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## Role of Community Libraries in Informal Education of the Underprivileged Children: A Case Study

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### Abstract

*Education provides an opportunity to gain knowledge and the skills needed to improve one's life and is bound to eradicate illiteracy. UNESCO which is the UN Agency that regulates equality in education states that "Education is a basic human right and that every child of a country must get an education". However, children of the marginalized strata are often neglected hence and NGOs, trusts, philanthropists around the country have taken initiatives to literate and educate them. In this context, the paper explores the Door Step School (DSS) organisation, which has been working since its inception towards achieving 100% literacy, among these children, residing in the slums and underdeveloped areas of Mumbai and Pune. Among its various initiatives to support the cause of attaining education, DSS has also set up community libraries in such areas. The findings indicate that children actively participated in the reading promotional activities that not only helped them develop their reading ability but also develop their language and learning skills.*

### Keywords

Libraries and education; reading habits; reading promotion; community libraries

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## INTRODUCTION

Education is not a privilege; it is a fundamental human right which means that everyone—from children to older people have a right to access quality education. Every country and its states must protect, respect, and fulfil the right to education (Das, 2018). Education as one of the most powerful tools can empower and uplift the economically and socially marginalised children and adults of society. It can, not only eliminate poverty and improve their standards of living but also help them be a part of the mainstream of society. International human rights law guarantees the right to education. The Universal Declaration on Human Rights, adopted in 1948, proclaims in Article 26: 'Everyone has the right to education'. UNESCO has been entrusted to lead the Global Education 2030 Agenda through Sustainable Development Goal 4 that seeks to ensure full implementation of the right to education as a fundamental right towards achieving sustainable development (UNESCO 2011).

As per census 2011, 77% of children in age group 5-18 in urban India have access to formal education. Whereas 23% (22.72 million) of urban children in the same age group are out of school. Out of this 9.1 per cent of urban children (8.97 million) in the 5–18 years, age groups are dropped outs, and 13.93 per cent (13.75 million) of children have never attended school. The census data also reveals that poverty or economic constraints are the main reasons for dropping out of school (NIUA 2016). In urban areas, a higher proportion of the children (28.67%) are out of school because of poverty or financial constraints as compared to rural areas (22.33%) (NIUA, 2016). Access to education is still a privilege in India to the marginalised (DSS, 2017). Countless citizens, philanthropists, NGOs, and many others have supported various educational activities and institutions in India for empowering underprivileged children. The community libraries (CLs) functioning in such areas is one of their approaches that supplements to increase and sustain literacy among the marginalised children (Tewari, 2010). Door Step School (DSS) the brainchild of the founder Mrs Rajani Paranjpe, is one such, non-profit, non-governmental organisation working towards providing quality primary education to the children from low-income communities, enabling them to maximise their potentials, change their thought processes and standards of living to get into the mainstream. The DSS's Programs reaches out to almost 63,776 children through projects like "Project

Foundation” and “Grow with Books”, under which educational activities and reading promotional activities are conducted at 142 construction sites, 240 government schools and at 3,241 communities in Pune (DSS, 2016). The number of children impacted and the marginalised areas that the DSS has reached out to in Pune form the base of this observational study and may serve as a guide for other agencies with similar activity.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a considerable amount of literature on promoting reading culture through the library or community library (CL) and is accepted as intrinsically beneficial to literacy, education, and development. The literature also emphasises the importance of CLs in changing the lives of economically backward children by helping them to read, learn and educate, as well as develop skills and confidence in themselves. There are several national, international organisations, NGOs and Public Libraries working towards promoting literacy through their library programs worldwide (Stilwell, 1989; Mostert, 1998; Dent and Yannotta, 2005; Stranger-Johannessen, 2014; Anderson, 2015; Abubaker, 2017; Langendonk and Broekhof, 2017; Knutson, 2018; BAI, 2019).

