title of the book that he/she has picked up to read. The teacher/librarian also separately makes a note of the book that each child has chosen.
- Make bookmarks; get the children to draw on them.

### **4. Engaging with a wordless picture book (3 – 6 Years)**

*Purpose* - Wordless picture books are a fun way to engage with children. Using them, you can help develop observation skills, fluency and a sense of what a story is. Slowly, you could also get your group to understand the nuances of the spoken and the written word.

The children will love the colourful art, and understand that pictures also ‘speak’ or ‘tell a story’. They will understand the idea of a sequence of events, plot, and characters and their

expressions and feelings. These are important skills to develop for literacy and language learning.

*Process* - Work with small groups. Ideally, don't have more than six to eight children looking at the book with you. This way you can give enough time and attention to every child who participates.

Sit in a circle with children; place the book at the centre. Tell them how excited you are about the book.

- a) Start with the cover, and ask them questions like -
  - What do you see here?
  - Who is this book about?
  - Shall we look inside?
  - Are you excited?

Mention the illustrator's name. If this is the first time the children are seeing a picture book, explain who an illustrator is. Use this opportunity to show how drawing and making beautiful pictures is a great thing to do. Talk about how they could do it too. With each picture book, talk about different illustration styles. If you do this often, the children will soon be able to recognize the styles of some illustrators.

- b) Take them through the book one page at a time:
  - Allow each child to look at the picture, note down what each child says.
  - Try to start a conversation around what the children have said. This could help you understand what each child is taking in.
  - Direct their attention to things they might not have noticed. It could be a character hiding behind the bushes, someone who looks sly. It could be a foot or a hand stretched out to create suspense! Ask questions like – what is happening here; who is this; what is he/she up to; what will happen next.
- c) Once you go through the book together, ask the children to summarize what they saw. Then you do it, show them how a narrative/story is built.

*Some children may want to touch the book and 'see' it for themselves. Keep five minutes for this. These are cues the children take from us - how much we appreciate their need to touch and feel a book. While doing this, we could also show them how to handle a book. Suggest that we all have the right to own and feel responsible for a book. This needs to be done with great care, so that the children don't feel intimidated.*

*Ideas for extension –*

- Ask the children to draw and colour a picture that they liked the most from the book.
- Use clay to make models of characters from the book.
- Make masks of characters with chart paper; you could use this later on to enact the story with the group.

### **5. Engaging with a picture book with minimal text (3 – 6 years)**

*Process* - Give each child a picture book with very little text to start with. Ask them to spend about 20 minutes looking at the book cover to cover. Tell them to look at each picture and understand what the illustrations are trying to say. Then each child tells the group his/her story by showing pictures from the book.

*Very young children may find speaking to a larger group hard. Help the child tell the story by gently encouraging him/her. Give each child the time and space to be able to express himself/herself. Don't pressure them; the child could lose interest. Encourage the child to speak in the language that he/she is most comfortable in. This supports a multilingual environment in the class and gives the child the confidence to speak in his/her language.*

*Ideas for extension –*

- Give the same book to other children later on and see how different children understand the story. That way, young children understand the idea of different points of view.
- Read the books the children are looking through aloud. So far, they would have looked at the pictures, and might have wondered what the story is really about. Listening to it could give them a sense of how close they were to the story. This encourages dialogue between the librarian/teacher and the children -- the children are already familiar with the book and this might encourage them to listen carefully.
- Maintain a log of the books that each student has 'read' (this is also called pretend reading) and encourage them to choose more books from a pile that you've already picked out for the group.

### **6. Making Borrowing Cards – (5 years or older)**

*Purpose* – This gives the children a chance to take responsibility for the library books as common property. It helps younger children understand that writing also has a purpose of record keeping.

*Process* - Each child is given half a sheet of chart paper. Each child makes a colourful border on the card and writes his/her name at the top. Then the child makes three columns with help: one for the accession number; another for title; and the third to tick when book is returned. If the child can't read yet, he/she can draw something from the cover.

*You can keep the cards in the library or the classroom at the end of every class. Once in a way, discuss how it is important to care for the books and other resources. You could also make the time to repair books that have been damaged, and involve the children in this.*

*Ideas for extension –* Get the children to make a large chart for the classroom library, where they can enter the books they borrow from class. This chart could have columns for students' names, the titles of the books, the accession number, the date of borrowing, and the date of return.

## **7. Write or Illustrate a Simple Story (6 years or older)**

*Purpose* – This activity encourages writing helps build storytelling skills. You review the stories or illustrations, help them revise their work, and publish it.

*Process* – Choose picture books that have simple themes for younger children. You could support children who can't write by becoming their scribe.

Some picture books are quite complex and students need to do a lot of thinking to create a story around it. You can choose such books for slightly older children.

You can divide the class into smaller groups, and each group can work on one part of the book. This could then be compiled before publishing.

*It's best to let the children work at their pace. Encourage them to work with the goal of publishing it. You could organize a book fair or mela and work towards that through the year. You could also keep a 'collection' of such work so the children know you value their work.*

*Ideas for extension* – Encourage children to write and illustrate their own stories. You could make this a writing project. The group can work on this over a period of time and come out with a book with all the stories the group has written and illustrated.

## **8. Write to Your Favourite Author or Illustrator (6 years or older)**

*Purpose* – Helps develop writing skills and understand the process of writing – drafting, revising and finalizing. They could also post their letters.

*Process* – Ask the children to come up with a list of their favourite authors/illustrators. The children can find out more about the author/illustrator, with the help of an adult. They could try to get their postal address or the email ID. You could get them to do this activity in pairs. Each pair can discuss what they want to write about. The children could also draw something or make some other little gift. Your group might have other ideas too, do ask them!

*Younger children might also want to write to their favourite authors. You could become their scribe: take them through the process and, over time, encourage them to do this on their own. Some authors might not be accessible – for example, if the author is no more. You could still encourage them to write the letter so that they can put down what they want to say to the author anyway.*

*Ideas for extension* – This could also be a group activity. The class can write to an author of a book that is everyone's favourite. This gives you the chance to discuss the book in detail. Each child can contribute what he/she likes about it. The group might have questions they want ask the author/illustrator.

## **9. Treasure Hunt - (any age group)**

*Purpose* – This activity helps to make children familiar with every corner and shelf of the library. When young children enter the library for the first time, it can fill them with a sense of wonder. This activity builds on that.

*Process* - Divide the class into groups of three or four. Create as many clues as the number of groups. Give the first team the first clue. This leads them to a book where the second clue is hidden. The last clue leads to the treasure - a special book from which you can read out a story or a set of picture books for the class to look at.

The clues should be very simple for young children. For older children, you could have more challenging clues. Some example of clues for young children are –

- Where would you find books on origami? What is origami and where did it start?
- Books from A to Z. To get information, you just need to know your alphabet! What comes after O and can be found in Egypt? Find a picture.

For slightly older children –

- Where is the book on the birds you find in the sub-continent we call our country?
- Where would you find the book that has a pig and a spider for two important characters?
- A children's book about the person who wrote our constitution?

*Allow the children to explore all the shelves in the library. We need to trust them with the books and not lock any cupboards or shelves up. It would be great to have open racks instead of shelves with doors.*

*Ideas for extension* – Display the books the children find during the treasure hunt. These might be books that the children just discovered and want to look through. Organize a book review or a book talk as a follow-up activity.

## References

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