



Strategy paper

on

A conceptual framework for a socially sensitive  
and balanced approach to early literacy

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# **A conceptual framework for a socially sensitive and balanced approach to early literacy**

## **Introduction**

As far back as in 1993, the Yashpal Committee in its report on *Learning without Burden* highlighted the meaningless and joyless nature of school based learning in India, and strongly raised the issue of non comprehension in the classroom. Since then there have been several initiatives for Elementary Education, which have included the macro District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and the more recent and mammoth Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). Over the years the discourse on “quality of education” has also got louder; yet we find large numbers of school going children in this country continue to rote learn their way through school and for all practical purposes cannot be said to be independent readers and writers at the end of elementary school. This continues to be a matter of grave concern, since efficient reading and writing abilities are at the core of successful and effective engagement with schooling and of meaningful participation in the contemporary global world. Within this context the imperative need for well informed and conceptually sound Early Literacy Programmes cannot be stressed enough.

Vygotsky (1978) put forth the idea that the earliest roots of literacy have their beginnings within the very first acts of communication. He has claimed that gesturing, playing , talking, drawing, scribbling and writing are all essentially part of a single, unified process of learning to make meaning and to communicate.. Vygotsky (1987) has also argued that the relationship between everyday concept formation and scientific concept formation is critical. He claims that it is everyday concepts, grounded in the day-to-day life experiences of children and adults, which create the potential for the development of scientific concepts in the context of formal instruction. As an example he suggests, that a conscious awareness of the study of language can only be possible if children have already built language structures of their first language through their everyday, natural processes of learning. In using this analogy he states:

...pedagogical experience demonstrates that direct instruction in concepts is impossible. It is pedagogically fruitless. The teacher who attempts to use this approach achieves nothing but a mindless learning of words, an empty verbalism that simulates or imitates the presence of concepts in the child. Under these conditions, the child learns not the concept but the word, and this word is taken over by the child through memory rather than thought.... It substitutes the learning of dead and empty verbal schemes for the mastery of living knowledge (Vygotsky, 1987: 170; Vol 1).



Vygotsky's ideas have important implications for school based literacy learning in India. Within the huge numbers of Indian classrooms, at one end of the spectrum are children for whom print based interactions form an integral part of their everyday life at home and in their communities. In other words, such children develop ideas, concepts and values about print through normal activities in their families and daily life. At other end of the spectrum however, are a very large number of children for whom literacy and print based activities do not form a part of their everyday experience. These children come from oral traditions, and often from marginalized backgrounds, within which active engagement with print is minimal. Unlike their peers, they are not equipped with basic knowledge about print. They do however bring to school rich resources of oral language and a repertoire of meaning making practices, but often find that these resources are not acknowledged within classroom practices.

This raises two important concerns while considering a conceptual framework for early literacy programmes:

1. The need to ensure that a variety of experiences which support children's natural ways of building foundations in print literacy become available to children inside classrooms. Recent studies have shown that the closer the match between home and community based literacy and language practices, and school based practices; the more likely it is that children will build strong foundations for meaningful reading and writing.
2. The need to address the special literacy learning needs of children from families and communities, whose first active engagement with written words and print based experiences occur only after they enter school. Such children are at a disadvantage when compared with their peers who are already aware of print concepts which they have picked up through every day interactions at home and in their social worlds during their early childhood years.

## **Overview of current theoretical and pedagogical perspectives**

### **Balanced reading approaches**

While whole language, whole word and phonics approaches to early literacy have been around for some time now, experts and researches have recently acknowledged that no single approach has been effective in developing independent readers and writers; instead a balanced programme which combines these approaches has been thought of as the most effective. The whole language approaches believe that children will learn to read and write naturally and actively in the same ways that they learn to speak. Children in whole language classrooms are provided authentic texts



and writing opportunities that are meaningful and purposeful to each child individually. The phonics approaches on the other hand, believe that children need explicit instructions in the rules of letter –sound relationships, and word and sentence formations, before they are able to read meaningful texts. Recent research has highlighted the need for a balance between these approaches. From this belief a new philosophy of teaching reading called the Balanced Reading Approach has emerged, which not only balances the reading philosophies but also the inherent classroom pedagogies.

