

Towards a Conceptual Framework for Early Literacy: A Balanced and Socially Sensitive Approach

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Introduction

Sixty odd years after attaining independence, we still find large numbers of school going children in India who rote learn their way through school, and for all practical purposes cannot be said to be independent readers and writers. This paper focuses on the special needs of children who do not have support for reading and writing at home, and who require support for enabling a smooth and meaningful transition from the oral cultures in their homes and social worlds to the print based cultures of school.

The paper proposes a balanced and socially sensitive Conceptual Framework for Early Literacy. This framework has evolved through sustained engagement with resource-poor classrooms, along with insights obtained from engagement with current literature and innovative programmes for Early Literacy which are being implemented in India. It is based on the premise that children need meaningful, and socially relevant engagement with books, along with various opportunities to actively and purposefully engage with a variety of print based reading and writing activities. The framework acknowledges the need for tapping the rich resources of spoken language and real world experiences that the children bring into the classroom. In addition to this, it provides the space for an explicit and developmentally appropriate form of learning opportunity/instruction on the awareness of sounds, knowledge of alphabets, and vocabulary and comprehension strategies.

The Indian Context

Strong foundations in reading and writing play a pivotal role in equipping the next generation of young learners to meet the expectations of schooling and of the global world. Within the Indian educational context however, there still isn't enough clarity, and several conflicting approaches to teaching young, beginning level learners to read and write coexist within a fairly confused and 'free for all' situation. These approaches to beginning level reading and writing are often not based on a sound understanding of children's natural learning processes and real life situations, but instead tend to be driven by issues of practicalities and management. As far back as 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. However, sixty odd years after attaining independence, the field of Early Literacy in India remains highly under-researched, and issues of school efficiency, classroom participation and school retention continue to be of grave concern (Govinda, 2007).

Based on some of the serious concerns which have been outlined in the preceding paragraph, Sir Ratan Tata Trust facilitated a Consultation on Early Literacy in April 2011. An important aim of this Consultation was to promote conceptual clarity within the Early Literacy and Elementary Education programmes. Post this Consultation, a

Conceptual Framework for a socially sensitive and balanced approach to Early Literacy was outlined for facilitating further discussion. This paper will present the Conceptual Framework for Early Literacy suggested by this consultation within the context of current thinking on Early Literacy.

Current thinking on early literacy

The foundations for meaningful reading and writing are laid in the first few years of life. During the 1980s and 1990s, the Emergent Literacy perspective was dominant in the field of early reading and writing (Teale and Sulzby 1986). According to their view, children begin to learn naturally about reading and writing at a very young age by observing, interacting and actively participating with adults and other children in a variety of informal, everyday reading and writing activities. These activities could pretend newspaper reading, drawing objects, scribbling pretend shopping lists, reading labels and signboards, listening to read aloud stories and so on. As young preschoolers observe and informally participate in print-based activities in their homes and social groups, they begin to sort out and acquire knowledge about the print itself. For example, they begin to realize that written symbols have meaning, and that there is a connection between the spoken sounds and the symbols of written language. They even 'pick up' some writing conventions such as directionality, and scribble pretend words from the left to the right side of a page. They scribble pretend messages which suggest words and sentences. Nobody has taught the child about all these various aspects of writing. He/she simply 'picks them up' from her real life experience in the same ways that she 'picks up' spoken language from her surroundings.

Gordon Wells (2003) refers to these early experiences as an extended 'apprenticeship' into literacy, through which young preschoolers engage with literate family members in joint activities based on written texts. Through such informal exposure to print, many children enter school already well advanced along the road to literacy, as compared to other children who actively engage with print for the first time only when they enter school classrooms. *All children do not have access to print based experiences in their early childhood and are therefore differentially prepared for schooling.*

A very large number of young learners in India come from rich oral traditions or 'non literacy cultures'. They do not enter school with the same degree of preparedness as children who have already actively experienced various forms of reading and writing at home. This is compounded by the fact that many of these children come from socially disadvantaged groups and are viewed, at times, as being unfit for school learning. Further, most of these young children do not have any support for reading and writing at home. All these factors affect their performance in school.

