

Recently, the Uttar Pradesh government issued a circular directing all state-run schools to allot 10 minutes during the morning assembly to read out main items from “physical newspapers”. The circular further added that this activity be conducted regularly on a rotational basis by students to cultivate the habit of reading. While the initiative is to be applauded, this practice has been in place across thousands of schools for several years.

Although the impact is yet to be scientifically measured, the fate of reading among students is starkly evident. They shun it, trapped in the cauldron of screen addiction, toxic effects of which have been so alarming that the Australian government has banned social media nationally for children under 16 years.

Informal survey

The task at hand, therefore, is to engineer a turnaround: to rejuvenate the reading habit that can organically act as a cognitive detoxification. For academia to meaningfully engage in this pursuit and for such initiatives to succeed, a practical roadmap must be drawn. As a first step, an informal survey was conducted among students, including those who participated in the newspaper-reading exercise. At the end of the school day, a few

students from Classes 6-12 were randomly chosen as they left school. Even those who had read out the news in the morning assembly were unable to recall most of what they had read.

The teachers revealed that the assigned students usually arrived a little early and hurriedly skimmed through the newspapers. This led to headlines being chosen randomly and read out mechanically; stuttering and mispronunciations being common while reading aloud; rapid reading which conveyed little meaning to listeners; a potpourri of news items often that confused rather than informed; and regular classes commencing immediately after the assembly, leaving no time to think over the news Conse-

quently, the practice yielded minimal results, and continuing the same format is likely to remain a futile exercise.

Meaningful use

Instead, the same 10-minute slot could be used far more meaningfully within their regular classes: each student should engage directly with a newspaper, reading news stories of their own choice, followed by quick activities such as retelling, discussing, summarising, expressing opinions, and debating what they have read. Most importantly, these tasks should be carried out in pairs, triads, or small groups, to ensure the participation of all learners. The conventional practice of individual presentations

should be avoided, as it is impossible to offer equitable opportunities to everyone and, even when done, are rare and infrequent. So inclusive learning spaces must be deliberately created.

Although the news of ‘here and now’ is accessible on digital media, the edge the print media enjoys is that the news stories are curated, offering backgrounds, profiles, and (un)biased interpretations. While fake news, misinformation, and disinformation characterise the current situation, the role of newspapers is unenviable, facilitating novice students to grasp authentic news and formulate viewpoints to share with their peers, parents and siblings, thereby deepening their think-

A paper a day

Why reading the newspaper should be part of classroom activity



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are merely spin-offs. More crucially, the much-touted 21st-century skills, such as creative and critical thinking, along with problem-solving skills, can be developed organically. Unlike the narrow academic focus of formal subjects, bringing newspapers into the fold is certain to create a cognitive appeal that can effectively motivate students to become willing readers.

Challenges and solutions

The major obstacle to this approach is ensuring access to newspapers for all students. Nevertheless, this challenge is far from insurmountable. Some strategies include adoption of schools as part of CSR initiatives by a newspaper, encouraging parents who can afford it to subscribe; allocation of a part of the annual library budget for newspapers; asking for help from alumni associations or local clubs; or even using back issues. Additionally, sharing of newspapers between two students will further help reduce expenses.

Halting the steep decline in reading among youngsters has emerged as a prime challenge and granting newspapers a legitimate academic status offers an immense potential to transform students into habitual readers.

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