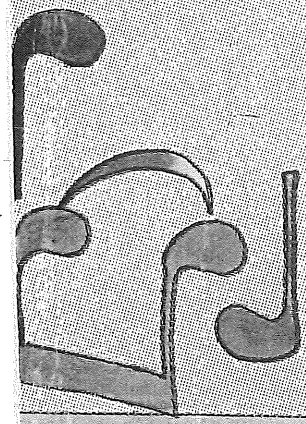
The Child's Language And The Teacher

A Handbook

KRISHNA KUMAR



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Creative Learning Series

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KRISHNA KUMAR

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Preface to the New Edition

Since its first appearance in 1986 under the auspices of UNICEF, this little handbook has found countless admirers and users all over the country. As its author I have never stopped feeling both surprised and daunted by the expectations that so many people associate with this book. Apparently, the book fills a gap which is much bigger than I had thought at the time of planning to write it. Voluntary agencies were always enthusiastic about it, but now even state governments are taking a keen interest in disseminating it. Its revised Hindi original, which was brought out by the National Book Trust some time back, has also found an audience among parents. This new English edition will, I hope, satisfactorily meet the demand which has been created by fresh initiatives in primary education.

I am grateful to UNICEF for permitting the publication of this revised edition by the National Book Trust. I am also grateful to Frances Kumar, my wife and dedicated teacher of young children, for helping me draft the revisions and identifying the English poems included in the chapter on 'Reading'.

Central Institute of Education
Delhi University
15 September 1998

KRISHNA KUMAR

Preface to the First Edition

The activities described in this handbook were tried out at the Children's Literature Centre, Tikamgarh, Madhya Pradesh, during the summer of 1985. My real gratitude is to the children who came to the Centre at 6.30 every morning to participate in the activities and who helped me study the practical aspects of the perspective with which I was working. I dedicate this book to those children. I also wish to express my gratefulness to Gurbachan Singh and Phool Chandra Jain who helped me organize the activities at the Centre.

My indebtedness to several language pedagogues of this century is obvious. Although I have used no direct quotations—in order to avoid the academic look that might deter some people from *using* the book—I have drawn heavily on the work of Joan Tough, Sylvia Ashton Warner, and James Britton. I have also freely used the ideas that I got from reading Frank Smith, Piaget, Vygotsky, Chukovsky, Gijubhai, and Rabindranath Tagore. The last two encouraged me to continue with my belief that it is possible to practice child-centred pedagogy under Indian conditions.

It is primarily to spread this belief that I wrote this handbook. I wish to thank UNICEF for letting me undertake its writing. Its recipients are teachers of pre-school and primary school children, trainers of these teachers, supervisors, and curriculum framers. Perhaps it will reach some parents as well. I hope it will make a small contribution towards softening our system so that ultimately

children may begin to look at the primary school as a nice, enjoyable place where they would want to stay.

KRISHNA KUMAR

1

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY LANGUAGE?

Most of us are so used to defining language as a means of communication that we often forget its usefulness as a means to think, feel and react to things. This wider use of language is extremely important for people who want to work with young children, for in childhood language plays a formative role in the development of the child's personality and abilities. It acts as a subtle, yet strong, force, shaping the child's perception of the world, interests, capabilities, and even values and attitudes. This handbook, particularly this chapter, will explain how.

First, however, we need to be clear about something which usually creates a lot of controversy. School teachers are used to thinking of 'Hindi' and 'English' or some other language as a school subject; so they would expect this book to be about the teaching of one specific language. Experts, on the other hand, are used to making strong distinctions between the child's first language, second language, and so on. Both teachers and experts expect that a book about language teaching should start by describing the rules that govern a particular language, its common structures, its vocabulary, and so on.

This book does nothing of this sort. It is certainly not a guide for teaching this or that particular language. It is about the functions that *any* language performs in the lives of children. Every child in the world—whatever his or her mother-tongue—uses language to fulfil certain immediate purposes. One major purpose is to make sense of the world, and in fulfilling this purpose language acts as a

marvellous tool. Unless we are able to take the child's point of view and understand the functions that language plays in the child's life, we cannot properly determine our role as teachers, caretakers, or parents.

Language and Doing

Children's use of language is closely related to the things they do with their hands and bodies and the objects they come in contact with. Words and action go together in childhood. Actions and experiences create the need for words, and words provide access to an experience after it is over. With the help of words, children enrich their relationship with the objects they come in touch with. On the other hand, words without action or contact with objects remain empty and lifeless for the child. Words like 'cat', 'run', 'fall', 'blue', 'river' and 'rough' mean very little to the child unless these words have first been used in a context where the child was actively involved with the object or in an act. Only after such involvement do these words become associated with an image, and become available for meaningful use in future.

This relationship between words and the child's physical experiences poses a unique responsibility on adults, especially teachers. As a teacher you may expect that parents have already provided a wide range of experiences to the children who are now under your care. This may not be true for the great majority of parents. Many parents either do not feel confident enough to allow their children to come in contact with a wide range of objects in early childhood or they do not have the time to accommodate the much slower pace at which children see and do things. Often, adults find it a nuisance if the child stands at the tap with her fingers in the stream of water for half an hour, or if she puts all the utensils on the floor, or if she wants to open and close an umbrella countless times. Sometimes, in order to avoid any possibility of damage to objects or harm to the child, adults

prohibit the child from all but a narrow range of experience.

Whatever the parents may or may not have done, the job of the teacher is fairly clear. She must create an environment which permits children to make continuous attempts to link the use of language with life's experiences and objects. This can be done by ensuring

- that children bring *to* school a variety of objects (such as leaves, stones, feathers, twigs, broken things) and talk about them, read about them and write about them;
- that children are asked to talk, write and read about the experiences they have had outside the school;
- that children are taken out of the classroom to see the world around the school so they can inspect ordinary objects carefully (objects such as a broken bridge, a muddy pit, a dead insect, a nest with eggs) and talk about them. Such study-visits in the school's immediate neighbourhood can provide valuable resources for language-learning as this handbook will later show.

So a school where children are not doing a variety of things with their hands, where they are mostly sitting and listening to the teacher, and where there are no objects to touch, manipulate, break and remake, cannot be a good place to develop language skills.

Things they do with language

Those who have studied children's language tell us that children start using language for a startling variety of purposes as soon as they have acquired mastery over basic abilities involved in talking. What follows is a discussion of some of the purposes.

1. Directing one's own activities

Children often talk about what they are doing at the time they are doing it. It is a kind of private commentary on their own action. Often, it seems, the commentary helps

them in carrying on with the activity for a greater length of time. It helps them maintain their interest in it. It does not matter if someone listens to the commentary. For example, in a group of small children making tunnels or castles with damp sand, each child may make a separate commentary and often it may be no more than an audible mumble.

Observe a child (of any age from 3 to 8) when he is doing something—including playing—all by himself. Listen carefully to what he says. Make similar observation of many different children—both boys and girls, and of different ages.

Did you find individual differences in their solitary 'talk'? Does the 'talk' help the child sustain his interest in an activity? Why?

2. Directing other's activities and attention

This use of language is well known to us as parents and teachers since a lot of our time is spent meeting children's demands. We are usually quite conscious of demands that are of a physical nature, but other kinds of demands are also significant. These other kinds of demands can be intellectual or of an emotional nature. Children use language to draw attention to something that they find curious or attractive. They expect the listener to show interest in what has attracted their own attention.

If you observe children in a group, you will often find them drawing each other's attention by pointing out something or a characteristic of something they think others might have missed. The importance of this use of language lies in the expectation it expresses. The expectation is that 'others would like to see what I have noticed'. This expectation is based on a deep-seated assumption concerning human relationships and the pleasure of being

together. If the person whose attention is being directed does not fulfil the expectation, a basic cause for the development of language gets discouraged.

3. To play

For most children from the age of two and a half onwards,

Listen to the rhymes that children sing while playing by themselves or in groups, indoors or on the street, skipping, running, jumping, ball-bouncing. If you are observant and careful, you may be able to make a small collection of traditional children's rhymes of your area that are still alive—despite the invasion of modern media and inert language teaching.

Write out the rhymes you find in a systematic manner. Look for variations and record them. Do *not* correct what appear to you as examples of bad grammar or distortions of vocabulary. Children's play-rhymes are a rare resource of highly creative and energetic forms of language. *And* they are extremely useful means of developing certain basic language skill, such as reading. See the next chapter for suggestions on how to use them.

Following are examples of traditional children's rhymes in two languages:

'I am a gold lock'.
'I am a gold key'.
'I am a silver lock'.
'I am a silver key'.
'I am a brass lock'.
'I am a brass key'.
'I am a monk lock'.
'I am a monkey'.

No school today, half holiday.
When we get our holiday we'll all run away.
Where will we run to? Down the slippy lane.
Who will run after us? The teacher with the cane.

अक्कड़ बक्कड़ बम्बे बो
अस्सी नब्बे पूरे सो
सौ में लगा धगा
चोर निकल के भागा

बरसो राम ध्ड़ाके से
बुढ़िया मर गई फाके से

words serve as a great resource for play and fun. They repeat words in different tones, distort them, combine them in strange combinations, and enjoy this whole process. They like to use words in situations where they may not be appropriate. They easily learn poems that distort words in this way. In brief, young children treat words as objects to play with. Play with words serves as an enormous outlet for creativity and energy.

4. Explaining things

Children talk about things to show their knowledge of 'how' a thing happened. For example, if you ask a child of three how it rained, the child will probably tell you that the sky was covered with grey clouds, then little drops began to fall, and then it rained hard, so hard that you couldn't see anything. In this example, by narrating the sequence of events, the child is explaining how a major event occurred. Stories are born out of this use of language, and in this sense all stories are explanations of things of course, not all stories provide reliable or scientific explanations of things. What they represent is our desire to interpret life. Small children want to interpret their life's events just as much as we adults want to explain events that have occurred in the world or in politics.

Collect stories that explain things. You may find many stories of this type in the local folklore, stories that explain why it rains, or how Man discovered fire. For one example of such a story, which explains how elephants lost their abilities to fly, see the accompanying box.
For suggestions on the use of such stories in language teaching, see chapters on talk and reading.

Elephants in the Sky

Once upon a time and long long ago, elephants living in India could fly. In those days as now, elephants were very big. They were grey in colour, just like some clouds who were their cousins. And like these clouds, the elephants could fly along in the sky, simply by flapping their floppy ears. Clouds can change shape and the elephants could change their shape too. They could turn into whatever they wanted to be. They could look like a dragon, or a giant kitty-cat. They could look like a castle, a mountain, or a dog running away. Anything.

One hot summer day, some pearly grey elephants were flying along in the sunshine. They soared over a village where little children were playing; over a field where a farmer was ploughing; over a river where a boy was bathing black water-buffaloes, and then up over a forest full of chattering monkeys. But up in the sky, a hot wind was dashing along. It saw the flying elephants. It caught up with them and blew right into their trunks. That wind was like pepper!

The elephants snorted and sneezed—krr-r-r-r-Frrr-r-r-r-CHOOOO! And they looked for a place to get away from the hot breeze. Below them they saw some big mango trees, fragrant, cool and shady. Slowly the elephants glided down to the biggest mango tree to sit on its branches, away from that hot wind.

It so happened that a teacher and his pupils were sitting under that same tree. It was too hot to stay inside the school that day. The teacher was feeling tired, and the children were restless. They broke their pencils. They got all the answers wrong. They giggled and whispered and squirmed like little mice. They just could not sit still.

The teacher got irritated. He stamped his foot, waving his pointer and shouting at the children. Then he thought to himself—'If these children don't behave, I'll say a magic spell and turn them all into little rabbits!' And he reached over to grab the naughtiest child by the arm. Just then the elephants arrived down from the sky and sat on the branch over the teacher's head.