### **Emergent literacies**

During the 1980s and 1990s, Emergent Literacy became the dominant theoretical perspective in the field of early reading and writing (Teale and Sulzby 1986). According to this social constructivist view, literacy acquisition has much in common with oral language development. A child begins learning about reading and writing at a very early age by observing, interacting and actively participating with adults and other children in a variety of everyday literacy activities, such as drawing objects and experiences, writing / scribbling pretend shopping lists, reading labels and signboards or in special literacy focused activities such as storybook reading. On the basis of their observations and activities these very young children construct their own concepts about print and then try these out in their play activities and also in real life situations. They test their beliefs about how written language works. Based on how others respond and the results they get, they modify these beliefs and construct more sophisticated systems of reading and writing. Their attempts at writing often evolve from scribbles, to drawing as writing, to creating letter like forms, to random streams of letters and finally, to increasingly elaborate systems of invented spellings. Eventually, through facilitated opportunities to engage in meaningful literacy activities, these children become conventional readers and writers.

### **Focus on skills**

During this same period of the eighties and nineties, a parallel, but very different view was gaining momentum primarily in the fields of educational psychology and special education. This perspective, which was first introduced by Marilyn Adams strongly, supports the idea that children's natural literacy development needs to be supported with explicit instruction for skill development. This perspective is known as the Scientifically Based Reading Research or SBRR was first introduced by Marilyn .J. Adams in her landmark book: *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print*. The underlying belief was that many skills, which are required for



interacting meaningfully and independently with a written script, are not picked up naturally through exposure to spoken language. In this sense the processes of learning to read and write are not the same as learning to speak. Rigorous research has been undertaken to identify the skills and concepts that children need to become proficient readers and writers. Whereas the Emergent Literacy has relied primarily on qualitative forms of research, this perspective uses tightly controlled quantitative experiments. A valuable contribution of this movement is that it has identified core knowledge and skills that young children must develop to become successful readers and writers.

Reading research from within this perspective has focused on the link between phonemic awareness, phonics skills, decoding / encoding, comprehension and fluency in reading. Readers who initially lack the ability to hear the separate phonemes in the oral speech stream (phonemic awareness) are unable to master the sound/ symbol / system correspondence of alphabetic language (phonics), which in turn makes it difficult to progress or develop as independent readers who can read, understand, and learn from print (comprehension and fluency). Phonemic awareness and phonic skills are seen as absolutely crucial to subsequent reading development. Research shows that these abilities begin within homes and community practice.

### **Blending of emergent literacy and skill based approaches**

Within current literature on Early Literacy, both the above perspectives are stated to have made significant contributions to a well rounded early literacy programme. Young children need meaningful engagement with books and an environment which facilitates active and natural engagement with of print, as suggested by the Emergent Literacy perspective. However, they also require explicit and meaningful instructions on aspects of phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, vocabulary and print awareness. Thus there is need to blend both these perspectives

### **Need to address the context**

A new set of debates have now brought a shift in thinking from viewing reading and writing as individualized cognitive processes to an acknowledgement that young children's early understandings about literacy occur within their social, cultural and linguistic communities. The specific forms of literacy may however change according to the purpose and the setting in which they are used. Some experts have argued that this perspective views the setting or the 'context' within which a literacy practice occurs, as a relatively benign and neutral setting, whereas in the real world this is not the case. They argue that hidden within several 'communities of practice' are issues of power and social identity. Therefore literacy practice cannot be viewed as the acquiring of a set of neutral, and de-contextualised cognitive skills.



### **Autonomous and ideological models**

Historically, we can now identify two distinct models of literacy. These have been referred to by Brian Street (1995) as the Autonomous and the Ideological models. The Autonomous model, conceptualizes literacy as a set of neutral, technical cognitive skills that are acquired by individuals. This model looks upon literacy as a set of cognitive and linguistic skills and strategies which are required for decoding and engaging with written texts. More or less the same approaches for developing these skills can be used to teach children to read and write regardless of the contexts within which they are located. This has been the more prevalent model, especially within the formal learning sites such as schools.

In contrast, the Ideological model does not think of literacy as an individualized cognitive activity. Instead literacy is viewed as sets of cultural and social practices which evolve and change over time, and that are adopted and adapted in different ways by different groups of people for different purposes. This model believes that particular versions of literacy are always located in a particular world view

Some key theoretical assumptions of this 'literacy as social practice'<sup>1</sup> stance are:

- Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts
- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life
- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant than others.
- Literacy is historically situated
- Literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making

