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CHILDREN'S LIBRARY unCONFERENCE 2018

Diversity in Children's Library & Collection

8 FEB 2018 • Sanskriti Kendra, New Delhi

REFLECTIONS

Libraries are vibrant and active spaces which engage children, encourage all kinds of readers and provide access to open spaces for reading, discussions and beyond. Parag's annual Children's Library unConference aims to create a space for children's library discourse in India. The conference acts as an avenue where library educators and others engaged in the library space meet, exchange ideas and present best practices and challenges. The theme of UnConference 2018 was 'Diversity in the Library'. Parag believes a library is the best means to foster an understanding and sensitivity of differences in a non-didactic manner. Multicultural literature has the ability to nurture respect, empathy and acceptance among all students, bridging the gap between students from diverse cultural backgrounds. As such the role of children's literature and libraries becomes critical.

The unConference was opened by Swaha Sahoo of Parag who elaborated on the need for advancing the discourse on children's literature and libraries. She introduced Parag's library programme and talked about how it nurtures reading and readers. She emphasized 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-2018 to be held in Hindi and English and invited applications.



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THE KEY NOTE



Feminist publisher Urvashi Butalia gave a stirring account of her journey as a feminist publisher and her quest to be inclusive and diverse, both personally and as a publisher. She focused on a publisher perspective in the context of diversity primarily bringing women's voices to the mainstream. She narrated the challenges and was quite critical of their own work as a publisher. Urvashi brought to us her experiences from a different decade, the 80's and discussed the political context and

accompanying shifts due to governments in power or with the rise of different political parties. Talking about "Shareer ki Jaankari", a book written by 75 rural women from Rajasthan and which brought a major shift in her publishing from urban, elite middle class, upper class voices to that of unheard rural women voices, she shared the experience of bringing out this book and what it meant for feminist publishing. She raised the question of publishing in English versus local/regional languages several times and considered it important in terms of who such publishing was reaching out to and why we need to ponder about it. Similar ideas were also shared about alternative voices like Laxmi Tripathi who is well known transgender activist, but there are lesser known ones who also need to find their voices published and it should be our endeavor to include and reach out to all. While Urvashi's talk was riveting, it was largely delivered in English and several participants who were more comfortable with Hindi has a difficult time following. This has been a challenge with speakers for unconference as finding truly bilingual speakers has not been easy.



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BREAKOUT SESSIONS



DIVERSITY & ILLUSTRATIONS IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Award winning illustrator Proiti Roy spoke to Usha Mukunda on how she looks at diversity through her work, style of illustration and thought process behind some of her books. She began with her own journey of reading, living at different places and observing diverse people and environments. Proiti shared that diversity came naturally to her because she grew up in Shanti Niketan where people from all walks of life live. But it also included careful observations. When she illustrates a story, she thinks of what children observe around them and tries to bring those elements into her illustrations. Proiti believed that children are open, inclusive and able to take in differences easily. It is adults who play safe and think children should only be introduced to conventional ideas. Children must be introduced to complex ideas as they are eager receivers. However, books should not be preachy or didactic.



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A few books were distributed among the audience to browse and come back with questions around representation. A participant who works with Madrassas in UP shared that towards the end of the book Ismat's Eid, a woman is shown without burqa, with open hair, going to the mosque on Eid. The children at a Madrasa had pointed this out to him. Proiti said that she was married to a Muslim and had stayed in Bangladesh and observed that women at that time did not even wear a burqa and Eid was always a time when women dressed up and went to mosques. In her observation this was not a problem. She also referred to something that she was later asked to remove from the same book, a dog as it is believed that Muslims do not keep dogs as pets. This discussion revealed that much goes behind little details in an illustration. Talking about A walk with Thambi Swaha pointed out how 'He smelt the market', just a line of text was so beautifully illustrated by Proiti. All of it was the illustrator's imagination and Proiti shared how she took her own experiences of the market into it. She also shared that the skin tone for a character was never her concern as all skin tones existed in India. Once she was asked to use brown skin tone for an Indian child which she felt was not correct given the diversity of Indian skin tones.

THE WORLD IN CHILDREN'S VOICES AND CHILDREN'S STORIES

Film maker and author Samina Mishra's session revolved around the creation of her book My Sweet Home, which is a result of a workshop that Samina and Sherna Dastur did with 20 children from schools of Jamia Millia Islamia. These children live in the congested neighbourhoods of Okhla, many of which come under the official category of 'unauthorized colonies' and tend to be tagged as 'Muslim areas', with the associated stigmas of being bad neighbourhoods and having linkages with terrorists. The book provides glimpses into the everyday life of the children and their ways of seeing their neighbourhood and the city through their friendships, favourite places, likes and dislikes and dreams. Samina shared that the book was a collective / collaborative work where children were given an opportunity to express themselves through written word and pictures. Samina emphasised that it was important to respect children and their understanding about the world. Children's voice was a major perspective in writing for children – that should inform our work in general, and our work of library in particular, she explained. Following this, the participants were divided into six groups. Each group was asked to go through one page of the book and asked to reflect on what was common and different in the pages. Participants were supposed to come out with diversity and universality. Participants appreciated the process of collaborating with children and



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BREAKOUT SESSIONS

encouraging their voices to be heard. Some shared challenges of implementing this in their own work in libraries and schools; but all agreed that the book was written in an inclusive manner.