Cr-r-r-r-reak.....cr-r-r-r-REAK.....CRASH!
The branch broke and fell down on the teacher. He fell down too, but the elephants were not worried at all. They quietly flapped their ears and started flying over to the next tree.
At that moment, the teacher jumped up and shouted at the elephants—'You elephants! You bad elephants! I'll show you! Knock me down, will you? I'll teach you a lesson!' He waved his pointer at the elephants and spoke some magic words.
Slowly, slowly the elephants floated down to the ground. They could not fly any more. And from that day to this, elephants have walked on the ground. Whenever elephants look up and see the clouds drifting along in the sky, they remember the time when they used to soar along too, changing to whatever shape they wanted, going wherever they pleased.

5. Representing life

This use of language is present in all other uses, but we need to study it separately or else we might overlook it. Children, just like adults, often use language to recall the past—to remember an event, person, or just a small thing. Words help us re-create something that is no more around, and often what has been re-created looks so real that we can go on talking about it for a long time.

Children often represent things and experiences in order to come to terms with them—to accept something at a deep emotional level. A child who has been frightened by something may talk about it many times over—until he adjusts to it. Especially when life springs a surprise on the child, he overcomes the surprise (with its uncertainty, confusion and sometimes fear) by repeatedly re-creating the incident with the help of words until the incident becomes a familiar one.

6. Associating

When we listen to a story that someone is telling, about his

own experience or someone else's, we respond to the story by associating ourselves with the characters and events described in the story. We project ourselves beyond our immediate life, even beyond our restricted past experiences, in order to relate to the story. When a child talks about the feelings of a metal toy, he imagines himself to be the toy. Language allows us to experience vicariously what someone else is going through.

7. Anticipating

Things that have not yet occurred, and some of which may not occur at all, form a subject of talk all the time. Children express their fears, plans, expectations and what they think might happen under strange circumstances, frequently. Words allow them to create an image of the future. Sometimes such an image helps it materialising the future; at other times it helps in accepting the future as it comes.

8. Inquiring and reasoning

Just about any situation can present a 'problem' that the small child must solve by finding out 'why' something is the way it is. Many problems are of the kind that the small child can successfully solve; for example, why a bus stopped all of a sudden, or why she does not like water to be poured on her head while she has her bath. The little child of three understands these 'problems' although not all children may be able to explain the precise reason in a vocal manner. Some children who can do so are most likely the ones who have heard adults using language to inquire or argue about something and who have been encouraged to do so themselves.

Unlike the 'problems' mentioned above, there are others that a small child cannot grasp in a 'scientific' sense. For example, the real reason 'why it rains' or 'why a tree falls down when the wind is very strong' is beyond the reach of a child of four or five. Yet, even such problems present excellent opportunities for the use of language as

a means to reason. It does not matter whether the reason given is accurate or not. What is important is that the child uses language as a means to reason, to inquire about something unknown. The more frequently the child listens to adults using language for this function, the more likely is this function of language to become accessible to the child.

This is a little exercise to find out if you can distinguish the eight different functions of language in children's life we've just discussed. Here are eight examples of children's talk. Assign them to the eight functions.

1. 'The clouds went away and the rain stopped.'
2. 'I'll go to Jaggagga, I will meet Baggagga.'
3. 'Don't do it that way. See, here is the knob.'
4. 'How does water reach so many houses every morning?'
5. 'I'll just put this cup here, then I'll call Ramu.'
6. 'These sweets are like the ones we had when Jeet chacha had come.'
7. 'I'll get a new shirt on Diwali.'
8. 'It was like a bazaar. So many ducks and they were so noisy.'

Clue: 1. Explaining; 2. Play; 3. Directing other's attention; 4. Inquiry; 5. Directing one's own activities; 6. Associating; 7. Anticipating; 8. Representing life.

What we say affects us

One thing we learn about language from this discussion of its various functions in children's lives is that it is a highly flexible medium. It can be adjusted to almost any situation in life. By adjusting it according to the needs of a situation, we improve our adjustment with the situation itself. Daily life provides numerous examples of this process. When we know that someone is angry with us, we respond to his anger by choosing (often unconsciously) words and tone

that might shape the situation according to our wish or intention. E.g. we use strong words if we want to fight, or we use mild words and tone if we want to cool down the situation.

We can say that our ability to use language in a flexible manner to a great extent determines our chance of standing up to the great variety of situations that life presents. At one level, our language expresses or shows our response to a situation; at another level, our language shapes the situation that we are facing. Language helps us to come to terms with things that happen around us all the time. It helps us in this way whether we are physically participating in events or simply reflecting on them.

Whether we witness an event physically or not, the language used to re-present it affects our response to it. Thousands of things happen everyday at places far away from us. These things reach us as narratives in a newspaper. In a sense, the newspaper allows us to create a picture of an event. It is the same thing when a child tells his mother about something he has seen on the street. The picture created by the newspaper or the child is accurate inasmuch as the language used for the narration is accurate. Accuracy is almost always a matter of degree because any use of language reflects the narrator's intention. If the child has seen an accident and was frightened by it, he is likely to convey it in a somewhat exaggerated manner. By exaggerating it, he justifies his fear, and thereby feels better adjusted to the sight he had seen.

Finally, language shapes our expectations. Someone who likes to explain things in a patient, systematic manner expects others to do the same. Similarly, a person who likes to inquire deeply about things unconsciously expects that others are also interested in such inquiry. By using language to explain or inquire, such people create an environment in which the importance of explanation and inquiry is understood. On the other hand, if language is *not* used for such purposes in a community or in institutions, the

children growing up there are unlikely to be used to careful explanations or patient arguments. If parents and teachers are using language mainly to keep children under control, then it is likely that children will see language as a means to control others. They might grow up into adults who do not want to do anything unless they are ordered to do so.

We started this chapter by asking how language shapes the child's personality, including perceptions, abilities, attitudes, interests and values. We can now answer this question by saying that language shapes the child's personality because the child lives and grows up in the environment that language creates. To this environment, the teacher makes a significant contribution. If her responses show that the teacher understands the child's aim in using language in a certain way, such responses will enhance the child's use of language in that mode. On the contrary, if the teacher's responses are based on preconceived ideas about what is appropriate or correct, such responses will obstruct the child's independence of expression and communication.

2

TALK

In our schools, talk is mostly regarded as a negative thing. It is assumed that if someone is talking, he can't be paying attention to the more serious requirements of learning. So when teachers find children talking, their first instinct is to stop them from doing so. Children are permitted to talk only during recess or when the teacher is not saying something important.

This view of talk has led us to ignore the enormous uses of talk as a resource for learning. This is true for all stages of learning, but specially true for learning at the earliest stages. For young children of primary school age, talk is a basic means of learning and consolidating their learning. A school where little children cannot talk with freedom is a useless school. Indeed, teachers who don't let their children talk have no business complaining about lack of funds to buy books or other resources; they are already wasting a highly valuable resource which costs nothing at all.

Of course, children talk for a wide range of aims, and not all of these aims have use for the teacher. For example, talking in order to overcome boredom is not the same thing as talking to draw another person's attention to something one has noticed. The second kind of talk has an important function as a means of consolidating one's learning as in this conversation that two children had in whispers, waiting at the teacher's desk while she was busy filling in her register:

Child 1 : 'She's wearing a ring.'

Child 2 : 'Didn't you see it earlier?'

Child 1 : 'No... Yes, yes, I've seen it before.'
Child 2 : 'Oh, but it's a different ring.'
Child 1 : 'She's bought a new ring. It's smaller.'
Child 2 : 'No, it's thinner.'

If you analyse this short conversation between the children, you will soon notice the opportunities for learning that became available to them because they were talking. If Child-1 had not talked about the ring he saw on the teacher's finger, he wouldn't have been able to remember that she always wore a ring. On the other hand, without this conversation, Child-2 would have missed an opportunity to observe the difference between the old and the new ring, and to understand the subtle difference between 'smaller' and 'thinner'.

In order to become aware of these various functions of talk, we must get into the habit of listening to children's talk. This looks simple, but it is a difficult thing to do because as adults we are used to thinking that our job is to tell children what they should do, that it is *their* job to listen. Such a belief hinders us from becoming good listeners to children's talk. By 'good listener' I mean someone who can patiently notice the purpose for which the talk is taking place and the possibilities of learning how the talk is opening up.

Two children talking in any ordinary situation may do the following things in their talk:

1. Pay attention to something they had ignored so far
2. Observe it casually or carefully
3. Exchange or share observations
4. Arrange observations in some kind of organized way
5. Challenge each other's observations
6. Argue on the basis of observation
7. Make a forecast
8. Recall an earlier experience
9. Imagine someone else's feelings or experiences
10. Imagine their own feelings in an imaginary situation.

If you get into the habit of listening to children's talk carefully, you will soon be able to distinguish these and several other functions. You will also see that these functions involve the use of development of intellectual skills such as analytical and reasoning skills. The activities given in this chapter can help you construct situations for developing such skills through talk.

The teacher who wants to use children's talk as a classroom resource must create a positive ethos for talk. Through her own behaviour and response to children's talk, the teacher must convince children that they are free to talk. Of course this need not mean pandemonium. On the contrary, what is required of the teacher is to ensure that every child feels that she is being heard when she talks, and that the teacher wants them to talk.

We can distinguish five kinds of opportunities that the teacher can create in the classroom to encourage children to talk:

1. Opportunities to talk about oneself

Given the freedom and chance, all children like to talk about their life, things that have happened and things that they anticipate. Some teachers treat children's personal life as irrelevant to their learning at school. Such teachers insist that children should only discuss impersonal matters in the class, matters that have been portrayed in the textbooks. Faced with this demand, a lot of children find themselves unable to participate in the class in any form. The impersonal matters discussed by the teacher do not interest them, and their personal matters (such as a recent visit by a relative, what a rainstorm did to the house, or getting sick) do not interest the teacher.

Such a situation leads to children's total dissociation from the curriculum. The teacher can avoid such a dissociation by creating opportunities for children to tell others about what is happening in their lives at home and things that have occurred in the past. If children are encouraged

to talk about such things, they will gradually find it possible to express their feelings and ideas about a wide range of experiences. Also, they will eventually be able to relate to the knowledge imparted at school under different subjects, such as science, geography, civics, etc., at a deeper, personal level.

2. Opportunities to talk about objects and experiences at school

The school's surroundings are an excellent resource for exploration and observation. Wherever the school may be located, there are always things around it that can provide material for extensive investigation and discussion. The school's surroundings may have any of the following things—shops, trees, stones, houses, street, fence, soil, gates, bird nests, beehive, flowers, butterflies, open drain, tap and so on: just about anything can be used as a subject for accurate observation, exchanging observations, determining the truth, and exploring its relationship with other objects.

Talk is an excellent means of doing all this with little children. As some of the activities given below will show, a teacher need not take large groups of children for a formal excursion; sending three or four children at a time to report on one object may do equally well. Excursions are of course exciting, and teachers who can afford to take children to places that may not be close to the school must do so. But a teacher who cannot take children with her to a museum or a post office need not make the excuse of not being able to take them to the small broken bridge just outside the school or the filthy outlet of water behind the school. The important thing is to provide ample occasions for all children to talk about what they have seen during an excursion.

3. Talking about pictures

Pictures are a great resource for creative and analytical

talk. Just about any kind of pictures can be used. In the daily newspaper and in weekly magazines we can find pictures printed as part of advertisements and news. Calendars, stamps, labels and posters are other sources of pictures that can be found just about anywhere, even in a small village. The teacher can build a collection of such sources for use in the classroom year after year.