The term Community library (CL) has been defined by different authors in various ways. Dent and Yannotta (2005), defined community libraries as “they are created by and for the local population to support their literacy needs and usually are not supported with government funds”. A detailed description of the community library by Mostert (1998) states that “*the community library should be established at the request of the community, fully cooperate with it and be included in participative management. It should provide information linked to the everyday lives of community members, and staff that is known to and trusted by the community to solve the user’s problem*”. Espen Stranger-Johannessen (2014) states that “a community library broadly covers everything from a lending scheme working out of a classroom with a box of books, to sizable and well-stocked buildings set up by Trusts or NGOs, with little or no connection to the local community. It may not be a part of a public library program and is run by one or more people from the community it serves”. He asserts that CLs often are: (a) the library which is initiated of, or together with, people of its community; (b) the library that strives to serve the information and literacy needs of its

community through its resources and services; and (c) the library which is integrated with the community and schools through cooperation, outreach programs and events, to promote literacy and develop reading skills and lifelong learning skills. Thus, community libraries are initiated by trust or NGO’s, established in urban slums or marginalised areas, serving a lot of 150-200 families, integrated with the community and public schools through cooperation, outreach programs and events to support the literacy and education needs of the marginalised children.

For more than 28 years, DSS, through its CLs for the children of the underprivileged in slum areas of Mumbai and Pune has been helping to not only develop their reading and learning skills but also to educate them to empower and to live a better life (Tewari, 2010; DSS, 2014; DSS, 2016; DSS, 2017).

## OBJECTIVES

### The study aims to:

1. Obtain an overview of the DSS CL engaged in imparting reading skills and education among children of the underprivileged in Pune.
2. Assess the impact in terms of the perceptions of the children about the benefits of reading and learning through the resources made available to them by the DSS.

## SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The scope of the study was limited to survey one unit of DSS CLs, based in Pune. Its functioning and reading promotional activities, conducted for the children not only to develop reading habits but also to attract them towards learning and education. With regards to the impact of the CL, reading promotional activities on the children, their perception about their interest in reading, helpfulness of these activities in their studies and opting for a career was considered.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Despite a widespread infrastructure of formal education, a large number of children were uncovered by this system. The need for another alternative whereby education would reach these children was sought, and the idea of a school at the children’s “doorstep” came into existence. The concept of Door Step School (DSS) came into being while the founder of this organisation was working at the Social Service

Centre at the Colaba Municipal School in 1988. DSS started with one non-formal education class of 50 dropout teenagers in one community and quickly spread over to four communities in the vicinity. Balwadis, study classes, and libraries were also initiated. The major activity of the centre was visiting the homes of the dropout children; identifying the reasons for their not attending the school and trying to bring them back to school. Factors affecting the inability to attend were varied and were not always influenced directly by the DSS social workers. Expanding to Pune in 1993, DSS constantly evaluated the educational needs in the community and developed strategies for addressing them.

Three major problems viz., non-enrollment, wastage (dropping out of school at an early stage) and stagnation (not achieving the expected level of learning at respective stages in school), in the public school system, were identified. DSS intervened and collaborated with the public schools and communities to improve upon these areas. All programs were designed to address these problems and aimed at facilitating the learning process and making education interesting and joyful to the children (Tewar, 2010; DSS, 2014).

DSS made plans to start four programs. They were literacy classes, study classes, pre-primary education and CLs especially for children of age group 6-14 (although they cater to children up to 18 as well). After having a clear idea of what the aim was, like-minded people joined hands with the founder and started the organisation in 1988-89 in Mumbai. This further expanded to Pune in 1993. It has now reached more than 60,000 children from 240 municipal schools and twenty slum community areas in Pune and Pimpri Chinchwad (DSS, 2014; DSS, 2016).

According to Rajani Paranjpe, reading is the first step towards achieving literacy. Thus, DSS focused on improving the reading skills, inculcating reading habits amongst the children as well develop a love for reading which would eventually develop into a love for learning. Better reading also results in improving the quality of learning and helps the children to cope with academics. It is said, "Once you learn to read, you will read to learn". DSS strives to achieve this motto.