It is important to realize that all children bring to the school their real world experience and knowledge, along with their competencies in the use of the language spoken at home. They also bring their imaginations, curiosities and natural inclinations to be purposefully engaged. These resources equip young children to engage with their new classroom experiences in meaningful ways. Unfortunately, classroom learning environments and school curricula most often do not provide enough opportunity for young children to use these outside-the-classroom experiences and resources that they bring with them. While working in the Early

Literacy Project (ELP) classrooms, we have interacted with many such school beginners who feel threatened by the unfamiliar print environment and school language inside the classroom and who are very reluctant to read or write.

Theoretical background

Vygotsky (1978) put forth the idea that the earliest roots of literacy have their beginnings in the very first acts of communication, and that expressing through facial expressions, gesturing, playing, talking, drawing, scribbling and writing are all essentially part of a single, unified process of learning to make meaning and to communicate. He also emphasized the need for building a meaningful relationship between the processes of everyday concept formation and scientific concept formation. He believed that everyday concepts, which are rooted in the day-to-day life experiences of children and adults, provide the basis for the learning of scientific concepts which are taught through formal instruction. For example, he argued that the study of language forms and structures which is undertaken in schools can only be possible if children have already acquired the language structures of their spoken language through their everyday experiences and natural processes of learning

Vygotsky's ideas have important implications for school based literacy learning in India in which rote learning and memorization are common substitutes for learning. Within the thousands of schools that are scattered across the length and breadth of India, there are very diverse groups of learners. As mentioned earlier, at one end of the spectrum are the children for whom reading and writing form an integral part of their everyday life at home and

in their communities. However, at the other end of the spectrum are a very large number of children for whom reading, writing and print based activities do not form a part of their everyday experience.

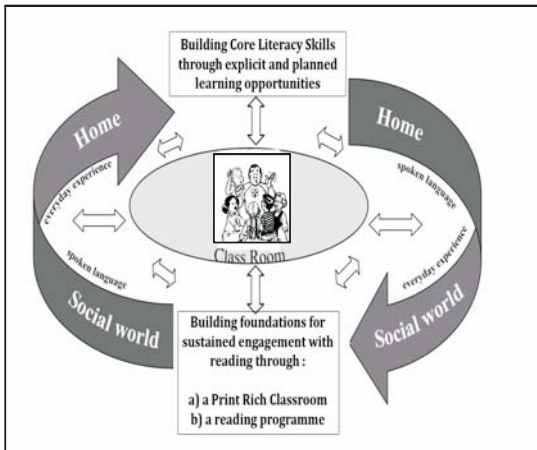
This raises two important concerns:

1. The need to ensure that a variety of experiences which support children's natural ways of learning to read and write become available to them 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 those children whose first active engagement with written words and print based experiences occur only after they enter school.

Conceptual framework for early literacy

Early Literacy Project (ELP) tried to build some clarity on what reading was and how it should be taught. This has been a highly contentious area within which a large number of conflicting and contradictory viewpoints prevail. ELP has worked intensively over a sustained period of time inside resource-poor classrooms to develop methodologies and supportive environments for promoting meaningful reading and writing. These include equipping young first generation literacy learners with the linguistic knowledge and skills required for processing the sounds and symbols of the *Devanagari* script; and the cognitive skills required for meaning construction.

A conceptual framework for early literacy



One of the main objectives of the Framework for Early Literacy is to develop a classroom environment and methodologies which equip children from marginalized and non-literacy backgrounds to build strong foundations for reading and writing with understanding (in this case, Hindi). It also aims to build to a sustained involvement with the processes of reading and writing by making them enjoyable and meaningful for young learners. This framework also gives primacy to the spoken languages and daily life experiences of children. This means providing opportunities to children within the classroom, to share their real life experiences and ideas in many different ways, so that children feel free to share and express real feelings, concerns, ideas and imagination in their own words and in many different ways.