Apart from the sources mentioned above, schools must consider picture-story books if they can afford to spend a little extra money. Although every Indian language has a substantial body of children's literature school teachers hardly ever show any interest in it. If school acquires a certain number of children's books, they are kept under lock and key to avoid damage. Teachers who want to use picture-story books must involve and train children in the maintenance of books. Little things like how to turn a page without spoiling the corners are a matter of careful training. Such little things make a contribution towards developing in children the perception of the picture-story book as a respectable resource for learning.

Talking about a picture with a group of children can be fruitful even if it is done in a totally informal, spontaneous manner. Yet, we can make such talk even more useful from the viewpoint of developing children's language by becoming aware of the different *dimensions of response*. Each question that the teacher poses to the child directs the child's response in a certain manner. How best can we use questions to enrich the child's perception and response? Following are the levels of response to which we can direct the child with the help of questions:

(a) **Finding :** At this level, all we ask children to do is to find things in the picture. Questions like these can be asked: 'What is happening in this picture?' Is there a mouse?' Who is sitting on the bicycle?' 'How big is the boy?'

(b) **Reasoning :** This level of response is concerned with the ability to attribute reasons or causes. The teacher

must accept whatever reason the child attributes to something shown in the picture. Of course she can then give her own reasoning, but only as one more possibility. Sample questions: 'Why is the little girl crying?' 'Why can't we see the back of the motorcycle?' 'Why is the mouse hiding?'

(c) **Projecting :** At this level, we ask children to relate to the picture by placing themselves in it. So the purpose of questioning at this level is to encourage children to project themselves into an imaginary situation, to imagine who would be saying what, how they would feel. etc. Sample questions: 'What would you see if you were sitting on this tree?' 'What is the little girl saying to the man on the bicycle?' 'What is the little mouse thinking?'

(d) **Predicting :** This level relates to the ability to anticipate the future course of events. Children are encouraged to talk about what might happen next. Sample questions: 'Where will this man go from here?' 'What will the little girl do at home?' 'How will she get home?'

(e) **Relating :** Now we ask questions that would enable children to think of something in their own lives that is similar to the situation shown in the picture. Sample questions: 'Have you ever sat on a motorcycle—what does it feel like?' 'Have you been in the company of a stranger—what happened?'

4. Listening to stories and talking about them

As we listen to a story our mind runs to the events and characters portrayed in it. Many stories are about events that we have never witnessed in our own lives, yet we can imagine them. Similarly, we are able to form an image of the characters even though we may never have faced people who are like these characters. This way, unfamiliar events and people become a part of our map of the world. Later on we can talk about such events just as we talk about events that have actually occurred in our lives. This is how people discuss films, books, and most of the news

published in the daily paper. Stories—whether they are about real events or about events imagined by someone—bring new material to our attention, and we accommodate this new material without much effort or difficulty.

When we listen to a story, we respond by imagining a sequence of events and the behaviour of characters; on the other hand, when we tell a story ourselves, we reorganize the experiences that form the story. If it is a real experience, we may be concerned about presenting it just as it occurred—in the same sequence of small events. However, it is rarely possible for anyone to talk about something just as it occurred; little distortions occur because some aspects of the experience strike us as being more important. If the story we are telling is not about real things, we reorganize it a little more freely, perhaps with the intention of making it more interesting to our listener. In either case, telling a story involves: (i) reorganizing of life, its events, characters, etc.; and (ii) making the story interesting to our audience. Both these things demand resourceful use of language. Indeed, any story requires us to manipulate language in a creative manner, and listening to stories provides us examples of skilled creativity of language. This is why story-telling is a great resource for a teacher of young children.

Some teachers regard story-telling as an art, and therefore, they feel, only a few are capable of telling stories well. This is an unfortunate feeling because it deprives children of the pleasure of listening to stories. Children will enjoy listening to a story if it is a good story. The skill of telling can only develop with time and practice. The main thing is to select good stories and tell them frequently. And no story needs to be a single occasion. Good stories deserve many tellings.

Talking about a story after it has been told is a tricky thing. Many teachers are eager to talk about the moral of the story. As soon as they finish telling the story, they ask, 'What does the story teach you?' This question has hardly

any value as a starting point of a meaningful discussion. The moral value of a story—if a story has one—has no special interest for children; for them the story itself is the important thing. A teacher who asks them about its moral value spoils the achievement of her own work. Equally wasteful is the demand of those teachers who insist that children must memorise the story verbatim. Such teachers want the story to be repeated verbatim. They make this demand so predictably that children stop enjoying stories because they feel anxious about the demand they will have to fulfil later.

We must realise that the important thing for the story-listener is to relate to the story, and that every child relates to a story in his or her own way. The child's own personality and past experiences determine his response to the story. He may imagine a character quite differently from how the character has been described in the story. He may find one incident far more emotionally meaningful than all

Story Bank

Many teachers do not know where to find a good story to tell. They sometimes console themselves and their children by reading aloud the story-like compositions which appear in magazines and newspapers.

It is not difficult for a teacher to make a personal collection or a 'bank' of fifty or sixty stories, and to memorise them. Stories for such a bank can be found in the following sources—

- Panchatantra, Kathasaritsagar, Mahabharata, Vikramaditya stories, mythologies, etc.;
- Collections of folk-tales from different parts of India and the World;
- Folk-tales of your own area. These can be collected with the help of elderly members of the community.
- Historical stories
- Old local incidents which can be narrated as stories.

the other incidents. The freedom to recreate a story and its characters in a way that is meaningful to oneself is a right every child must have. For example, in the story given on p. 7 a child may imagine the teacher to be a female. A teacher who believes in the child's right to imagine the characters in any manner he wants will create opportunities for children to talk about a story in any way they like, to distort it, to extend it, substitute its characters, and to make up their own stories. Such opportunities need not occur immediately after the story has been told. Often it may be best to start a totally different activity after story-telling.

5. Acting it out

Stories and drama are closely related, and often the teacher can move from one to the other with great success. A child who is attentively listening to a story is silently taking the different roles depicted in the story. The same thing happens in drama, only in a more explicit manner. In drama, children get an opportunity to act out different roles with the help of speech and physical movement and gesture. They still have to imagine that they are someone else, and they have to look at things from someone else's perspective, just as the listener of a story must do. The main difference is that in drama one has to look at things from someone else's perspective more actively. One has to find words and gestures appropriate to an imagined situation and an imagined character. There is a great opportunity to improvise, and this is where the key to using drama as an extension of talk lies.

Unfortunately, much of the dramatic activity that takes place in schools does not leave room to improvise. Children are assigned certain roles, and they are given dialogues to memorise. Drama is used as a special occasion—associated with little intention to extend children's use of language. Only a few children participate in the final presentation, everyone is constantly afraid of going wrong.

So there is no freedom and sense of fun. These two characteristics—freedom and fun—are essential for the use of drama as a language activity.

Teachers who want to use drama as a part of their language teaching must remember all the time that drama is nothing special or exotic for children—it is a part of their daily lives. Children use dramatic devices all the time, devices such as mimicking, exaggerating and pretending. Drama is invariably a part of children's own traditional play activities and games. It is hard to think of a child who does not possess dramatic skills. But many children may not want to use their dramatic skills in the classroom. They may think that the classroom is not an appropriate place for play. And this is where the teacher makes a difference by establishing in the classroom an ethos in which play looks possible and right. There is of course no single technique to establish such an ethos. You have to build it gradually, by encouraging spontaneous talk about real life, by being attentive to children's talk, and by being gentle.

Secondly, it is important to remember that drama for display is not the same thing as drama for daily use. What we are talking about is the latter, and this kind of drama has little use for pre-decided scripts, dialogues, dresses, rehearsals and lights. Just about any short narrative account of any incident is good enough to be acted out. The best narratives of dramatic quality may usually come from children's own talk—provided the children feel free enough to talk about what they see and feel in their daily lives. How a bus stopped, some people got off and some got on, how the bus started again, and what is happening inside it now may be an excellent little narrative to be acted out by *all* forty or more children in a class. On the other hand, stories that the teacher has told or read out can provide exciting material for drama. If a story has only a few characters, let small groups of five children each act it out separately or have different stories to dramatize. There is no point setting up a competition among different groups.

It will create unnecessary stress and dependence on the teacher.

If you use spontaneous drama from an early age, it will form a very sound base for the development of reading skills. The link between drama and reading is not a direct one, but the link is there. Drama provides a distinct opportunity to use words and one's body movements (gestures, bending, etc.) as symbols in a conscious manner. Along with story telling dramatic action permits the child to participate in the world in a symbolic manner (that is, taking part in events in which one may not be directly involved). This is the same ability that a good reader requires—the ability to see things that are not physically present before one's eyes, and to respond to them as if they were physically present.

The teacher's response

By the time children enter school, most of them have already acquired remarkable mastery over the basic structures of their mother-tongue. They not only know how to use language for a larger number of transactions, they also know the importance of adjusting one's language to different contexts and audiences. As a listener, a child of five is capable of translating messages into action (e.g. bringing a glass of water if he is asked to, and putting it back in an appropriate place), and is also capable of making intelligent guesses about people's personalities and their mutual relationships on the basis of their talk. The small child acquires these capabilities during his routine day-to-day life—no one 'teaches' him as such. Whatever happens in the child's milieu passes through the filter of the child's attention and becomes a part of his language repertoire.

As teachers we must respect the child for having accomplished these abilities. There is hardly anything new that we can actually teach; we can only create conditions that might enhance the abilities that the child already has. In the context of talk, the main requirement for creating such

conditions is to be conscious of one's response to the child's talk. Everytime we listen to the child and respond, we must

1. Allow the child to say the whole thing
2. Be interested in what the child is trying to say
3. Control our desire to contradict
4. Respond by saying more elaborately what the child has said, using more words and a richer sentence structure, rather than by just saying 'good', or 'that's no good'. For example, if the child has said, 'Squirrel in tree', the teacher's response can be, 'You saw a squirrel going up the tree?'
5. Ask for more information or direct the child to a new aspect of the topic.

To be able to talk to children in this manner requires considerable practice. The foremost thing is to be sensitive to the fact that talk is an important learning resource for the child and a shaping influence on the child's social behaviour and personality.

Unusually quiet children may present a special problem to the teacher. It is quite possible that some children in your class show far greater interest in playing or making things than in talking, but if a child shows no desire to respond, to ask questions, or to tell others about what he is doing, then it may be wise to give such a child some special attention. It is likely that this child has been discouraged or repressed in various ways at home, and his quietness is just one manifestation of the damage that has been done to his personality, especially his self-perception in relation to others. The influence of a repressive home environment is a strong one, but it is by no means impossible to change it. A sensitive teacher who knows what is wrong can bring about miraculous changes in the small child's interaction with the world.

Some activities

These are just some of the dozens of activities any teacher can organize in any ordinary classroom. Each time an

activity is repeated with some little change, it will be received with even greater enthusiasm by the children than it got last time. So enact each activity any number of times, adding something new each time. Keep a record of the variations so that you can introduce your innovations to a new colleague. Nearly each activity described here can become the starting point of a dozen variations.

1

What Did You See?

Stage 1 : Ask one child to go out of the room, see what is happening outside, and tell the class what he saw. For instance, he might report that he saw a truck, two shops and a bicycle.

Stage 2 : Now the rest of the children, preferably sitting in a circle, will ask him questions, one by one, and one question per child. For instance, a child may ask: 'What was hanging from the bicycle's handle?' The reply may be: 'A basket.' The next question may be, 'What colour was the basket?'

Stage 3 : When one round of questioning is complete, the teacher will ask the child who had gone out: 'Who asked the best question?' Supposing he says, 'Shashi asked the best question; the teacher will ask: 'What was the question?'

