

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

## **The Indian context**

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF 2005) articulates the vision of a State that seeks to universalize schooling and address key contemporary education issues. In a textually mediated global world, which is being driven more and more by the printed word, access to script based literacy is one such important key issue. Efficient reading and writing have become essential tools for access to learning within and outside the school, as well as for actively participating within the contemporary world. It is therefore a matter of great concern when the Position Paper of the National Focus Group on the Teaching of Indian Languages (NCERT 2006), recognizes the failure of schools to address the linguistic diversity and multilingual competencies of young learners, claiming that, “most children leave schools with dismal levels of language proficiency in reading comprehension and writing skills even in their own native languages”. As more and more children in this country are brought under the mantle of schooling, many are unable to cope with the expectations of school, and as a consequence issues based on school efficiency, classroom participation and school retention continue to be causes of grave concern (See Govinda 2007). These are grim reminders of the long term and sometimes indelible implications of the initial years of schooling, with young learners from marginalized backgrounds being particularly vulnerable, as they struggle to build tentative and fragile relationships with the worlds of school and with the larger worlds of written words. Those who are unable to cope, simply “drop out”.

## **Current thinking on Early Literacy**

Large scale surveys as well as smaller ethnographic studies have over the years highlighted the fact that children from resource poor and socially marginalized communities achieve at lower levels than their more middle-class peers. Current literature indicates that one of the important reasons for this poor performance is the gap between the school and home environments of such children. (See Jayaram 2008). Work within the Emergent Literacy and other socio-cultural perspectives on Early Literacy have claimed that unless children acquire literate behaviors through using print and interacting with other literates within their social environments, they are often unable to go beyond a mechanical and incomplete mastery of the written code. In other words they are not able to engage meaningfully and with understanding with the processes of reading and writing, and through these with other aspects of the school curriculum.

A vast body of literature on Early Literacy has highlighted a profound correlation between social background and literacy levels and the consequent implication of learners from some social contexts, in having greater difficulty in learning to read and write than others. Being encultured into the practices of reading and writing through meaningful interactions with others has been found to greatly assist new learners. Gordon Wells in his book "The Meaning Makers", which is based on a fifteen years longitudinal study on language and literacy learning, undertaken in Bristol, England, claims that "there is little doubt that, in accounting for the difference between children, the major influence is that of the home, particularly during the preschool years and the first year or two at school" (1986: 195-196). What this study clearly demonstrates is that it is growing up in a literate family environment, in which reading and writing are naturally occurring activities that gives a child a particular advantage at the start of her formal school education.

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

Recent thinking with the area of Early Literacy suggests that the foundations for meaningful reading and writing are laid in the first few years of a child's life. Research within the Emergent Literacy perspective confirms that it is through exposure to a variety of informal reading and writing experiences at home that young children begin to experience different forms of reading and writing much before they enter school (Teale and Sulzby 1986). 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 while participating in social interactions. They experience an extended "apprenticeship" into literacy as they engage with literate family members in joint activities in which written texts play an instrumental role. In these activities, the adults' aim is not to teach their children to read and write *per se* but to assist them to contribute to an activity, to the extent of their current capability while managing those parts that are beyond them.

The first and most basic idea these young children have to grasp is that there is a systematic and constant relationship between the patterns of graphic symbols and the "words" to which they correspond. This is typically achieved through discussions with adults about what particular graphic symbols "say". As has been frequently pointed out, children often make this discovery first with respect to familiar signs and logos that they see in their surroundings or on television. In the case of alphabetic languages, there is a further level of correspondence to be understood - that

of the sound- symbol correspondence which is intrinsic in phoneme-grapheme relationships. How parents and other family members provide assistance with this learning task varies widely. In some communities, systematic attention is given to learning the letters of the alphabet and their associated sounds; in others, the instruction is much more incidental (Heath, 1983). For many young preschoolers this breakthrough is often made through the process of learning to write their own name and the names of other significant family members.