DSS initiated by taking education to disadvantaged children, i.e. providing education wherever they were like pavements or on footpaths or road construction sites, building construction sites, outside big markets,

railway stations and such places (DSS, 2014). Innovative programs like Grow with Books, Child to Child Library, School on Wheels, etc. were introduced to cater to their needs and demands. The core program focused on providing quality primary education to these children. Educational Activity Centres (EAC), Community Learning Centers (CLCs), Community libraries a part of CLCs, Reference Library, Child to Child Library, Internet facility, Library at School on Wheels, Shared Reading and Learning, Educational sessions on Social Skills were some of the other programs that were initiated to facilitate reading and learning (DSS, 2014; DSS, 2017). Many such innovative activities and programs are introduced to help and motivate the children to read, learn and educate has been highlighted in this paper.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper explores the working and functioning of educational and reading promotional activities conducted in the CL run by the DSS in Pune. Although DSS functions in Mumbai as well, Pune was considered for writing this paper as the founder, and her long-standing team was available at the Pune campus to provide the historical background of the NGO, as well as the access to one of the CLs, was ensured.

The study was conducted in November-December 2018. A survey was conducted, to collect the primary data from the respondents. Though DSS conducts its activities through 3,241 CLs or learning centres in various marginalised, underdeveloped and slum areas of the city, however, due to time constraints one representative CL placed in Hadapsar, Pune was considered for this study.

A structured questionnaire with open and closed-ended questions was the main method used for data collection and it was administered to 23 children of age group 6-14 years. Respondents were selected as they came and were present on that day. They were also asked to rate the satisfaction of the enriching activities, services, and facilities of the libraries provided to them by the NGOs, on a 5-point scale. A bilingual i.e., English/Marathi questionnaire was administered. Considering their age and for those children who were unable to understand, the researcher orally explained each question and got the responses. The questions were framed as per the children's level of understanding. Simple questions such as - Do you like to read? What do you like to

read? Do you feel happy while reading? Did the reading help you gain information and knowledge? Did reading inspire you to become something in life? What do you wish to become in life? were structured to gain their perceptions of reading and its usefulness.

The survey received a 100% response. The questionnaires were supplemented by interviews relating to the survey to facilitate and gain thorough insight and feedback from the respondents. The observation about their participation in the activities conducted during the reading hour was also another method used for noting the unsaid aspects of the data, included under the Discussion section. Excel software was used to analyse quantitative data whereas qualitative data were subjected to content analysis. This paper, therefore, reveals the state of reading interest in children of age group 6-14 years and their active participation in the activities conducted for experiential learning. Since the study is exploratory with a small sample size, the findings are indicative in nature. They, however provide important guidelines to conduct a larger study to firm up the results.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The data collected through questionnaires filled in by the respondents i.e., library personnel of the DSS and children of age group 6-14 who are the users of the CL have been analysed.

The data from the library personnel indicated that DSS has been working towards its vision to provide quality primary education for all children up to 14 years of age and to be an instrumental force for development. DSS with a mission to bridge this divide implements innovative programs that will bring education to these children and help them make the transition to literacy and lead a brighter future.

DSS has initiated CLs at around 3,241 sites in urban marginalised areas of Pune i.e. communities and in Municipal and Semi-Private Schools in places like Pimpri, Khardi, Munshi, Jilha Parishad, Kothrud, Hadapsar, Yerawada, and Aundh and other small areas like Phugevasti, Panjar Pol, Shastri Chowk, Usatodhi, Kanhewadi, in Pune reaching out to almost 60,000 children (DSS, 2014; DSS, 2017). CLs are provided with a collection of books and other resources mentioned above. They are classified, arranged as per grades and also by reading level,

language and subject wise as per their use or convenience. The total collection is systematically registered manually and computerised centrally. The centres use Excel and In-house developed software tailored to meet their needs.

The staff catering services to these children are said to be teachers who may not be professional but are trained and remain updated with current and experiential teaching aids from time to time. A team of 4 to 5 staff has the responsibility of a single CLC with its library. Every CL has a collection of 2000 to 2500 books, few atlases depending upon the children's strength. A total of 3,50,000 books are available for all community centres. The collection also includes flashcards, placards, puppets, pamphlets, globes, posters, one-page stories and motivational stickers.

Children enrolled in this organisation are from nearby areas and from different municipal schools too. They actively participate in various activities and borrow books. Books are borrowed for 3 to 7 days. A day is fixed for them to issue and return. Usually, the circulation of books is carried out on Saturdays. A Long Register or Notebook is maintained to record the circulation transactions. A Schedule of Daily Activities, Time-Table is also displayed.

