



LEARNING CORNER

A library movement across Karnataka

Vinita

Hippocampus is one of the city's landmarks – a library that was set up in 2003 in response to the dearth of good children's libraries in Bangalore. What started as a centre for urban middle class families is now a movement across both urban and rural Karnataka.

The Hippocampus Reading Foundation (HRF) was subsequently set up to serve less privileged children. It has evolved a model where the foundation provides technical consultancy and local groups implement the programme. Libraries are typically set up in schools and community centres. HRF provides training and materials, and partner NGOs the required infrastructure. Today there are *Active Libraries* in more than 130 government schools accessed by over 60,000 children in 5 districts of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

A graded programme

A library is made 'Active' by using a comprehensive activity-based library programme developed by HRF called *GROW BY Reading* (GBR). Books are colour coded at 6 reading levels. The programme aims to assess the reading levels of children, provide books suited to their skills, and improve their reading comprehension and fluency. There is a related book list and activities for each reading level. The package is presently available in English, Tamil, Kannada and Urdu.

To ensure that the library is not just a room full of books, the programme identifies some key non-negotiables:

- Creating a definite library period within the school timetable
- Allocating a defined space (within the school) for the library
- Appointing a facilitator who dedicates time with children at the library – this could be a teacher or even a high school student

HRF has found that for children from less privileged families, the library assumes great significance since these children are invariably first generation learners who may not have reading support at home, or they may not be aware of opportunities available to them. Spending time to read may be a luxury that such children cannot always afford. The Active Library empowers children to read and learn within the school itself.



Training for librarians

Training inspires librarians to create an environment that excites children and facilitates their reading interest. Over a 2 day period, participants learn the basic elements of the *GROW BY Reading* programme and are then equipped to set up a library. The practical nature of the training coupled with theoretical insights shows them how to motivate and assist children to read and learn.

Training programmes take into consideration the context of government schools and teachers. For instance, at a training programme for government school teachers from Tamil Nadu, HRF chose to organise the training in a completely different environment that made the teachers feel special and more enthusiastic. Consequently their participation and learning at the programme was much more.

Sustainable models: libraries as enterprise

HRF has initiated work with women's self help groups to set up libraries as viable businesses. HRF provides training and handholding and women pay a sign-up amount as commitment. After initial reluctance, 3 women have signed up so far and paid Rs 5000 each. The women will charge a fee of Rs 10 per child per month. Despite issues of caste, one of the women belonging to an SC community has managed to enrol 20 children already. Similarly, work has been initiated with students in a college in Hassan district and with the School Development and Monitoring Committee members of Bijapur to promote children's libraries as a business model and as a community movement.

Working with various NGO partners and schools over the last few years has reaffirmed HRF's emphasis on sustainability. It seeks to partner with organisations that have a strong community base and remains skeptical of partners focused only on scale. HRF views itself as an agent of change, and prefers to demonstrate the success and benefit of libraries in schools with a pilot programme before it is taken to scale by the government. Hence its role as a consultant working in partnership with organisations that already have a base within the community.



TEACHER TALK

Tribute to a teacher

Tara Chacko

Mrs. Anna Joseph was a teacher who touched my life in a special way more than thirty years ago, when she was teaching in our school – the Ida Scudder School at Vellore. My first memories of Mrs. Joseph are of her teaching us English and taking charge of the library at our school in the 1970s. If I close my eyes I can still bring up the image of Mrs. Joseph – a graceful person dressed in a beautiful cotton sari waiting for the school bus.

Mrs. Joseph was a passionate teacher of English who introduced dimensions of the language that we had not imagined existed. Most of us found grammar to be really boring but Mrs. Joseph had a way of simplifying it and making it very interesting. She was particular about our diction and she would patiently correct our pronunciation. My classmate Johnny still remembers her making us repeatedly pronounce the word 'vehicle'!

Mrs. Joseph was always generous in her appreciation of our work, encouraging us to express our ideas freely. In high school I did not enjoy writing and knew that my English compositions were quite boring. In those days for the ICSE English language exams we had to write stories based on a picture presented to us. Mrs. Joseph would bring pictures to class and stimulate a lively discussion of ideas to develop a story.

Another thing we learnt from her was the way she gave us feedback. Her suggestions were put in such a positive and encouraging way. She never linked her appreciation with criticism by using the word "but", and had the ability to make us feel good about ourselves. For someone like me who was not doing well in class she was an important person who saw potential in me that I neither knew nor believed in, and this certainly helped boost my self confidence.

Our school had humble beginnings and when I was in high school we got a brand new library thanks to a donation made to the school. Mrs. Joseph played a big part in helping to set up the library. I was the library prefect at that time and worked closely with her. Her disciplined way of working, her passion for reading and the way she encouraged reading habits in us was inspiring. She opened the world of books to us.

