



Building foundations for learning

On behalf of my organisation I wish to thank UNESCO Bangkok for the privilege of this opportunity for sharing our education innovations at this Asia Summit. These education innovations have aimed at developing a conceptually sound and effective Foundation Programme for Early Literacy and Learning with a well defined and simple framework that allows the flexibility to address the individual needs of young learners. Our focus has been on pedagogy and classroom processes which have been arrived at through sustained engagement with the ground over a period of time. We have also tried to engage with some of the multiple perspectives through which early literacy and learning are being viewed within current literature. Through this modest effort we have been constantly reminded of the words of the Chairperson of the National Reading Panel.

*Teaching reading is really rocket science.
It is an enormously complex act.*

- Donald. N. Langenberg
Chair, *National Reading Panel*

Our challenge has been to try and make this complex task conceptually sound and yet relatively simple to implement within the contexts where we work.

The Organisation for Early Literacy Promotion - OELP is a not for profit, organisation which has been driven by a small group of individuals who believe that a meaningful school experience can play a major role in transforming the lives of young children and is in fact the inalienable right of every child. We were concerned that many schools function as sterile spaces in which children are not engaging with learning and so children continue to drop out or get pushed out. In 2006 we began an exploratory search to address this concern. This search has taken shape as OELP.

The context

Most of the young children that OELP works with grow up within oral traditions which are entrenched within highly stratified social patterns defined by caste and kinship groups. It is a harsh and arid landscape within which most communities eke out a living through daily wage work, subsistence farming or pastoral activity. Migration is rampant, especially during the harvest and sowing seasons when entire families shift to neighbouring districts and states to provide the daily wage agricultural work force. In addition, families work as labour at brick kilns or construction sites. The social world within which little children in these locations grow



up in is entrenched in the narrative and anecdotal forms of spoken communication. We have found that a meaningful shift to the more dis-embedded and de-contextualized written forms of communication, that are prevalent inside school classrooms, is extremely challenging not only for the young learners but also for many adults in these communities. Margaret Donaldson, through her seminal work in the late eighties; and a vast body of subsequent work on early literacy and language learning, has continued to remind us that the shift from the spoken to the written forms of communication does not come naturally, especially for children who do not have opportunities to engage meaningfully with print in their early childhood years. Dealing with the highly dynamic and complex cultural and social-linguistic contexts and a stratified society has continued to pose a challenge. We continue to come across many children who are engaging in classroom processes in mechanical ways as well as children who are irregular or get pushed out of school. This will perhaps be a familiar canvas within many other contexts.

Location: OELP work sites are situated within community centres and schools located in 20 villages in the State of Rajasthan in North West India. We have in the past supported likeminded NGOs working with children from marginalized communities in four other States of India.

Our aim is to build strong foundations for learning within children from diverse socio-linguistic and cultural backgrounds so that they are able to experience success as confident readers and writers and thinking learners and are able to engage with the contemporary world with fullness. We believe learning occurs in situations in which children feel good about themselves and their communities and are able build on their natural ways of learning.

Development of a two year Foundation Programme on Early Literacy and Learning

In 2013, OELP began to focus entirely on the development of a two year Foundation Programme for Early Literacy for beginning literacy learners. This programme has been piloted in 15 locations and the results have been very encouraging, with 80% learners achieving proficiency levels on the end term competency based evaluation at the end of Grade 2. The OELP innovations are currently being implemented in fifteen rural schools and community based village libraries and covers approximately 2000 children.

OELP's conceptual understanding of literacy

Becoming literate learners means:

- Being able to think independently
- Being able to make sense of what one sees, hears or reads



- Being able to share one's ideas, thoughts or feelings through spoken, pictorial, written or other forms.

Building an informed understanding

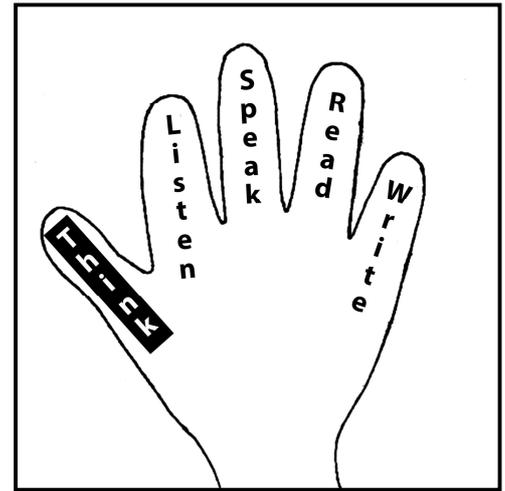
Early literacy is a fairly new area of work within the Indian context with indigenous research on early literacy acquisition within the Indian languages and diverse socio-linguistic contexts difficult to come by. OELP has therefore drawn from the insights available within the larger body of research and literature on early literacy and language learning. During the initial years of conceptualization and setting up, OELP drew heavily from Marie Clay's work on Emergent Literacy, which sensitized us to the importance of early home experiences for building foundations for early literacy. Based on this thinking, it became important for us to identify and address the special literacy and learning needs of the children who had minimal opportunity for natural engagement with print at home and in their social worlds. We also realised it was also important to consider the lack of structured routines within the daily lives of many children in their early growing up years. This makes it difficult for them to engage with the unfamiliar and rule bound world of school. The more we engaged with children, the more we realized the value of understanding their natural ways of learning and incorporating these into our programme. We became acutely aware of the multiple threads that we weave the complex fabric of early literacy and learning. I will try and give a glimpse of some of these various strands that we picked up through our journey.

