

GUIDE TO SETTING UP AN OPEN LIBRARY IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION:

A School without an open and active library is like a human being with no centre. S.R. Ranganathan, the founder of the library movement in India calls the school library, “Truly the heart of the school. Stimulating currents go out of it into every corner of the school.”

Can this be done in each and every school, however big or small? Yes it can, provided you, the teachers and your students bring your energy and enthusiasm to making it happen.

Why is it so crucial for every school to have an open, accessible library for the students and teachers to use freely?

Knowledge is everyone’s birthright and it empowers children to be well-informed, free from bias and prejudice. Access to knowledge through reading, listening, viewing and discussing, brings about an intelligent, literate and competent human being. The library can also provide historical, geographical and cultural awareness to readers through well-chosen resources. At a young age, children are full of curiosity and the zest to learn beyond the limits of the school curriculum. A library gives them the opportunity to pursue their thirst for knowledge. Here is the place where independent thinking is nurtured, individual interests are developed and self-confidence grows.

As children grow older, they are faced with many challenges and dilemmas in society. How are they to know what is right? Here too the library can provide ample material in terms of inspiring true stories, biographies and essays by thinkers. Articles by leading intellectuals and scientists can help them to distinguish the true from the false. By providing this open exposure the library can help bring about a well-informed, intelligent and balanced community of young citizens and the country will be richer in human resources.

When it is begun at a young age, optimum library use and the reading habit can be a lifelong asset. Reading for pleasure has intangible benefits because young people absorb knowledge, values and perspectives with very little effort. School libraries are valuable and effective aids to bring about better learning and higher achievement levels in examinations, competitions and other activities. For teachers, the library is an invaluable tool to keep themselves abreast of factual information and deeper knowledge. They will be better educators and have the confidence of knowing that they are well read and up to date. For the school, the library is an invaluable asset because it can support, reflect and enhance the curriculum.

Here are 5 essential requirements for an active school library.

1. ENVIRONMENT : Location of the library
2. EXPOSURE : The Quality of the Collection.
3. EASE OF ACCESS : Open and accessible to students and teachers.
4. ENCOURAGEMENT : Weekly library period, browsing and borrowing.
5. ENRICHMENT : Library-related activities and projects.

Have a corner in the library for this age group where their art- work is put up. This will make them feel that the library is a part of their life! Have an open box with books inside. Change the contents every now and then. Nothing is more exciting for a young child than to look in a box and find treasures! The first step is to make these children feel welcome and at home in the library. Initially they may not take in the whole place and may wander around. Gradually these rows of books take on a definite shape and individuality and the children begin to feel comfortable in this environment. Also they realize that these books can be pulled out, examined and even read. At the youngest age, colour, texture, large illustrations and even smell are important factors in attracting them to the material. Children seem to instinctively recognize excellently produced books. The stories and poems they enjoy are the repetitive and simple ones where the character meets different people or creatures and the words are repeated over and over again. Books with animals in them are very popular.

Sometimes the story content in the book is not so important for this age group because the child tells his own story to go with the pictures.

This is the time to make them aware of the care required in handling books. The first thing is to make sure their hands are clean and dry and also that they are not eating something! They accept this discipline happily because they are made aware of the consequence of water or mud on books. Then when actually reading a book, how do they treat the book? This can be conveyed through a story where the victim is a mishandled book or through showing them how the spine of a book is as delicate as our own spine. Also teach them how to turn the pages as well as how to mark their page with a book mark if they have to put the book aside. This is a good time to have them make posters to tell others what they have learnt and also for them to make book- marks. It is important whenever imparting instruction to make it clear and visually apparent why this is so.

They can be introduced to simple methods of borrowing and returning, which they handle themselves. For example, what has worked well is for each child to be given a part of a KG cardboard sheet. They decorate the edges, write their own names on it and then make columns. These sheets are kept in an open box on the table in alphabetical order. Each child can enter the name or accession number of the book and the date borrowed on their own sheet. When they return the book, they put a tick against the book. This is not only a simple, fool- proof method but it also establishes the relationship of trust and responsibility.

Coming next to activities, story- reading of course is a must. This can be done interspersed with other activities like reading from encyclopedias or information books accompanied by explanations and giving them time to ask questions. Stories of myths and legends are ideal and if I may say so a must in this present age where grandparents are no longer around to tell tales! In this context, it must be stressed that young children derive most enjoyment from a book by sharing it with the adults close to them. So books must be sent home for a grandparent, if available, or for parents and for older siblings to read out to the child. Parents must be asked to come into the library on some occasions to choose books along with their children. This involvement will enhance care and responsibility in the whole family.