Stage 4 : The next round starts with Shashi. Ask her to see something that the earlier child had not seen. When she comes back, ask children to come up with new questions—not the ones they have already asked.

2

Asking the Explorers

Send a small group of children, no more then five or six, to study some specific object or place near the school or even inside the school building. For example, they may be sent to examine a cluster of trees, a tea-stall, a broken bridge, or a nest. Ask them to explore it carefully and discuss among themselves everything they notice.

While the explorer group is away, tell the rest of the class about the object in some detail. For example, if the explorers have gone to examine a tea-stall, tell the class about the things available at the stall, who runs it, where do the things available there come from, etc.

When the explorer group comes back, it will face questions from the class. The teacher can also have her turn.

Next time, send a different group.

3

Guess What I Saw

One child goes out, stands at the door or at some distance from the class, and selects one of the hundreds of things she sees around (it could be anything—tree, leaf, squirrel, bird, wires, pole, grass, stones). When she comes back, she says just one sentence about the thing she has in mind. For example, she might say, 'What I saw is brown.'

Now every child in the class gets one chance to ask more about the thing and to guess what it was. For example, questioning may go like this:

Child 1 : 'Is it thin?'
Answer : 'No.'
Child 2 : How big is it?'
Answer : 'It's quite big.'
Child 3 : 'Is it as big as a chair?'
Answer : 'No, it's smaller than a chair.'
Child 4 : 'Can it turn?'.....

Finally when the thing has been guessed correctly, some children may object to the answers they got for their questions. For instance, someone may point out that the colour was not brown but clay-like. In such situations, the teacher's role is very important, as someone who can help children establish subtle distinctions between meanings.

4

Doing What Was Said

Ask children to listen and do what you tell them to do. Start with simple things to do, and ask the whole class to do them together. Examples:

'Touch your head.'
'Close your right eye.'
'Clap on your head.'

Divide the class in two groups. The teacher will give instructions to the first group, and the children of this group will now give similar instructions to the second group, Gradually make your instructions more complicated, for example:

'Touch your head with both hands, then touch your right ear with your right hand.'
'Close both eyes, touch your neighbour, ask him to give you his left hand.'

When children of one group give instructions to the other group, they need not repeat everything they have heard. Encourage them to make up new instructions.

5

Comparing

Make sets of similar-looking things, such as leaves of two or more trees, flowers of different plants, stones, pieces of paper cut in different shapes etc.

Ask children to listen to the description you give of one of the things in a set, and on the basis of the description they must decide which one you are thinking of. Example:

I'm thinking of a leaf that is smooth and long, and it has even edges.'

After doing this activity a few times, ask children to take turns to choose and describe. Change things each time you do this activity. Identify more subtle features each time.

6
How Did You Make That?

Teach children how to make things with paper, cloth, or any other available material. Making a paper boat, a hand puppet, or cat's cradles would be fine. Make elaborate comments on what you are doing as you demonstrate while the children are following you with the appropriate material in their hands. For example, If you are demonstrating how to make a paper boat, describe each step: 'Fold the paper in half. Now turn the corners inwards. Lift the remaining strip.....'

When children have learnt how to make the thing, ask them to describe the process. Next time, assign different things to different groups, and let one group explain to the other how it made its thing.

7
Acting Out

Stage 1 : Choose ten or fifteen different kinds of common actions that children are likely to be seeing everyday. Examples : Sweeping the floor, peeling a banana, washing dishes, cutting vegetables, walking with two full buckets. Whisper to each child which action you have chosen for him or her. Then every child comes forward and performs the action. Others must guess what the action was.

Stage 2 : Make the activity more complicated by choosing actions that involve four or five people. Form groups, and ask each group to perform a collective action. With older children who can read, use slips of paper to tell them what to do.

8

Analysing a Picture

Form groups of five and give a picture to each group. The teacher must examine each picture carefully before the activity starts and must prepare questions according to the levels of response (please refer to page nos. 17 & 18 for the levels of response). So the teacher will have five questions for each group.

Allow at least five minutes for children to examine the picture and discuss it among themselves. Number the children from 1 to 5, and ask the five questions you have.

The questions can be used for informal, individual talk as well. When you have organized this activity a few times, you will find it a lot easier to make up questions, but in the beginning it is best to prepare in advance.

9

Guessing the Right Picture

This activity can be organized only if you have a number of books of children's literature, particularly several picture-story books.

Pair all children. As they sit face to face, one line looks at books and selects one picture out of all the pictures given. Now every child sitting in this line describes the pictures she has selected to the child sitting in front without showing him the picture. When the description is over, the book is handed over to the child who was listening, and he is asked to find the picture that fits the description.

The two lines exchange books and the activity carries on. This activity can be organized slightly differently with the help of pictures on the wall.

10
Making a Story

Collect odd things like lids, torn pieces of cloth, broken bangles, empty toothpaste tubes, little stones, leaves, nibs, etc. Make piles of five or six of these items, and distribute the piles among groups of five or six children. Each group finds a suitable place to sit down and talk about the things in the pile. The aim is to prepare a story in fifteen or twenty minutes. When all groups return to the classroom, one narrator in each group tells the story. Allow variations if other group members insist that the story has not been told correctly.

Success of this activity depends on how much experience your children have of listening to stories. Also, are they used to making up stories? Just about any common experience can be narrated as a nice, little story. Similarly, any common object can become the starting point of a narration. If you show this kind of imagination as a teacher, your children will soon acquire it.

11
Where Do You Live?

Children sit in two lines facing each other; one line has 'tellers', the other 'listeners'. Each teller has to explain to the listener the way to reach her home. Listeners can ask any number of questions to understand better. Example:

Teller : 'Go straight and turn.'
Listener : 'How far should I go straight?'
Teller : 'Go till you find a garbage dump, then turn.'
Listener : 'Turn right or left?'
Teller : 'Right..... No, no, let me see.....'
When all tellers have had a change, the listeners become tellers, and we start again.

What do we achieve?

All the activities described here are aimed at enhancing the child's ability to use language to deal with the world. So while our focus is talk, we are in fact working on a much wider area of the child's development. This wider area includes the ability to use questioning as a way to find new information, making intelligent guesses on the basis of limited information, relating to things at more than one level of acquaintance, and making creative interpretations. Some of the activities provide to the child the opportunity to work in two media, i.e. words and picture. Such an opportunity builds the base for the ability to connect abstract and vivid symbols. It will make an immense contribution to the child's development as a reader.

These activities, and the ones you will design along these lines on your own, will offer many connecting points with the activities described in the next two chapters on reading and writing. These more complex skills undoubtedly widen the child's repertoire of language, but speech remains a primary means of dealing with the world throughout life. So even when children can read and write, talk-based activities must continue.

3

READING

Of all the challenges that teachers of young children must face, the challenge of introducing children to reading is perhaps the most difficult as well as the most exciting. It is the most difficult one because reading is not a simple skill; it involves the combination of many skills and cognitive abilities. There is no single foolproof method of teaching how to read. Every method has its own limitations, and no one can tell the teacher precisely what to do under given circumstances. Yet, the teaching of reading is an exciting thing. It is exciting because so much in the child's life depends on it, and once the child has been introduced to reading and books in a successful manner, there is no end to what the child can accomplish.

So, the real point is how to teach reading in a 'successful' way. This should give us a moment to ponder on the enormous rate of failure we see around us in this matter. Millions of children learn reading every year, and a great many of these children fail to achieve lasting reading skills. A great many manage to read well enough to pass school examinations, but do not develop any interest in reading. So many seem to read well but actually comprehend very little. To a great extent these failures can be laid at the door of poor teaching of reading.

No teacher needs to be reminded of the role that sound reading skills play in the child's overall development. Yet, it seems that few teachers know precisely what 'sound reading skills' are and how they can be developed. The way in which we will look at reading in this chapter,

'sound reading skills' would mean *skills that enable the child to associate meaning with written or printed language.* Unless a child can *make sense* of what he or she reads, or *relate it to something else* that he already knows, we cannot call his reading sound. So, in terms of our work, we will define reading as a process of finding meaning in written words.

The way things are

Once we agree to work by this definition, we will soon see that we cannot be satisfied with a number of things that routinely occur in kindergartens and the early grades of primary schools. For example, rote recitation of the alphabet, or choral sounding out of a story word by word cannot be described as very satisfactory procedures for the teaching of reading by our definition. While doing these activities, children cannot associate any meaning with the written language. Separate letters of the alphabet do not mean anything. If words in a story are read one by one, they mean very little; one cannot relate to the story this way.

Some people might say that such activities may not be immediately meaningful, but they serve as the basis for meaningful reading in future. Perhaps this argument has some truth in it. However, the truth will apply only if all children stay long enough in school to get a chance to read meaningfully. What about those children who feel totally frustrated by drills like repeating a sound a dozen times, copying a letter, sounding out separate words? We all know that children like activities that have an immediate pay off. Few children can feel excited about doing something that promises to yield results in the remote future. And for many children, the future may not offer the opportunity to stay on at school. Early frustration and failure, along with many other factors, lead to their departure from school.

So, the key question we face is: 'How to make the initial teaching of reading meaningful?' Some of the things that

teachers can do are described in the following pages. To those who are used to old methods, some of these things may appear totally bewildering or impossible. Surely, if the old methods were working fine, we would not need new ones. We need not just use new methods but a totally new perspective because the old methods are not working well.

Starting with books

It is important to start with books—rather than with flash cards, charts, or wooden letters—because it is books that we want children to be able to read ultimately. Other materials, such as charts and cards, may also be useful, especially as supplements to books. The child's mastery over cards or charts does not often give a sense of accomplishment that the ability to read a book can give. But let us first be clear, what kind of books we are talking about, and then, what to do with them. The books that can form the basis of reading instruction are the same that have been mentioned in the context of talk in the last chapter. If you can make a collection of about twenty books of children's literature, you are ready to start a new kind of reading instruction for your group of children. Along with these twenty books that you can buy, you can *make* some books yourself. Any good story written in clear handwriting and illustrated with diagrams of pictures (that children can draw) can become a permanent part of your book collection. Similarly, you can make collections of poems, songs, and the rhymes children sing while playing games.

Reading a book to children

Always make sure that children are sitting around you on the floor and the group is no bigger than ten. When one group is sitting around you, other children in the class must have something else to do. In the group sitting around you, every child should be able to see the book as you read it and turn its pages. As you read, make sure that you don't just read what is written, but convert it into your

What is Reading?

Reading is a mystery to those who cannot read. Thirty years ago, even experts did not know precisely what happens when a child learns to read. On the basis of their experience and convention, teachers had evolved certain 'methods' such as the alphabet methods, the 'look and say' methods, the 'word' methods, and so on. None of these 'methods' were based on the knowledge of the reading process. Yet, these 'methods' continue to be popular to this day.

Now we know that reading involves *sampling* of graphic information. As our eyes wade through shapes of letters, punctuation marks, combinations of letters in words and spaces between words, our mind does not have to handle all of these graphic details. If this were the case, the mind's capacity to process separate bits of information would be overloaded, and the speed at which most of us normally operate would become impossible. This is precisely what happens to a lot of children who learn reading by conventional methods. They break down each word into smaller units, thus overloading the mind's capacity to process the meaning of words. The competent reader's eyes prevent such overloading by allowing only a limited, selective intake of the graphic data available in the text. He does not pay attention to the entire body of a letter, or to all letters in a word, or to all words in a sentence. As he reads, his eyes take into account a small proportion of the graphic details. He fills in the rest by intelligent guessing or prediction on the basis of his previous acquaintance with the shapes of letters, words, their meanings, their combinations, and generally with the world.

