POLICY BRIEF

**Key Findings from the Study “**Public Library Services for Children – Case Study of select Public Libraries in Kolkata”

**Introduction**

As part of its elementary education portfolio, Sir Ratan Tata Trust’s Publication Initiative, branded ‘Parag’, focuses on publication and dissemination of regional language children’s literature. Recognizing the need for creating avenues and spaces for children to access quality children’s literature, the Trust has supported running of classroom, school or community based libraries with a range of partners. However, due to lack of primary data on the status of public libraries for children in India, it was difficult to provide inputs into programme planning of the Parag initiative, which aims to engage with all kinds of library spaces including public libraries. Lack of data on public libraries and children’s section particularly, has also been faced by the National Mission on Libraries (NLM), a body constituted by the Government of India to look at the current status of libraries in India and recommend measures for improving and strengthening libraries.

This case study critically evaluates the kind of facilities and services available to children across 10 public libraries in Kolkata. A mix of government funded and private libraries were chosen to study the membership pattern, book collection, reading habits and viability of public libraries. This policy brief summarizes major findings from the study. The research adds to the existing literature on children’s libraries in India and also provides important inputs for the NLM as it tries to rejuvenate the public library system in India.

**Key Findings**

**Shrinking Library Space**

All the eight libraries surveyed in the study agreed that children’s membership numbers had fallen over the last 10 years, and some were on the verge of shutting down. For instance, Sharat Smriti Pathagar had only 20 members despite having a little 6,600 books. Lack of patronage and lack of funding were cited as the two main reasons behind the decline of the library. Only two libraries supported by trusts and with adequate funding had a fair number of members --- Rama Krishna Mission and Sri Aurobindo Bhawan. Yet, comparing the membership to the number of books and size of the library, it can be seen that many more children can benefit for the libraries’ collection.

**Table 1 (Membership vs Collection of the Libraries)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Branch** | **Membership during survey (Oct 2012)** | **Books** | **Funding** |
| **Sharat Smriti Pathagar** | 20 | 6,655 | Donations |
| **Vivekananda Pathagar** | 50 | 5,095 | Govt. aided and donations |
| **Rama Krishna Mission Children’s Library** | 200 | 27,000 | Govt. aided and Trust |
| **Ari Aurobindo Bhawan Children’s Library** | 728 | 40,000 | Govt. aided, Trust and donations |
| **Ram Mohan Library and Fre Reading Room** | 80 | 3,500 | Govt. aided and donations |
| **Lion’s Club Children’s Library** | 25 | 1,400 | Private (Trust and donations) |
| **Eloor** | Children use Parent’s cards | 3,000 | Private Fee charging |
| **Mustard Seeds** | 20 | 500 | Private, run from home |

Inadequate Library Infrastructure, Lack of Energy and Space

**Limited Book Collection**

* DPL has a separate book advisory committee for children but there are no stated criteria or qualification for selection of members to the committee. No specific policy exists on selection of children’s books. The general selection tools include book reviews, catalogues, websites, titles shortlisted for awards, and books supplied by booksellers on approval basis among others.
* The book collection does not mirror the need and aptitude of the users. All DPL libraries have the same set of books irrespective of the community in which they are located, or the needs of the children they cater to.
* Books for younger children comprise mythology, historical and religious figures, biographies of Indian leaders, and stories from the Panchatantra. Delightful and richly illustrated books by acclaimed authors/illustrators are absent. Books by several Indian publishers who have published original and contemporary stories over the last 10 years are also missing. DPL’s English book collection for older children (11-15 years) is dominated by foreign authors. These books are prominently displayed in all the libraries, while there is little Indian writing that is showcased.

In a majority of DPL libraries visited the English books looked new and showed little wear and tear from regular usage. While children prefer Hindi books, the Hindi collection is dominated by poor quality of publishing, old stories, retelling of mythologies, religious and historical figures and are heavy on text. A majority of books in Hindi have morals at the end, especially those targeting younger children. A large part of the Hindi collection for older children comprises text-heavy non-fiction books, without engaging illustrations or photos.

*Children find English books difficult to read and non-interesting.*

*Children demand smaller stories with simple language and pictures.*

*Hindi books were also preferred over foreign English titles*

**Absence of Extension/Outreach Activities**

* Early literacy activities are absent from DPL libraries, where pre-school children or early readers have been excluded completely. The age-group of children DPL serve begins at 6 years, the official age for children to attend grade I in government schools across India.