Activities like telling the story of a book they read and saying why they liked it will prepare the ground for later book appreciation. They can also be told a story and then asked to make illustrations for different scenes in the story. Sometimes, they can show a character or an incident in a popular book and ask a question for the rest of the class to guess which book this is from. Another way to creatively use a story is to read it out, perhaps more than once and then ask them to enact the story as a play. There is no written script but since they all know the story, they know what to say and each time they enact it the lines may change though the story line does not. Once in a way, the children can pair up and read out a story to each other. This is a very popular activity.

You can also play some spotting games with them like asking them to say what is new in the library each week or fortnight. This keeps the library-carer also on his/her toes because there has to be something different or new each week!! Encourage group activities like story reading or sharing, as well as individually helping them to find a book they like and sit with it for at least 10 to 15 minutes. This will begin to build their stamina for reading as well as to sustain interest and not be distracted.

Finally and most important, they must be made aware of the discipline of a library even if it is in a small way. For example, they begin to see that a library is a place where others do quiet reading and study so it is not a place where they can be very noisy. They see the need to replace material in a given place because it must be available to the next user. They see that the library is a special place for a particular use and they begin to respect that.

We will go into each of these aspects so that they are understood clearly. Once that is done, you will surely have a child-friendly library in your school which can serve as a model for many more schools. So shall we proceed on this exciting path?

Where can the library be located?

Some schools may have a separate space where the library shelves can be placed. Others may have kept the books in locked cupboards in the Headmaster's room. There may even be virtual libraries where no student has ever seen or touched the books! The important thing is to ensure that whatever collection you have is made available to the students. So you may have them in trunks which can be kept open, or arranged on window shelves, even hung on strings across classrooms and hallways. All of these ideas can work if everyone cooperates in taking care of the books and uses them well.

For now, we suggest that you can either use an independent space anywhere in the school or keep your collection in each classroom. Use open shelves where the books can be pulled out and looked at. The shelves must be at a height which can be reached by the children. Each term, the collections in the classrooms can rotate. This way, students will look forward to a different set of books over time. If possible, place the shelves in a bright corner noticeable by the students.

What will your library look like?

Remember, the library is being used by young people. So make it look attractive, colourful and inviting. Students can be asked to make a sign saying, "Our Library" or any other idea you can think of. They can make posters or signs to advertise the library and its collection! Every week some books can be displayed with the covers facing outwards for everyone to take note of. This "job" will happily be taken on by students in turn. Have an open 'kinder' box with some colourful books inside. Children love to rummage through boxes to find treasures! Change this collection once a fortnight otherwise they will stop looking! If you have any objects and craft items made by teachers or students, they can be displayed on the shelves between the books. The eye needs a change when viewing rows and rows of similar things. Ingenious mobiles made of paper or clay can be made by children and hung above the shelves. If there are maps of the region and the country, they can be stuck on walls nearby. Clear signs should be placed on the shelves and racks to direct users to different types of materials. A container with book marks (made by students) can be kept nearby to remind students to use the books carefully. A soft board should be made available and designated as the library board where book illustrations, news of latest books, reviews, paintings and other contributions by the students, jokes, quizzes and comments can be put up for everyone to read. These should be changed every 10 days or so. Old and dated material is worse than having a blank board!

Selection and Collection : Organisation and Arrangement

Selecting a good collection requires care. Reading reviews of books in newspapers, visits to book shops and exhibitions, taking suggestions from experts and even from students and parents are all steps towards an excellent collection. The importance of a good collection cannot be stressed enough. Access to such resources will nurture imagination, a broad base of knowledge and a deeper understanding of issues they will face in life. Such an unbiased exposure will bring about good citizens for an enlightened democracy such as ours. The material can include good fiction, non-fiction, poems, plays, biographies and reference books. The students and teachers must have the opportunity to read inspiring and informative books. Different people's experiences from around the world also helps readers to be open in their thinking. A/V material must also be part of your collection. As you grow in your knowledge, you will find yourself more able to select the right material.