She used to oversee the books that we borrowed and would tell us about the author or the theme of the book. She was always there to guide us about whether a book was appropriate or not. She would stimulate our interest in a book by sharing some interesting aspects about it.

My sister Deepa remembers how Mrs. Joseph understood that she was a voracious reader and would allow her to borrow many books from the library even on 'non library days'. Rather than rigidly stick to the library rule of allowing children to borrow books only on an allotted day, she was willing to bend the rules to support their thirst for reading. Anyone interested in reading could be sure that Mrs. Joseph would take an interest in discussing the book with them.

She had a gentle but firm way of dealing with us that had a greater impact than any of the hollering or yelling we got from some of our other teachers. I remember an incident when Johnny was caught drawing naughty cartoons and marched to the principal's office. He was sure he was in big trouble. Mrs. Joseph who was with the principal at that time looked at Johnny and all she said was 'I am very disappointed with you'. Johnny says those few words were more effective than any thrashing he would have got.

We all saw Mrs. Joseph as a grandmother teacher – a person who took a personal interest in each of us, someone who was compassionate and caring and at the same time firm when required. She was a very expressive and demonstrative person. I remember the day the ICSE results were announced and Deepa stood first in English in the ICSE. Mrs. Joseph was so thrilled and was waiting in front of the principal's office. When she saw Deepa she rushed to her and hugged her with such jubilation telling her 'I knew you would do it'. Deepa treasures that memory. She reached out to each of one of us – whether we were rebellious, needed special attention, needed an interest kindled or someone to believe in our potential. There is so much we have learnt from Mrs. Joseph that we would like to emulate. Her passion, her sensitivity and gentleness, her encouragement, and most importantly, her belief in us.

WHAT'S NEW

'What did you ask at school today?'

This book is a valuable addition to our bookshop. It marries the insights gained in working with children over 15 years with current research on child psychology. Kamala Mukunda, a teacher at the Centre for Learning, Bangalore, examines issues that are close to the hearts of most parents and educators, such as: what is the nature of intelligence? How does the Nature vs Nurture debate stand today? She interrogates subjects from moral development to memory, problems of testing to styles of learning. The book is peppered with witty illustrations that make it friendly and readable. It is available at Sutradhar for Rs 199.

SPOT LIGHT

All things wild and wonderful

Revathi Suresh

Sutradhar recently organised a two-day workshop on storytelling, facilitated by Vishakha Chanchani – illustrator, art teacher, author and storyteller.

The theme of the workshop was animals and the wild, and our kinship with them. While environment and conservation have only recently become part of school curriculum, nature and the wild have been at the very heart of the tradition of storytelling since time immemorial. Native stories explore man's relationship with animals, birds, plants, trees, water, and the universe itself. Vishakha wanted participants to explore a different way of being and seeing, and provide a 'glimpse into some of the possibilities that can happen with stories.' The workshop started with a game where participants had to take on the persona of an animal. While some became lions and tigers and others frogs and monkeys, almost none chose to identify with insects!

Through activities like collage making, sand painting, clay modelling, shard painting, and designing game boards—'all game boards are like stories. You have adventures...you cross hurdles and obstacles before you reach home'—based on the theme of the workshop, the participants discovered that there is more to the art of telling a story than voice modulation and puppetry. They were provided a simple introduction to primitive and native art; they learnt how to convert words into pictures and pictures into words; they examined the use of colours, lines and space and looked at the imagery involved in the telling of the tale. The activities were based on interpretations of Aboriginal myths where the protagonists were snake, spider, praying mantis and bird.

Shard painting truly captured the imagination of the participants. Vishakha chose shards because 'they are irregular in shape and don't have the predictability of paper or any other flat surface. The uneven surface can produce surprising results...it allows you to work on the inside and outside.'

A teacher endorsed the excitement of working on this surface: 'Usually there are so many rules...dos and donts. I felt happy when I was painting. We often give children specific instructions on what to put into a picture, but this made me feel so free.'

Over two days the participants learnt how human perspective relegates other inhabitants of the earth, not just animals, but also smaller creatures like insects and worms, to the periphery of popular imagination. 'Even our vocabulary is prejudiced...we say 'don't bug me', 'creepy-crawlies', 'kanjoos-makkhichoos...'' a teacher observed. Another said that she 'found worms repulsive and felt jittery about them but making them (with clay) made me see them in a different perspective.'

STORIES WITHOUT WORDS

'Game boards are like stories' - Vishakha



PARTICIPANTS PAINTED POTSHARDS - IRREGULAR AND TWO SIDED SURFACES TO TELL STORIES



The participants were from NGOs, schools and pre-schools. They liked Vishakha's non-instructional method and, at the end of two days, felt that they had learnt how to tell stories without words.

'I thought it would be about voices, puppets etc. We've learnt that storytelling is integrally connected with art and music,' said one teacher.

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