OELP chose to locate itself within a socio-cultural perspective with the understanding that young children learn through experiencing their world and trying to make sense of it through social interactions with more informed 'others'. The issue of making a shift from the familiar world of home to the unfamiliar world of school, including the shift from the home language to the school language became an area of intensive engagement. We also made an effort to understand the composition of the Indian scripts, which are alpha-syllabaries and are not alphabets. We then used this knowledge to figure out the most effective ways of getting young learners to engage with written texts as thinkers.

The implementation framework

We discovered that it is essential to provide teachers or the education worker with a simple framework which is aligned to their daily programme and so does not make planning a demanding exercise. These ideas are presented to teachers and other practitioners diagrammatically in the form of OELP's hand. Please see the diagram.

Teachers are helped to draw parallels between the pivotal role that a thumb plays for increasing the functionality and efficacy of each of the four fingers in a hand; and the role of ‘thinking’ as the key factor for imbuing meaningfulness to the four aspects of language and literacy i.e. listening; speaking; reading and writing. In other words teachers are able to reflect and understand that **these four aspects of language and literacy become active and meaningful only through their consciously planned linkage with “thinking”**.



The above ideas have been used effectively by OELP for getting teachers in rural areas to appreciate that mere inclusion of activities for listening, speaking; reading and writing, in the daily classroom programme is not adequate. It is only when we create planned, authentic opportunities for children to reason; to reflect; to draw inferences; to predict ; to question or narrate in their own words that that meaningful language and literacy learning occurs.

Designing responsive learning environments At this stage we experienced that mere access to schooling did not make the classroom an inclusive space for learning and the classroom or learning centre was not an equal space. It was a huge challenge to engage children who came from the lowest rungs of the social ladder. They often remained as silent and passive spectators in the learning space. We were compelled to take cognizance of more recent perspectives on literacy such as those from the New Literacy Studies or the Multiple Literacies perspectives which have argued that literacy does not consist of neutral cognitive processes but instead is a socially and culturally situated practice. This body of work sensitized us to the fact that “who you are matters inside the classroom, and therefore it is vital for the learning space to address “difference”.

In our journey this has meant that we pay attention to developing carefully designed learning environments which are responsive and ensure that the children’s various needs and interests are addressed. Based on the findings of the National Reading Panel (2006) and the literature that has subsequently emerged, OELP chose to locate its work within a Balanced Approach with a focus on both meaningful engagement with language and literacy in natural ways and a structured skill building programme. We have also realised the need to move beyond “meaning making” to facilitating “thoughtful reading and writing” so that the young learners that we are



working with, respond to texts as critical thinkers who question; reason; express opinions; and engage with variety of texts in reflective and thoughtful ways.

The focus of OELP's two year Foundation Programme

Three skill sets have been woven into the foundation programme. These are:

- Foundation skills for schooling
- Foundation skills for early literacy
- Higher order thinking skills

Raising our expectations As our journey progressed OELP realised that children were far more capable than the expectations that we had of them. During book based conversations even with our six year olds, we found they were drawing on their real life experiences to questions, draw inferences or analogies, reason, predict and so on. However this required that high quality and well designed learning opportunities are made available to them and the teachers or educators are equipped to facilitate such learning opportunities. We worked on simple ways of weave “thinking” into every aspect of the programme. These opportunities do not need to be based on cost intensive resources. What is essential is that each child gets to engage with reading and writing as a thinking learner.