*Children need basic literacy support but we are not equipped … such programmes would be welcome … it would help children immensely” (Interview with staff at Shahdra Library)*

* Not all children accessing the libraries are independent readers. Many children who came to the libraries in Shahdra and Narela that cater to the urban poor cannot read even simple sentences fluently.
* At the DPL library in Sarojini Nagar, sporadic events are organised including film screenings, story-telling sessions and painting competitions. However, the library does not have the required person power or the training to organise these events on a regular basis.
* Little or no cooperation was seen between DPL libraries and the neighbouring schools or community centres. As Table 1 shows, each library has several schools in the neighbourhood. Other than distributing free membership cards, the library has no interaction with the schools.

**Lack of Digital Literacy/resources**

Free internet access is a major draw among children who queue up to access the net for 30 minutes every day. However, library staff is not well-versed or comfortable with technology. Children are left on their own for 30 minutes without any guidance. They either play computer games or browse the Internet without any clear idea of what they are looking for. Many children also did not know how to browse for information and there is no specific guidance available to them.

**Absence of trained library Staff**

* Knowledge of material – books, magazines, audio-visual, digital is absent among the seven librarians interviewed including awareness of latest titles, popular books, contemporary Indian authors and publishers working with children’s books.
* The librarians were not very aware of the existing collection in the library. This is significant because all the librarians interviewed had worked with the DPL for a minimum of 15 years and a maximum of 25 years.
* While DPL librarians were aware of the general socio-economic background of the children coming to their libraries, they lacked the autonomy and the expertise to contextualize the book collection according to the needs and tastes of this diverse membership.
* Significantly, librarians at DPL do not have the autonomy to select books for the library and therefore lack the motivation to remain informed about the latest happenings in the sector. None of the seven librarians had recommended any books for children in the past.
* All the seven librarians had done a formal course in Library and Information Science (LIS). But none had since attended any capacity building workshop related to quality improvement in libraries. They had attended LIS conferences but none that helped them choose books for libraries, understand and interact with children or adults, and conduct extension and outreach activities.

**5. Recommendations**

With its large network of libraries and resources, DPL has the potential to reach out to a large number of children in Delhi. With small but significant changes, it can make itself more relevant to both the curricular and extracurricular needs of children and young adults. Some recommendations are:

**5.1 On Management and Human Resource**

* A clearly defined policy on the development of children’s libraries that reflects child population of the area, children’s reading and literacy level; possible extension activities and training needs of DPL staff among others
* Implement a bottoms-up approach for rejuvenating the children’s sections by training and empowering the librarians who are bogged down by lack of leadership, motivation, and caught in a large number of administrative jobs
* Organise workshops and courses that introduce librarians and library staff to the importance of developing a reading culture in children, train them in conducting activities around books and conduct exposure visits to dynamic children’s libraries
* A separate budget for the children’s sections thus according priority to this much neglected area

**5.2 On Material Selection**

* Urgently put in place a written policy for selection of books, emphasizing aspects such as quality of writing, story, illustration, context and multiculturalism.
* Standardize the process of selection of members to the book advisory committee. At present members are selected by word-of-mouth or reference. Specify a set of competencies for members selecting children’s reading material
* Widen the base of publishers, authors and illustrators to include contemporary books that reflect today’s society and children.
* Ensure librarians are exposed to the latest in children’s literature, attend children’s literature festivals, and plan activities around books

**5.3 On Infrastructure**

* The Sarojini Nagar library comes closest to defining a vibrant and cheerful public library space for children. Given the shortage of space, libraries can take small steps such as changing the paint on the walls to a much brighter shade; bringing in paintings by children, works by children’s authors and illustrators into the library space; improving the display of books by putting big books in bins, hanging strings for display of small format books etc.
* The problem of storing old books that are no more in use has come up repeatedly. DPL should immediately put a policy in place for discarding these books. This would free up much needed space in many of the libraries.
* In at least four of the libraries – Sarojini Nagar, Chandni Chowk, Vinobha Puri and Narela, there is scope of changing/improving the library infrastructure significantly.

**5.4 On Extension Activities**

* Activities such as English proficiency classes, regular storytelling sessions, puppetry, digital literacy and theatre have been identified by the DPL staff as areas of demand and DPL needs to put one person in charge of planning and executing these activities.
* There is no shortage of funds at DPL. Therefore, DPL should actively seek out partners who are working in the above identified areas to provide their expertise.
* DPL should target pre-primary children through early literacy activities. This will enable children to gain literacy and reading skills and get them interested in reading early in life
* There is a huge potential in collaborating with neighbouring schools across branches. This would not only increase membership but also usage of DPL libraries as it partners with schools and caters to needs such as non-fiction books, summer projects for students etc