Reading is not an isolated behaviour. It involves simultaneous processing of all three types of clues that any use of language consists of, namely (i) graphophonemic clues or the shapes of letters and the sounds associated with them; (ii) syntactic clues or word order (such as, noun follows adjective); and (iii) semantic clues or the meanings of words. As habitual users of language, we develop certain expectations relating to all three types of clues. These *expectations* help us fill in by prediction or intelligent guessing what our eyes have ignored during their speedy journey through graphically presented symbols.

own idiom. You may have books which tell a story or talk about something in great detail. Plain reading aloud of a long story will not work. You must know the story so that you can shorten it, using your own words. On the other hand, if the text written on each page is just one or two lines, then you can elaborate it by adding details. It is especially important that you point to the details shown in the illustration and talk about these details in a relaxed manner.

Book reading of this kind is not an occasion for asking questions or testing children in any other from. When the story is over, it is over, and it is time to move on to something else unless a child wants to say or ask about something. But as a teacher, you must spare book-reading sessions from your questioning.

If every child gets at least three chances in a week to listen to a book being read in this way, you will soon see that children will begin to talk about the books you have read. Repeat a book as many times as you or the children want. Soon enough you will notice that children will become so familiar with the pictures and the story as to anticipate your reading. Such anticipation will one day lead children to read the book by themselves. By then they will know all the things the book says, and they will have established all kinds of associations with these things. When they read it—often without knowing all the words on a page or all the letters in a word—they will relate to it at many levels of meaning or association.

Singing poetry

If you have read the little essay called 'What is Reading?' given above in a box you will see that the skill of systematic anticipation plays a key role in the process of reading. Poetry can make a wonderful contribution to the development of this skill. By listening to poetry regularly little children get accustomed to the basic patterns of a language. What is especially useful about poetry in this matter

is that it is so easy to store it in one's memory. Small children have to put in no special efforts to memorise poetry; just by enjoying it several times and reciting it they make it a part of their permanent collection.

The important question for the teacher is: 'How to select good poems and where to find them?' The poems that most primers and textbooks carry are often of a low quality and have little value for the development of language. Similarly, much of the poetry published in Hindi monthly magazines has little worth. Most poems we see in textbooks and magazines are moralistic and dull. They have an artificial sentence structure and vocabulary. They lack the feel of real day-to-day language. This is why they have hardly any values as resources for learning language.

Quite different kind of poems are needed for building the foundation of children's reading skills. A selection of such poems is given on the next two pages. Such poems can surely be found in all Indian languages, but the teachers who want to find them will have to search very carefully. They will need to keep their eyes open for playful and natural use of language. Also, purely didactic poems will have to be left out.

One thing that any teacher can easily do is to write out the songs that children sing while playing certain games, such as while skipping, jumping, and playing ball. These are traditional rhymes, and it may be difficult to collect them in cities. However, with some effort, we can make our own collections of such songs. The collection can take the form of one or more little books with a song written nearly on each page, along with a suitable picture which can either be made or cut out from a magazine or some other source. It is not always necessary that the picture should accurately portray what the poem says. If the picture simply evokes a mood or a scene that is vaguely associated with the poem, this is fine. You can prepare several books by yourself in this manner, each one of about

16 pages, using ordinary white paper if you cannot afford the slightly more expensive drawing paper. If you use drawing paper, the book will last longer and you won't have to prepare the same book each year.

1.
I have a little cough, sir,
In my little chest, sir,
Every time I cough, sir,
It leaves a little pain, sir,
Cough, cough, cough, cough,
There it is again, sir.

— *Robert Grave*

2.
I saw a squirrel
Run through the wood
By every tree
It stopped; and stood
Ready to climb
With its paws on the trunk.
And every time
(For no danger came)
It hurried on,
And was gone.

— *John Buxton*

3.
If you should meet a crocodile,
Don't take a stick and poke him;
Ignore the welcome in his smile,
Be careful not to stroke him.
For as he sleeps upon the Nile,
He thinner gets and thinner;
And when'ver you meet a crocodile
He's ready for his dinner.

— *Anonymous*

4.

I walked out in my Coat of Pride;
I looked about on every side; And said the mountains should not be

Just where they were, and that the sea
Was out of place, and that the beach

should be an oak! And then, from each
I turned in dignity, as if

They were not there! I sniffed a sniff;
And climbed upon my sunny shelf;

And sneezed a while; and scratched myself.

— James Stephens

5.

Bow-wow, says the dog,
Mew-mew, says the cat;
Grunt-grunt, goes the pig; And squeak goes the rat.
Tu-whu, says the owl;

Caw-caw, says the crow;
Quack-quack, says the duck; And moo, says the cow.

(a taditional rhyme)

6.

Who has seen the wind?
Neither I nor you;
But when the leaves hang trembling,
The wind is passing by.

Who has seen the wind?
Neither you nor I;
But when the trees bow down their heads,
The wind is passing through.

— Christina Rossetti

7.

Faster than fairies, faster than witches,
Bridges and houses, hedges and ditches,
And charging along like troops in a battle,
All through the meadows the horses and cattle;
All of the sights of the hill and the plain
Fly as thick as driving rain;
And ever again, in the wink of an eye,
Painted stations whistle by.

—R.L. Stevenson

8.

Behind the blind I sit and watch
The people passing—passing by;
And not a single one can see
My tiny watching eye.

They cannot see my little room,
All yellowed with the shaded sun,
They do not even know I'm here;
Nor'll guess when I am gone.

— Walter de la Mare

9.

I love little pusy,
Her coat is so warm,
And if I don't hurt her,
She'll do me no harm,
So I'll not pull her tail,
Nor drive her away.
But pussy and I,
Very gently will play.
She'll sit by my side,
And I'll give her some food,
And she'll love me,
Because I am gentle and good.

(a traditional rhyme)

10.
A E I O U
We are very little creatures,
All of different voice and features;
One of us in glass is set.,
One of us you'll find in jet.
T'other you may see in tin,
And the fourth a box within.
If the fifth you should pursue,
I can never fly from you.

— *Jonathan Swift*

The way to read poetry books is the same as for other books, that is, sitting with a group of children with the book in the middle. After two or three occasions, you can sing the poem aloud without the book and ask children to sing with you. They will be able to sing the poem from memory quite soon if the poem is of good quality. Later, when you read it again from the book, they will anticipate the words given on the pages. Children of six can happily copy out a whole poem on a separate piece of paper or slate, and if they know it by heart by that time, they will have little difficulty recognizing individual words after a few days.

Making books and reading them

Having books in the class (not just in the school) is of course good and useful, but it is no substitute for making books. The best reading material that children can have for learning to read is what their teacher prepares for them, both individually and collectively. The activities we have discussed so far (i.e. telling and reading stories, talking about pictures, singing poetry) will provide the basic resource for the material that the teacher is going to produce. The raw material, i.e. paper, will depend on what is available. If children have copybooks, these can

surely become proper 'books' in the sense explained below. If the teacher or school can afford to buy loose paper, both ordinary paper and the stronger drawing paper, it will add to the possibilities.

The starting point can be found anywhere around the age of five, and we must remember that all children in a class can never start reading at the same time or progress at the same pace. Variations can be quite striking. Some children may show great interest and capability at five, and they will master reading skills by the time they are seven, whereas some children will continue to have difficulties when they are eight. The teacher who is in touch with her children will not worry about such different pacing. All she must do is to reflect on the progress that each child is making and the special difficulties that some may be facing. This is a challenging task; in some situations, where the number of children is large, it may be impossible. In such a case, only a limited accomplishment can be imagined.

Out of the talk generated by the various activities relating to stories, pictures (discussed in the last chapter), and poems, choose a word or sentence for each paper. It is important that the word or sentence should represent the story or picture which created the context for talk. This is the only way to ensure that it will carry some immediate meaning for the children. Read aloud what you have written for each child. Then ask the child to copy it below or to write over it.* When you write a new word or sentence for the child to read everyday, always look back at the previous 'texts', asking the child to read them, reading yourself when the child faces difficulty. And each day, as you sit with the child to write a new sentence and to listen to the old ones, remember to extend the older texts by talking about them. For example, if an old text was

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** See the next chapter, especially the section under 'Between talk and writing' for means to develop pre-writing hand-movement.*

about a dog, ask one or two questions and make one or more remarks about where the dog went or where he is this morning. Finally, don't bother to correct minor mistakes in the child's reading of these little texts that you have created. For example, if the sentence 'rain came' is read as 'rain comes', don't correct such an error, for after all the error does not damage the meaning.

Each copybook in the class will gradually become a book of ideas or stories. As you look at the child's writing below the text you write each day, you will notice that the shapes of different letters vary in terms of difficulty for the child. Some letters or signs require special practice, and such practice can be done on the same page, as many times as necessary. The ultimate aim is that the child becomes proficient in the writing and recognition of each letter in the alphabet of the language you are working with.

Some people think, and they might have already told you, that the Hindi alphabet is an altogether different thing from the English alphabet. They think that the *'matras'* used in Hindi must be learnt separately, and that initially children should be asked to read only those few simple words that have no *'matra'* This view is based on an assumption, and it is certainly not necessary for every teacher to accept the assumption. *'Matras'* are a part of Hindi's nature as a language; there is no reason why children should not be allowed to encounter *'matras'* as a part of their overall progress in reading meaningful texts. It is another matter to give them special practice in writing the *'matras'* or in using *'matras'* in their own writing later on.

Meaning and sounds

It is important to start with meaningful units, such as words, sentences or a story, rather than the letters of the alphabet. When children become visually familiar with a text and they know what it means, they can be encouraged to notice its components. So, if we first help children to become familiar with a set of words or short sentences

forming a simple story, we can then draw their attention to the letters used in each word and also the sound-values these letters stand for. Visual familiarity implies that the child will treat the word itself as an image. The opportunity to 'read' sizeable number of words with the help of this kind of visual memory does wonders to build self-confidence and motivation for future reading. Subsequently, children can learn to identify the letters used in a word and the sounds they represent. Once they have analysed in this manner all the words which they had earlier learnt to read with the help of visual familiarity, they are ready to combine the two processes and read a simple text on their own. Progress from here on will depend on the frequency of opportunities they get for reading and on the ethos the teacher creates for making reading a popular and enjoyable activity.

Some activities

Once again, what we have below are some suggested activities, indicating the kinds of things you can do to make the learning of reading skills an enjoyable process. As they are described here, they relate to different levels of progress, but they can be adapted to suit any age or level of accomplishment with a little effort and re-designing.

1

Floor as a Map

If you have a classroom without furniture, fine; otherwise, take children out to the verandah, backyard, or wherever there is an open space for children to move about freely.

Choose symbols for running, walking, hopping, skipping, galloping, taking giant strides, tiny half-steps, walking backwards and sideways. All symbols should be simple and easy to remember, for example: running: ⟶
skipping: 

Now assign each symbol to one corner of the open space. Explain to children what each symbol stands for. When you do this activity for the first time, don't take more than three or four symbols, otherwise the children may get confused. Choose any point to start. Ask children to do what the symbol says when they reach the spot where the symbol is drawn on the floor or displayed in chalk on a stone or cardboard. When each child has a chance to participate a few times, replace the symbol with the relevant word, writing it neatly where the symbol was drawn. Increase the number of symbols as children become familiar with them. And each time they return to the classroom, ask them to draw a map of the space outside, showing what they did where.

2

Dividing the Alphabet

Divide the alphabet into three parts and write each part in big letter on a long strip of paper. Stick up all three parts on the wall at some distance from each other—at points where all children can see them easily. For a language like Hindi, use a fourth strip for 'matras'.

Now write a word on the blackboard. Ask children to see the letters and signs in this word carefully and identify them in the strips on the wall.

3

Reading Science

Select some unifying themes to talk about familiar objects. For example, you could select 'things that fly', 'round things', 'flat things', and 'things that swim'.

