

Libraries, Literacy and Technology: empowering children with reading and digital literacy skills

SUCCESS STORY

Libraries are expanding their outreach through innovative services geared to supporting literacy among beginning readers



"I am happy that our library can provide the necessary equipment and assistance for cultivating new and advanced skills for our children. It is certainly an excellent initiative and if it continues, will help to make children more creative."

-Md. Kamrul Hasan, UNO & Chairman of Manirampur Public library

Photo taken by – Suriya Maheen, Intern, READ, Save the Children.

*Submitted by- Ferdousi Fatema, Research and Monitoring Officer, READ, Save the Children.
Email: fatema.ferdousi@savethechildren.org*

Bangladesh has a relatively well-developed market of early grade children's books. Save the Children took stock of well over 5,000 titles from diverse sources. However, many parents as well as schools do not prioritize the reading of storybooks because they perceive that exam results depend on memorization of the textbook. Every primary student receives a textbook from the GoB at the beginning of the school year. But reading a range of new, unknown text supports authentic reading and comprehension. After screening of storybooks by an independent group of experts, it became clear that many books in the market are not appropriate for helping children to read. For instance, the content and layout may be inconsistent with children's reading level or interests.

To build a reading culture, children need both *access* to appropriate books graded according to reading level and *opportunities* to read. The limited school hours at primary level are not sufficient for practicing reading skills so it becomes imperative to look beyond school walls if children are to enjoy more time reading. Libraries are a logical choice to fulfil this purpose. However, a baseline study by Save the Children as well as a national Landscape Study by the British Council (2015) pointed out that libraries had virtually no books for beginning readers nor any services for them.

Against this backdrop, the Vice Principal of Monirampur Degree College, Mr. Mohammed Moniruzzaman, set up the Monirampur Public Library in 1982. Since then, the library has served 175 lifetime members and 15 managing committee members. In the early days of its establishment, the library received an enthusiastic response from the community, with an average of 50 readers visiting per day. But the number began to decline from 1991 onwards and by 2015 it was reaching 2-3 users per day. The atmosphere of the library was forlorn.

In March 2015, a joint venture started up between twenty libraries, Save the Children and IREX, resulting in a project known as Beyond Access Bangladesh. On 28 June, 2016 a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Save the Children and the Department of Public Libraries. Under this project, Save the Children and IREX equipped the library with a range of learning materials such as good quality books for beginning readers, print materials for the environment, puzzles and other language games. A limited

number of tablets were provided, pre-programmed with digital reading materials and access to on- as well as off-line interactive games and game apps.

The librarians were trained on literacy instruction and the use of technology to promote reading. They organized meetings with near-by schools and community members to popularize the library activities. Together, they developed a plan for outreach that appealed to local residents. The libraries conducted community events such as reading festivals and a special event for International Literacy Day to raise their profile. These initiatives have attracted people back to the Monirampur Public Library. The number of daily users has risen to 45, half of which are children.

Monirampur Public Library now runs an active service that meets the needs of its community. Young learners from different schools in the area visit the library every day. Guardians are very happy with the revival of the library, especially the access to digital literacy for their children. The students are most enthusiastic about the tablets and diverse storybooks. The library functions as a learning hub in the community, cultivating creativity in addition to reading skills.

Importantly, Monirampur has created more inclusion, opening its doors to children with special needs. Swadhin, a student at Laden Grammar School, talks about how happy he is with the library. Aside from being differently abled, Swadhin struggles with poor performance at school. After being introduced with the library, he has changed remarkably. Swadhin is a faithful visitor to the library and has developed a knack for reading and learning. He ranks number one in his class. Now he encourages other young learners to come to the library regularly, where he thinks that children like him have an opportunity to succeed.