KNOWING THE OTHER: THE NEED FOR DIVERSITY IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Editor Sayoni Basu introduced the Children's First Contest where writers were invited to submit manuscripts featuring children with special needs. The idea behind Children First was to publish books which treat children with special needs as children first—with all the hopes, fears, mischief and fun that comes with being children. Books where children with disabilities are treated like any other child—but with a disability—help in fostering a healthy acceptance of disability, thereby leading to genuine friendships and dissolving of differences, Sayoni said. She spoke about the challenges in publication business such as costing of the books, illustrations and finding authentic stories. When asked how publishers source authentic stories Sayoni said they talk to people in the field and encourage stories from the ground. A discussion ensued on how it was difficult to find 'authentic stories' even with the best of intentions.

Following this Sayoni divided the audience onto five groups and distributed a few books. She gave a list of questions for the audience to review the books – What is the book about? Would you choose the book for your library/child? Why? Which age group would you recommend it for? She focused on two books in particular - Kittu's Very Bad Day by Harshikaa Udasi, and one chapter from the book Invisible People by Harsh Mander. Each group was given 10 minutes to discuss and share. The discussion was not structured with few not participating because of discomfort in English. While a Hindi translation of a chapter from Invisible People' was provided, the time was not sufficient for a detailed review of either the books or the chapter to reach a firm conclusion. The session ended with some interaction with audience. When asked about Invisible People Sayoni said that Mander's writing was matter-of-fact and non-judgmental, leaving it up to the reader to reflect on the incidents in the book. She said one of the best ways to be inclusive and representative of diverse communities was to present both sides of a story.



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LEC ALUMNI PRESENTATIONS



Three LEC Alumni presented their field projects done during the course. Aarti Srinivasan (LEC English 2017) presented on 'Setting up a Bookshelf Library and Empowering children to run the space independently.' Aarti shared that the project not only gave her confidence as an educator, it made her re-discover many aspects of the library. She was happy to discover that children took their responsibilities seriously often did a better job at taking care of books. She also got to know her children better. She shared that the LEC has given her the perspective to involve children more deeply in the running of a library. Kavita Kapil (LEC Hindi 2016) presented on 'Engaging children with philosophical discussions in the Library.' Kavita shared that she chose the topic of death, something she was afraid of talking about. Through the project Kavita not only got over her own fears, she realized that children were highly observant, discussed death with friends and knew much more than they were credited for. One of her key conclusions was that children are capable of discussing serious philosophical themes and adults should be open to do so with them.



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Neetu Yadav (LEC Hindi 2017) presented on 'Introducing and engaging children with poetry in the Library.' Neetu shared that children were not reading poetry books in her library. Through the project she brought in more poetry books and through carefully planned activities encouraged children to engage with poetry. Neetu said that the project taught her that most children will read different genres provided the library educator planned and introduced them to a variety of books and in an interesting manner. A participant asked her how she could see a change in reading behavior in such a short span of two months. Neetu answered that she had put in place a long term plan for engaging children with poetry books. But simply by making available more poetry books she observed that children started reading those. To sustain that habit she would be doing more in the future.

The presentations were appreciated by all. They also showed how each of the three alumnus had grown through the process of field project and reflected on their own work, which is also one of the goals of field projects under the Library Educators Course.



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MASTERCLASS HOW TO MAKE YOUR LIBRARY & DIVERSE COLLECTION

After a sumptuous lunch, the audience was divided into two – Hindi and English master-class participants. The aim was to develop:

- AN UNDERSTANDING OF KEY DIVERSITY CONCEPTS SUCH AS UNCONSCIOUS BIAS, CULTURAL APPROPRIATION AND INTERSECTIONALITY
- AWARENESS OF HOW TO RECOGNISE COMMON PROBLEMATIC STEREOTYPES, TROPES AND STANCES IN TEXTS.
- ABILITY TO ASSESS THE DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVENESS OF A COLLECTION THAT SHOULD ENABLE YOU TO AUDIT YOUR OWN COLLECTION.
- PROVIDE TOOLS, TIPS AND ADVICE ON HOW TO BETTER DIVERSIFY COLLECTION AND DISPLAYS.

The English masterclass was led by Sujata Noronha of Bookworm, Goa with support from Alia and Thejaswi Shivanand. The masterclass began with participants identifying three themes that represented them the best from among language, caste, region/geography, profession/education, marital status, gender, income and food. After a game of identities, participants were divided into groups of 3 and discussed a pre-reading that had been shared with them – The Parable of the Lost Daughter by M M Vinodini about a Dalit woman protagonist and her journey, relationships of power and struggles with identity. Participants discussed which parts of the story they liked the most, what disturbed them the most and why. Conversations revolved around the influence of religion on society and relationships, how education can break or reinforce social hierarchies and how among others. Participants concluded that we are interwoven with all these identities of caste, gender, class, income, food etc and nothing can be separated from the person. The session left participants a little disturbed and confused, forcing them to reflect on intersectionality and multiple identities.