Write the theme on the blackboard, read it aloud, and ask children to tell you which two or three things would go under this theme. For example, under 'things that fly', they might tell you: kite, aeroplane, bird, and cloud.

Ask children to copy the list and draw little sketches of the things included under a theme beside the words.

4

Hop-scotch with Words

Prepare a grid, or several grids if all children are going to play, on the ground. Write names of familiar objects (e.g. glass, spoon, house, tree) in each house and make a little symbol showing the object.

Divide the children in groups of five with one child in each group acting as the referee. The referee's job is to throw the stone into a house and to supervise each child as he lands in each house, reads aloud the object it stands for, and skips over the house with the stone. The referee's job must rotate each time this activity is organized.

5

Doing What You Read

Children who have learnt to read still must learn that reading is related to doing things. In this activity, the teacher stands quietly near the blackboard, and instead of saying things, she writes a brief instruction what a child must do.

Number all children, and each time you write an instruction on the black board, mention a child's number beside it. For example, you may write:
'Get up, bring a stone—10'. The instruction means that child No. 10 must get up and bring a stone from outside. Now the next instruction may say: 'Ask No. 10 for the stone, place it on your right knee—5'.

Gradually, you can incorporate complex commands in this activity. Such commands may ask a child to look carefully at a poster hanging in the class and identify a subtle detail in it, or to describe the way to the local hospital, or to count the number of trees outside the school, and so on.

6
Last Word, Next Word

This activity will require a substantial number of books of children's literature.

Distribute books among children so that each child has a book he can read easily. Ask children to open the book anywhere, see the right side page. Is there a full stop at the end of this page? If there is, the child must open another page.

Now all children will read the right side page silently. Ask them to stop when they reach the end. Tell them that they must not turn the page.

Ask each child to guess what the next word (on the next page might be). When she has made her guess, ask her to verify. You can let children clap for a correct guess.
When everyone has had a chance and they are now facing the left side page, start again. This time, each child is asked to recall what the last word on the previous page was.

7
Three Questions

Divide children into two groups sitting in lines so that each child faces another. Now give a book to every child and ask her to open it anywhere, read the right side page and then give the book to the child facing her.

This time every child will read the page that her companion has just read. Having read this page, the child can ask up to three questions which the companion must answer.

In the initial stages, children may not be able to decide what to ask. You may have to show them examples of questions they can ask. You can train them to prepare questions about what they read.

8

Poetry Muddle

This is a very complicated activity, so you must prepare it carefully and well in advance. Once you have prepared the material, you can use it many times, and you will see how exciting the results are!

Select several 4-line poems, preferably rhymed all through. You must have as many poems as the number of children. Now supposing you are going to organize this activity with 20 children, write the first line of all twenty poems on separate pieces of paper. On each paper, write the second line of a different poem. Follow this for the third and the fourth lines. You will end up with twenty papers, each one with four lines from four different poems.

Children will sit in a circle. To start, tell the children that the poems they have are all muddled and they have to find the last 3 lines that actually belong to the first line they have on their paper.

Ask a child to read the second line on the paper. All the other children will listen carefully and consider whether this line might be theirs. The child who thinks it belongs to him raises his hand and asks for the line. If his choice is correct (according to the teacher), he notes down the line. The child who has given this line scratches it out on his paper. Now the next child reads out his second line, and you carry on this way till every child search for the appropriate third line!

9
Responding

The levels of response to a picture, and the questions associated with these levels, that were discussed earlier on page nos. 17 & 18 are quite relevant for responding to literary material such as stories and poems.

When you distribute stories, magazines, or books among children, prepare your questions along the lines suggested. When children have finished reading or a little later, you can use the questions to organize a discussion on the basis of children's responses. But don't do this everytime they have read something. Perhaps you can choose a day every week when children can discuss what they have read that week.

Children's responses to stories and poems must not be evaluated. Nor should you ever suggest that a response was 'wrong'. Every response is valid, including the ones that distort the content of what was read. What a response indicates is the child's way of accommodating the content of a text. The child must be left free to arrive at a different, perhaps more 'accurate', interpretation on later readings.

Having Started

The activities described here will offer many starting points for new activities, based on new, freshly prepared material. As a teacher you will soon notice that children who are introduced to reading along the lines suggested here find any reading material worthy of comprehension. Even a scrap of old newspaper can serve as a puzzle. By tearing it up into smaller pieces and asking children to recombine them with the help of the sentences printed on them, you can use the scrap of paper as a means of encouraging the skills required to become a good reader. These skills are:

intelligent guessing, associating meaning with text, and judging the correctness of one's guess.

When a child has learnt to read, the teacher's job is to make sure that the child uses reading for a variety of purposes. Many of our primary schools do not provide encouragement for the use of reading for a variety of purposes. It tends to get associated with textbooks and preparation for examinations. Reading to find new information, reading for developing a personal interest, and reading for pleasure get neglected. Reading fails to become a part of the child's overall personal development. As a consequence, the child who is capable of reading fails to become a reader. This is indeed a grave failure, but any teacher can avert it.

4

WRITING

Writing is a kind of talk. As we write, we communicate with someone although most often the person we are communicating with is not present in front of us. At the same time it is true that we do a lot of writing simply to preserve something—a piece of information, an idea, a memory. But even in this role, writing can be seen as a talk—with oneself. If I write about my experiences of this day in a diary, I will be preserving these experiences, most probably with the hope that I would, myself, like to read about them again someday.

As teachers, then, we must introduce writing to young children as a form of talk. By the time children come to school for the first time they are already capable of talking with confidence with a variety of people on a variety of topics. Their 'sense of audience' has started to grow. This sense is very useful for learning to write, but they will need to apply it to an audience who may not always be present. Some kind of audience may of course be present, such as the teacher or other children and oneself. It is the job of the teacher to ensure that children see writing as an act of addressing someone.

Let us be clear that we want something very different from what is happening at present. Millions of young children are being taught writing as a mechanical skill. It starts with teaching them the shapes of letters in the alphabet. Children are asked to copy each letter dozens of times, and the teacher inspects the shape of the letter they produce. It takes several weeks in many schools to cover

the entire alphabet in this manner. During this long time, learning to write loses all sense of purpose in the child's view. Later on when children are asked to write words, and still later to compose sentences, they look upon the teacher to tell them what to write. In short, they do not see writing as a means to say something. They see it as a ritual or drill that their teacher has taught them to perform.

Now if we want to depart from this situation, we must make sure that we present writing as an extension of talk. The activities given in the chapter on talk (Chapter 2) are, therefore, extremely useful for organizing writing activities. Talk offers an opportunity to sort things out for an audience, and this is what makes it so important for the teaching of writing.

Between talk and writing

The first thing, then, is to ensure that before writing is introduced to a group of children, they must all be capable of talking with confidence about their life and the things happening around them. What this means is that these children must have

(i) the desire to share their experiences and perceptions; and
(ii) the ability to narrate one's experience or present one's view.

These children are ready to learn writing. However, a lot more is necessary before they can start writing words and sentences.

Writing any language involves making complicated shapes on paper. It requires acute perception and memory of subtle differences in the tiny shapes of individual letters of the alphabet. It also requires the ability to use 'abstract symbols' to convey ideas or feelings. Letters of the alphabet are abstract symbols. They are abstract inasmuch as they carry no pictorial similarity with the sounds they convey. For example, the shape of the letter 'A' has no particular

reason to have the sound value of 'A'. We just accept it as 'A'. The child who wants to write English must accept 'A' as 'A' and use it only where 'A' is appropriate, either in combination with other letters or independently (in the sense of 'one'). In other words, he must get totally accustomed to a number of such arbitrary symbols.

The abilities mentioned above cannot develop in a day. The best way to develop them is by giving children the opportunity to draw and paint regularly. Few schools might have the money to spend on buying drawing paper and colours for all the children. But perhaps a lot of schools can organize drawing and painting with the help of the following material:

- pieces of charcoal, chalk, slate pencils (known as 'batti' in Hindi), and red sandstone ('geru' in Hindi);
- other kinds of locally available colour:
- old newspaper, used paper sheets, old copybooks or any other paper;
- plastic or tin cups or boxes.

Most of such material can be collected gradually, and the teacher can build this collection over a few years so that eventually she has a good stock of everything. One missing thing in this list is brushes. We do not need brushes

Who will make all the arrangements for drawing and painting? Who will distribute paper, mix colours, clean the floor when a glass of water spills, and so on? A teacher who takes all these responsibilities on herself and takes no help from children in organizing things and tidying up afterwards will soon be exhausted and perhaps frustrated. She may want to abandon such activities, and this will be very sad. To avoid this possibility, every teacher must make it a point to get each child's help to spread paper, mix colour and water, pile up all the paintings neatly, and wash all the brushes. This training of the children is part of their learning.

if children are going to work with dry colours. But if a teacher wants children to mix colours in water, then she must find ways to acquire thick brushes. For very young children it may be possible to make brushes with cotton wool, but such brushes are quite difficult to maintain or use. On the other hand, if proper brushes are bought once and if they are washed carefully each time after they have been used, they will last a long time.

What are children going to depict in their drawings? This question is of central importance in the development of the desire to communicate and express. Once again we must look at the present situation and depart from it consciously. In the majority of schools where any kind of painting is ever done, children are asked to depict some stereotyped topics or objects, such as the lotus flower, kite, banana, and so on. Of course there is nothing wrong with a lotus flower; what is wrong is that a teacher should tell a five-year old child what he or she should depict.

The teacher knows that she is always in a position of authority. Whatever she will tell the child to do will be taken as a command. So if she tells the child to depict something specific like a banana, the child takes this as a command. From this command, the child learns the following things:

- the teacher knows what I am supposed to depict in my paintings;
- painting is not a medium for me to express myself;
- what I depict as banana must be approved by the teacher as a banana.

It is a common sight in nurseries and primary schools to see children using thin pencils with great difficulty, making a lotus flower or banana with great commitment to the teacher's command and with equally great frustration in not being able to fulfil it to their satisfaction. Primary schools may not have brushes, but a great many of them insist that all children must have erasers. And erasers are used by children as a tool to achieve perfection.

They make the figure of a banana, then erase it because they feel it is no good, then they make it again, and erase it again—till the paper tears and the teacher is totally upset. In such practice, they surely get a lot of opportunity for finger movement (for good pre-writing preparation?) But they get no sense of satisfaction at being able to communicate. This makes the entire activity quite wasteful and destructive.

Drawing and painting can contribute to the child's overall development, and especially to his development as a user of language and a writer if the child is left free to explore these media independently. If you are working with very young children (i.e. three or four olds), your job as a teacher is mainly to provide enough paper and colour, and to have the patience to see the child's work completed. Given the ethos of being directed by the teacher in our country, many children will ask you to tell them what to draw or how to draw it. *It will not be easy to mould this habit of asking the teacher for direction into enjoyable use of the medium to express one's own ideas.* Such moulding can be achieved provided the teacher is patient, encouraging, and knows what her aim is.

Drawing with colours is of course not the only means of developing children's hand movement. A lot of other activities can contribute to such development. Pouring water from one pot to the other, sorting things such as seeds (the larger pulses, such as rajma, chana, lobia, are excellent for this), lifting things and putting them back, and feeling the shapes of things are examples of such activities. One may expect that such activities are common in homes.

Unfortunately, this is not true.

In many many homes, including homes of the poor as well as middle class people, children are not allowed to touch things. Often they are not allowed to touch anything that can break; so, something that might assist the child to learn how to handle objects carefully is kept out of the child's reach. Consequently, a large number of children are

deprived of basic experiences that their hands should have had. The influence of such deprivation on writing may be indirect, but it is a grave influence. The teacher who does not bother to provide activities that might let the child overcome the deprivation may face serious problems in teaching writing skills. Drawing and painting are excellent media to avert such problems.

