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# CHILDREN'S LIBRARY unCONFERENCE 2017

4 MAR 2017 India International Centre, New Delhi

## REFLECTIONS

Libraries have an enormous potential in nurturing an active and vibrant learning space, wherein children with diverse interests can engage with books, access a rich collection of literature and engage with collaborative as well as self-directed learning. However, such active reading communities in school libraries are few in India and the discourse around libraries needs to be enriched. Parag's Children's Library unConference aims to create a platform where library educators and others engaged in the library space, with reading and children, get to meet, exchange ideas, present best practices and challenges and learn from each other—with the vision of enriching the library discourse in India.

The unConference was opened by Swaha Sahoo of Parag, as she elaborated on the need for advancing the discourse on children's literature and libraries by enabling, enriching discussions between librarians, library educators, teachers, publishers, authors, illustrators and social workers actively engaged in the children's library space. She emphasized on the pivotal role played by trained and sensitive library educators, who enable open and active learning communities of children in the libraries. She highlighted Parag's Library Educator's Course-2017 to be held in Hindi and English and invited applications.

The unConference was intentionally designed to facilitate more conversations between participants, panelists and display organizations. The crux of the UnConference lay in the walk-through of the displays. Eight organizations doing significant work in the children's library space were called to display their best practice around children's libraries. The best practices were around some/any of these topics that have significantly improved the quality of their library work - making quality children's literature available, promoting inclusion in library spaces, encouraging participation of school and local communities, encouraging reluctant readers, or making the library more engaging and dynamic. The organizations displaying their work were, Bookworm, Centre for Learning, Deepalaya, Kalike, Muskaan, Pratham, Room to Read and Trilogy (For details of best practice displayed see Annexure A).



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Participants were divided in eight groups and each group was led by either a panelist or a participant with significant experience in the space of children's libraries. Participant groups spent 20 minutes each with two assigned organizations and spent the remaining 20 minutes to visit one or more organizations of their choice in an open, unstructured format.

All the panelists and group facilitators were given a set of guiding questions to probe and deeply understand the vision of the organization, alignment of their library practices with the vision, sustainability of the practice and its inclusive nature. Participant walk throughs were followed by a panel discussion. Attempt was made to not limit the panel discussion to the panel but to encourage and actively engage with participant reflections.

The UnConference closed with an address by Prof. Shailaja Menon, who provided an academic and sociological analysis of the need and importance of building active communities of readers quoting different examples. She emphasized upon building a library culture - a reading culture, emanating from the fact that culture shapes who reads and for what purpose and by promoting libraries in the lives of young children we are actually trying to create a cultural shift. Her other important point was on the teacher/librarian as reader and teacher/librarian as writer, where she emphasized the need of it and quoted examples from her Kathavana experience and other such efforts.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER

**DOES THE DISPLAY REFLECT WHAT THE ORGANIZATION  
WISHES TO CONVEY AS THEIR BEST PRACTICE?  
HOW CLEARLY HAS THE MESSAGE BEEN SHARED?**

**IS THE BEST PRACTICE, IN ITS ESSENCE, SUSTAINABLE?**

**DOES IT CARRY WITHIN IT THE SEED OF GROWTH?**

**DOES THE BEST PRACTICE ARISE FROM THE ORGANIZATION'S  
VISION?**

**WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMPACT OF THE BEST PRACTICE OVER  
A PERIOD?**

**IS THE LIBRARY SPACE INCLUSIVE OF LANGUAGE, CULTURE,  
ECONOMICS AND IN TERMS OF ACCESS?**



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## KEY AREAS FOR REFLECTION

Certain themes came out strongly in reflective and dialogic spaces during display walks, panel discussions and informal discussion spaces.

