

## **Building Foundations for Reading and Writing with Understanding in Young Learners from Marginalized Communities**

There is a magic in sharing moments with a young child who is completely absorbed in a book....lost to the world around....wandering through terrains that the written words and pictures unravel! Such is the power of the written words. They have the capacities to wrap up even very young ones in completeness. They open up new worlds for young children and propel them into a global world that is driven by print. Yet such moments are becoming rare jewels that are denied to a very large number of young children in this country.

### **The foundations for meaningful reading and writing are laid in the first few years of life**

Recent research in early literacy suggests that the foundations for meaningful reading and writing are laid in the first few years of a child's life. A vast body of work done on emergent literacy confirms that it is through exposure to a variety of informal reading and writing experiences at home that many young children begin to experience different forms of reading and writing much before they enter school. These experiences may take the form of imitating a grown up reading a newspaper or book; recognizing some familiar written words or alphabets on hoardings, labels or television; pretending to read or write letters or messages; making pretend lists or listening to read aloud stories and so on. Experiences of this nature help very young children to make natural and meaningful connections with written words.

As children observe and interact informally and participate in print based activities in their homes and surroundings, young preschoolers begin to sort out and acquire knowledge about the print itself. For example, they begin to realize that there is a connection between the sounds of spoken and the symbols of written language. They "pick up" some writing conventions such as directionality and scribble pretend words from the left to the right side of a page. By the time they are three or four years old, many of these children become sensitive to the difference between alphabets, words and sentences and therefore leave gaps in between a scribbled pretend message to suggest words or even sentences. Often these scribbles are related to something that the child wants to say, and the child will read it aloud as a meaningful piece of writing. Nobody has taught the child about all these various aspects of writing. She has simply "picked them up" from her real life experience, in the same ways that she "picks up" spoken language from her surroundings.

**All children do not have access to print based experiences in their early childhood and are therefore differentially prepared for schooling**

Available literature, especially from within the Emergent Literacy and other socio- cultural perspectives draws our attention to the fact that children, who have had exposure to reading and writing in their early childhood years, have been found to come better equipped with the knowledge and skills required to deal with school learning, than their young counterparts who are actively engaging with print for the first time only when they enter school classrooms. Many young learners in this country, especially children from marginalized communities, encounter the written forms of language for the first time only when they step into school. Current literature in the field of early literacy emphasises that children who come from oral traditions or “non literacy cultures”, and who do not have access to a print based home environment in their early childhood years, are at a major disadvantage when they enter school. They do not enter school with the same degree of preparedness as children who have already experienced various forms of reading and writing at home.

These children from “non literacy cultures” are not able to view written words and alphabets as something meaningful and connected to “them” or “their lives”. Instead, they experience these as unfamiliar and something connected “to school work”. They begin to feel threatened inside the classroom. At times they are afraid of making mistakes and being belittled and so they are hesitant to participate in classroom reading and writing activities. This is compounded by the fact that they come from social groups who are often viewed as being unfit for learning .The situation gets further aggravated by the fact that they do not have support for reading and writing at home. Many of them are in fact required to help with domestic chores or work to supplement the family income during out of school hours, and so they do not get time for home work or for reading and writing practice at home. All these factors affect their school performance, and they soon begin to fall behind school expectations.

In a compelling book entitled “*Other People’s Words*”, Victoria Purcell – Gates presents a case study of a single child, Donny, who belongs to a poor, urban, Appalachian community in America. This is a community that is deeply entrenched in oral traditions, and therefore even to this day many Appalachians have not learnt to read and write. Donny comes from one such home. In this book the author captures the immigrant state that Donny finds himself in, once he enters school. It is a world that is completely alien for him, since he has had no exposure to reading and writing in any form in his early childhood, and so has learnt very little about written language

during his preschool years. He struggles to participate in classroom activities, however his participation is limited to the mechanical aspects of written forms, since he has never learnt to view print as something meaningful. This affects his performance and gradually he gets left behind in class and begins to be seen as a failure.

