



SETTING UP A CLASSROOM LIBRARY TO SUPPORT EARLY LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

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Setting Up a Classroom Library to Support Early Language and Literacy

You can find magic wherever you look. Sit back and relax, all you need is a book.
- Dr. Seuss, *The Cat in the Hat*.

Introduction

Being surrounded by a carefully curated collection of good literature should be seen not as a privilege, but an imperative for every child to grow into being a literate individual. Every child has the right to access good literature. Apart from opening up windows to worlds other than their own and holding up mirrors to their own worlds (Galda, 1998), literature plays a huge role in how a child learns to read and write, how she experiences the written word and makes sense of it.



Figure 1. A vibrant library can go a long way in developing readers for life.
Image courtesy: Mridula Koshy, The Community Library Project.

Well-stocked school libraries or classroom libraries can compensate for the lack of books at home (Mills, 2011). According to Stephen Krashen, “.. access to and the use of the library emerged as the most consistent predictor of reading scores at middle school and beyond,

followed by sustained silent reading, socio-economic status, and finally instructional reading” (Krashen, Lee, & McQuillan, 2008, as cited in Mills 2011, p. 54).

Children can potentially access three kinds of libraries – community libraries (that are open to all members of the community); school libraries (that service the entire school); and classroom libraries (which is accessed only by students of the class). In this brief, we attempt to highlight the importance of a classroom library and how to set one up, given the significant role it plays in developing young children into readers for life.

Why do classrooms need their own libraries? Isn't the school library enough? Students typically access a school library once a week, during *library period*. On the other hand, classroom libraries are accessible throughout the day. The teacher can plan curricular extensions, read aloud sessions, and encourage children to develop independent reading habits every day with this kind of a resource in her classroom.

In addition, the books are hand-picked keeping in mind the children in the classroom – their needs and interests – unlike in a school library that caters to a range of age-groups (children and staff), as well as a range of needs and interests.

Needless to say, certain elements of setting up a library would be common to all the three kinds of libraries mentioned earlier – community, school and classroom. Nevertheless, the suggestions in this brief are for the last category.

This brief addresses teachers with an interest in setting up a classroom library to aid language teaching, and others who may be interested in or curious about how to set up such a library. ELI has earlier brought out a practitioner brief on activities to conduct in libraries¹; and that brief could be used in tandem with this one.

The simplest way to make sure that we raise literate children is to teach them to read, and to show them that reading is a pleasurable activity. And that means, at its simplest, finding books that they enjoy, giving them access to those books, and letting them read.
- Neil Gaiman (2013) in *Why our Future Depends on Libraries, Reading and Daydreaming*.

¹See ELI's Practitioner Brief 3, "[Promoting Language and Literacy Development through School Libraries](#)" for more.

What key aspects do we keep in mind while setting up a classroom library? The readers, the collection, the interactions, and the logistics of managing a classroom library. In the sections that follow, we discuss each of these aspects.

The Readers

It is very important to understand our students and where they are coming from – the languages they speak, the social contexts they come from, their learning levels and needs.

Children need a diet of both the familiar and the new in their readings. Sometimes we see two extreme positions in putting together collections for children. In some well-funded private libraries in the country, we see an exclusive selection of international books, titles and



Figure 2. A group of young children browse through a book. **Image Courtesy:** Lakshmi Karunakaran, Buguri Community Library, Bengaluru.

authors. Children who borrow books from such libraries are not likely to encounter characters like themselves in the books they read. They may grow up reading about raspberry pies and blue-eyed friends and contexts, environments and behaviours completely unfamiliar to them. Not seeing yourself or your life represented in any of the books you read is likely to send a strong signal that you, your people, or issues don't matter as much as other people or issues do. It also could be difficult for you to connect with and make sense of what is going on in the books you read.

Then there's the other extreme. To avoid the dangers that have been described, some libraries, especially those run by well-meaning, progressive schools and organisations, try to curate a collection entirely representative of the readers in their context. Their idea is that the familiar is good, and the unfamiliar is difficult for young readers to relate to. But an important strength of books is that they take us to ideas beyond our own lived realities – they expose us to other worlds. And just because the setting is unfamiliar, does not mean the issues are unfamiliar. Themes like friendship, loss and hope can cut across cultural contexts and have universal appeal.