Starting to write

At what point or age we can start teaching how to write is a decision that every teacher must make according to her assessment of the children she is working with. A good criterion for deciding is whether the children have developed reasonable amount of flexibility and control in their hand and finger movement through drawing and other activities. Children who have been exposed to books or other forms of reading material (see the chapter on Reading) may themselves demand opportunities to write. This will make the teacher's task easier. When children demand something, it is a sure sign that they want to do it at that point. It may be that the task proves too hard, so the demand is withdrawn after some time. But it will surely be made again after a few days. This is how children encounter and master a lot of things, and the case of writing is no different.

When you have decided to start teaching how to write, the first thing to do is to *ask children* to tell you what you should write about. If you have been using the verb 'write' in your conversation with children, they will have no difficulty understanding what you mean. But if the children do not know what you want, you can proceed differently by asking for names of things, such as: animals they admire, things they like to eat, things that move, things they are afraid of,* and so on. You can tell them that

*If this suggestion sounds strange, do remember that things that a child is afraid of have great emotional power in his mind, and therefore, he will remember such things easily.

you will write one word on every child's copybook or on the floor, and so every child must give you a different word to write. Ask children to copy this word just below where you have written it or trace over it first. The floor is an excellent space as a resource for learning to write. It allows you to write in big letters, and it is a lot cheaper since the only thing you have to buy is chalk or charcoal, or some other local variant. The only problem that the floor presents is the need to wash it afterwards. If you can involve children in washing it at the end of the day, you can achieve very high levels of motivation for learning to write. Some parents may oppose the involvement of children in washing the floor, and you will have to decide what to do with their opposition. These are, of course, not the only ways to start. Those working with children will have heard of several approaches, the most common being that of starting by teaching how to write letters of the alphabet. Whether one uses the blackboard to write out the letters in large size, or cuts them in cardboard, or asks children to copy them from their primer—one thing we must keep in mind is that *the alphabet has no meaning, and therefore excessive or isolated emphasis on the alphabet can discourage children from seeing writing as a means of meaningful communication.* However, the alphabet can be fruitfully introduced after the teacher has established several strong bridges between words and meaning.

There can be many ways to incorporate the alphabet in early writing without teaching it in a mechanical fashion. For example, you can maintain a long list of words, and present a small selection of those that start with the same letter. Draw children's attention to this fact, and then ask them to spot more similar letters. Each time you organize this kind of activity, you can ask children to review the words they had seen last time. As you gradually build up their stock of commonly used words, you can begin to sort them out according to different characteristics (e.g. length, part of speech, content, etc.) and paste up the words that

belong to one category on the wall. There is no point pasting them up so high that only you can see them clearly. I would not have mentioned this if I had not visited many schools where pictures and charts are stuck far above the reach of children. Any material which is placed too high for children to see is both useless and insulting to them.

Beyond the beginning

The real challenge of teaching how to write starts *after* children have mastered the basic skills involved in writing. The challenge consists of developing in children :

(i) a sense of audience, and

(ii) the desire to convey.

To achieve this dual purpose, the teacher will have to keep a long-term perspective in mind while organizing every little activity. Once again, the teacher must remember that the sense of audience and the desire to convey are relevant for both writing and talk. So, any activity that involves writing will benefit from the opportunity to talk, and vice-versa.

Having a sense of audience requires us to have a definite person in mind when we write. On the other hand, the desire to convey requires us to have a definite purpose as we write. Often, the writing that children do—whether words or sentences or whole stories—are meant for the teacher to read. In order to extend the child's sense of audience for classroom writing, the teacher can suggest some specific audiences for different activities. The child sitting next, someone else in the class, children of another class, and parents can be some possibilities. Imagined receivers like a dog who visits the school at recess, a bus, or children of the adjoining village or town can present exciting opportunities for writing. As children grow older, their perception of the audience will undoubtedly widen towards the inclusion of many adults in society who perform specific roles. The teacher's task is to notice when the child is using a distinct

strategy of language to reach a specific audience, and to encourage such use. For example, if we ask children to tell a dog why they like him, it is important to encourage them to say something that the dog will understand and appreciate. What one says to a dog will differ in the content and style from what one might say to a friend. One might say to a dog, 'Good dog, sit down.' To a friend, one says, 'I like you because you play with me.' The choice of content for any specific audience influences the choice of words, phrases, and the structure of the entire sentence. But one need not teach about words and structures independently. Children will gradually learn the implications of their choices when they have had opportunities to write for a variety of audiences.

Having something to convey depends on several aspects of the child's personality, perhaps the most important aspect being confidence in one's own perceptions. A child who has never been asked to talk about what he has seen, or a child whose narration of events has always been criticised or ignored is unlikely to have developed confidence in his own perceptions. Such a child is also unlikely to feel excited about conveying something. The usual response of such a child to an invitation to talk or write is: 'I've nothing to say'. The child may not say this; but by asking the teacher to tell him what to write he will show that he has nothing of his own to say. If you are working with such children, your job will be doubly challenging, for you will have to rebuild their confidence in themselves, in the validity of their view of the world.

The teacher's response

As soon as children have started writing on their own, a great deal of their progress starts to depend on the teacher's response. In many many primary schools in our country, the only response the teacher makes consists of corrections of spelling or grammar. Copybooks of children are littered with corrections made by the teacher in red

ink. On the other hand, when the child has written everything 'correctly', the teacher simply puts a tick mark and signs. Both such responses are highly inadequate if not outright destructive. Apart from correcting the child's mistakes or putting an approval sign, the teacher must write something expressing her response to the child's writing. Did it remind you of something? Why does it seems a good piece of writing? What more could be said? Has someone written something differently? There are a hundred ways of responding to a piece of writing. Every-time, as a teacher you must extend what the child has conveyed, just as you need to extend the child's talk by expressing your response in an elaborate manner. By writing a sentence or two on the child's copybook, you will show to the child that you see writing as a form of dialogue rather than as a mechanical exercise. Even if what you are checking is a grammar drill—something all teachers have to cope with—you can say something interesting and personal, although brief, at the end. It will be more important to the child than your signature.

For correcting mistakes, it is not enough to spot them. If you merely spot the mistakes and circle or underline them in red ink, you are only emphasising examples of the child's inadequacy. More important is to show your recognition of the child's mastery where it has occurred and to offer the correct alternative to portions where a mistake has occurred. Another way of helping the child with a mistake is to invite the child's active attention to identification of the mistake. For example if you want to correct the spelling of a certain word, give the right spelling and now write the word thrice with different spellings. Ask the child to spot the correct spelling. If you involve the child in spotting an error, you are helping him to develop the capacity to look at his own work with a critical eye.

Some activities

1
Familiar Things

Talk about 'sets' of household objects or other familiar things, such as 'utensils', 'clothes', 'vehicles'. Ask children to name different things that would come under a set (e.g. spoons, pans, cups, under 'utensils'). List all things that form a set on the blackboard.
Form two groups of children. Every child in the first group will copy the name of one thing from the list. For instance, someone will have 'spoon', someone else will have 'cup'. Children of the second group will now demand things, one at a time. Whoever has the demanded things in the first group must stand up and go over to the child who has demanded it, and show him how to write the word he had copied earlier.

2
Collecting Signs

Depending on the area where you work, you can choose signs of different kinds. In villages, slogans written on wall, posters, and advertisements can be used.
Ask children to copy the signs they see on their way to school. Write all the signs on the blackboard and ask the children to explain where they found them and what they mean.

3
Completing Words

Pair all children. One child will start a word, the other one will finish it. They will take turns till each has completed ten words successfully.

4
Just One Word

Form groups of five. Each group will have one piece of paper or copybook to write on, and at least one pencil. Select one child as the 'starter' in each group.

The starter thinks of a sentence but he can only write one word on the paper which now goes to the next child in the group. This child can also contribute just one word—that goes with the first which is already there. The paper keeps going around till the sentence is complete.

Anyone can decide at any point that the sentence has become 'sick' and therefore must be abandoned. If others agree, the group gives the paper back to the starter or selects a different starter to write a fresh word.

5
Drawing a Map

Ask children to tell the class how they go home. First tell them how you go home—describing briefly but clearly two or three things that you meet on your way.

When every child has had a chance to tell, ask them to draw a map showing the route they have just talked about. To demonstrate, draw the map showing your route on the blackboard. Go to each child as the map is in progress and write the name of one of the objects that he wants to show on the map, such as 'tree', 'shop', mailbox', etc. Ask the child to copy the word just below the map.

Next time, do this activity by talking about the way to some other place, such as 'my friend's house', 'sabzi mandi', 'temple'.

Each time you organize this activity, increase the number of words you write in the map.

6
Places Around Us

This is an extension of the last activity, but this time we ask children to draw maps of spaces or places they know rather than of the way to get there. Examples:

the school's backyard
the classroom
nearby pond or river

Write the name of any one object shown in the map at the appropriate place. Ask children to make the same map again, this time writing the name of the object where it belongs in the map.

7
Getting There

Ask children to find out from their elders the names of nearby villages or towns.

Write the names of these places on the blackboard. Ask children to copy them.

Arrange the names according to direction, making a simple map on the blackboard. Distribute the names among children and arrange the children according to the map. Create a short dialogue based on the directions for each place.

Example:

'Where are you going?'
'I'm going to Jhansi.'
'Where is it?'
'In the north.'
'How far.....'

Introduce words for direction and distance in writing.

8
Writing About Pictures

See activity No. 8 in the chapter on 'Talk' and organise it with older children, asking them to write answers to your questions.
Use children's own pictures as well as advertisements, magazines, etc. Start by asking children to describe the picture, then proceed to the more complex questions.

9
Listing Sounds

To do this activity for the first time, include four or five older children who already know how to write. They will serve as 'recorders'.
Divide children into groups of five or six. Each group has to prepare a list of all the sounds that can be distinguished by the group members. Each group can move around a little, taking turns to stay at the gate for a few minutes, going to the back, etc. Whenever a member identifies a new sound (e.g. the creak of a door, leaves shaking), she tells the recorder who enters it in the list.
When the groups reassemble, the recorders read out their lists. Members can be asked to copy the sound they contributed, identify it in the list, and write it out.

10
Making Poetry

Make groups of five. Give four lines of poetry to each group and ask them to add four more lines.
Let each group go away to some distance for fifteen or twenty minutes of discussion.

5

TEXTBOOKS, SPACES AND EXAMINATION

This final chapter is about the realities of life at a primary school and the question dealt with here is:

'Is it possible to follow the suggestions given in this handbook and, at the same time, fulfil the routine requirements of an ordinary primary school?'

Surely this question will bother a number of teachers who might read this book. And it is an important question for those too who want to use this handbook as a manual for the training of teachers. No one is more aware of the realities of school life than the teacher. So if this book does not convince the teacher that it has been written with recognition of the school's reality, it will surely fail to make any sense.

Primers and prescribed text books

Every teacher in our country is expected to 'cover' the textbook; that is, she is expected to finish each lesson given in the textbook one by one, doing the exercises that the textbook offers, giving homework concerning each lesson, and ensuring that children have a mastery over the content of each lesson. There is no doubt that these expectations are counterproductive as far as the teaching of language is concerned. Making a kind of intellectual paste of the lessons given in a prescribed textbook, and persuading children to eat a bit of this paste everyday cannot be an enjoyable and exciting experience. Yet, this is what we as teachers are required to do.

What we can do in this situation is to recognize that no

textbook in the world can provide all the material that is necessary to make children's life at school enjoyable and worthwhile. Even the best textbook can only offer a sample of good material. The rest must come from the teacher's own resourcefulness and hardwork. If we accept this view, we can begin to consider how compatible the advice given in this handbook is with requirements of a prescibed textbook. Let us recall the main point that this book wanted to raise, namely: 'What are we teaching in a language class?'