The author, who is the Director of a university, based Literacy Center, decided to spend a period of two years as a teacher, guide, and friend with Donny and his family. This gives her the opportunity to closely observe the family and build a deeper understanding of the reasons for Donny's failure to engage meaningfully with reading and writing in the first two years of school. Through this journey she is able to relate the marginal impact that school instruction has on Donny's reading and writing performance, to the wide gap between his non print world at home, and the world that is assumed by the school. As one reads this book, one begins to draw parallels and see the faces of the many "Donny's" inside our own young learner classrooms. Young children, like Donny, who are encountering written alphabets and words for the first time in school. In fact, "Donny" begins to take on the garb of a worrisome, but rampant classroom phenomenon in this country. This book forces one to realize that young girls and boys from marginalized, oral backgrounds are particularly vulnerable, as they struggle to build tentative and fragile relationships with the unfamiliar world of school and with the unknown world of written words and symbols. Both in Delhi and in rural Rajasthan, the Early Literacy Project (ELP) has found many children who are barely able to read and write with understanding at the end of Class five; while several others, who found it just too difficult, have simply "dropped out" of school. Related research now tells us that most of these are children who have not been able to make a successful transition from home to school.

**The first one or two years in school are important for facilitating a successful transition from home to school for young learners**

With the Right to Education Bill being passed by Parliament, all children in the 6 to 14 years age group, in this country are to be brought under the mantle of schooling. Education is being viewed as a Fundamental Right, making it mandatory for the State to provide free and compulsory education. There is at the same time wide spread acknowledgement that merely enrolling children into schools is not enough, and it is equally important to ensure that children engage meaningfully and successfully with schooling, and do not drop out. This can only happen if children from diverse backgrounds are able to experience school as a positive learning experience, which widens their knowledge, skills and confidence levels. For a very large number of children

however, the shift from home to school, which requires a shift from engaging in spoken forms of language to engaging with the written forms, can be a huge challenge. The first one or two years of a child's school life are extremely important for helping children to make this shift. This is the time when teachers need to be sensitive to the special needs of children who are engaging with print for the first time and equip them with adequate skills and knowledge for engaging successfully with reading and writing. These are the years when the foundations for meaningful reading and writing are laid for them. It goes without saying that unless children read and write with understanding, they cannot become successful and independent reader and writers, nor can they be successful school learners.

I am reminded of a passage from the book *Zorba the Greek*, in which the author Niko Kazantzakis shares a profound experience with the natural world and provides us with some food for serious introspection and reflection. He writes -

“I remembered one morning when I discovered a cocoon in the bark of a tree, just as the butterfly was making a hole in its case and preparing to come out. I waited a while, but it was too long appearing and I was impatient. I bent over it and breathed on it to warm it. I warmed it as quickly as I could and a miracle began to happen before my eyes, faster than life. The case opened, the butterfly slowly started crawling out and I shall never forget my horror when I saw how its wings were folded back and crumpled; the wretched butterfly tried with its whole trembling body to unfold them. Bending over it I tried to help it with my breath. In vain. It needed to be hatched out patiently and the unfolding of the wings should be a gradual process in the sun. Now it was too late. My breath had forced the butterfly to appear, all crumpled, before its time. It struggled desperately and a few seconds later, died in the palm of my hand.”

The author, through this short passage compels us to consider the analogy of young children being pushed too early into domains they are not ready for. As I step into beginner's classrooms and look at all the little faces gazing at me; I see many little butterflies waiting to flap their wings and fly... Kazantzakis' profound words then serve as a reminder of the power that I have as a teacher or educationist, to snuff out, or to give wings, to a little child's flight.