### **1. NEED TO EXAMINE PATRIARCHY AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE:**

Kamla Bhasin emphasized the need to take books to children and children to books. However, she urged everyone to seriously consider which books are chosen to be made available in these libraries. She talked about stories such as the snow white and the seven dwarf and other fairy tales and tales of princesses that represent women as helpless and in need for rescuing by the prince. She cautioned everyone to examine the deep rooted patriarchy present in a lot of traditional children's books. She also talked about making children's literature inclusive from the lens of caste, religion and class. She reiterated that the goal of reading and learning is liberation—liberation from inequality, stereotypes, hatred, violence, conflicts, wars and personal weaknesses. She said that values espoused in the Indian Constitution must serve as tests to sift good children's literature from the bad.

### **2. ATTENTION GIVEN TO LITERATURE FOR/ABOUT CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES:**

Sayoni from Duckbill publishers talked about the inadequacy of children's literature for and about children with disabilities in India. She said that children with disabilities are often looked at with an 'othering' lens and excluded from the world of other children. Children's literature must aim to create a healthy acceptance of disability through sensitive and empowering representation of children with disabilities. Considering these factors, Duckbill conducted a 'Children First' writing contest, for authors writing stories that feature differently abled children.

### **3. EXAMINE THE LARGER VISION OF A LIBRARY:**

It was seen that there were different understandings regarding the larger vision for what a library can do for children's development. Is library just another tool to teach children how to read and write? Is library a space to explore joy, creativity and imagination? Is library a medium to understand diverse experiences? Is the core purpose of a library to stimulate the thirst in children for social justice and equity? Or is library a means to provide culturally valued codes of engaging with text to social groups living on the margins?



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## KEY AREAS FOR REFLECTION

Each program is guided by their own larger vision for a library that goes beyond programmatic concerns. While issues around access, reach and day-to-day activities used in running of the library are important, they must be guided by a well-articulated vision. Therefore, it is an important task for all library programs to engage in serious reflections around what their personal vision for a library is. Guiding documents such as the National Curricular Framework, Yashpal Committee Report, Kothari Commission Report can help in aligning personal visions to larger national goals. It is important to reflect upon the uniqueness as well as the interconnections between a library and a classroom. In this context, library educator can be an important link between the library and the classroom as well as between children and the library.

### **4. READING FOR LITERACY OR HIGHER ORDER SKILLS:**

During the panel discussions, some panelists expressed appreciation for some libraries that are striving to develop not just the functional aspects of literacy but also higher order cognitive and social skills of children. It seems really important to study and highlight this aspect of library work through research, semi-academic or popular articles. Some projects seem to be looking at libraries as just an extension of their work to improve functional literacy and numeracy skills amongst children.

### **5. READING FOR PLEASURE:**

Reading for pleasure is the kind of reading we undertake in anticipation of the satisfaction that we derive from the book. In order for this to happen, the reader needs to have a near autonomy in choosing what to read, when to read, where to read and how to read it. Adults can play a role in providing suggestions and creating an atmosphere where reading can be enjoyed, however, the ultimate choice lies with the child. Research shows that reading enjoyment is more important for children's educational success than their socioeconomic background. However, the access to the idea of 'reading for pleasure' has been limited to privileged sections of the society. Therefore, it is important to lay down explicit steps that boost children's intrinsic motivation to pick up a book for pleasure. In India, where oral tradition has its stronghold and spread of functional literacy is so uneven, detailed discussions are due that make explicit the cultural codes of how to read for pleasure, how to make reading an active exercise of reflection, dialogue and creativity. Collective brainstorming of strategies needs to be done, wherein children are motivated to engage with the relatively lonely affair of choosing to sit with a book.



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## KEY AREAS FOR REFLECTION

### 6. USE OF ACTIVITIES:

There was a fair amount of discussion on the use of activities in the space of a library. Several display organizations talked about activities involving theatre, play, singing, and arts and crafts that they use in addition to reading books. As much as activities can help children to connect with the context of a book, to reflect on what they have read by accessing various other forms of bodily/creative intelligence, to build excitement for picking up a book; one must be conscious about the intention behind using activities. 'Doing activities for the sake of doing activities', can take children away from the intention of bringing them closer to books. One must be intentional in the use of activities that bring children closer towards wanting to read a book or to reflect better on what they read in the book. At the same time, traditionally libraries are seen as quiet spaces that are devoid of any interactions or activities. Some teachers expressed their surprise with the idea that they can facilitate activities in the library. Therefore, it might be useful to provide space for collective ideation exercises, where library educators can come up with and share relevant activities that they can use in their libraries with children of different age groups and reading capacities.