Once you have gathered your collection, the first thing you must do is to record each and every book that you have. So each book must be stamped with the seal of the school and given a number called the Accession number. It is also necessary to record other vital statistics of the book. So you make columns with headings like this:

Accession No./ Title. / Author./ Publisher./ Date of Publication./ Place of Publication./ Source./ Price./ Subject.

Enter each book under these headings and write the matching Accession No. in the book.

Now you are ready to label the book for its subject. Keep this very simple. REF. for reference books like Encyclopedias, Dictionaries, Atlases etc, FIC. for story books. KNOW. for all non-fiction books,

TEXT. for text books. These labels can be stuck on the spine of the book. If you wish you can give different coloured labels for each category. Generally, reference books are never lent out but all other books can be lent for a week or two. A/V material can be accessed separately and labelled with A/V on them. If you wish to use your own ideas for labelling and further classifying, you are free to do so. But make sure it is simple and easy to use by students.

What is an Open Library?

If you have a wonderful collection of resources and no one is able to look at it or touch it or read it, whom does it benefit? It is no use having a library if it is not made easily accessible and available for the students. Closed and locked book cupboards are the remnants of outdated systems which have no meaning in the present age. Therefore an Open Library is one where there is accessibility for the users to handle the books, browse through them and borrow the book of their choice. We may be worried that the books will get damaged, lost or stolen but there is a better method than locking.Talking!

Speak to the students in the first library session about the value of books and how enjoyable and educational it is to read them. Ask them to guess who are the natural enemies of books....fire, water, dirt, insects and us! Show them how to turn the pages, how to hold the books, and how to protect the spine to make the books last longer. You can also talk to them about their ownership and pride of the library. You can tell them that each week two of them will be in charge of taking care of the books, the displays, reshelving and book repair. This will make them feel a sense of responsibility to the library. In this way character building takes place and they grow to be mature adults. These two students can display a few books each week. They can choose a topical theme or any theme they are interested in. They can also be in charge of the soft board and see that there is something fresh and interesting put up. These contributions will come from the activities which we will talk about.

In an Open Library, there is mutual trust and interdependence between teachers and students. Throughout history, you will have heard of great people who remember their school teachers and librarians with gratitude and affection. You too can be a happy memory one day for your students!

How does the library begin to function?

The single most important way to begin is to ensure that each class has a weekly library period. This will have to be put into the time-table and can happen if the Head of the school and the Staff are convinced of the fundamental importance of the library. In his classic book, "New Education and School Education," S.R. Ranganathan, the pioneer of Library Science in India, systematically explores all the reasons why there should be a library in every school and also why there should be a provision for a library period in the time-table of each class. We urge you to read this book which brilliantly sets out all the beneficial aspects of an open library in a school.

In this library period, the teacher can plan activities, interactions, borrowing and returning, and encouraging and exposing the students to further reading. The library MUST lend books for students to take home. In this way, there will be continuity in reading beyond school. Parents, grandparents

and siblings may also look at the books so that there is optimum use. Books may be lent for one or two weeks. The method of borrowing can be made very simple. Each student can make a card out of KG cardboard giving his/her name and class. Three columns can be made to enter the date of borrowing, name of book and Accession No. The last column can be the date of return. These cards are kept in nicely decorated chalk boxes or something similar in alphabetical order of the student's name. At the time of borrowing and return, the students can function independently. The two students in charge for the week can do the overseeing.

One week this activity of borrowing can take place. The other week can be set aside for various activities which we will take up

How will activities bring about enrichment?

One of the biggest challenges in education today is to see that children start reading at a young age and go on to become committed readers. The library can play a crucial role in this movement because it can provide reading material for education, entertainment and ethical values. Reading is a unique learning tool and children who are introduced and encouraged at an early age to read are seen to grow in awareness and perception. Their comprehension is of a high order and their critical skills are sharpened by judicious reading. Therefore reading must become a daily activity and a part of their life. All children relate with joy and enthusiasm to games and interactive situations. Anything that breaks the routine of classes is always welcomed by them! A visit to the library is in itself a treat but if the place is dull with too many restrictions, then the charm fades. So the library must be a welcoming place..... a place of discovery. Independent thinking, initiative, self-confidence and ability to express one's thoughts are all developed in a stress-free atmosphere through games and activities. This is the way enrichment takes place both for the student and for the teacher.

