

# Early Literacy Project – Explorations and Reflections Part 1: Theoretical Perspectives

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**Abstract:** *Recent 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. Children are viewed as active participants in the process of learning. They learn the social rules of meaning at home and then extend these social rules to the texts encountered in school. It matters therefore whether the norms in the classroom discussion and transactions privilege single versus diverse and multiple interpretations, and whether they provide equal access to children from diverse social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The Early Literacy Project (ELP) interventions are reported in two parts. This first part introduces ELP and discusses the theoretical concerns on the basis of which the project has been designed, as an exploratory intervention which seeks to find suitable ways to strengthen the foundations for reading and writing in Hindi for diverse groups of young learners within mainstream government schools in Delhi, with a special focus on neo-literates. The project's concerns include evolving active, facilitative, and equitable classroom learning environments and related teaching methods which honour learner diversity in the classroom. These include methodologies for phonological processing as well as for meaning construction that enable children to make deep connections with their lived experiences and inner worlds, and may, in fact, be considered the written forms of spoken language.*

## **Early literacy in Hindi – the mainstream Indian context**

A comprehensive discussion on the existing situation of early literacy in mainstream young learner Hindi classrooms in this country is beyond the scope of this

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paper. It is however being briefly touched upon so as to highlight some factors which have led to the genesis of the Early Literacy Project (ELP). The mainstream discourse in Education over the past two decades, in the Indian context, has been unequivocal in highlighting the need to respond to the socio-cultural, economic, and linguistic diversity of young learners. The National Education Policy of 1986 (GoI, 1986) offered provisions of flexibility in curricula and syllabi, provided a 'common core' is retained (GoI, 1986, Section 3.4). This policy further provided for contextual textbooks and other learning materials as well as plural learning processes that would reflect the rich geo-cultural diversity of the country. The recommendations of the Yash Pal Committee Report (GoI, 1993) reinforced these policies. The National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCERT, 2005) built further on this vision by giving primacy to the active learner and to the importance of building informed understandings of specific socio-political contexts of learners and learning processes, while appreciating their diversities. This document also highlights the significance of bridging the gaps between home and school to facilitate processes of active learning and meaningful constructions of knowledge in the classroom. However when it comes to the translation of the visions and policy provisions into classroom processes, the situation on the ground begins to look rather bleak.

The vision of a state that seeks to universalize schooling and address key contemporary education issues is articulated in the above documents. In the present context of 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 are viewed as essential tools for access to learning within the classroom and for actualization of some of the visions that have been incorporated in the above policy documents. 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". This document recommends that the medium of instruction at the primary school level should be the children's mother tongue. However, the situation on the ground is complex, with diverse languages being clubbed under one mother tongue. For example, in the case of Hindi, Jhingran (2005:16) points out that about 20 languages (called mother tongues in the 1991 census analysis), which have been grouped under Hindi, in fact, had more than one million speakers each in 1991. These include Bhojpuri (23.1 million), Chhattisgarhi (10.6million), Rajasthani (13.3 million) and so on. Many of these are written languages with an extensive literature. Within the classroom this translates into the reality of several children with "Hindi" as their mother tongue, in fact not being able to understand the "Hindi" of the curricular transaction. For example, while implementing ELP Phase 2, which is currently in process in rural Rajasthan, we have found that most children in the early classes do not understand the Hindi used for classroom transactions, and efforts at facilitating meaningful reading and writing based on the prescribed textbooks in these schools are made by the teachers through translations into the children's home languages. However this makes the actual reading process cumbersome, mechanical and difficult for the young learners. This is a familiar and well documented scenario in a large number of young learner classrooms across the country, within which language diversity becomes a major stumbling block to reading acquisition, since effective pedagogies for dealing with the multilingual character of these young learner classrooms are not in place. The vision document of the recently set up National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), New Delhi claims that failure in achieving sound reading skills may be a factor for a child to drop out of school. This document also expresses the concern that "as an area of Primary Level curriculum, reading as such has remained neglected in our own system and whatever attention it receives comes under the teaching of a particular language" (NCERT; 2008).