How then does one bring the magic of written words to our little ones who step into school? How does one entice them into engaging meaningfully with the world of print? How do little readers and writers get born? How does one build bridges between the worlds of home and the worlds of school, especially for children who are far removed from the world of written words? These are some of the challenging questions that the Early Literacy Project began to grapple with, as we began this journey inside classrooms in July 2006.

### **How did the Early Literacy Project (ELP) evolve?**

The Early Literacy Project (ELP) was born out of the several years of classroom experience with young children who read and write mechanically and are unable to make any sense of what they are reading and writing. Many of these children are studying in schools in our capital city, Delhi. This project developed as an exploratory search for methods which could build strong foundations for meaningful reading and writing in Hindi, for children who do not have support for reading and writing at home. It began in Classes 1, 2 and 3 in six Municipal Corporation (MCD) Schools in Delhi, and was implemented for one year, from July 2006. The children who attend these schools are mostly children of migrant, daily wage workers, from various parts of the country. After a year of intensive and sustained work inside classrooms within an urban context, this exploratory search was relocated to schools in rural Rajasthan, where we worked inside classrooms in eight government primary schools, as well as, in eight non formal bridge schools which function at night and aim to provide support to children who have not survived formal school and have ‘dropped out’, or to children who are unable to attend school in the day. This work in rural Rajasthan is still in process.

One of the main objectives of ELP is to develop methods which enable children from diverse backgrounds to build strong foundations for reading and writing with understanding, in Hindi. ELP began work in schools with the belief that it is important to actively engage with children and teachers and generate methodologies for meaningful reading and writing, which are grounded inside classrooms. This meant that these methods evolved organically over a period of time. This process ensured that these methods developed through a close engagement with children’s existing learning processes and at the same time remained rooted in the complexities of resource poor classrooms. We have therefore, been doing sustained work inside classrooms over the past three years. Through this intensive classroom engagement ELP has developed methodologies which attempt to systematically equip children with some foundation skills for meaning based reading and writing. These methods include the linguistic skills required for engaging with the sounds and symbols of written scripts, as well as, the cognitive skills required for meaning construction.

Children who have had no exposure to reading and writing in their early childhood often do not view reading and writing as personally meaningful processes, and tend to learn reading and writing in mechanical and superficial ways, often based on rote memorisation. ELP believes that it is essential to help such children to make personal connections with written words. They need

to realize that they can express their words, ideas, feeling and imaginations through the written form and experience the processes of reading and writing as meaningful for them. Once the children experience individualized connections with written words, they start using them. In the ELP project we try and do this by developing non threatening print rich classroom environments. The walls of the classroom provide a variety of displayed print and opportunities for the children to draw, write words, and share experiences from their daily lives through written and pictorial forms. These spaces allow children to experiment with written forms without being afraid of making mistakes. They also allow children to use to use their home languages freely and confidently with in the classroom, thus exploring the written forms of their oral vocabulary. Such print rich classroom environments provide children with opportunities to actively make friends with written words and experience the written forms as something meaningful and connected to them and not as something that is connected just to “school work” as we have found many young children are prone to believe.

### **Some broad guidelines**

Before launching into the classroom based work ELP identified some broad guidelines, which would give direction to the classroom methodologies as they evolved. These are as follows:

- Provide a balance between a structured programme for introducing young learners to the relationships between letters, sounds and meanings; and opportunities to children for freely and actively exploring these in a variety of natural ways.
- Utilize the inherent character of the Devanagari script, which provides a symbol for each spoken sound. This is done by equipping children to first identify the sound units in each word through the process of syllabification, and then combine the syllables to form the whole word. This is a process that facilitates efficient reading since it breaks written words into speech (sound) units that young children can easily identify.
- Equip children with the skills of combining syllables (aksharas) to construct their own meaningful written words which match their individualized oral vocabularies, and further to visualize the meaning of each word through a drawing. So that from an early stage children begin to relate to written symbols as meaningful and connected to their worlds.
- Link reading and writing activities, inside classrooms, with the children’s home languages and experiences so that they can build upon their oral vocabulary and connect to reading and writing in meaningful ways.
- Equip children gradually over two years to make a smooth transition to the language of classroom transaction.