### **Newer debates**

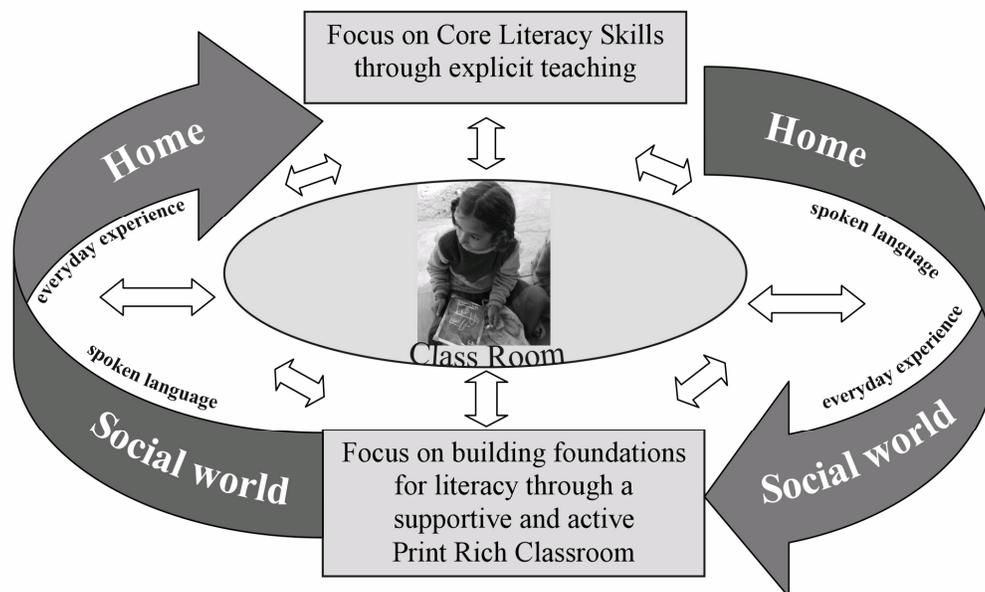
The more recent perspectives, which have been briefly discussed in the above sections, have raised new debates within the arena of early literacy, between individualized perspectives of literacy development (Autonomous model) and literacy being viewed as social practices (Ideological model). They have also highlighted the importance of providing space within the framework of the balanced reading programme for children's natural learning processes; their real

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<sup>1</sup> See, A social theory of literacy: practices and events in David. Barton; Mary Hamilton and Roz. Ivanic (eds) (2000). *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context*. New York: Routledge, page 8

world experiences and knowledge forms. These newer perspectives have brought to the foreground the importance of addressing issues of diversity and home to school transitions, particularly in the case of children from marginalized and oral traditions, who do not have adequate opportunity to engage with literacy within their homes and social environments. Ways in which the Autonomous model can be integrated with the Ideological model are also being explored within more recent literature.

## Conceptual framework for a socially sensitive and balanced approach to early literacy<sup>2</sup>



The conceptual framework for early literacy which is presented above, locates the classroom within the socio- cultural contexts that the children come from, and gives primacy to the spoken languages and daily life experiences of children. Literacy learning inside the classroom is viewed as a dynamic flow with the world outside the classroom. This framework aims to integrate aspects of the Autonomous Model through an explicit focus on skills; with aspects of the Ideological Model by viewing the print rich classroom as an authentic social context, which draws upon the

<sup>2</sup> The above conceptual framework has been developed by the Organization for Early Literacy Promotion, through its Early Literacy Project (ELP). It has been based on insights from available literature on early literacy and intensive and sustained classroom based work with young learners from marginalized communities, both inside schools, as well as, out of school. This work began in July 2006 in urban Delhi and then shifted to rural schools in Rajasthan. This framework has benefited and been developed further on the basis of insights gained from the discussions which took place during the SRTT, Consultation on Early Literacy in April 2011



spoken language and the real world experiences that are available to the children in their homes and social worlds. In this way this framework aims to address issues of diversity, while placing children and their learning processes in a central position.

## Key Features

- The centrality of children’s needs and natural learning processes
- Classroom literacy practices draw upon children’s every-day experiences which occur in their homes and social worlds.
- The framework draws from the spoken language resources of the children, with the understanding that oral language lays the foundation for the early literacy development of the child
- It provides space for building foundations for literacy by creating space for children’s natural emergent literacy processes, concepts and attitudes within an active and supportive print rich classroom
- It focuses on the explicit teaching of core literacy skills required for phonological processing and for the various processes of meaning making.
- It facilitates home to school transition by providing for a constant flow between classroom literacy practices and the children’s homes and real worlds.

## Components<sup>3</sup>

The above framework is broadly divided into two main components. These are:

A) A focus on building foundations for reading and writing

B) A focus on building core literacy skills – for phonological processing and for meaning making

These components may be integrated into the learning opportunities and practices that are available within the existing classroom practices and curriculum framework, provided that this is done in sensitive, meaningful and child friendly ways.