The textbook continues to dominate curricular transactions and in many mainstream classrooms it is the only resource that is used. Post independence the state took upon

itself the responsibility for designing these textbooks through an organizational base headed by the NCERT, with these centrally produced books being used within the state schools such as the schools run by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD). Some changes in the approaches to reading within these centrally developed Hindi textbooks for young learner classes may be noted through a shift from the earlier explicit and decontextualised instruction in phonological and word identification skills to the more implicit “whole word” approach in the seventies and eighties. The shift was based on the understanding that children would find learning whole words more motivating than learning letter sound correspondence. Also that phonologically regular words assist children to “pick up” the sound-symbol relationships of alphabets in a more meaningful way. The beginning readers in the popular *Bal Bharti* series (1997) were designed as linear and additive books wherein beginning literacy learners were introduced to reading through a hierarchical progression which was arrived at through phonetically selected words, sentences and texts. Although each lesson was woven around a topic, phonological awareness dominated the content and design of the beginning level Hindi readers within these series, making the language used appear contrived and far removed from the children’s material world. Major transitions in Hindi textbooks for the younger classes, however, came about in the last decade. Elementary Education in India now saw the emergence of ambitious macro state initiatives like the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), and the more recent and mammoth Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) which catalysed a process of textbook renewal and curricular reform aimed at promoting more contextualized and learner centered pedagogies. In Delhi some of this new thinking has been introduced through the current Hindi textbook series called “*Udaan*”, introduced in the MCD schools in the academic year i.e. 2004-2005.

It is useful to take a look at the beginning level textbooks in the “*Udaan*” series since approaches to beginning reading and writing are an important focal area within the ELP intervention. In “*Udaan Part 1*” (2004) there is linearity in the presentation of the Hindi alphabet or varna mala, and each letter is presented

through association with sets of familiar words which have been carefully selected from the children’s day to day world and are visualized through pictures. While this linearity maybe an area for debate, emphasis has been given to classroom talk and discussions based on the visual and textual inputs. The book also presents small poems and short expository texts, which have been selected on the basis of their interest for children, and not because of their phonological content. There is a clear departure in these beginning level readers from the earlier decontextualised, and linguistically controlled introduction to letters, words and sentences. The inherent pedagogy within “*Udaan Part 1*” is designed to help children understand the relationship between oral and written language, so that reading becomes a meaningful process within which the children “pick up” the structures of written language through usage. However, this thinking and its pedagogical implications do not seem to have been communicated clearly to many teachers. During sustained classroom engagement within the ELP schools we found that teachers were resistant to accepting these learner centered pedagogies and were in fact confused as to how they were expected to engage beginning learners, who did not even recognize the letters of the alphabet, with the poems and other textual content that have been incorporated in these books. Almost all the teachers cited a preference for the earlier “systematically organized and graded” *Bal Bharti* series, which they claimed were ‘scientific’ and accessible for children since they were designed to help children “learn to read”. Clearly there was a conflict in the definition of ‘reading’ as perceived by the textbook writers and by the teachers, with the teachers giving emphasis to the processes of sound – symbol mapping and the decoding required for word recognition; while the textbook writers had viewed reading as a process of constructing meaning. Further the methodologies for transacting these books were not clear to the teachers. This situation was further compounded by the daunting challenges inside most of these resource poor classrooms which required the teachers to simultaneously deal with complexities of learner diversity; large class sizes, learner irregularity, as well as engagement with the specific learning needs of many beginning learners who were encountering reading and writing for the first

time without support at home. In the light of such classroom realities these teachers had found the graded and linear structure of the earlier textbook series easier to transact, and they were unclear as to how to engage with the more holistic and open ended new textbooks. The textbook writers intended to reform classroom pedagogies through the redesigning of the textbooks. However, we found that instead in Class 1 in all the selected ELP schools it perpetuated a dependence on traditional primers and the textbook was used perfunctorily, only to meet the requirements of supervision, since the teachers were bound to use it and it provided the yardstick through which performance was periodically judged.

It is important to juxtapose the above experience with developments that have occurred over a period of time within the larger field of Early Literacy. 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. Some reading researchers, such as proponents of the reading readiness and bottom – up approach argued strongly for explicit instruction in phonological and word identification skills. Successful reading was thus considered to be built upon a hierarchy of sub-skills, which have to be learnt systematically, in a given sequence and practised regularly. The ‘top-down’ and ‘whole language’ approaches on the other hand, argued that deliberate teaching of basic elements (letters, sounds, blends, words) merely fragments the process, and distracts the child from the real business of reading. Such an approach also considers that alphabet sounds are abstract for children. The proponents of the top down and whole language approaches to reading and writing laid an emphasis on ‘meaning’ which is to be arrived at through language usage and exposure to the relationship between the spoken and written words. While this has remained a highly contentious area, 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 two decades, these earlier “great

debates” have in fact made way for “second generation debates” which view reading and writing as socio-cultural practices instead of the earlier focus on individualized cognitive and linguistic skills and processes. These new perspectives on early literacy emphasize that reading materials and classroom practices need to be grounded in an informed understanding of children’s natural learning processes along with sensitivity and understanding of learner diversities and learners home backgrounds.