- Once the children have acquired basic script knowledge and initial reading and writing competencies, provide them with a supportive print rich classroom environment for actively engaging with a variety of informal reading and writing activities in non threatening and meaningful ways.
- In the older classes i.e. Classes 2 and 3 focus on strengthening reading and writing comprehension and other higher order skills like answering questions independently.
- Involve the regular class teachers in the process of developing these methodologies.

## **An overview of the ELP Methods for beginning reading and writing in Hindi**

### **Class 1**

**The Varna Samooaha Approach.** This method uses a structured framework of six groups of consonants and vowels for introducing reading and writing to beginning level readers and writers. These are introduced to beginning readers and writers in a chronological order. The children are exposed simultaneously to alphabets, syllables, words and texts from within a varan samooaha, so that they can experience these as interrelated. The varna samooaha methodology focuses on the developing the following:

**i) Phonological processes** for exploring and building awareness of :

- a) Sound units within spoken language, especially awareness of syllabic sounds or aksharas
- b) The sound – symbol relationships within written language

**ii) The processes of meaning construction** for understanding of the sound - symbol- meaning relationships within written language, so that children are able to experience meaningless alphabets and syllables as parts of meaningful written words.

ELP found that it is essential to equip children from “non literacy backgrounds” with the linguistic knowledge for being able to write their spoken words in the written form . a vast body of work with young learners has clearly indicated that within the Devanagari script the linguistic unit that unit is most akin to spoken sounds is the akshara and not the phoneme. However, in most schools the children are taught written Hindi through the varna mala which is based on phomenes, and on fragmentation of words into each phonemic sound. ELP has found that this makes the process very difficult for young learners. Instead by basing the introduction of written words on the akshara ( alpha- syllable) as the linguistic unit, one provides a opportunity for the children to locate the exact written forms of their spoken words. The eLP approach is thus

based on the process of syllabification of words, through the use of the aksharas. Further the children learn to combine askshara to make their won words.

Unlike the sight word or whole word approach, the ELP methodology does not provide children with a predetermined word list, but instead equips the child with the knowledge of sounds and symbols available within the script, so that they can use this knowledge to construct words from within their oral vocabulary. This distinction is important as it highlights the active role played by the each child in constructing written words from within her particular language repertoire. Each child is equipped to identify symbols for different sounds and then learns to manipulate and combine these symbols (aksharas) in different ways to construct words that are part of their language experience and spoken vocabulary. Often these words are in a child’s home language. The child is thus given opportunities to make meaningful connections with the written forms from a very early stage. Once a child has constructed a written word she is required draws a picture to illustrate its meaning. ELP considers this to be an important part of the process of meaning construction. This is also completely different to imposing an arbitrary meaning through a word card with a picture already on it, as is often the case. With the ELP methodology the meaning that each child illustrates is unique for that child. For example in one school the children’s drawings for the word *pani* (water) have varied from drops, to a bucket, a tap, a river, a glass, an earthen pot. Each picture gives a glimpse into the unique mental image that the word conjures for the particular child who has constructed the word. In this way each child begins to experience a real and living connection with written symbols and forms.

### The ELP methodology for beginning reading and writing in Hindi

For beginning readers and writers in Class 1 ELP has developed the *varna samooha* methodology to introduce the Hindi script. Through this method the Hindi alphabet has been divided into six groups called *varna samoohas*. Through these *varna samoohas* children are thus introduced to a limited selection of a few Hindi alphabets and *matras* (abbreviated vowels) at a time. The groups have been designed to help young children understand the linkages between sounds and symbols of alphabets, syllables, words and texts and to experience these in interrelated ways. The idea is that written characters do not remain as meaningless symbols which