The services provided to the children are circulation of resources, reference collection, book talks i.e. storytelling or reviews or summary of books, screening of educational and informative videos and display/exhibits of books, posters. Sessions and group activities like rights and laws awareness talks, loud reading, shared reading, storytelling is also organised. These events, activities are planned yearly, monthly, weekly and event wise.

Storytelling, puppet shows, poster making, placards, role plays, book talks and loud reading, toys and games, motivational talks by eminent personalities, internet surfing, exposure visits, though planned well in advance are all teacher-based activities. The activities, projects, programs, resources, etc. are funded by local and foreign funding organisations; Philanthropists and companies under their CSR activities. The organisation has expanded its network in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu with ASME as Funding Partner.

The activities of this 28-year-old organisation have been promoted by word of mouth, through parents meet, students from municipal schools, as well as

group mobilisation and motivation efforts. Inspiring the children to involve in various activities of CLCs is an ongoing process. Parents and schools approach the NGO to help the children in their learning processes.

The challenges faced by the organisations were lack of motivation amongst parents; difficulty in retaining and getting children who are associated with income generation to attending the school regularly, and lack of space.

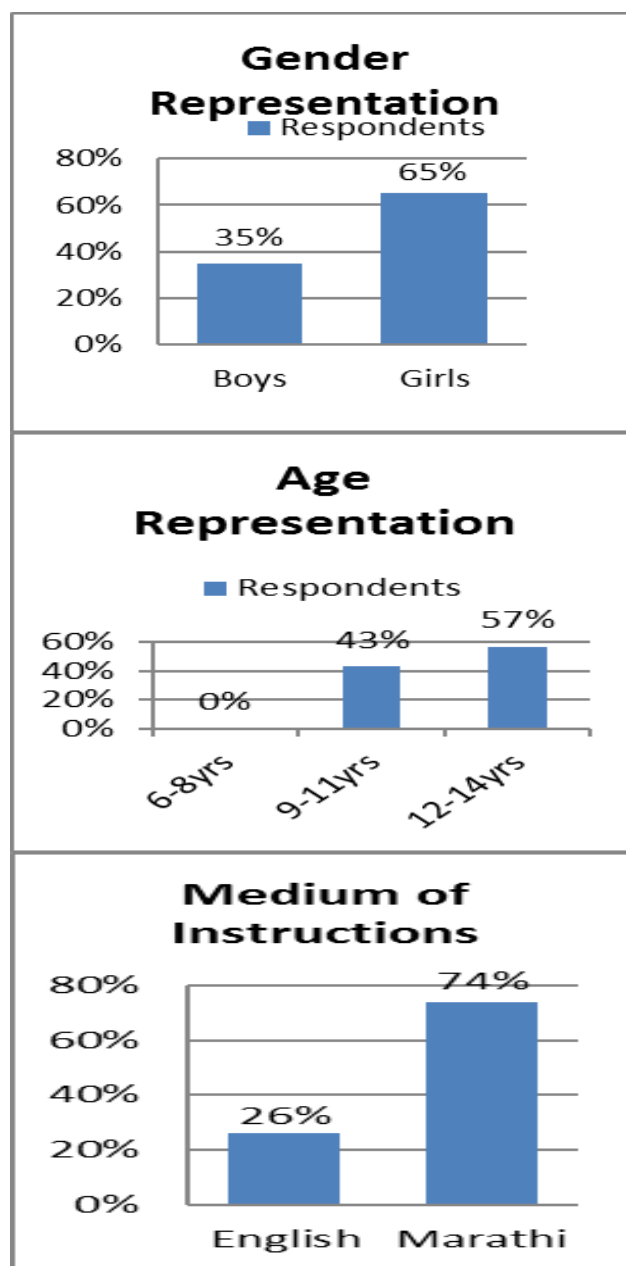
The findings of the data collected from the library personnel as respondents to this questionnaire show that despite various challenges and limitations the organisation has sustained, grown and spread over different parts and have reached out to more than 60,000 disadvantaged children of the city. The library also provides a safe structured space for children to come and spend their time productively. The teachers associated with the organisation, are usually from the communities itself. Though the teachers did not possess professional degrees, they acquire the required knowledge and skills through training and workshops organised during vacations. The training on current teaching and learning aids of teachers is a continuous process.

The staff observed that amongst the various activities conducted by the DSS, like those of reading, storytelling and role-plays builds confidence among the children to face the world. Perhaps reading, sharing and participating in group activities bolster them.