Key features

- This Conceptual Framework for Early Literacy draws from the spoken language resources of the children with the understanding that oral language lays the foundation for the early literacy development of a child.
- The Framework gives a central place to children and to their varied individual needs within the Classroom.

- It recognizes children's natural learning processes and the innate desire for all human beings to make sense of the world that they experience.
- It provides an opportunity for building the foundations of literacy by creating a space for children's natural learning processes by enabling their active involvement with a planned and supportive print rich classroom.
- It also focuses on the explicit teaching of the core literacy skills required for phonological processing and word recognition, as well as for the various processes of making meaning.
- It aims to facilitate home to school transitions by providing for a constant two-way flow between classroom literacy practices and the children's home and real world experiences.
- It recognizes the role of children's literature and the environmental print in the process of building independent and engaged reader and writers.

Components

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

- A) A focus on building and strengthening the foundations for a sustained and meaningful engagement with reading and writing.
- B) A focus on building core literacy skills for sound/phonological processing and for meaning making.

A. Focus on building foundations for sustained engagement with reading and writing

Through the following interventions:

- 1) The planned and active use of a print rich classroom

Some suggested elements of a print rich classroom

- Classroom labelling
 - 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 and captions in the above areas and wherever possible
 - Space for free writing and drawing
- Some ways in which a print rich classroom can build a foundation for meaningful reading and writing are:

2) A reading programme which provides exposure to literature and information texts.

Some important components of a meaningful reading programme are:

- Opportunity to engage with a variety of books and literature – both fiction and non fiction
- Opportunity to respond to literature in multiple ways

- a) Aesthetic – Reading with the primary motive of experiencing the text and responding to it through expressions of feelings, imagination and other experiential ways.
 - b) Efferent – Reading with the motive of extracting information from the text either for the purpose of building one’s knowledge base or for answering questions, locating facts, filling in gaps, summarizing, etc.
- Opportunities for being read to, through engaging and interactive read aloud sessions
 - Opportunity to respond, discuss and share readings and books
 - Opportunity to use and understand different genres and text types such as a) Narratives b) Poems c) Information books and texts d) Instructions e) Expository texts which present or argue different viewpoints
 - Exposure and usage of displayed authentic texts such as messages, letters, newspaper clippings and ads, invitations, posters, bus tickets, labels, etc.
 - Opportunity for content area (subject area) reading for building skills such as: identification of key words, identifying main ideas, making outlines and summarizing.

Table 1: Suggested elements of a print rich classroom and the corresponding foundation skills and attitudes for reading and writing which they may support

Print Elements and/or activity based on the print rich classroom	Corresponding foundation concepts, skills and attitudes for reading/writing
Classroom Conversations based on: Classroom displays, poems, texts, pictures.	Use of spoken language in a variety of ways based on the displays.
Space for free writing, drawing and make-believe play activities	Creative expression through drawing and free writing; Natural experiences of symbolic representation such as incorporating reading and writing into play and make-believe; dramatization; drawing, story-making, etc.

Displays of a variety of authentic texts such as labels, newspapers, ads, etc.	Enrichment of knowledge base and vocabulary Building confidence through non- threatening use of print in a variety of meaningful and fun ways
Reading/book corner Display of books and children’s stories/writings/ drawings Informal and non threatening opportunities for meaningful reading	Enjoying books and stories Motivation to read through book talk, story telling, read aloud sessions, and engagement with books in a variety of ways
Language games based on the displayed print	Engagement with spoken and written language in a variety of fun ways
Word Wall	Support for phonological processing, word recognition and meaning construction through rhyming words, word activities and word games
Teacher modelling, demonstration during read-aloud sessions	Develop print concepts, or understanding the basic conventions of print such as knowing how to handle a book or follow words on a page; title/cover of book, directionality, reading left to right and top to bottom; orientation; concept of ‘words’, word spaces; punctuation/ intonation; functionality; meaningfulness.
Labelling, written instructions and picture captions	Enhance Print awareness - noticing print everywhere; knowing how it is used in different meaningful ways for different purposes Actively facilitating the use of these elements
Name displays and/or attendance charts	Letter naming - awareness that letters have names and are different from each other in shapes and sounds Alphabet games, classification activities, etc.
Blackboard and charts	Follow written directions, read and do, activities based on weather charts, calendars made by children, etc.
Display of children’s work	Support the development of self confidence and a positive self image so that children feel confident, are willing to take risks and are excited about learning new things
Teacher modelling and demonstration of the multiple ways in which reading and writing are used	Exposure to a variety of meaningful ways of using reading and writing