**Varna Samooha - 1**

<p><b>Consonants and vowels</b></p> <p style="text-align: center; font-size: 1.2em;">क प म ल न अ आ ई</p>	<p><b>Akshar chart</b></p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; text-align: center;"> <tr><td>अ</td><td>आ</td><td>ई</td></tr> <tr><td>क</td><td>का</td><td>की</td></tr> <tr><td>प</td><td>पा</td><td>पी</td></tr> <tr><td>म</td><td>मा</td><td>मी</td></tr> <tr><td>ल</td><td>ला</td><td>ली</td></tr> <tr><td>न</td><td>ना</td><td>नी</td></tr> </table>	अ	आ	ई	क	का	की	प	पा	पी	म	मा	मी	ल	ला	ली	न	ना	नी
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are just rattled off, but instead, children are able to relate to these as parts of meaningful words, as is shown in this visual for the first group or *varna samooaha* 1.

The children first learn to recognize the sounds and shapes of all the consonants and vowels which are being introduced within a *varna samooaha*. This is done through a variety of activities. Next, they are introduced to all the possible combinations that are available in the *varna samooaha* through an *akshar* chart (as shown in the visual above). The children also learn to recognize words which are constructed by combining the letters and syllables available within the *varna samooaha*. They are taught to clap to the sound beats for these words made from within the *varna samooaha*. Such words are displayed in a “word wall” so that they are visible to the children all the time, and the children get familiar with them. The “word claps” help them to listen attentively to the sounds for different parts of a word. Then they are encouraged to locate these word parts from the *akshar* chart. Such activities are fun ways of getting the children to gain script knowledge and experience the relationships between the sounds, letters and meanings. Pretty soon the children are ready to juggle around with the sounds and shapes of the various letters and syllables that they find in the *akshar* chart and combine them to create their own words. For example, a child may combine /pa/ and /nee/ from the *akshar* chart to make the word *panee* (water). It is fascinating to watch this process, and experience the joy of a child who has just actively constructed her first written word. Once it dawns on the child that the through written form that she has put together she is actually represents something from her real world – be it a family member, a colour, or some object.....she gets hooked! From this moment onwards it becomes like a treasure hunt, and we have found that little children can happily spend hours discovering their own hidden words from the *akshar* chart.

After a child constructs a written word from the *akshar chart*, she is asked to draw a picture to illustrate its meaning. ELP considers this as a very important activity. This drawing helps the child to connect the written word with a mental picture that is in her mind, and so it gives the written form a meaning. During such activities the children’s spellings and drawings are not “corrected”, so that they feel a sense of inner connection with their words and their drawings. ELP has also developed little rhymes from the words available within a *varna samooaha*. These are presented to the children through poem posters as shown in the visual above. Children recite these rhymes /poems with actions, and then learn to read them from the poem poster with the help of the *akshar* chart, since each word of the poem can be located from within the *akshar* chart. .

Giju Bhai, in his book *Prathamik Shala Mein Bhasha-Shiksha* makes a reference to a phase in a young child's reading and writing development, which he calls "*shabdon ki bahaar*" or "springtime of words". He describes the exuberance with which young children, who have been able to unravel the codes of the written script, want to engage with written words all the time. ELP discovered the same abundance in the children's active engagement with written words. They suddenly begin to actively engage with the print that they see around them. They keep hunting for different words from *akshar* charts and word walls. They compete with each other to find new words. They play word games. ELP believes this is so because each child feels a sense of ownership of the words that they create. This is empowering for them.

### **The ELP approach for the more advanced young readers and writers in Classes 2 and 3**

Development of a facilitative print environment in the classroom for the slightly more advanced level readers and writers with a focus on:

- a) Strengthening reading and writing with understanding
- b) Facilitating active engagement with print in a variety of meaningful, natural ways.