The table 1 depicts the demographic characteristics of the respondents i.e., children as the users of the CL.

**Table 1:** Demographic Characteristics

Characteristics	Number	%
<b>Age (In years)</b>		
6-8	0	0%
9-11	10	43%
12-14	13	57%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	08	35%
Female	15	65%
<b>Medium of Instructions</b>		
English	6	26%
Marathi	17	74%
Hindi	-	-
Others	-	-



**Fig. 1:** Bar Graph Representations of the above table

Table 1 and Fig. 1 show that more number of Girls availed this facility as compared to Boys. The respondents in the age group 9-11 were 43% and that of the 12-14 age group was 57%. It was also observed that all the respondents were aware of the organisations' CL, and visited the same every day.

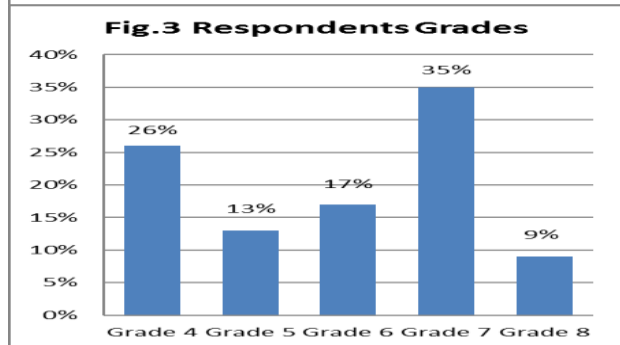
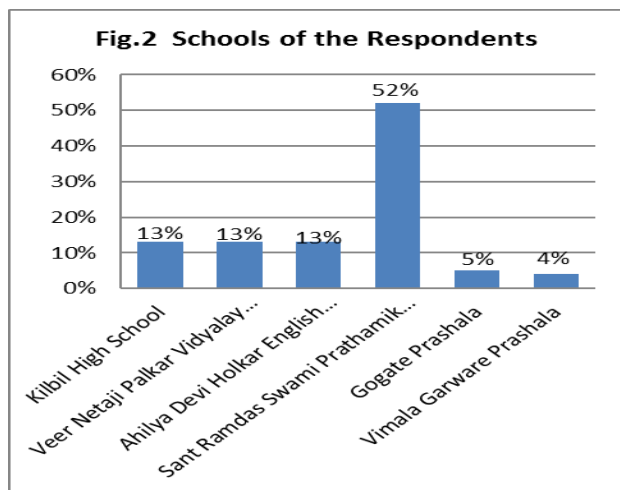


Fig. 2: Bar Graph representation of % of respondents from different schools visiting the CL & Fig. 3: Grades of the respondents

Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 show the respondents from different municipal or public schools and of respective grades availing the facility of the CL.

Fig. 4 & 5 depicts the varied reading interests of the respondents. Books are considered the most sought reading material by the respondents. All of the respondents have indicated that they like to read storybooks. 43% of respondents have also mentioned reading newspapers. The above figs. shows that 57% of respondents like reading stories, 7% like reading autobiographies and biographies of great leaders, 13% like reading Akbar-Birbal stories, 13% like Fairy & Princess Tales, 4% like moral stories, 4% like poems, bhajans; 26% liked comics, 7% liked to read general information books rather than storybooks and 4% liked to read horror, adventurous or mystery stories. Since the respondents had multiple choices varied feedbacks were received. Fig. 5 depicted that all the respondents were aware and liked to read books, 43% also like to read newspapers. None of the respondents were aware of

Magazines or periodicals and hence did not mention reading the same.