This book answers the question by saying that the teaching of language covers a wide range of experiences related to the development of children's minds. The language class gives us an opportunity to work with children in a highly flexible, creative, and enjoyable medium. What is special about this medium is that all the children are already familiar with it when they come to school. They use it in a variety of circumstances, adjusting it to meet the requirements of different situations. The teacher of language is not going to offer them something totally new; all she can do is to help them enhance their mastery over the medium which they are already using. The teacher can do this by creating conditions in which children can develop new skills and use these skills, such as reading and writing, to sharpen their abilities to learn and respond.

In this agenda any book can only serve as a resource, and textbooks are no different. If the textbook is of good quality, it might have a more frequent use than other books would have. The exercises given in it, provided they are well-designed in terms of the aims discussed in this handbook, can be used as a basis of classroom talk and writing. However, it should be clear to the teacher that her main aim is to develop children's ability to use language rather than to 'cover' the textbook lesson by lesson. If the textbook begins to dominate life in the classroom (for instance, if the teacher stops using other resources and materials), it should be a matter of concern.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the activities and approach which have been proposed in this handbook are by no means incompatible with a textbook or primer. Any teacher can combine textbook-based activities with the ones recommended here. Indeed, such a teacher can expect that the textbook would become much less difficult for children to understand if they are getting opportunities to use and learn language in a wide range of creative activities. Such children can master the prescribed textbook a lot faster than other children whose entire training in language in the classroom depends on the textbook.

In a number of activities described in this book, the textbook can be directly used as a resource for printed material, pictures, and topics for talk. It may be best to use the textbook in combination with other resources, otherwise it may become too familiar and therefore the activities based on it may not bring the kind of thrill that comes from handling something new. Every teacher will have to determine the right proportion of textbook-based activities in wider programme using a variety of resources. One thing necessary is to feel confident that the textbook can be 'covered' (as the school may require) without being transformed into a paste day after day by intensive reading.

How to use space

One serious problem that nearly all primary schools in India face is that of space. There are two sides of the problem one of which is quite well known, but the other one is rarely discussed. The first aspect relates to the number of children in a class or school; the second aspect relates to the organization of space.

There is enough evidence to say that if all children enrolled in a school came to school every day, we will see rather impossibly crowded conditions. It is very difficult indeed for a teacher, who must look after 50 or more children in a class, to do justice to the approach and

activities presented in this book. Similarly, teachers working at single-teacher schools may find it very difficult to utilize the ideas they will find in this handbook. If they can try out even a few of the activities on one or two days in a week, then this should be a matter of reasonable satisfaction to them.

The second aspect of the problem of space is relevant for all teachers—the ones who are lucky enough to have only 30 to 40 children in their class as well as those working in very crowded conditions. The challenge is to organize the space available in the school in a way that it serves as a congenial environment for the development of children's language. Perhaps no one would disagree that such an environment does not exist in most of our primary schools. The walls are bare, often quite dirty to look at; there are no shelves or cupboards, and when there is one, it is not used with any specific aim. Of course we are not taking into consideration the schools that have no walls or whose walls are crumbling.

In schools where the walls are strong and intact, they can be used for a variety of purposes that are relevant to this book. We have placed much emphasis on the opportunity to express oneself in different media, including pictures. Walls are an excellent means of storing pictures that children have made as well as pictures that the teacher has acquired. Both kinds of pictures can be used for eliciting talk and writing activities. The pictures should not be placed too high up on the walls. And children will need to be gradually trained to treat wall-pictures with respect. If you, as a teacher, are moving from a bare-wall classroom (where children sprinkle ink when they start to write) to a picture-wall classroom, do *not* expect to be successful in a day or a week or even a month. It may take time for children, who have been used to bare or messy walls, to get used to nice pictures. But it will happen.

In many schools, walls are used for pasting or painting moral slogans. These slogans serve no purpose—either

moral or linguistic—but the tradition lives. Teachers who will read this handbook and experiment along the lines given here will soon see that slogans consist of a very restrictive, stereotyped use of language. Since no one seems to live strictly according to the ideals given in a slogan, children begin to see the slogan as a meaningless use of language. If a classroom is decorated with moral slogans all around, one can imagine why it would be difficult to associate language with meaning. And isn't that our aim?

In place of moral slogans, you can consider making poetry-posters, consisting of a poem written in large-size letters and a picture. Older children can help you write the poem, and the younger children can draw the illustration. Make sure that the poems you choose are exciting and enjoyable rather than didactic or philosophical. The best thing would be to select poems that the children enjoy and would like to place on the wall. It is quite necessary to keep on making such posters so that you can change them frequently.

And Examinations

Finally, teachers who want to use this book must reflect on the demands of the examination system. These demands start early. In private (not necessarily elite) schools, even entrance to the nursery and grade one is subject to test results. Later, every year the child is likely to face annual examinations, except in those parts of the country where promotion is ensured in the early grades. In any case, the grade five examination carries a lot of weight in many parts of the country, and beyond it stand many more examinations that instil anxiety in parents, teachers, and children alike. The anxiety is as much a part of our culture as is the joy of festivals like Diwali. It is hard to imagine an Indian child who is not worried about examinations!

Primary school teachers can hardly protect children from the impact that the pervasive culture of the examination

system makes on them. But teachers can attempt to improve the quality of the traditional approach used for examining children. Teachers of young children can also widen the scope of formal evaluation procedures. We are referring both to the system of annual examination and the frequent tests which schools, especially English-medium schools, take throughout the year. In the context of language, the questions asked at an examination inevitably focus on the prescribed textbook, treating it as a book of knowledge. The fact is that unlike the textbook of science or social studies, the language textbook is essentially a sample of readings which are supposedly designed to train children to become skilled, independent readers and to make them capable of enjoying and deriving meaning from unfamiliar texts. The quality or level of children's reading skills, therefore, ought to be tested by assessing how much interest they have developed in independent reading and what capacities they have developed for analysing and interpreting new or unfamiliar texts. The prevailing procedures of testing, which focus on the prescribed textbook, largely ignore this requirement.

Present-day examination procedures also neglect children's listening abilities as well as their skills in the use of spoken language, such as for narrating an experience or expressing an opinion. There was a time when a rudimentary oral examination used to be a part of the primary school curriculum. That practice needs to be revived and broadened, towards including the different uses and functions we have discussed under 'listening' and 'talk'. Teachers should also train themselves in observing children's progress in these areas, and in maintaining records of their observation. Various kinds of check-lists are being used these days to maintain a record of children's progress. Quite often these check-lists are used rather superficially, as a means to keep parents and authorities happy. Record-keeping as a means of assessment becomes a difficult challenge when a teacher has to look after fifty or more

children, and sometimes more than one class. For situations of this kind, we need less cumbersome ways of record-keeping, supplemented by well-designed and imaginative examining procedures.

Finally, in the context of writing skills, the traditional approach evaluates children in a very narrow sense, focusing on their capacity to write an answer which is correct with reference to the textbook. Writing for different kinds of audiences and situations, expressive writing, reporting, probing and other modes find very limited room in the school's scheme of testing or examining. And what little room they do find often indicates hostility towards the purposes these modes are supposed to serve. If these modes are to be given a respectable place in our scheme of assessment or evaluation, we can hardly limit ourselves to the child's performance during a fixed number of hours. Once again, we need methods of record-keeping which take into account the teacher's overall workload.

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Krishna Kumar (born 1951) is professor of education at Delhi University. He has been the Head of the Central Institute of Education and a member of the Yashpal Committee. His books include *Raj, Samaj aur Shiksha; Vichar Ka Dar* (in Hindi), *What is Worth Teaching; Learning from Conflict; Social Character of Learning*, and *Political Agenda of Education*. His writings for children include *Aaj Nahin Parhoonga* (in Hindi) and *Princess Promila*, a novel.

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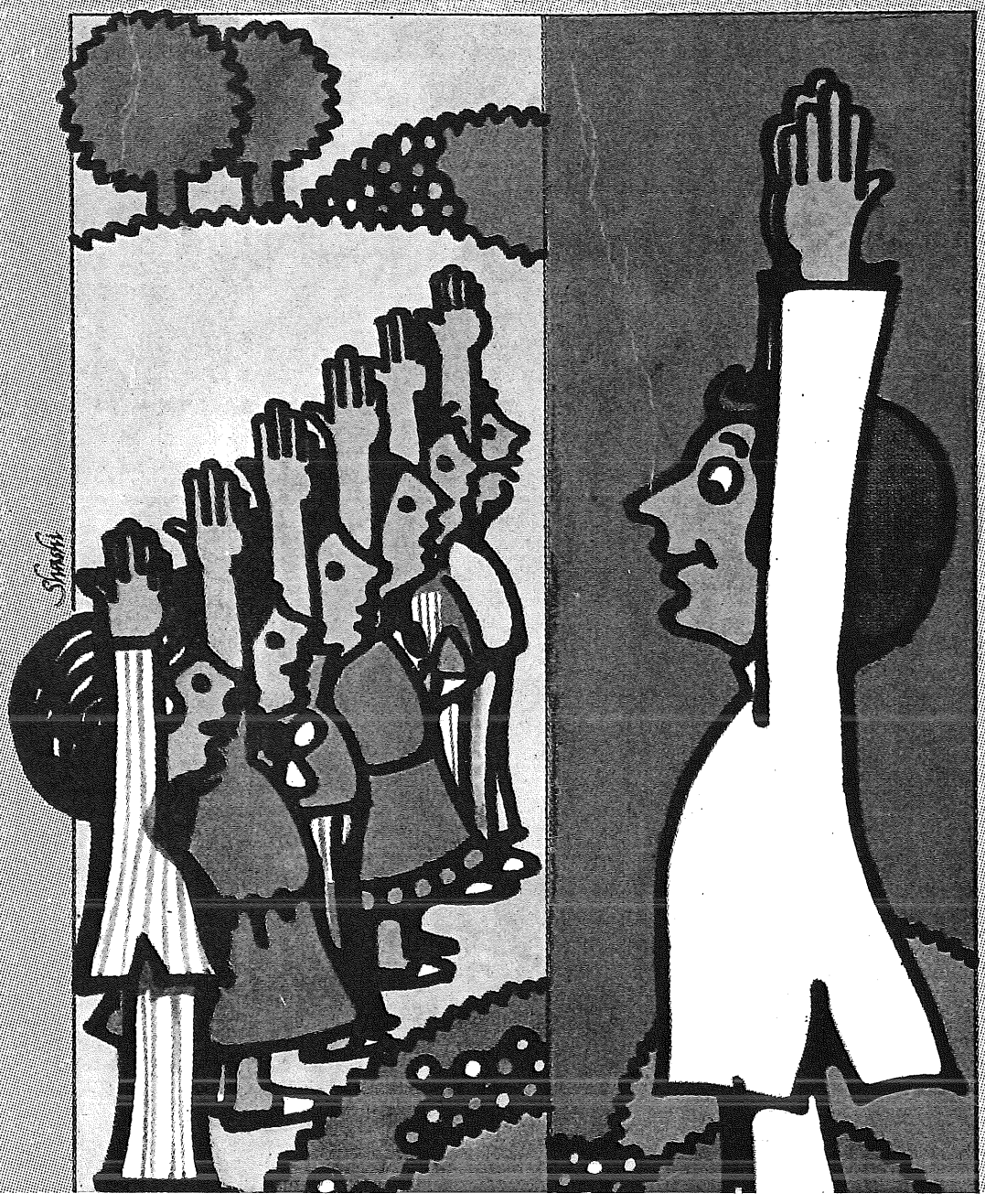

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