### 7. LIBRARIANS AS READERS:

It is important for librarians to role model the practice of reading for the children they engage with. It allows for librarians to motivate children to read, to engage in deeper discussions around literature with their children, to suggest relevant books to readers, to design meaningful engagement around different themes and genres of literature and the like. It is important, therefore, to create a platform wherein teachers and librarians can come together and build a community of active readers. Online platforms and social networks can be instrumental in creating such a platform.

### 8. READING AS A CULTURAL PRACTICE:

In the closing address, Prof. Shailaja Menon shed light on how one looks at reading is influenced by social and cultural practices around her/him. Different sections of the society have looked at reading in different ways. For some, reading has historically been a practice that was used to exclude them from accessing power and dignity. For some other social groups, practices of reading and writing were used to assert power by professing knowledge of the divine. Some social groups used their ability to read and write in a more functional way, by providing services of accounting and documentation to those in power. These historical realities continue to affect how different social groups look at reading and



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that shapes their reading behaviors. Is reading looked at a sacrosanct practice, wherein books are the words of divine and hence, not to be argued with? Is accuracy of reading/writing more important than subjective interpretation? Are reading/writing looked at as means of creative expression? It has been seen that access to reading and writing as means of development of the self; expression and liberation is limited to some privileged sections of the society. As socially conscious library educators, she says that we must look at the library practice as a tool to provide these culturally valued codes of power around reading to all the sections of the society equally.

### 9. SCALE VERSUS DEPTH:

A fair amount of time was spent in discussing the duality between the scale and depth of library work. Are small libraries that are engaging with children and communities deeply the way to go? Or is it more important to focus on the reach of libraries and make books available to larger number of children? Can scale be re-examined and conceptualized differently? The depth of an initiative in how deeply it impacts the children and the larger communities can also be a different way of looking at scale. A large number of motivated library educators can work independently as a strong, interconnected network of practitioners, in order to retain the autonomy and focus that small scale work allows. As development practitioners, one needs to find a way to stay with (or perhaps move beyond) this apparent duality between scale and depth. While some participants fell in the trap of this duality, it took a lot of time away from other important discussions around practical insights that were learnt by interacting with a variety of library practitioners.

### 10. CHILDREN'S AUTONOMY IN THE LIBRARY:

The topic of the autonomy of children in running and engaging with the library was also given attention. A participant expressed his concern around not involving children's voices in the library discourse. A lot of panelists supported the idea that children are the ultimate owners of the library and that the functioning of the library should be democratic; children should have the autonomy to engage with books of their own choice; and library educators must have trust in children's abilities and interests. However, the practical layers around the ways in which children's participation can be strengthened need to be sufficiently opened.



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## FEEDBACK RECEIVED

A gathering of people engaged with libraries was first of its kind and it was **VALUABLE** to meet people from different organizations.

Desire to have **MORE** number of such unConferences, more number of days per unConference, more organizations to be present next year.

Kamala Bhasin's opening address was **POWERFUL**. It brought attention to an aspect about children's literature that has not been emphasized so much before.

Walk through with display organizations was **VALUABLE**. They presented different approaches to working with libraries.

Panel discussions **COULD NOT ENGAGE** all participants. These discussions could have focused more on issues unique to the space of library such as the vision of libraries, inclusive nature of library practices, sustainability of library initiatives, challenges faced during implementation, motivating reluctant readers, developing reading communities, engaging children's families and larger communities with school libraries.

Participants shared they **NEEDED MORE TIME** to reflect upon their learnings, their own experiences and how they situated their learnings in their own practices.

Participants also came with a fair amount of experience as practitioners and felt it would be good to have some **TIME** to voice their insights, challenges and success stories.

