

“Can you help us set up a library?” was the request from Chirag School in the Kumaon Himalayas at Uttarakhand. “On a clear day, you can see the entire Nanda Devi range, as well as Trishul and Panchachuli from around the corner,” the letter added. What was I waiting for? An assignment dear to my heart and a chance of a sight of the Himalayas. I didn’t waste a moment and so July 1st saw me heading out north. To Delhi first, then an overnight train to Kathgodam and then a taxi ride to Sitla, near Mukteshwar. My spirits rose with the ascent and I found myself breathing in the air as I had never breathed before. I had not seen such a blue expanse of sky for so long and a feeling of great serenity came over me as I gazed at the lush green trees. I knew I would be happy and at peace here.

After a day, I began the interaction with the school. There are almost 60 children from ages 3 to 9. They speak Kumaoni and Hindi and very little or no English. The school itself is set in a valley with a magnificent panorama all around. Every now and then when the sky looked dramatic, I would stop short to gaze and wonder, probably much to the amusement of the kids and teachers. My target was to immerse the children in English with the help of stories, poems, songs, games and activities and finally plays. As an add-on, I was to spend an hour in English activities with the teachers too.

But what of the library, you ask. I am getting to it! The school already had a wonderful collection of books, magazines and AV material thanks to the wisdom and planning of Rajiv, the Gurujii! So my first task was to alert him that a record of all the books they have was an urgent necessity. With the help of a couple of volunteers, the accession began and was almost complete by the end of July. This record enables users to borrow and return with the help of the accession number. It also categorises the material into different broad topics with a sub-topic added. Material can be accessed through key words. If books go missing, re-ordering is easy with the help of the information in the accession register.

Secondly, a physical space was located in a corner of the English language room and the library was formally housed there. A large sign, displays of books and magazines, posters and pictures made by the children, low seating for reading, a pick-a-book box, and colour-coded labelling for books and shelves, ensured a welcoming and user-friendly atmosphere.

Thirdly, an important aspect of a library, namely care for books and right handling was taken up through talking, showing and some dramatics. Book marks were made by the oldest children as a follow-up activity. Each book mark had a sentence written by the child about reading or about books. These were placed in a convenient holder for general use in the library.

Fourthly, the whole concept of browsing and borrowing was introduced through a game of selling books like in a shop, choosing what is wanted, buying it and finally going home with it. They were told that in a library, the same thing happened except that they could, at no cost, borrow and return the books.

They were now ready for borrowing, and again thanks to the free hand I was given by Rajiv, I started the Devdars, the oldest group, on borrowing. But first they had to understand the importance of registering their borrowing and returning. They also had to realise that it was a system based on trust. So they each made themselves a borrower’s card with their name on it, columns for date of

borrowing, title of book and date of return. With this in place they were off and running! Every day books were going home and coming back. I waited a bit for this to get set and then would just ask what the story was about or what their favourite part in the story was, to make sure the book was being looked at!

Next we had some mini- book talks. Without fixing it beforehand, I just asked three or four children to come up and speak a little about one of the books they had borrowed and why they liked it or not. This was an introduction to a book talk and by now they must have done a few more. This activity grows in depth and sophistication as the children get older and as the librarian/ teacher also learns to ask key questions.

One fun activity we had was a treasure hunt. browse and read there quietly. Each child was given a written clue leading him/her to a book they had seen on display or had borrowed. The children found their books in a flat 2 minutes! So next time the clues should be harder. But the follow-up activity was challenging. Related to the theme of the book was a thinking question. They had to respond to this with three or four sentences of creative writing.

We also instituted a library rota with two children each day being in charge of changing displays and generally making the library look inviting. This too took off well.

With the teachers, we had some poetry talks and later story talks. These consisted of their taking home a poem or story to read and coming back to present it to the rest, followed by a general question and discussion session. This went very well and I saw each teacher growing in confidence.

Finally, with the teachers, we made a book buying trip to Nainital. Before going, we went through the main features of selection. At the bookstore, teachers spent 45 minutes individually selecting books for the library which were of interest to them personally. Then we all gathered and tried to make a more careful selection of the ones put aside. Some things became clear. We eliminated too many of or by the same author. Also books which were too specialised. Similarly books with bad binding or very small print were taken out. Teachers were helped to discern good publishing and translation works. The exercise was very enjoyable and energising.

Further suggestions :

1. One teacher can take on the role of librarian for a term. This would enable continuity for a while. This person should ensure that each class is doing at least some of the things listed above and more, if possible, taken from my booklet or any other ideas they have too.
2. Once a week, the youngest children (Pre-school) can be brought to the library for a half-hour visit. The group should not be larger than 10 to 15. They can be shown books, pictures, or can just sit and look at books. Later they can be asked to draw and contribute something to the library.
3. Gradually the next class can be allowed to borrow books. Start with just one at a time. Later they and the Devdars too can borrow one fiction and one non-fiction.
4. With the acquisition of reference books like dictionaries, encyclopedias and atlases, children can be helped through games to learn how to use them. (See my booklet)

5. As they read stories they like, they can be encouraged to put up simple plays of the stories, just at Assembly. Scripts need not be written. They can create their own dialogue if they know the story well.
6. They can take home a poem each and learn them by heart, and recite them in Assembly with their own actions.

Treasure Hunt Clues given to Devdars :

1. Do you like colours? This book has many colours. Find it. What is your favourite colour? Why?
2. This book has the name of the rainy season. Find it. What happens when it does not rain in this season?
3. The name of this book is like the sound of water. Find the book. If you did not have water, what would happen to you?
4. This book is about a happy rabbit with a kite. Find it. What makes you happy?
5. Do you like eating outdoors? There is a book about this. Find it and tell us when you went for a picnic and what happened there.
6. A cloud is smiling because it will rain. Everyone is happy! Find the book. Do you like rain? Why or why not?
7. This is a story about a wrestler (pehelwan). It is in black and white and has no colours. Find the book and tell us why you think there are no colours in the book.
8. The king of the forest has a pain in his tooth. Find the book. Who is the king of the forest? What happens if you don't brush your teeth well?
9. This book is about a king in Manipur. He has three sons and one daughter. Find the book. Whom does he choose to be the next ruler and why?
10. The name of this book has the names of three people who are in the story. These names all rhyme with each other. Find the book. When words rhyme, what is it like? Can you give two or three words that rhyme?

Usha Mukunda. July 2009.