ELP has devised activities for promoting reading with understanding. For example an area of difficulty within children in rural schools in Rajasthan is answering questions based on small written texts. Since this is an important competency, especially for school success, ELP is giving this a lot of attention. This has been approached in a phased manner, initially by basing questions on texts which are based on the children's experiences. These texts are derived through the process of shared writing, in which the children choose what they want to write about. There is discussion and then they children jointly dictate the sentences which the teacher writes in their own words. Questions based on such texts have a direct connection with the children and have been useful for facilitating the process of independent answering of written questions.

The ELP intervention for the more confident, young readers and writers, has also tried to capitalize on the classroom as an authentic social setting, or a living context within which children can interact with each other through the written form. ELP tries to get children to actively engage with a variety of displayed print in the class. For example, children respond to each other through displayed messages; or use written words from the word walls for playing word games or participating in word activities; they write and respond to displayed riddles in the riddle corner, at times in their home languages; they share displayed rhymes, play-verses or poems in various ways through reading and writing; they read, look at and talk about pictures or

displayed writings; they listen to stories being read aloud or they read story books from the reading corner, and then they share their ideas about the story. They write, draw and respond to storybooks through reader's response charts. All of these become ways through which these young learners interact and communicate with each other in authentic and purposeful ways, through a variety of texts and textual materials. These are wall spaces in the classroom where the children are free to use their home languages and invented spellings in their own ways. Thus, the walls of the classrooms become like buffer zones which allow children to use print freely, without being afraid to make mistakes. The idea is for young learners to realize that reading and writing have deep connections with their lived experiences and inner worlds. ELP believes that it is important for children to experience written words and texts as a means through which they can relate to their worlds, and to each other.

This has not been an easy journey. ELP has a long way to go. There are several challenges that ELP has come across, both in the urban and rural contexts. These have confirmed ELP's belief that children who come from 'non literacy' cultures need special attention. Through work over the last year and a half ELP has identified some foundation competencies for building reading and writing with understanding. ELP's experience suggests that once these are developed within the first two to three years of schooling, children begin to engage more confidently and with understanding with reading texts in a variety of ways. ELP's exploratory effort has reinforced a belief that if we want to regard schools as places where all children will learn, regardless of their home circumstances, then it is vital to build informed understandings of the specific socio-cultural contexts within which learning occurs.

### **Additions**

A common practice for beginning reading is the whole word method, in which children are taught to sight read a predetermined list of words, which cover a large section of the Hindi Alphabet and matras. The understanding is that letters are abstract and meaning less and the children need to begin with meaningful words. Once the children learn to recognize these words they are taught to break these into the constituent consonants, vowels and matras through various activities. The underlying basis is building phonemic awareness. In depth reading observations with 1300 children in Delhi and about 350 children in rural Rajasthan and 50 children in rural MP, have revealed that such an approach leads to fragmentation in the reading process. The following are the kinds of reading behaviours that became visible during the reading processes:

- 1
- 2

The inherent character is the DN script --- based on syllabic awareness, through akshara knowledge has not been utilized and the reading process creates obstacles for reading with understanding. ELP's experience.....

**Notes:**

If we are going to teach reading we need to be clear about what is reading. I would like to share a definition that provided by Marie Clay, "Reading is the transfer of meaning from one mind to another through the medium of written language". The way to bring about this transfer has in fact been at the heart of bitterly fought debates, know as the "great debates" , with the proponents of whole language strongly advocating that reading be 'picked up' though immersion, while the "phonological perspective" suggesting the need to teach children to break the code through breaking tasks into small units, i.e. letters, words and sentences. Learning to sound out words, which then become sentences. The whole word approach as against the whole language in the Indian context. A look at early Literacy literature with the past decade or so indicates a clear shift in the debates. .. within the socio cultural perspectives - a shift from viewing reading from an individual cognitive activity to viewing reading as act that is located within a socio-cultural context. The emergent literacy Perspective.. role of early childhood...not so for children from oral traditions.... The need to focus on home – school transitions. What this implies

Phonological processing

Processes of meaning construction.

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09.08.2009

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