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<sup>3</sup> During the implementation of early literacy interventions in Hindi with marginalized children in rural Rajasthan, the Early Literacy Project (ELP) has found that this combination of strengthening of foundational literacy skills and concepts and providing explicit focus on core literacy skills, within the context of the *Devanagari* script, has had a positive outcome on the literacy learning of children from marginalized rural communities..



## A. Focus on building foundations for reading and writing

Emergent Literacy refers to what children know about reading and writing before they actually learn to read and write. This does not include the teaching of reading but instead involves the building of a foundation for reading. It refers to the early literacy concepts, skills, and positive attitudes that form the foundation for subsequent reading and writing. For example, the understanding that print letters have sounds that can create words, and that these words can be read from left to right to tell a story; is pivotal to reading meaningfully. These and other literacy based experiences play a crucial role for building a solid foundation for meaningful and reading and writing at a later stage.

After reviewing a large body of research on how children become good readers, a panel of experts commissioned by the U. S. National Academy of Sciences (2000) concluded that having a language and literacy foundation is important for later reading success. This foundation involves a variety of experiences with stories, conversation, word play, books, and other meaningful print (signs, notes, lists, directions, etc.). Experiences such as drawing, make believe play, story making, handling and looking at books; read- aloud sessions and free writing activities; have been found to be much more important in the long run than simply teaching children to recite the alphabet or to read words. An important component is the exposure to a rich oral vocabulary, in whatever language or languages the child speaks. These experiences serve to build a strong foundation for later literacy learning. For children who do not have access to such experiences during their early childhood years; a variety of such experiences in the classroom prove to be invaluable towards helping them build meaningful connections with the processes of reading and writing. All such experiences pave the way for fluent reading at a later stage. The print rich classroom can be used to provide such experiences.

### **Some elements of a print rich classroom**

- Classroom labeling
- Display of children's writings, drawings, collections etc, to be changed from time to time
- Display of a variety of texts, pictures with captions, to be changed from time to time
- Special focus areas such as:
  - Book corner
  - Poem corner
  - Message boards (can include a meaningful and simple daily morning message)

- Word walls

- Written instructions in the above areas and wherever possible
- Space for free writing and drawing

## Building foundations for reading and writing through the active and planned use of a print rich classroom

The print rich classroom needs to be designed and used actively in a variety of ways that strengthen and build strong foundations for reading and writing. Ways in which aspects of the print rich classroom can build foundation literacy skills are suggested in the table below

**Table 1: Correspondence between foundation skills and attitudes for reading and writing and the elements /activities of a print rich classroom**

Foundation concepts, skills and attitudes for reading and writing	Corresponding supporting element and /or activity based on the print rich classroom
Usage of <b>spoken language</b> in a variety of ways	Conversations based on: books, displayed writing, poems, texts, pictures. Shared writing.
<b>Rich knowledge base and vocabulary</b>	Displays of a variety of authentic texts Book corner Book talk Word wall Message board
<b>Enjoyment</b> of books and stories and the motivation to read	Reading / book corner – sharing, reading, talking , responding to books, story telling, story writing Poem corner Display and of children’s stories /writings Simple written instructions, which provoke the child to read and find out or read and do
Exposure to the many <b>different ways that adults use reading and writing</b> in their daily lives	Teacher modeling Display and use of authentic texts
Opportunity to <b>communicate</b> through a variety of ways, such as talking, gestures, writing, drawing	Language games Book conversations, response charts Sharing experiences Opportunity for creative expression and free writing

Incorporate reading and writing into <b>play activities</b>	Opportunity for make believe play, dramatization, story telling,
Help children <b>associate meaningfully</b> with printed and spoken words	Through a variety of meaningful opportunities to engage with different print elements
<b>Phonological awareness</b> - recognizing the sounds that make up words	Focused Word Wall activities Word games Rhyming words in the poem corner etc
<b>Develop print concepts – or understanding the basic conventions of print</b> such as - title/cover of book, concept of “words”, spaces, directionality, orientation, functionality, meaningfulness reading left to right and top to bottom; knowing how to handle a book or follow words on a page	Teacher modeling, demonstration and conversations during read- aloud sessions
<b>Print awareness</b> -noticing print everywhere; knowing how that it is used in many different meaningful ways for different purposes.	Labeling Written instructions Picture captions Through exposure and activities based on displayed authentic texts in the classroom
<b>Letter naming</b> - knowing that letters have names and are different from each other in shapes and sounds	Name displays such as in attendance charts, Alphabet games, displays
<b>Follow directions</b>	listen and do activities
<b>Positive self image</b> – so that children good about themselves and feel confident that they can learn new things	Display of children’s work Use of children’s home languages Activities based on children’s real world experiences

## B) Core literacy skills <sup>4</sup> - for phonological processing and meaning making

Structured opportunity for practice and learning help children to develop some core literacy skills. These can be made meaningful and interesting for the children. The core literacy skills which need to be addressed explicitly are:

<sup>4</sup> Presented by Dr. Shailaja Menon in her presentation of Comprehensive Reading Framework during the SRTT Consultation on Early Literacy.