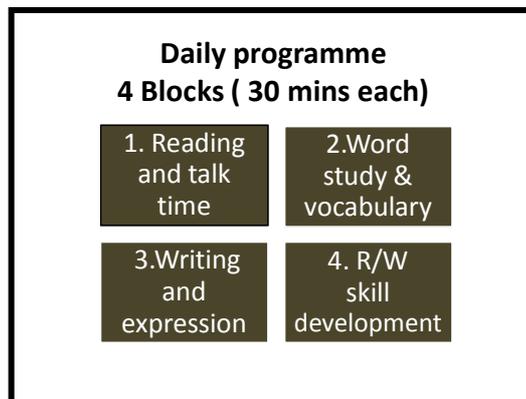
Innovation at four levels of complexity

Based on the above understanding the OELP innovations engage young learners with reading and writing simultaneously at four levels of complexity:

- As decoders
- As meaning makers
- As text users
- As thinkers

A simple four block implementation framework has been developed to provide a structure for the daily programme, so that teachers are supported with a structure that allows daily activities at all the four levels as mentioned above. To translate this conceptual understanding into classroom practice, OELP uses the **Four Blocks Approach**. The Four-Blocks is a Balanced Literacy framework, which was created by Dr. Patricia Cunningham and Dr. Dorothy Hall in the late 80s. Four Blocks allows students to develop their reading, writing, speaking and listening skills towards becoming effective,

literate communicators. It is an instructional delivery system for teachers, with a focus on “the HOW in teaching, and not only on the WHAT”.



The Four Block implementation framework is based on four half hour time slots, with a specific pedagogy focus. This is a broad framework which allows flexibility so that teachers are able to keep the interest and levels of the learners in mind while providing a variety in the classroom activities.

An overview of the Four Blocks

A brief overview of the OELP Four Blocks (some minor modifications have been made in the time allotment for each block based on the specific needs of Classes 1 and 2 in our work area)

Block 1- Talk time and reading– 30 to 40mins

This includes conversations and read aloud with a gradual shift to guided reading; shared reading and independent reading. There is a focus on strategies to be used for pre-reading, during reading and post reading; as well as the kinds of questioning which can generate higher order thinking.

Block 2- Word recognition and vocabulary building - 20 mins

Through a variety of activities and games, many of which use the displayed print in the classroom.

Block 3- Writing and activities for creative expression – 30 mins, with a focus on emergent literacy. Children are also encouraged to use a variety of natural materials to express their ideas in creative ways.

Block 4- Skill building – 30 mins

Skill building includes a focus on both foundation skills and higher order thinking.

Involving parents and members of the community

This has been an important component of the OELP innovations. There are regular parent and community meetings for sharing children work and progress. In addition OELP has a network of village libraries, which aim to build a culture of reading, while providing planned

opportunities for children to interact with adults in the village to engage with local knowledge forms. We hope to bring out books made by children on some of these compilations, and use these in our libraries.

Assessment and learner tracking

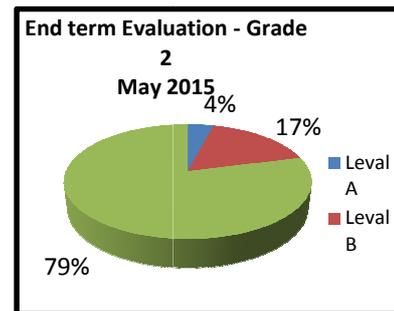
Learning indicators based on seven broad competencies are used for mapping children’s learning progressions at six measurement points i.e. at the end of each trimester, spanning a two year period.

Assessments include:

1. A baseline evaluation
2. Summative, competency based evaluation
3. Formative, observation based check
4. Individual profile folders

A feather in our cap!

The piloting of OELP’s Foundation Programme for Early Learning was undertaken in 15 State run schools in rural Rajasthan on approximately 2000 children from marginalised communities, including a large percentage of girls. The end term results of the pilot phase on competency based assessments of reading, writing and thinking skills have indicated that almost 80% learners have achieved proficiency level C.



Today we feel proud of our little Grade 1 and 2 learners within rural schools in Rajasthan. We can see that they will match up to any of their urban peers from well off families. They are reading books; they are questioning, thinking and expressing their views. They are well on their way to becoming "confident and thinking individuals".

Current status of the OELP Project:

Direct outreach: about 2000 children

Indirect outreach: about 15000 children (through our partner NGOs)

The OELP project is currently in a transition phase. So far, the OELP programme components have been in an establishment phase. We are now exploring effective programmatic mechanisms for expansion of our classroom and community based innovations to new locations, while ensuring quality. We are also exploring areas of synergy with teacher education colleges. We have been able to access financial support for setting up 10 of our



school based centres as demonstration sites for a Field Resource Centre. Discussions are currently on with the State and other NGOs towards building partnerships for expanding our outreach. OELP believes that scaling up needs to be taken up in a phased manner and through an informed understanding of the essential requisites for ensuring the sustainability of high quality classroom practices and innovations.

Some key elements of OELP's Foundation Programme for Early Literacy and Learning

- Provides an enabling and responsive learning environment
- Supports natural ways of learning and builds on mutual respect and shared learning
- Is conceptually sound
- Is simple and aligned to the mainstream school system
- Provides systematic mechanisms for monitoring and tracking learner progress
- Provides community linkages through a network of village libraries run by local *bahus* (daughters-in-law).

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