During the walk throughs, in some groups, discussions **LOST THEIR FOCUS** around the best practices of the display organizations. Visits became more of freewheeling discussion sessions. The focus shifted to questions of the 'how many', 'how much' nature.

The UnConference was largely held in English and that was a **BARRIER** for some participants to engage effectively.

The unConference could be a space to share possible activities to be done in libraries; have sessions on how to choose good children's literature; and engage in deeper discussions on some key issues and themes related to libraries.





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## WAY FORWARD

Despite the challenges faced, several participants, display organizations and members of the organizing team felt that the unConference was a good start to take forward the intention of enriching the discourse around children's libraries in India.

This event got together a lot of practitioners in the children's library space and gave an opportunity to discuss library work. However, engaged and in-depth discussions around themes encountered by library practitioners needs to be strengthened going forward. Few points emerge for improving the next year's UnConference:

**MORE TIME** needs to be given for display organizations to hold meaningful discussions around library practices; also for display organizations and participants to mill around and talk to each other.

**OPPORTUNITIES** for smaller group discussions or reflections can be designed in addition to/in place of the panel discussions. This might allow for more participants to open up discussions around challenges faced by practitioners etc. This will also engage the participants more actively.

**FORMATS** such as convention, masterclass, parallel workshops etc can also be explored.

**LANGUAGE** in which the UnConference is conducted needs a more careful attention, in order for it to be more inclusive of participants who are not very comfortable with English.





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After an engaging walk through the Displays, the UnConference room buzzed with participant voices, as they participated in an engaging 'Library quiz' hosted by Sujata Noronha.



In order to encourage a shared reflective space for librarians, library educators and book lovers of all kinds, a library journal called 'Torchlight' has been started with the initiative of Bookworm. This journal was inaugurated in the UnConference.





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## ANNEXURE A

### Best practices by Display Organizations

The display organizations displayed one (or in some case multiple) best practice that they considered was instrumental in significantly improving their own library work. These displays were in the form of charts, art/craft, standees, photographs, books, worksheets or videos. The panelists were given a set of guiding questions that they could use to analyze the nature of the best practices displayed by the organizations. This section will document the best practices, as displayed by the organizations and the following section contains a summary of reflections around these guiding prompts and other themes that came out during the UnConference.



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## ANNEXURE A

### 1. BOOKWORM:

Bookworm spoke about the importance of providing access to their book collections to several far flung areas in Goa. They operate a central library and run small library programs in several other parts of Goa. They also run the Mobile Library Program and School Library Programs to enable access to their rich book collection. Bookworm engaged the audience through a beautiful display that demonstrated how toys, cloth pieces and locally available play materials can be integrated with storytelling. Bookworm also talked about an innovative practice of blowing up books and reprinting them in the form of accordion-shaped story boards, which can be used for read-alouds or shared readings.





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## ANNEXURE A

### 2. CENTRE FOR LEARNING:

For Centre for Learning, focus of their library efforts lay around building relationships between books and children as well as between adults and children in the library. Centre for Learning, Bangalore spoke about a variety of practices that they have used in their school to keep their library space engaging, meaningful and participatory learning space. They talked about children's involvement in tasks like maintaining book records (manual and digital), maintaining display boards, book repairs, labelling, stamping and arranging books, cleaning the space, and arranging returned books on the shelves. They spoke of ways in which the library space interacted with the entire school through activities like displays of good books, movie screenings, storytelling sessions, theatre and plays. They talked about activities done around the library such as quizzes, book auctions, treasure hunts, making wishbooks, making newsletters, book reviews, introducing various genres in literature, introduction to different writing forms, author interactions, book talks and silent reading sessions among others. In CFL, reading does not stay confined to the libraries but also extends to common dining and leisure spaces, classrooms and also around their bedtime.