Therefore, you should understand your readers – their developmental needs, concerns and contexts – to curate a well-balanced collection of books that both comforts and challenges in a variety of ways. Books play the role of mirrors and windows – they show us who we are, even as they open our minds up to other realities we may not yet have experienced, making us more aware and empathetic to other realities (Galda, 1998).



Figure 3. Diversity in a library collection is vital. Books play the role of both mirrors and windows. **Image Courtesy:** Jamuna Inamdar, Aripa Foundation, Bangalore.

A selection of books across different reading levels might work well, so that every child, irrespective of the reading level he or she is at, can engage with the collection.

The Collection

In a primary classroom library, the collection could have picture books, chapter books (Grade 2 upwards), information books, as well as reference books, magazines, audio-visual material, children's newspapers, and so on. Diversity is vital.

“The word “diversity” encompasses acceptance and respect. Diversity is understanding that each individual is unique and recognising our individual differences in regards to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, physical abilities, religion and political beliefs. It is about moving past just being tolerant and actually embracing and celebrating the richness of each individual. The library has long been recognised as the most trusted environment in which discovery and exploration of these differences should take place.” (Overton, 2016, p. 2).

What Overton has said (see box above) helps us recognise what diversity brings into a library space. In a classroom library, children would benefit if you strive towards collecting books of a variety of themes and topics that would help build the world view of your children.

Titles like *Catch that Cat*², *Kanna Panna*³, *Kali and the Rat Snake*⁴, *The Why Why Girl*⁵, *Wings to Fly*⁶, and *I didn't Understand*⁷ are all examples⁸ of books with a diverse range of themes.

Catch that Cat and *Kanna Panna*, for instance, deal with disabilities in a sensitive manner and do not make it seem like a child on a wheel chair or a child with a visual impairment are limited by their challenges. They are stories that celebrate their characters and show us how they continue to be individuals who would not let these challenges come in the way of being who they are.

² Vishwanath, T. (Illustrator: Nancy Raj). (2013). *Catch that cat*. Chennai: Tulika Publishers.

³ Whitaker, Z. (Illustrator: Niloufer Wadia). (2015). *Kanna panna*. Chennai: Tulika Publishers.

⁴ Whitaker, Z. (Illustrator: Srividya Natarajan). (2005). *Kali and the rat snake*. Chennai: Tulika Publishers.

⁵ Devi, M. (Illustrator: Kanyika Kini). (2012). *The why why girl*. Chennai: Tulika Publishers.

⁶ Rajendran, S. (Illustrator: Arun Kaushik). (2006). *Wings to fly*. Chennai: Tulika Publishers.

⁷ Shrinivasan, M. (Illustrator: Shubham Lakhera). (2018). *I didn't understand*. Chennai: Tulika Publishers.

⁸ All these titles are available in Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Telugu, Marathi, Gujarati and Bengali.

You might be wondering how many books you should start a classroom library with. This is a valid question. More so because we sometimes work in highly challenging contexts where resources can be tight. Try to work towards having a ratio of 1:3 books – three good books for every child in your class. This may sound like a big number. You may ask, *what if I have 50 children in my classroom – would I need 150 books to start off?* However, it is not necessary that you *begin* with three books for every child; over a period of time, you could aim for that ratio.

Interesting side-note: In Western contexts, educators like Fountas and Pinnell (1996) recommend a collection of about 300-600 books for classroom libraries, depending on the grade level and number of copies of each title. Their calculations estimate that teachers should expect first-graders to read about 100-125 books during the school year, and older children, who are likely to read longer books, to read 50-75 books per year (cited in Neuman, 1999). While we cannot currently match these kinds of expectations in most Indian classrooms, we can definitely try to maximise the number of books available.

Another key aspect for a collection is **quality**. A good library would try to exclude poor quality books and include high quality books. But what is poor or high quality in children's books? It is beyond the scope of this brief to explore this topic at length⁹. In short, however, we would try to avoid books that discriminate against, exclude, or stereotype people or groups of people. We would avoid books not worthy of discussion, or not likely to be developmentally appropriate for students. We could not entirely exclude culturally-distant selections, but would have a balance of culturally-familiar and distant selections. We would try to include books with plots, characters, themes, settings worthy of discussion, or that use text and illustrations in interesting ways. Having said that, we understand that enough high-quality books might not be available in a certain language. We have maximum choice in

⁹ See National Council of Children's Literature's Guide to Good Books (YEAR) for an elaborate discussion of the idea of quality: <http://eli.tiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Guide-to-Good-Books-1.pdf>

English at present, fewer in major regional languages like Marathi, Telugu and Oriya, and even fewer in tribal languages.