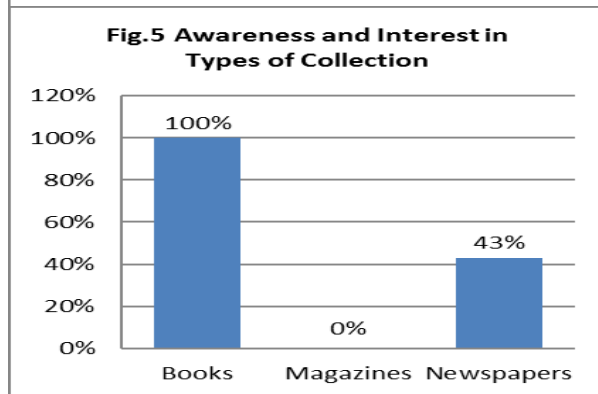
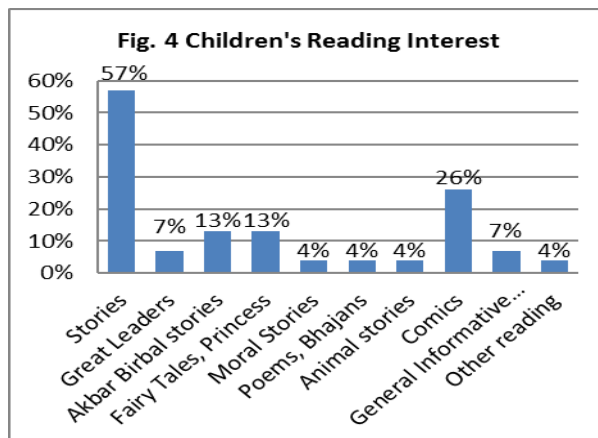


Fig. 4: Bar chart depicting % of respondent's Varied Reading Interests & Fig. 5 depicting the respondent's Awareness and Interest in Different Types of Reading Collection

Note: Percentage exceeds 100% because respondents were allowed multiple answers

Fig. 6 show that 96% of the respondents like to read stories, 65% are also interested in poems and 9% likes dramas, while other 9% of respondents like other reading materials like encyclopaedias, biographies, historical & geographical information's. Fig. 7 shows the awareness and interest of the respondents in the activities conducted for them. These activities not only attract their attention to the CLs but also develop and sustain the interest in children to read and learn.

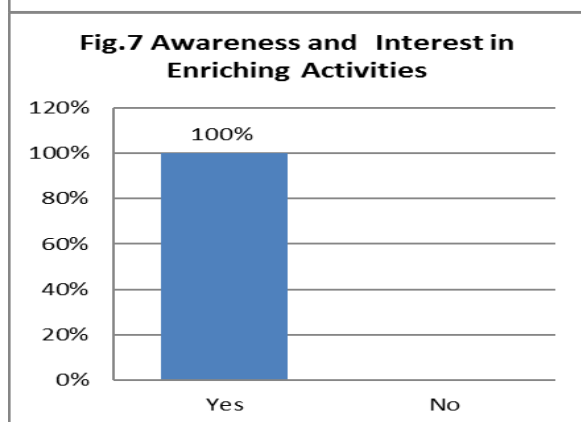
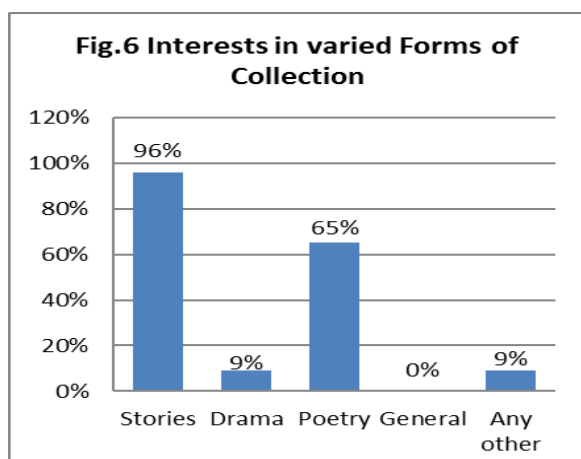


Fig. 6: Bar Graph show respondents Interest in the forms of Reading collection &

Fig. 7: Bar Graph show respondents Awareness & Interest in Enriching Activities conducted

Table 2: Ranking of the Enriching Activities

Ranking → Activities ↓	Can't Say	Satisfactory	Good	Better	Best
Book Borrowing	0%	0%	4%	26%	70%
Story Telling	0%	0%	18%	30%	52%
Puppet Shows	83%	0%	4%	9%	4%
Placards	52%	0%	4%	14%	30%
Posters	0%	0%	4%	18%	78%
Book Talks	0%	0%	0%	9%	91%
Role Plays	13%	0%	0%	26%	61%
Lectures/Talks	4%	0%	4%	18%	74%
Toys	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Games	0%	0%	0%	4%	96%
Any other	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

