

## EDITORIAL

### Learning to Read

NCERT initiated 'field visit' programme for the faculty of NCERT, in which all the faculty members were required to teach in Government rural schools for three months. The objective of 'field visit' programme was to understand the current school practices and also the effectiveness of NCERT textbooks particularly in the rural school context. In one such 'field visit' programme, while teaching Mathematics to Class V, I realised that students' inability to read the sentences in the Mathematics textbook was a hindrance in the learning of Mathematics. Then, I tried to find out how many students could read their Hindi textbooks meaningfully. After a short reading activity, on the basis of students' reading ability, four groups could be identified. The first group of students could read their textbooks meaningfully; they could also read simple story books and informative literature such as 'Measures for Prevention of Dengue' meaningfully. The second group of students could recognise words and read them correctly. Surprisingly, however, they did not seem to be able to make sense of the written text. The third group of students recognised the letters of the alphabet and sequentially grouped these into words. For example *ma, cha, lee (machalee)*. The fourth group of students recognised the letters but could not group these meaningfully into the words. This raised a question: What factors could be responsible for such a situation? I tried to find out the factors that influence the development of reading ability. I observed teaching-learning processes, interacted with teachers and students, and also compared the reading ability of students studying in different classes.

The teachers use alphabetical approach, where students are first taught to recognise the letters of the alphabet in this case, Hindi. The students are expected to memorise the letters of the alphabet in sequence (*varnamala*). Children learn appropriate sound label for letters of the alphabet. To teach sound labels, teachers use words, for example *ka for kamal, A for Apple*. For English, students were seen memorising the spelling of words, H-A-T (HAT). For learning Hindi, students did not memorise spelling; they read separate letters and grouped these into words. Slowly they start reading words and sentences. However, the study conducted by NCERT in Mathura (U.P.) suggests that 'whole' language approach facilitates meaningful learning. The 'whole language' approach essentially means the integration of the four language skills in the language classroom. With 'whole language' approach, the number of students struggling to group letters into words

can be significantly reduced. However, teachers in this school, believe that recognition of the letters of alphabet is essential and a mixed approach, taking the best of alphabetic, phonetic and 'whole language' approach may work better. Experiments by teachers can help them to evolve effective methods and strategies. The 'whole language' approach has not reached the schools. All teachers' training programmes should have some discussion on 'teaching approaches for early grades'.

Interaction with the students revealed that all the students who could read meaningfully had a regular private tutor at home. The private tutors too used the same traditional alphabetical approach but they spend a fixed number of hours with students and also provide individualised instruction. Even in group tuitions, individual learner's difficulties are addressed. This suggests that adult support at home in the form of a tutor or any other family member facilitates the development of reading skills in children.

The third factor investigated was the availability of reading material other than textbooks. Many schools visited during 'field visit' programme, have a collection of children's books kept locked in a book case. In some schools the books are not issued to the students. Also there is no library period or reading time in school time schedule. Interaction with teachers revealed that the teacher in-charge of the library issues books only to the class teachers. The class teacher has to take the responsibility of returning books to the library in good condition. The teachers are apprehensive that students may take books home and may not return them or may damage the book. Practically students do not get books to read. However, the field experiences of NCERT faculty show that students love to read story books and other interesting material related to forests, wild life, nature, new places, life stories, experiences etc. It was observed that children, who can read meaningfully, borrow books from different sources and enjoy reading books. The 'Barkha series' and 'Firki Magazine' developed by NCERT, were very much liked by the students. Students who get opportunities to read story books or other interesting literature become better reader. Therefore, schools must ensure that all students get books of their interest from the library. Schools must encourage students to read Children's page in newspapers and other literature available in the school library.

I also compared the reading ability of students from different classes of the same school. In those classes where teachers are regular and time devoted to each task is more, the reading skills of students are better. Further, the reading ability of students can be improved with teacher efforts.

The field visit programme suggests that factors which influence the development of reading include teacher efforts, availability of reading material and print rich environment, teaching approach and adult support at home.

Dear teachers we look to you to support our Government's programme, 'Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat' putting in all your efforts, providing children more time for reading, making books and print material available to them and innovating effective strategies for teaching in the early grades. The programme will surely become a success with your efforts.

— **Academic Editor**