In such a context, what sense does it make to speak of high-quality books for the collection? People working on the ground we spoke to gave us suggestions to circumvent these issues:

- If there is limited high-quality children's literature, we ensure we have at least a minimum number of *acceptable*-quality books so children have enough books to engage with. Books of wit and humor, like the stories of Tenali Rama, Panchatantra or mythological stories, could be a part of your collection, so long as you maintain a non-moralistic means of engagement. Dialoguing with your children often about what they have read (or heard you read to them) and what they think of a story with a moral can help children engage more critically.
- If you have very few options, you could think of ways to enhance your collection by creating books in the class¹⁰, or find creative ways to engage with fewer options.
- You could consider adding books in other local languages – for example, you could include books in the regional language, if books in the tribal language are not available, and use multilingual pedagogies to help children access the regional language.

While not ideal, these strategies could help in a small way, even as we wait for publishing in multilingual children's literature to take off with full steam. *We need to bear in mind that quantity is important but may not be so, if it is at the cost of quality.*

Suppose the issue is not that there are not enough high-quality books in the language that you are working in, but that *you* have not built an adequate collection yet or your organisation does not have a good enough collection. One way is to get together with other teachers and *share* collections on a rotating basis. Organisations like the Organization for Early Literacy Promotion (OELP) have been using this system rotating books across classrooms for years. Each classroom has a set of 20 to 25 books at a time, and the collection changes every month. Of course, over the years, they have built a large centralised library with a carefully selected collection of more than 18,000 books (with at least 40 copies of each title) from various

¹⁰ See: ELI's Practitioner Brief 7, "[Children's Writing: Creating Books in the Classroom](#)" for more details.

publishers like Eklavya, Parag, Tulika Publishers and Pratham Books, which also includes books hand-picked from the World Book Fair¹¹.

Interaction

What sets a good classroom library apart from a not-so-good one? What if you had all the books and resources that you need, but you notice children were not being drawn to the collection? Whether you have a special time allocated to free reading in your classroom, or whether you choose to use the collection during language or other teaching hours, you need to consider the nature of interactions that children have with books throughout the school day.

Ask yourself these questions:

- How often do you encourage children to look at a specific selection of books on to display?
- Would you allow a child to touch the books without your permission?
- What would your response be to a child who gets distracted from the assigned task during a language period, but is looking at a book instead?
- Would you restrict browsing time to designated time periods?
- How would you respond to a child who has torn a page from a book? Or has scribbled on a book?
- Would you allow a child to take a book home?
- What would the rules for using books in the classroom be like? Do you think children should be part of discussions as you go about setting these rules?
- Do your children feel free to access the books, and is the environment as non-threatening as possible?

How you answer these questions would indicate the nature of the interactions your students have with the books in your classroom. The more democratic the process of setting the rules, the less fear your children feel around the books. The more they are allowed to take responsibility and the more free access they have to books, the healthier the interactions.

¹¹ For more details, visit: <http://nbtindia.gov.in/nbtbook> and http://nbtindia.gov.in/nbtbook/Client/InnerPage/16_history-of-ndwbf_ndwbf

Encouraging children to handle books – and over time, to treat them with care – is important to determining the quality of interactions in your classroom.

Now let's consider how you bring your students into closer interaction with the collection. As mentioned earlier, ELI has a brief on activities you could use to support high quality interactions with books. In addition, we recommend that you go through our brief on *Comprehensive Literacy Model in Indian Classrooms*¹², in which we suggest ideas for effectively using 90 minutes of daily language and literacy teaching time.

The classroom library is a valuable resource in supporting comprehensive literacy in the classroom. If you can dedicate even a 30-minute slot for daily read aloud of suitable books from your collection, it could support comprehension, oral language development, vocabulary development, literary appreciation, critical reading, and writing, among other aspects. You can also use the books for Shared Reading, Guided Reading, or Independent Reading.

The Logistics of Managing a Classroom Library

Space. Ideally, you would have a dedicated space in the classroom to set up a library.

Perhaps a well-ventilated, well-lit corner easily accessible to children. But what if space is a luxury in your classroom, and you cannot dedicate a corner for books?

There are many ways to make a compact reading corner.