As young preschoolers observe, interact informally and 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 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**

With assistance of the kind discussed in the previous section being provided at home, many children come to school already well advanced along the road to literacy. Indeed, some are already independent readers and writers by the time they enter school. Available literature, especially from within the Emergent Literacy and other socio- cultural perspectives draws our attention to the fact that these children, who have had exposure to reading and writing in their early childhood years, 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. A very large number of young learners in this country, especially children from marginalized communities, actively encounter the written forms of language for the first time only when they step into school. They have not had any exposure of the kind mentioned in the earlier section.

Such 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. Available literature highlights the fact that 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”, and they relate to them in mechanical and superficial ways. At times they begin to feel threatened by the unfamiliar print environment inside the classroom and are afraid of making mistakes and being belittled. This makes them hesitate to participate in classroom reading and writing activities. This is compounded by the fact that many of these children come from social groups who are often viewed in disparaging terms and at times as being unfit for school learning .The situation gets further aggravated by the fact that most of these young children do not have any support for reading and writing at home. Many of them are in fact required to help with domestic chores; to look after younger siblings; to take the cows and goats to graze or work to supplement the family income; and so even if they do get to school, they do not get time for home work or for reading and writing practice at home. All these factors affect their school performance, and soon they begin to fall behind school expectations.

In a compelling study 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, decides 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 build in-depth connections between the marginal impact that

school instruction has on Donny's reading and writing performance and 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 "Donnys" 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, neoliterate backgrounds are particularly vulnerable, as they struggle to engage with the unfamiliar world of written words and symbols; and that they require special attention.

In both situations i.e. in the case of the MCD schools located in Delhi as well as, the government primary schools in rural Rajasthan, ELP has found many children who are barely able to read and write with understanding at the end of Class five. There are also several others, who found it just too difficult, and simply "dropped out" of school. Many of these are children who, for various reasons, have not been able to make a successful transition from home to school. There are several studies which highlight the social and political bases of educational deprivation as a major factor for India being one of the largest zones of illiteracy (Jha and Jhingran 2002; Vasvi 2003)

**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, have been brought under the mantle of schooling. Education has now become a Fundamental Right, making it mandatory for the State to provide free and compulsory education. Although the disparate schemes that are being passed off as "education", are highly questionable, there is at the same time also a 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. 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, requires a shift from the informal home environment to formal school environment, accompanied with a shift to from the home language to the school language. Added to this, in many instances, is the challenging shift from the spoken forms of interactions at home to engaging with written forms at school. In many cases these are accompanied by a hostile and unfriendly environment. All of this can be extremely daunting for the little children who step into school with great eagerness.

The first one or two years of a child's school life are extremely important for helping children to make a successful shift from home to school. 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. It goes without saying that unless children experience success and positive self esteems, they are not going to be able to learn to read and write with understanding.

Children bring to the school their real world experience and knowledge, along with competencies in the usages of spoken language, i.e. of their home language or mother tongue. They also bring their imaginations, curiosities and natural inclinations to be purposefully engaged. These are resources that equip young children to engage with their new classroom experiences in meaningful ways. Classroom learning environments need to encompass these outside-the-classroom experiences and resources that children bring into the classroom. If a young child's home language and the world that it encompasses, does not find acceptance within the classroom, it is unlikely that she will participate meaningfully in the classroom processes; instead it is more likely that the child will internalize rejection, and adopt the role of a benign spectator or non-participant who does not want to risk failure (Purcell- Gates 1995)

## **The Early Literacy Project (ELP)**

### **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 learners from marginalized communities 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 in a drought prone area, 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 who are unable to attend school in the day. The work in rural Rajasthan is currently being up scaled to 120 non formal bridge schools covering more than 2000 children.

To begin with ELP tried to build some clarity on what is reading and how should it be taught. This has been a highly contentious area within which a large number of conflicting and contradictory viewpoints prevail. The seventies and eighties were witness to the bitterly fought “great debates” of ‘whole language’ versus ‘phonics’ which focused on how to introduce letter sounds and word identification skills, and whether these should be taught in a structured and sequenced way or not. The proponents of whole language strongly advocated that reading be ‘picked up’ through immersion in a print environment the same ways that children “pick up” spoken language from their social environment. The “phonological perspective”, on the other hand, supported the need to teach children to break the written code through breaking up written texts into small units, i.e. letters, words and sentences. Recent thinking suggests that the most effective approaches for developing initial reading are those that combine extensive and varied exposure to printed texts, along with systematic phonological instruction and awareness of sound segments, letter sound correspondence, comprehension, vocabulary and spelling development.