**1. Phonics** – is the relationship between written letter shapes (symbols) and their sounds. This is a fundamental skill for beginning reading. Children require special activities which help them grasp the sound –symbol correspondence within alphabets.

**2. Phonemic Awareness** – is the ability to notice, think about and work with the individual sounds in spoken words. This is not an innate ability .Before young children can become aware of phonemes they need to master phonological awareness and learn to recognize the larger units or oral language, including words and syllables. They can then be helped to understand that words are made up of speech sounds or phonemes. Phonemic awareness differs from phonics because it deals with sounds in the spoken word, whereas phonics is concerned with the printed word.

Both the above core skills are required for the process of word recognition.

**3. Vocabulary** – building vocabulary is an extremely important skill for children to have when they are learning to read and write. Most two-year-olds have vocabularies of 300 to 500 words. Most children enter school knowing about 5,000 words. A wide vocabulary helps children to:

- know the meaning of words so that they can understand what they are reading and express themselves better while writing..
- make connections between sounding out words and knowing they're pronouncing them correctly.

Vocabulary falls into four categories:

- listening- the words we understand when we hear
- speaking- the words we use when talking
- reading- the words we understand when we read
- writing- the words we use when writing

**4. Comprehension** – refers to the child's ability to read and understand information presented in written form. Reading is not a passive activity. Good readers use a variety of strategies to help them in the processes of building understand and make meaning. They are aware of why they are reading a text. They gain an overview of the text before reading; make predictions about the upcoming text; read selectively based on their overview; associate ideas in text to what they



already know; note whether their predictions and expectations about text content are being met; revise their prior knowledge when compelling new ideas conflicting with prior knowledge are encountered. They are also able to figure out the meanings of unfamiliar vocabulary based on context clues. They underline, reread and make notes; summarize ; retell or paraphrase in their own words to remember important points, and think about how ideas encountered in the text might be used in the future; relate the text to personal experience, and so on. All these are comprehension strategies which help children to read with understanding.

**5. Fluency** – is the ability to read text accurately and quickly. It includes the clear, easy, written or spoken expression of ideas and freedom from word-identification problems which might hinder the process of reading or writing with a flow. Fluent reading requires efficient word recognition and decoding skills. This leads to which to speed and automatacity in the reading process and help children to read with comprehension. Fluent readers read meaningfully, with an intonational flow and expression. Young and less skilled readers, in contrast, exhibit a lack of such meaning making skills and strategies. They need to be taught these various strategies to help them understand texts and become successful and independent readers. Reading researchers have developed approaches to stimulating active reading by teaching readers to use comprehension strategies for reading with understanding and also for monitoring their own reading process. These comprehension strategies are an important part of a reading and writing programme.

### **Classroom instructional processes for reading and writing**

Some reading and writing tasks are modeled by the teachers and others are accomplished with the support of the teacher, leading to a few that are done independently by the child. These instructional processes may be arranged on a continuum, based on more or less teacher support. Balanced Literacy also provides many opportunities for real life reading and writing experiences in a child-centered classroom. Children read and write each day independently and in group settings (both large and small).

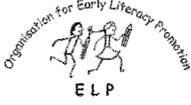
The balanced literacy classrooms use different types of reading and writing processes:

Reading aloud to children

Shared reading / writing - whole class

Guided reading / writing - small group

Independent reading / writing - individual



Students also participate in a variety of writing processes. Beginning with emergent forms, there is opportunity for teacher modeling and guided writing, as well as, individual and group free writing. Shared, collaborative writing is an important classroom activity. The children discuss their ideas on a topic and then dictate sentences, which the teacher writes, in the children's words on to the black board. Each child then copies down the text constructed by the children.

## **Conclusion**

The balanced and socially sensitive conceptual framework that has been presented above is based on the premise that children need meaningful, social engagement with books, along with various opportunities to actively and purposefully engage with print, and reading and writing activities. In addition, most children also need some explicit, developmentally appropriate form of learning opportunity / instruction on phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge; vocabulary and comprehension strategies. It is important that the explicit teaching of these skills is provided in meaningful and interesting ways which are tailored to the age level, and interests of children, so that they enhance literacy learning and do not become dull, meaningless and mechanical.

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