- Quality Education Support Trust (QUEST), which runs programmes in resource-challenged classrooms in tribal Maharashtra, has *pustak petis*, little metal boxes filled with books, placed in a corner.
- You could use a small wooden box or carton with books such that the titles or cover pages are visible. You could create sections within the box for different reading levels (see Figure 4a).
- Alternatively, you could place a mat on the floor, spread out a set of books and allow children to read or browse books for some time every day.
- If you want children to have access to books at any time during the day, tie strong strings against the wall and hang books so that every child can reach them.

¹² ELI's Brief Number 12: Comprehensive Literacy Instruction Model in Indian Classrooms can be accessed here: http://eli.tiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Comprehensive_Literacy_Practitioner_Brief_12_PDF.pdf

You could also have a wall rack to arrange books but make sure that children can reach books even from the highest rack (Figure 4b).



Figures 4a & b. In classrooms where space is scarce, you could create libraries using cartons, wooden boxes, strings on which books can be hung and wall racks. **Images Courtesy:** Mridula Koshy, TCLP; Ruchi Dhona, Lets Open a Book.

If space is not a constraint, you could set up book displays (see Figure 5). Book displays allow children to get to know their collection. They can display the work of children. You could also display interesting material thematically – carefully selected books based on a certain theme and decorating the space with material representing the theme.

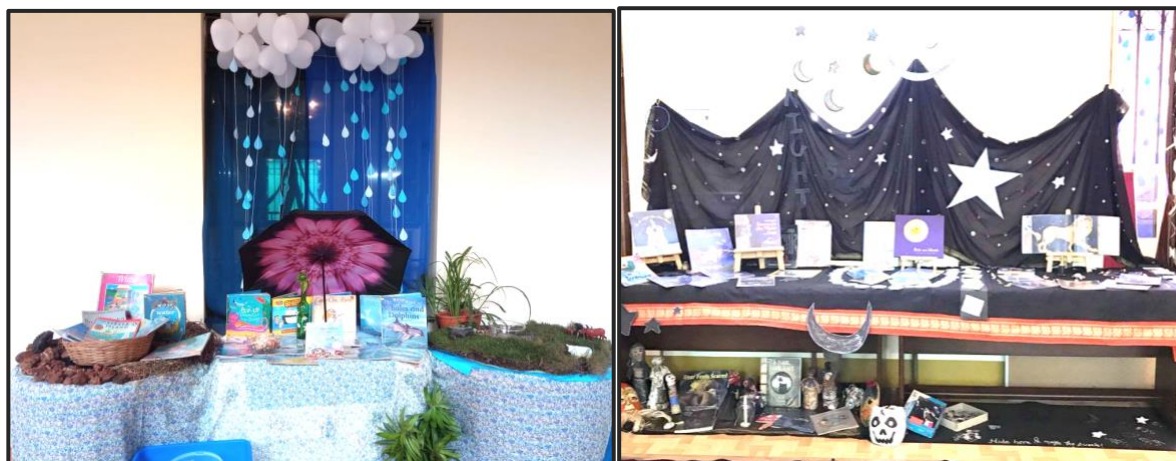


Figure 5. Pictures showing displays around themes such as *rain* (left) and *night* (right). **Image Courtesy:** Bookworm Library, Goa.

If water or rain are themes you are exploring, you could pull out all books in your collections that have these as a main or supporting theme. You could decorate the display using sea shells, pebbles, sand or flowy garments in blue or green. If you have the space and a large collection of books in your classroom, you could change the displays frequently. Displays such as these can be a fun learning experience for children as they explore stories as part of their literacy, language and cross curricular classes.

Organising the collection

Accession numbers. It would be good to keep a record of the books and material in your collection. An accession register helps catalogue the books in your library. You could keep updating the register as you add new books to your collection. If you choose, at any point, to lend books to students, it would be convenient to make entries in a register against the name of a child (more on this later). If you choose to introduce borrowing cards¹³ as a literacy activity, accession numbers can come in handy.

Fill in details of every book in the collection. You could number the first book you have ‘1’, followed by other details such as title, author, and publisher. The number that you give a book is its accession number. Enter the accession number in each book and if you have a school stamp, make a stamp mark on one side and in a couple of other places inside the book (The stamp should be in one corner of the page without making any mark on the text or pictures). Repeat this for the rest of the books in your collection.

Classification system. We recommend a simple classification system based on reading level and genre.

Reading level. A simple way to organise fiction is to have labels in different colours for different reading levels.