There was discussion on whether such books can be kept in libraries, were parents ready to expose their children to such text and how to facilitate the discussion with parents. Participants were asked to critically examine their efforts to include diverse collections in



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MASTERCLASS - HOW TO MAKE YOUR LIBRARY & DIVERSE COLLECTION



their libraries and stand up for what they believed. A short film highlighting the lack of women authors and women's voices in literature was shown and enabled a discussion around authentic voices and who was telling the story. Lastly, six groups were given a pair of books each. Each pair revolved around a similar theme and participants were asked to review the books and share which book seemed to have the more authentic voice and representation of the issue it revolved around. For example, one group had the books "Kanna Panna" and "Catch the Cat"; both with differently abled protagonists. After analysing both the stories the group summarised that Kanna Panna was less authentic. The author was unable to hold the story till the end whereas the other book - Catch the Cat flowed smoothly, and represented inclusion without effort. Several such pertinent and insightful comparison came up during the group presentations and it was felt, both by participants and facilitators that a strong beginning has been made to reflect on diversity in the library collection. There was a sense of satisfaction at hearing the probing and insightful questions and thinking shared by the participants.



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MASTERCLASS HINDI

The Hindi masterclass was led by Ajaa. It focused on getting participants to think about 'self' identity and then reflect on stereotypes at a personal level; to think about stereotypes that we harbor in respect to different communities/groups that we perceive as different from us. The session began with participants identifying their most important Identity markers from among religion, region, gender, caste, class, food habit, physical, professional etc. Participant also discussed briefly with their immediate neighbour about their choices. This was followed by dividing participants into five groups with different themes (Muslim, Girl/Women, Dalit, Tribal, Differently Abled). Participants wrote about their assumptions/long held beliefs about the group they were assigned. Each group then got a children's book that dealt with the theme they had been assigned. After reading the book participants were asked to compare their assumptions/beliefs that they had written with that represented in the book.

A rich discussion followed where several participants shared that their assumptions had been wrong and they held stereotypes about a certain community only because they were different, without really understanding them. For example, Differently abled group shared that before reading the book 'Cath the Cat' they assumed that differently abled children were not active or independent and always limited in their lives. But this was challenged and forced them to think differently. However, some groups argued strongly for the beliefs they held. It was disturbing to see several participants sharing that they thought Dalits were suppressed and weak. The tribal group shared they found illustrations of 'Kali and the rat Snake strange and dirty. They did not like the depiction of the protagonist Kali 'because he was black and ugly'. This discussion took up majority of the time and it was seen that stereotypes were deeply rooted. Hence it was felt that time was needed to open up the discussion. However, this meant that the final session on tools to audit library collection could not be completed. Many people felt that the discussions needed a closure and more time. Yet the session opened up a discussion around diversity and left participants questioning and reflecting on their understanding of others different from them. The feedback from participant across the masterclasses was positive. They felt the masterclass had forced them to reflect about diversity, examine their own beliefs and assumptions, and clear those before taking the concept of diversity to the book collection and library. They said they wanted longer masterclasses around such themes that enabled skill and perspective building.



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POINTS TO PONDER

• **ONE OF THE CHALLENGES FOR UNCONFERENCE HAS BEEN TIME MANAGEMENT AND KEEPING TIME FOR AN INTERACTIVE DISCUSSION AFTER A TALK, ESPECIALLY A TALK BY PERSONS WHO HAVE DONE MUCH.** A feedback received was that speakers should commit at least half the day. While they share what they have done, they don't have time to listen and understand what we have been doing/thinking in the library space.

• **PARTICIPANTS WERE ASKED DURING REGISTRATION WHAT BREAKOUT SESSIONS THEY WOULD LIKE TO ATTEND. SINCE MANY HAD NOT READ THE SCHEDULE AND BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SESSIONS, THEY WERE UNABLE TO CHOOSE CORRECTLY.** Many wanted to change at the last minute and several wanted to attend multiple sessions, which was not possible. Logistically, Parag needs to figure out a better means of communicating parallel sessions to participants well in advance.

• **LANGUAGE HAS BEEN A CHALLENGE AND BILINGUAL SPEAKERS HAVE BEEN IN DEMAND.** While designing sessions, we have tried to make them participatory, so that participants don not get left out, but this is not always successful.

• **GIVEN THE DIVERSITY OF PARTICIPANTS, THEIR AWARENESS LEVELS AND CAPACITY BUILDING NEEDS, DESIGNING WORKSHOPS AND SESSIONS THAT CATER TO ALL IS A CHALLENGE.** This year, since we decided to mix LEC alumni with other participants, the challenge was to have sessions that both alumni and participants who had not had much library training would find engaging.



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ANNEXURE

Participant profiles

A quick analysis of the total of 101 participants that were present of the UnConference shows this distribution.