Over the last decade or so, the earlier “great debates” have in fact made way for “second generation debates”. While the earlier perspectives viewed reading as individualized linguistic and cognitive processes of decoding and meaning making; within the more recent thinking on Early Literacy there has been a shift towards viewing these individual processes as being located within larger socio-cultural contexts. Reading, within the newer perspectives is not considered a neutral and autonomous act but, is believed to be influenced by the social context within which it occurs. In other words cloaked within a reading event are issues of social identity, power, and differentiation of rights and responsibilities. At stake in any reading event is who can do what, in which situation, when, with whom, and with what social consequence. (Bloome and Dail, 1997). Within young learner classrooms in which children are from varied and sometimes marginalized backgrounds, it is therefore, important to consider whether the norms in the classroom discussion and transactions permit diverse and multiple usages and interpretations, and if they provide equal access to children from diverse social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Based on this thinking ELP found it important to ensure that classroom reading materials and practices are grounded in an understanding of children’s natural language learning processes, their home backgrounds, and

their daily life experiences and classroom methodologies for teaching reading and writing allow space for the diverse learning processes inside classrooms.

### **Conceptualization of ELP**

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 to 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 learning processes and at the same time remained rooted in the complexities of resource poor classrooms. Through this intensive classroom engagement ELP has developed methodologies which attempt to systematically equip children with some foundation skills for meaningful reading and writing. These methods include the linguistic skills for engaging with the sounds and symbols of written scripts, as well as, the cognitive skills required for meaning construction.

Through classroom engagement ELP found that 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 engage with reading and writing in mechanical and superficial ways. 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. To begin with children are taught to construct their own meaningful words, so that they can experience individualized connections with their own written words. This also helps them to relate to alphabets and syllables as parts of meaningful words, and later be able to view their own words as parts of a written sentence. All these processes attempt to make a child experience the connections between the spoken and written forms of language.

Effort is also made to develop 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 in a variety ways. 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, and 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. They also help to support curricular learning.

### **Overview of the ELP intervention strategies**

- 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 (*akshara*) 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 recombining the written forms of the syllables to construct the whole word. This process aims to facilitate efficient reading and writing 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.

## **The challenge**

Within any Early Literacy interventions, it is challenging for classroom pedagogies to combine considerations based on children's natural learning behaviours and capacities to make sense, explore and invent; with methodologies that equip young learners to engage adequately and efficiently with various aspects of script knowledge. Often primacy is given to imparting script knowledge based on a vast scholarship. In young learner classrooms there is a possibility that the resulting pedagogies may take the form of teacher driven, controlled reading and writing, which focus on introducing young learners to the grapho-phonetic structures and the varied forms of the script through planned exposure to alphabets, syllables, words and practice routines based on these. The underlying assumption is that once children have acquired script knowledge, they will be able to engage effectively with it to meet their own language needs. The risk of such an approach is that since it is not embedded within contexts that are meaningful for young learners, it is unlikely to engage children actively, purposefully and meaningfully, and therefore, they are likely to respond in mechanical ways and superficial ways. The challenge therefore is that these abstract, structured routines of script knowledge are brought alive by drawing upon children's creative energies and inherent capacities to make sense. This requires the creation of classroom opportunities for meaningful and purposeful engagement with various aspects of the script, in ways which are sensitive to children.

**The ELP interventions** have focused at two learner levels, as follows:

**A.** The ELP interventions for beginning literacy learners in Class 1, i.e. for

- Developing phonological skills and orthographic knowledge
- Developing processes of meaning construction in Hindi.

**B.** The ELP interventions for more advanced literacy learners in Classes 2 and 3, i.e. the development print rich classrooms environments for supporting and strengthening a variety of meaningful reading and writing activities in Hindi.