- Red. These are for emergent and very early readers who are just learning how to read. Wordless picture books, and picture books with words labelling the picture or simple repetitive words can have red stickers on the spine.
- Yellow. These are for intermediate readers who can decode simple words and make meaning, with or without the help of pictures. Picture books with simple

¹³ Refer to ELI’s Practitioner Brief 3, “[Promoting Language and Literacy Development through School Libraries](#)” to understand how you could make and use borrowing cards.

sentences one or two lines or just a few sentences a page can be placed under this level.

- **Blue.** These are for readers who are comfortable with reading longer sentences and can make sense of what the text conveys. Longer books with or without pictures can go here.

Genres. A typical classroom library should have these kinds of books:

- *Reference Books.* These are books that readers can refer to but cannot borrow, such as, encyclopaedias, dictionaries, and atlases.
- *Information Books.* These are books about people, places, and things (Baird, 2012). All non-fiction books and textbooks belong here. You could categorise non-fiction books as biographies/autobiographies, science, social science/environmental sciences, mathematics, travelogues, recipe books, and so on.
- *Fiction Books.* These are all kinds of story books, from wordless picture books, to picture books and chapter books. Depending on how large your collection is, you could classify fiction as picture books, chapter books, and so on.
- *Poetry.* Rhymes, poems and so on can be placed under this genre.
- Other material that can make it as part of the stock are newspapers, magazines, maps, posters, audio-visual material, and so on (if you have the resources for these).

Who Manages the Library?

It is important to consider who takes the ownership and responsibility of the classroom library. Is it the elementary class teacher, is it the children? Could parents of your children play a role? Does the school have any role to play when it comes to your exclusive classroom library? Who do you think could help you with the overall maintenance, management and support for your classroom library? Since we are considering the setting up of a primary classroom library, the onus tends to be largely on the teacher who understands the needs of her students— the different reading levels they are at, their interests, their language learning needs . It is therefore vital that you expect and support the children in taking up the collective responsibility of managing the classroom library. You could, if you like, have children take turns to be a class library representative to assist you with the maintenance and upkeep of the

class library and the collection. Children should also be taught to take care of books – maintaining them in good condition, repairing torn books, and using and replacing them according to the rules you have collectively created. You could speak to them of your love for the books and how you care for the things you love. Show them how you care for your collection of books, and they are likely to follow over time.



Figure 6. Children browsing books in their classroom library. **Image Courtesy:** Ruchi Dhona, Let's Open a Book.

Lending Books. This is one of the most challenging decisions you would have to make as a primary grade teacher with a very limited collection in your classroom library. Many teachers may be worried about permitting children to take their precious books home. Will they return them? Will they handle them carefully? But as mentioned earlier, if we believe in taking collective responsibility of the collection and maintaining the books in a good condition, we should try to have democratic processes in place from the very beginning. Even if you feel your students are not ready to take on the responsibility of caring for books and returning them safely, when you first start your classroom library, how you interact with them over a period of time and help them understand the value of their classroom library, will go a long way in developing a sense of responsibility and love for their books. You could make your students a part of discussions regarding the lending system and come up with a system that is fair and easy to follow.

The Process of Lending. A very seamless method you could use almost immediately in your class if you have assigned accession numbers to all books, is to use a class library register. You could choose to lend one book per child per week. You would need a long note book. Begin with a double page. On the top write the name of the month. This should be

followed by 5 to 6 columns. The first column will have the names of the students in your classroom. The rest of the columns in the first row would have the dates when the book is lent (e.g. every Friday of the week could be when you lend a book). In the columns against each child's name, and the remaining rows, you will enter the accession number of the book that has been borrowed that week. Once the book has been returned, you strike out the accession number against the child's name. In case the child has not returned the book, the accession number would help you identify that the book is due. Below is an example of how the register could look.

June, 2019					
Name	07/06	14/06	21/06	28/06	
Aditya	<i>Accession Number</i>				
Ananya	<i>Accession Number</i>				
Bindu	<i>Accession Number</i>				
Chaitra	<i>Accession Number</i>				
Deva	<i>Accession Number</i>				

Conclusion

Once we set up the classroom library and think of a system to use it regularly and effectively, we will soon be able to see the positive implications this small addition would have in developing in our children a love for books and reading. This could well be the first step in developing learners who appreciate and value the presence of books and making the process of their learning to read and write both more joyful and systematic at the same time. For you too, as a teacher, you will notice what a great resource the classroom library is for your teaching! The children too will benefit a great deal, especially if they do not have the luxury of being surrounded by books at home!

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