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## ANNEXURE A

### 3. DEEPALAYA:

Deepalaya's encourages member to member bookreading practices, wherein children from the Deepalaya centers take books home and read stories out for their friends and family in their neighbourhoods. This practice of older children reading out younger children in the community has had a significant impact in creating a culture of reading in the community around Deepalaya's library centers. Deepalaya has established several community libraries in Delhi. Their librarians are trained to actively engage with book reading, by asking children questions that stimulate their curiosity, imagination and help them to connect stories with their own lives. Deepalaya also employs an incentive system to encourage children to read more books. After a child finishes reading 20 books, she/he is allowed to take books home and if children finish reading 100 books and submit a certain number of book reviews, they get a gift voucher that contains books, bags and stationery materials.





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## ANNEXURE A

### 4. KALIKE:

Kalike talked about several practices that they use in their interactions with government schools such as community engagement with children's libraries, MIS capacity building of library educators, children conducting read alouds for community members, visit of education department officials to the libraries, read-aloud sessions and post-reading activities. Kalike pays careful attention to developing not just the basic literacy skills but also higher order thinking skills in the children through their library program. Kalike also said that efforts are underway to integrate their primary education program with Nalli Kalli—the early primary program of the Karnataka state.





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## ANNEXURE A

### 5. MUSKAAN:

Muskaan focused their display around how they made their libraries conducive for children from marginalized sections of the society to express themselves freely by publishing various stories written by the children as well as the library educators. Stories such as Barish ka ek Din, Naya Sweater, Where is Payal? come from the children and their communities. These books are published in Gondji, Ojha Gondji, Pardhi, Hindi, Marathi and English. Where is Payal? was put together by giving children a prompt that asked them to imagine where their friend Payal must be when she is nowhere to be found. Children came up with different possibilities. Ideas were put together, edited and published as an illustrated book. Library educators have also written books that represent the lives around them from their unique point of view. Making such contextual reading material available to children plays a pivotal role in getting children more engaged with the stories, representing the lives of people living on the margins of the society, and inculcating a sense of pride and confidence in children's own abilities.







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## ANNEXURE A

### 6. PRATHAM:

Pratham runs community based reading sessions that are coordinated by village volunteers, who are often mothers of the village. Along with books, Pratham provides activity worksheets to children. Children engage with these math and language activity sheets in small groups or independently.





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## ANNEXURE A

### 7. ROOM TO READ:

Room to Read's (RtR) display focus was around the use of multiple reading practices such as read-alouds, shared reading, paired reading and independent reading that are useful in carefully scaffolding children's reading journeys towards making them independent readers. Room to Read's work focuses on working with a large number of school teachers directly, in order to transform their attitudes and practices around children's libraries. RtR talked about the importance of changing teachers' attitudes around torn books. It is often seen that teachers lock up the library books for the fear of the books getting lost or torn. However, RtR makes it clear to all the teachers that they need not worry about lost and torn books and that such books will be promptly replaced. This has resulted in teachers giving more freedom to children to pick books of their own choice and children have also taken more ownership of their book collection, resulting in drastic reduction in the number of books needing replacement each year.





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## ANNEXURE A

### 8. TRILOGY:

Trilogy is a private library based in Mumbai. They maintain a warm and intimate space for the readers, as they try to understand each child with great care and suggest books that are likely to interest them, in order to encourage the reluctant reader. In this library, parents enroll with a monthly membership fee and bring their children along with them. One practice that helped them in encouraging children to read books is to write short summary notes along with the books that roused children's interest. They saw that children started participating actively, as they replaced the notes written by the librarian by their own little notes.





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## ANNEXURE B

### Panelists

**FAIYAZ AHMED** (Pratham)

**GURBACHAN SINGH** (Azim Premji University)

**MALVIKA RAI** (Shiv Nadar Schools)

**SOURAV BANERJEE** (Room to Read India)

**SUJATA NORONHA** (Bookworm Goa)

**USHA MUKUNDA**



Panelists engaged in a lively discussion around children's library best practices.





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## ANNEXURE C

### Participant profiles

A quick analysis of the total of 121 participants that were present of the UnConference shows this distribution.