- Support for reflective reading through opportunities for offering opinions and questioning the content of text.
- Opportunity to engage with books freely and with enjoyment.

B. Building core literacy skills - for phonological processing and for meaning making

In addition to the exposure to a print rich environment, it is important to provide structured opportunities for building script

knowledge and for developing some core literacy skills. These need to be made purposeful and meaningful. Some core literacy skills¹ which need to be addressed explicitly are:

1. Phonemic Awareness – It is the ability to notice, think about and work with the individual sounds within spoken words. Research indicates that children listen to speech sounds in a flow and often do not have an awareness of word boundaries. They need to learn to recognize the larger units of oral language such syllables and words. They also need special activities to help them understand that words are made up of speech sounds or phonemes.
2. Phonics – This refers to the relationship between written letter shapes (symbols) and their sounds (phonemes). Along with phonemic awareness, children require special activities which help them grasp sound – the symbolic correspondence of written alphabets and syllables. Phonics also teaches children how to use this knowledge to read and spell.
Both the above core skills are required for the process of recognition of written words
3. Word recognition and vocabulary – This refers to the ability of a child to recognize, understand and construct their own written words. A wide vocabulary helps children to read and write with understanding, as well as express themselves better while writing.
4. Comprehension – This refers to the child's ability to read and write with understanding. Reading is not a passive activity. Good readers use a variety of strategies to actively engage in the processes of making meaning. Researchers studying reading have developed various

comprehension strategies which can be taught to children to help them to read and write with understanding and become successful and independent readers.

5. Fluency – This is the ability to read and write accurately, quickly and with a flow. Fluent reading requires efficient word recognition and decoding skills. This leads to speed and automaticity in the reading process and helps children to read with comprehension. Fluent readers read meaningfully with an intonational flow and expression.

Role of the teacher/facilitator

It is vital for a teacher to be sensitive to the children's natural learning processes, their family backgrounds, and their individual differences while fostering meaningful and purposeful ways of engaging with reading and writing.

For this the teacher needs to be sensitized and equipped for the following:

- To understand that a relationship of trust and mutual respect is a crucial component for any meaningful learning to take place.
- To be sensitive to children and be able to reflect on his/her behaviour towards children.
- To be able to engage with the diversity in the classroom and generate respect for individual differences between learners and their parents, and build an environment of shared learning.
- To understand children and their language and literacy learning processes so as to be able to take an initiative and not just mechanically implement what is given.
- To develop the skills of managing young children in effective, nurturing and yet firm ways.
- To be able to demonstrate/model different reading and writing practices.

Conclusions

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

¹ *The Balanced Approach to Reading and writing emerged after an extensive and substantive review of research on early Literacy. For details see the report of National Reading Panel, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2000): Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and its Implications for Reading Instruction. <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/smallbook.htm>.*

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The teacher's task is therefore clear: it is to train his pupil to take in several words at a glance (one 'eye jump') and to remove the necessity for going backwards to read something a second time. This shows at once that letter by letter or syllable by syllable, or word by word reading, with the finger pointing to the word, carefully fixing each one in turn is wrong. It is wrong because such a method ties the pupil's eye down to a very short jump, and the aim is to train for the long jump. Moreover, a very short jump is too short to provide any meaning or sense; and it will be found that having struggled with three or four words separately, the pupil has to look at them again, altogether and in one group, in order to get the meaning of the whole phrase.

(From *The Teaching of English Abroad Part I* by F. G. French, 1962, Oxford University Press)