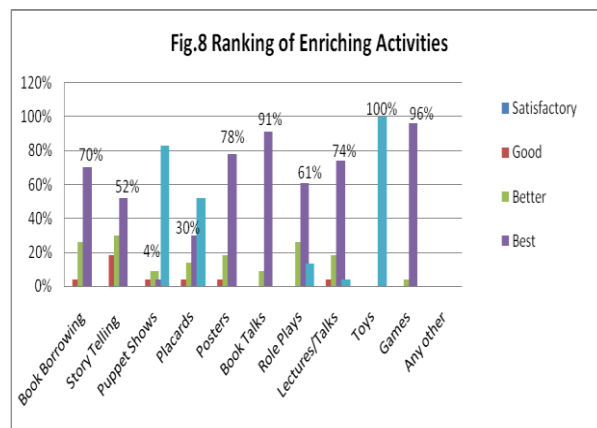


Fig. 8: Bar Graph depicting respondents ranking of the different enriching activities conducted to attract them and develop their interests in reading and learning.

Table 2 and Fig. 8 indicate the ranking of the enriching activities by the children. It has been revealed that Games were ranked best by 96% of respondents. These include educational games that help them learn alphabets, words, numbers, sentences etc. that improves their reading and learning skills. The second most ranked activity was the Book talk (91% respondents) which included reading storybooks aloud, narrating summary or reviewing a book. Poster making activity which included drawing and painting was ranked best by 78% of respondents. These were followed by Educational talks (74%), Book Borrowing (70%), Role Plays (61%) and Storytelling activity (52%).

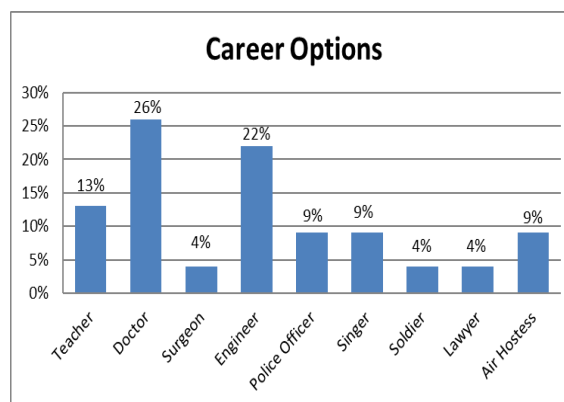
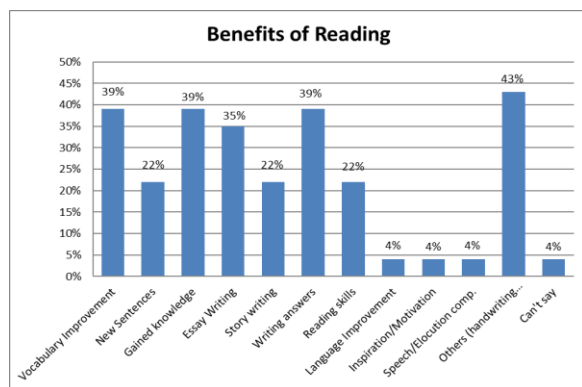


Fig.9: The Bar Graph depicts the respondents' career choices they aspire for in life.

The impact and effects of reading was gauged by asking about the benefits of reading. It was observed that all children were happy to read and learn, were

motivated to study further aimed for various professions. Fig.9 revealed that Doctor (26%), Teacher (13%), Engineer (22%), were most wished aim of the children. Few wished to be police officers and singers (9%), soldiers or lawyers (4%) and 9% aimed to be air hostess. Thus, it can be stated that knowledge gained about career through reading resources helped children to set their aims or opt for professions as per their interest.



**Fig.10: Bar Graph to study the Perception of Respondents about the benefits of Reading**

It was observed (Fig. 10) children were aware of the benefits of reading. 39% of respondents perceived that reading improved their vocabulary, sentence formation, writing answers in exams, gaining information and knowledge; 35% perceived that reading helped them in writing essays, and 43% of respondents identified other benefits such as improved their handwriting, got new ideas, and gained confidence.