A range of language programmes aimed at promoting reading and writing in Hindi and other Indian languages coexist within varied Indian contexts. These include both teacher centric and learner centered early reading and writing programmes and materials which are designed within frameworks based on different perspectives. Early reading and writing have also been focus areas within recent large scale and campaign mode programmes, which aim to assess and enhance early reading capacities, as well as provide reading material and school reading rooms or library programmes. In addition, the link between curriculum design and effective reading and writing has been addressed by innovative programmes with have either existed in alternative schools or have engaged as systemic interventions within mainstream schools. These have provided some useful contributions and insights in the field of early literacy in the Indian languages. A few examples of such innovative programs are: Neelbagh in Karnataka, Prashika in Madhya Pradesh, Kerala Sashtra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) in Kerala, Digantar in Rajasthan, the Organic Reading Programme in Phaltan, Maharashtra and the Rishi Valley Programme in Andhra Pradesh which has been further adapted on a large scale as systemic interventions by the Nali Kali Programme in Karnataka and the Activity Based Learning (ABL) Programme in Tamil Nadu. Some of these programmes have clearly articulated the theoretical perspectives within which they are located, while in the case of others this remains an ambiguous area and decisions regarding content, materials and classroom pedagogies which have been designed to promote initial and early reading and writing are based more on field practicalities than on understandings based on children’s learning processes. There has in fact been a striking absence of “the great debates” within the mainstream academic discourse and

approaches to beginning and early reading in the Indian languages within the Indian context. Many of these programmes do not articulate the underlying thinking within which they have been conceived, especially in the case of approaches to beginning and early reading. The situation on the ground remains grim with large scale surveys and performance based data indicating a rather dismal ground reality with large numbers of children not being able to read and write efficiently at the end of primary school, and drop out rates in the beginning years of schooling remaining very high. This project is a humble effort to engage with some of these concerns.

### **Conceptualization of the Early Literacy Project**

Many children from resource poor and socially marginalized communities achieve at lower levels than their middle-class peers. Current literature and documentation, some of which cited above, indicate that one of the important reasons for this poor performance is the gap between the school and home environments of such children. Work within the Emergent Literacy and other socio-cultural perspectives on early literacy have claimed that unless children acquire literate behaviours, using print and participating with literate others within their social environments, they often cannot go beyond a simple and incomplete mastery of the written code. According to this view, being encultured into the practices of reading and writing through meaningful interactions greatly assist new learners. This project aims to understand the literacy acquiring processes of young children who come from socio-cultural groups that typically underachieve in school. Further, to use this understanding in order to evolve meaningful and facilitative classroom print environments and related teaching methods as an attempt towards creating conducive classroom cultures for enhancing reading and writing in initial and early young learner classrooms. The Early Literacy Project (ELP) also aims to use available insights within early literacy research and literature to respond to classroom diversity and home-school differences in ways that are meaningful for children.

The Early Literacy Project may thus be viewed as an exploratory quest for ways to strengthen the foundations for reading and writing in Hindi for young readers and writers from diverse backgrounds who come to learn in mainstream

government schools run by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. Many children in these schools belong to migrant families from different parts of India and bring with them an interesting mix of linguistic, social and cultural traditions. For these young learners, the language spoken at home is often not the same as the language used for curricular transaction in the classroom, and therefore they are often unable to understand much of what transpires in the class. In the Indian context, the issue of language disadvantage has been clearly identified as an area of concern. Nevertheless there remains a parallel concern which has not received attention: the shift these children are required to make from the oral cultures in their homes to the print culture of a classroom. Current literature in early literacy points out that this transition does not come naturally. For children who come from homes where there is limited access to printed words, the transition from the spoken interactions at home to those based on the written mode within schools can be very challenging. My varied engagements with young learner classrooms over the last several years, and more recently through the four year Bachelor of Elementary Education (B. El. Ed) programme, have provided me with first hand experiences of the struggles inside classrooms which are faced by a large number of young learners who do not have support for reading and writing at home. In many cases these children end up as numbers on “dropout rate” charts, which do not in fact reflect the experiences of disempowerment, alienation or rejection which these little children face at a very young age. This has been the driving force behind this small exploratory effort. Stemming from these concerns ELP is a modest attempt towards trying to equip these beginning learners with the skills and knowledge required for active, meaningful and successful engagement with reading and writing in Hindi in the beginner classes within mainstream schools.

The effort within ELP has been to allow the intervention methodologies to emerge organically through active engagement with children from diverse backgrounds inside classrooms, so that these methods and approaches develop in response to the varied needs and learning behaviours of children, as well as, through active engagement with the complexities and challenges inside classrooms. This process

was operationalised through concerted efforts at providing sustained support to regular teachers inside classrooms over the period of one academic year, coupled with regular, informal review and planning meetings with these teachers, which aimed at ensuring that the ELP approaches develop with the involvement of regular class teachers and are grounded in classroom realities. ELP believes that it is of primary importance for children to understand and experience reading and writing as processes which are meaningful for them; children need to realize that they are in fact another mode through which they can represent their thoughts, feelings, experiences, curiosities, ideas and fantasies and that both reading and writing have a deep connection with their inner worlds and lived experiences. This is in contrast to several children's perceptions of reading and writing as something to do with "school" and "studying" or as tools for accessing written texts, including the content of textbook lessons<sup>1</sup>.