## **The ELP Classroom methodologies**

### **Class 1**

The need to identify which linguistic unit plays a critical role in beginning reading has been a focus area of a vast body of current research in reading acquisition (See Patel 2004:35). Orthographies vary in terms of their written linguistic units. In alphabetic orthographies, such as those based on the Roman script, the phoneme, which is the minimal unit of potentially

meaningful sound within the orthography, is used as the basic written unit. In logographic orthographies, such as Japanese or Chinese the visual notation is the smallest unit, representing either a morpheme or a word. Finally, there are orthographies where the basic written units are not only phonemes but also syllables, or sub-lexical units which contain at least a single vowel. *Devanagari*, or the script for Hindi belongs to this category (Nag-Arulmani 2003). The *Devanagari* script in fact makes possible a written symbol for each spoken sound in Hindi.

In Class 1 the ELP intervention focuses on the developing the following:

- i) **Phonological processes** for exploring and building awareness of:
  - a) Sound units within spoken language, especially awareness of sounds corresponding to the alpha-syllables 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.

As mentioned above, within the Devanagari script the linguistic unit that is most akin to spoken sounds is the *akshara* or alpha-syllable and not the phoneme. However, in most schools the children are introduced to written Hindi through the *varnamala* which is based on phonemes. ELP has found that this makes the process very difficult for young learners, since they are taught to break up words into alphabets and abbreviated vowels (*matras*), which do not correspond directly to spoken sounds. For example in the case of the word पानी, a child does not hear the separate sounds of प | न | ी, but the child does hear the sounds of the *aksharas* पा and नी. Observations of individual reading processes have suggested that children engage with reading and writing based on the *varnamala*, in mechanical ways, through the use of their short term memories, so that with gaps in time, such as during holidays many children tend to forget all that they have learnt. Instead by basing the introduction of the script on the *akshara* (alpha- syllable) as the linguistic unit, the children to be able locate the exact written forms of their spoken words. The children do this through the process of syllabification of words, or the breaking of spoken words into their sound units. Then the children are taught to match these sound units to the corresponding written *aksharas*. Further, the children learn to combine these written *aksharas* to make words. Children have been found to pick up this process very quickly and then use it

effectively to construct written words from within their oral vocabularies, which may be words in their spoken home languages.

Unlike the sight word or whole word approach, the ELP methodology does not provide children with a predetermined word list to read, but instead the child is equipped with the knowledge of sounds and symbols available within the script, so that they are able to construct their own individual written words from within their spoken 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 experience. These words have a connection with the child. In Rajasthan ELP has found that these words are often in *Marwari*, which is the child's home language.

Children are 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 in many classrooms. In this case 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 *Devanagari* script. First of all the Hindi alphabet (*varnamala*) 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. These groups have been designed to help young children understand the linkages between sounds and symbols of alphabets, syllables, words and texts and to

**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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experience these in interrelated ways. The idea is that written characters do not remain as meaningless symbols which are just rattled off, but instead, children are able to relate to these as parts of meaningful words and poems, as is shown in this visual for the first group or *varna samooha* 1.

The children first learn to recognize the sounds and shapes of all the consonants and vowels which are being introduced within a *varna samooha*. This is done through a variety of activities. Next, they are introduced to all the possible combinations that are available in the *varna samooha* through an *akshar* chart (as shown in the visual above). Daily recitation of the *akshar* chart is done with actions in various directions, so that the children become thorough in recognizing all the *aksharas*. The children next exposed to one or two words which can be constructed by combining the *aksharas* available within the *akshara chart*. They are taught to clap to the sound beats for these words. Some of these 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 *askhara* 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 *akshara* chart and combine them to create their own words. For example, a child may combine /pa/ and /nee/ from the *akshara* chart to make the word *pane* (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 *akshara* chart.

After a child constructs a written word from the *akshara 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 samooha*. 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 *akshara* chart, since each word of the poem can be located from within the *akshara* chart. .

Giju Bhai (1997), 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 *akshara* 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.

The ELP intervention for the more confident, young readers and writers, has 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. It has been much more challenging to build print rich classrooms within the resource poor conditions in the rural schools, but even here word walls, morning messages and poem and reading corners have been tried out fairly effectively.

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 foundation skill, 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.

### **Conclusions**

Through work over the last year and a half in rural Rajasthan ELP has identified some foundation competencies for building reading and writing with understanding. ELPs 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, so that children are equipped to engage with school based learning in meaningful and empowering ways.

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