The children opined that they visit the library to find information and felt that it is also a source of inspiration and motivation. They suggested that they would like the library to have more books in terms of novels, motivational, essays or composition writing, sports and hobbies, which will help them improve their knowledge and further their education. A few children also mentioned the opportunity to access books through the CL has promoted reading for pleasure amongst their family members and were borrowed through them.

Most of the library personnel expressed an opinion that the library users viz., children/adults in or out of the education of all ages and all backgrounds, find CL as great support for learning and has improved their language skills. The library is usually used by children as part of class activities once a week or

once every two weeks. Many visit the library after school, at weekends and during holidays. Children use books to do homework, revise, improve English and composition; and borrow books for themselves or others. The library also provides a space for them to come and spend time productively. The children liked that they could choose to play games of their interest, read, and/or relax at the CL, the atmosphere in the library and the support provided by staff. The children enjoy a quiet and conducive atmosphere that encourages study. Students, who are dropouts and trying to pursue their education, value the combination of the books to support their learning, together with the library atmosphere. The fact that the library is open to the children in the holidays is especially valued by their parents as they believe that this prevents at least a few children from getting involved in risky or negative activities.

## DISCUSSION

During the visits to this organisation's CL, the innovative and creative reading promotional activities conducted for the underprivileged children were observed. It was also observed that children were treated with love and affection. Observations reveal that the library did not discriminate among its users on any socio-economic parameters and thereby attempted to inculcate the values of impartiality and being just to the children.

The centre organises all activities before or after school hours. The reading promotional activities facilitate the children's physical, social, intellectual, emotional and moral development. The DSS staff members make planned and systematic efforts to facilitate the child to actualise his/her potential and talent. The teaching is adapted as per the individual needs of children. The events, activities are planned yearly, monthly, weekly and event wise in coordination with their coordinators and authorities.

The teaching materials or aids developed by DSS are aimed at enriching the children. The enrichment learning material like information posters and visits to banks, dispensaries, clinics, enriched and exposed children of actual working at such places. Children enrolled with DSS get individual attention. The staff maintained reflective diaries and notebooks to note their observations about various issues, queries, any problems discussed by the children.



During the reading activity, several queries raised by children were promptly answered by the teachers. This encouraged the students to ask questions that arise in their minds, boosting the child's confidence and also built trust with the staff.

Apart from all the reading and learning activities, the DSS staff also try to establish a relationship of trust with the child and parents for the all-around development of the children. Confidentiality of the information concerning the child is maintained and shared with legitimate persons only.

It is surmised that the children taking advantage of the facilities provided by the DSS have benefited in numerous ways. Although the impact may not be evident or measurable, many children have completed education and are doing well in life. The DSS staff observed that children who do not complete studies due to some reasons, still settle down in their lives. They have also noted that those adults, who were with the DSS in their early ages of learning even for a shorter period, were promoting the DSS activities and encouraging their friends and family members to enrol with DSS. They are also enrolling their children in the community centres. This change in the attitude of parents is a major achievement and one step towards achieving the overall goal of DSS. This also shows that the roots of education have struck in the families wherein it will lead to hope for a total literate community.

The role of a library thus, in developing reading habits is quite obvious and significant. The availability of several information resources provides not only ample opportunity for reading but also develops interest and enthusiasm in the minds of the reader (Stilwell, 1989; Langendonk and Broekhof, 2017; BAI, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

Libraries in the communities introduced by any NGO, trust, philanthropist, etc. play an important role in changing the lives of underprivileged children. The NGO, viz., the Society for Door Step School (DSS) believes that books, reading and writing have the power to change lives. It is best understood that developing the love for reading inspires creativity, improves employment opportunities, mental health and wellbeing, and is one of the most effective ways to help children in educational attainment (Tewari, 2010; Stranger-Johannessen, 2014; Langendonk and

Broekhof, 2017), breaking the poverty cycle and getting them into the mainstream.

DSS is committed to providing good educational and lifelong learning facilities to the underprivileged and deserving children. DSS has successfully implemented unique programs focusing on underprivileged children helping them to, develop their reading, learning and writing skills. The enriching activities and programs provide experiences and exposure, helping them to not only be independent readers by the age of 10 or till they reach std. IV class, but also inculcated self-learning skills. Thus DSS is making an invaluable contribution towards imparting education to the underprivileged, developing good citizens and subsequently a good society.

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