Basic Activities to begin with :

1. Orientation and Introduction to the library and the resources.

At your first library session, take the opportunity to show the students all the different material that the library has. For example, explain to them the value of reference books. Tell them where the fiction books are and how they are arranged. Similarly, any other areas or special books you wish to highlight can be pointed out. This is the time to invite them to take on responsibility for the library. Tell them you would like their suggestions and ideas for making it a lively place.

2. Care of books and making of bookmarks.

Talk to the children about the natural enemies of books – fire, water, dirt, rats and insects! Also tell them how even we human beings do not give books the care they need. Show them how to turn pages and tell them why the spine needs protection. Divide the class into two groups. One half can read the books while the other half makes book marks with drawings and captions on care of books. Keep the book marks for all to use. The next time you have this activity you can exchange the groups.

3. Telling stories and reading out to the students.

All age groups, young and old, love to listen to stories and through this enjoyable activity, both teacher and students get knowledge, values and inspiration. Therefore on a regular basis, do read out to the students from biographies, newspapers, and story books from around the world. But do please ensure these stories are enjoyable to listen to and read and are not heavy on moralising. You see, there are books and stories where young children learn valuable lessons intangibly. So careful selection is very important. Nowadays, there are very many Indian authors who are doing a beautiful job of writing for children with subtlety and charm. So be sure to look well and not be satisfied with the first rack in the book shop!!

Sometimes a student can also be asked to read out to the others. Playing audio CDs of stories and showing classic films is also a very educationally beneficial activity.

4. Wall Magazine or Display Board.

This is a very enriching experience for the students who create the board as well as for those who read it. Divide your class into 4 or 5 groups. Choose a theme or topic. This could come from books they have read. The beginnings of reference work can also happen with children being shown how to refer to an atlas, a dictionary or an encyclopedia. Then they pick out what interested them and present this in a simple manner and put it up on the board for all to read. Everything need not be a grand presentation. Spontaneity is also very crucial and it gets lost if we ask them to polish many times. That can come when they are a bit older. This activity may be done over two weekly library periods and so for two weeks the wall magazine is on display for everyone to see and read.

5. Making the library space attractive and colourful.

Soon after the library begins to function, one of the periods can be set aside for this activity. First spend a few minutes asking the students what they can do to improve the appearance of the library.

Making posters to increase use of the library, decorating boxes to hold borrowing cards, writing labels for shelves, hanging mobiles on strings, making paper crafts and clay crafts, gives children a chance to use their different skills and also benefits the library.

6. Demonstrating use of various reference books through simulation.

First show them all as a class how to select a topic and look it up in an encyclopedia. Do this also with some words in a dictionary and with a few geographical places in an atlas. After this, divide them into three groups. Each group sits with one of these reference tools and with their own examples, they search and find the answers. This is a very exciting and satisfying activity which helps them learn about the uses of these search tools.

More advanced activities and projects.

These are to be taken up when there is a degree of ease and familiarity with reading and with the use of the library but can also happen at a simpler level earlier.

1. Book Talks :

A book talk is a presentation of a book which the student has read to the others in the class. In a period of 45 minutes, two or three such presentations can be done. The advantage of a book talk is that it allows for others to ask questions and for a discussion about larger issues which the teacher can facilitate. After such a presentation, other students feel motivated to borrow and read the book.

2. Book reviews.

At the primary level, book illustrations from a book they have read can be done and put up with a star rating for the book. Make sure their illustrations are not copied from the book. They can choose a character or scene they liked best and give their own title to the piece.

3. Repair of books.

In spite of the best care, books used by large numbers of children are bound to need repair. This is a very happy activity where the creativity of each student comes out in the ways in which they provide help to the books! Replacing torn covers, cloth bindings, loose book covers, strengthening the spine and the corners of books, writing one or two sentences about the book or a character.....the possibilities are endless. Added to this they can even help with numbering and labelling books neatly.

4. Making books.

This activity is good for social and cultural enhancement. Students can be divided into groups of four. Each group can take on a person in the community to interview and write about. They could cover different professions or older residents as well as women with some crafts skill. Each group produces a book with illustrations and sketches which is displayed in the library and later becomes part of the collection. A small function can be held where the people who have been written about are invited and the book shown to them. In order to give them some structure, you can first talk together and come up with a common set of questions for the interviews. Then each pair can go along and talk to the subject along with the teacher who can jot down answers as it will be too much for the children to ask and write down simultaneously. After all the children have completed this first stage, sit together and help each pair to read your notes and use the answers to write an account in their own words. This has worked very well with 8 to 10 year-olds.

