

# Reports

## Rethinking Reading

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Researchers largely agree that reading is not just an aid to acquire learning but it is an important means to facilitate thinking and therefore, enables an enhanced understanding of society and its problems. A holistic notion of education includes the ability to read with comprehension, as a necessary pre requisite. So there is a need to refashion 'reading' as ability and encourage a suitable reading habit. Efforts for the same will make a more profound impact if started at the elementary level of education.

As a remarkable endeavour to achieve this is the Reading Development Cell set up by National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). The *End-term Survey Report: Mathura Pilot Project* 2012-2013 prepared by Early Literacy Programme, Department of Elementary Education, NCERT provides these details.

"NCERT had set up a Reading Development Cell in the year 2007 under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan with support of the Ministry of Human Resource Development. The creation of this Cell marked the beginning of a significant attempt to focus the attention of policy makers and curriculum designers all over the country on the pedagogy of reading in the early classes." (p. iii, *Report*)

The highpoint of this programme is that it "emphasizes on using children's literature in the classroom to provide children with an environment conducive to reading." (p. iii, *Report*) This renewed focus on children's literature is noteworthy.

In order to suggest appropriate and relevant children's literature, workshops on children's literature review are routinely held. Books which explicitly or implicitly convey gender, regional, religion, caste or racial biases through language, themes or illustrations are rejected. Books which promote heterogeneity and offer different worldviews both domestic and international are recommended.

This programme by Reading Development Cell also emphasises on providing 'print-rich environment' in the classrooms. It includes arranging posters in classrooms/ reading rooms/ libraries, exposing children to assimilate the written words with illustrations. It adds to an ambience of reading and promotes a familiarity with written text. It is a beneficial way of increasing the accessibility of reading material.

Reading is understood as an activity in which the reader responds to the complete text. There is a visual impact of the text, particularly for a child reader. So illustrations are as important as the language of the text. Various methods have been undertaken to ensure the availability of good children's literature and to spread awareness among teachers and parents regarding the importance of reading.

The basis of these strategies is that "reading and writing are understood as developmental processes and an early literacy classroom is an unhurried, relaxed space for teachers and students to enjoy the processes of reading and writing." (p. 6, *Report*) A graded reading series named '*Barkha*' (includes four levels) was created and compiled to introduce and then expand the reading skills of children by gradually increasing the number of sub plots, illustrations and the number of sentences. A

children's magazine "Firkee Bachchon Ki" was also published.

It was also felt necessary to design and create a 'Reading Corner' to ensure that reading material is readily available, it is suitably displayed and children are also provided required time to browse through books.

Above all, it was imperative to provide adequate training of such a pedagogical practice to teachers. Five books were produced for teachers to augment their understanding. *Reading for Meaning* includes seminal articles on analysing reading with comprehension. *Padhne ki Samajh* is about early literacy and pedagogical techniques for reading. *Padhne ki Dehleez par* focusses on problems encountered in teaching to read in the Indian context. *Padhna Sikhane ki Shuruvaat* expounds the various dimensions of reading. *Shuruati Lekhan –Ek Samvad* centers on the relation between reading and writing in early literacy. Vigorous translation and vetting workshops were held to make these books available to wider audiences. English translations of all these books will be published.

To further encourage readers, it was proposed that regular book fairs can be organised as a far reaching exercise, to offer children and their parents opportunities to engage with books and interact.

As a further initiative in this direction, the Mathura pilot project was conceived and carried out in 2008 across five hundred and sixty one schools in five blocks of Mathura districts. "The interventions in the project involved providing material for children and teachers, extension programmes, orientations of teachers and monitoring." (p. iv, *Report*) The above mentioned efforts

were executed along with rigorous orientation modules for teachers. Since 2008, this project has been implemented.

To assess the progress of the same, an End-term survey was conducted in forty selected schools in 2012. The survey report bears testimony to the immense success of the above mentioned pedagogical practices and teachers training. It serves as evidence that new and ground-breaking attempts at elementary level can have fruitful impact on the reading ability of children. Teachers must find it motivating to look beyond the conventional methods and incorporate something new, something different. And above all that this is possible.

Once such preliminary efforts are in place, reading becomes an effective process for children. Their levels of comprehension are also improved; they progress from the mere factual to inferential and extrapolative reading and finally are able to be evaluative readers.

Special and unusual methods of teaching to read at the elementary level are very useful in achieving proficiency in languages at advanced levels. There is a current necessity to value reading not only to study but in order to evolve as responsible human beings. Teachers, parents and children must appreciate that we read to discover, to seek new worlds, to imagine, to know, to wander, to situate oneself, to be aware and to think.

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