5. Performing skits from stories in the library.

If there are teachers interested in drama, students also get inspired by this activity. They can select any story they have read and enjoyed and enact it. Since all the children have read the story there is no need for a written script. They say their lines from their familiarity with the stories. This too has been a great hit!

6. Designing book covers.

This activity has many skills built into it. Students learn how to depict the cover of a book to attract readers. They learn about the content of the book, the author and so on. Their imaginative abilities are also encouraged.

Special events to be celebrated:

Each term one day can be set aside to celebrate the library. These could include World Book Day on April 23rd, Children's Day on November 14th, Gandhi Jayanti on October 2nd and any other day significant to the school. On such days, library-related games may be played, students' library-related work displayed and publishers invited to have a book exhibition. Cleaning and decorating the library could also be done. An author or librarian may be invited to be the chief guest and parents and other members of the community may attend too. This will create a good feeling for the library and its activities.

What are the qualities and strengths of the teacher in charge of the library?

Here we come to the most important facet of the library – the human resource guiding and shaping it. Much depends on the enthusiasm, spirit and willingness of the person. In return, there will be the reward of running an active and vibrant library where teachers and students are growing and learning in knowledge, responsibility and involvement. Your library can become a model for other school libraries and can spread the library movement throughout the state and country. To make it simple for you, here is a 10-point charter which may be of help.

1. Attitude comes first. A positive attitude will bring about positive results. The role of the teacher-in-charge gets defined by his or her attitude.
2. Affinity for books and children is very important. An active library can only come out of an ease of interaction with both books and students.
3. Self-confidence comes next. You must function without fear, but not with arrogance. Do not use fear as a tool with the students nor feel fear of failure. Sincere work will always succeed.
4. Be pro-active and innovative in inspiring and enhancing the use of the library.
5. Work with other teachers to bring about total use of the library. They can encourage students' use of the library.
6. Invite and accept help from students in all aspects of running the library.
7. Have a clean, cheerful and attractive environment in the library. Make it a welcoming place.
8. Try by any means to gather a good collection of resources. Quality is more important than quantity and use is most important of all.
9. Teach children to care for and respect books and the library. This is done not by rigid rules but by talking, demonstrating and appreciating these qualities in your users.
10. Introduce and expose them to all varieties of resources – books, magazines, A/V material, rare books, archival material, Braille so that they may understand that knowledge can be disseminated in so many ways.

REMEMBER – yours is not a passive role. Showing students how to “find out” is a vital part of education. When you have provided them with this learning, you have given them an education for life! Your enthusiasm and spirit can overcome many drawbacks or hurdles.

How can the school library interact vibrantly with the community?

A school exists for the community of children, and the parents and elders in that community contribute to the well-being of the school. Therefore the school library can initiate many ideas to strengthen this relationship.

1. The school library can open its doors to all the members of the community so that they too can benefit from its resources. On their part, the community can donate money or books to the library. Imagine a beautiful image of the school librarian and some students going around their neighbourhood with a ‘jhola’ asking for nourishment for the library!
2. The community can help by providing space for book fairs and exhibitions to be held.
3. Maps, historical records, myths and folk tales of that region can be collected and kept in the school library for all to enjoy.
4. In the same spirit, elders of the community can be invited to share their memories and stories.
5. The library can initiate a “Mela” where food of the local region is made and sold. So also crafts and hand-made articles by parents and other members of the community can be exhibited and sold. Part of the proceeds may be given to the library.
6. The school can also interact and exchange books and activities with neighbouring schools.
7. Short excursions can be planned to take students to the important spots in the neighbourhood. For example if the school is situated near a forest or a mountain or a temple or a museum, a day trip should be made. Before and after the trip, related material can be displayed in the library for students to read and gain a deeper understanding.
8. Always remember that your school and the library exist in an environment which can be of great advantage to you and your students in many ways.

At the end

The library in a school belongs to all the users. They can make or mar it. The library caretaker has the challenging and exciting opportunity to make it come alive. Helping him or her in this adventure are the other teachers and head, the students, and the community. But yours is the hand that guides. This manual will grow if you add your own experiences and ideas to it. Feel free to use ideas that work for you and your school library. There are no hard and fast rules. The aim is to have a library that is buzzing with use. We wish you a rewarding experience!

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