Work within the project has been taken up at two levels:

- a) For building the foundations for initial reading and writing through linguistically controlled classroom environments and methods in Class 1
- b) For developing and using print rich classrooms to enhance and strengthen reading and writing for the more advanced early literacy learners in Classes 2 and 3.

The ELP interventions have attempted to focus on the foundation skills required for phonological processing and word identification, as well as, for the processing of meaning construction.

### **Background**

A substantial part of school learning is through the written mode. Available literature however, confirms that for many beginning school learners the transition from the familiar oral modes of learning in their home environments to the written modes in school does not come naturally. Gordon Wells (1986) in the introduction to his book "The Meaning Makers", which is based on a fifteen years longitudinal study undertaken in Bristol, England echoes a widely articulated concern for beginning learners within schools classrooms for whom:

"...written language seems to have little meaning; despite much time and effort they are unable to reach the stage of "independence" in communicating through reading and writing and, as a result their progress in other areas of the curriculum is jeopardized. All too often they come to be seen – and to see themselves – as failures" (1986: xii)

The importance of the first few years of schooling cannot be emphasized enough. Captured within aggregate statistics or more personalized ethnographic studies, are the recurrent reminders of struggles that many young learners undergo during the initial years of school. 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 serve as reminders of the long term and sometimes indelible implications of the initial years of schooling. Young learners from marginalized backgrounds are particularly vulnerable, as they struggle to build tentative and fragile relationships with the worlds of school, and with the larger worlds of written words. As adults we are often in danger of forgetting just how abstract and symbolic much of what we present to children in schools really is. It is important to understand that children's thinking is not inferior to adults; rather that it is different in form and experience. Their thinking is 'embedded' in a context which has meaning for them, whereas much school activity is what Donaldson (1978:76-85) describes as 'disembedded', or thinking which is divorced from a context in which children can see purpose and meaning. Available research has acknowledged the need for young learners to have learning tasks presented to them within meaningful contexts in which they can bring to bear, their previous learning experiences and understandings. Much of this work has highlighted the valuable role of play, active learning and free explorations for young learners to understand the representational meanings behind the symbols they create or use within natural learning processes (see Moyles 2001). These research findings have important implications for early literacy practices in young learner classrooms.

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<sup>2</sup>. 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. Current thinking within the area of Early Literacy has highlighted that classroom learning environments need to encompass these outside-the-classroom experiences and resources that children bring into the classroom. If a 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)<sup>3</sup>. 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.

While teachers within the MCD schools were found to often allude to the children's home backgrounds as being largely responsible for their degree of proficiency within the classroom, the Early Literacy Project's (ELP's) experience suggests that there isn't much space within the ambit of existing curricular transactions and classroom practices for these teachers to engage with deeper reflections on the epistemic and pedagogic implications for schooling or of the differences in the children's real world experiences and home backgrounds. Diversity within the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) school classrooms exists in many forms some of which were experienced through this project as follows:

- Linguistic diversity, i.e., the variations in the learners with respect to the mother tongue, the language/dialect spoken at their homes as a variation from the requirement of standard Hindi
- Differentiated degree, and variations in print usages in the learners' homes
- Age variations within a class
- Social and cultural variations among the learner population
- Differentiated degree of participation within classroom transactions
- Variations in performance levels on classroom tasks

### **The context**

ELP Phase 1 began in 6 Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) Schools, located on the outskirts of South West Delhi in July 2006, and was implemented for one academic year. It reached out to a total of approximately 1300 children (boys and girls), and 30 teachers from two sections each of Classes 1, 2 and 3 in the selected MCD Schools. The core ideas of the intervention were developed through intensive classroom engagement within 2 out of the 6 selected schools and emerged organically in response to the diverse needs and learning behaviours of children within classrooms. ELP Phase 1 focused on evolving active and facilitative approaches to beginning literacy learning, along with the development of print rich classroom environments which honour learner diversity and aim to enhance reading and writing for the more advanced young readers and writers. ELP Phase 2 began in January 2008 and aims to consolidate some of the learning from Phase 1 and to extend these interventions to the new context of rural Rajasthan.

Many children within the schools selected for ELP Phase 1, belong to migrant families from different parts of India, such as Bihar, Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Orissa. In several cases, the language or dialect spoken at home is not the same as the language used for curricular transaction in the classroom, and therefore entry into school can be daunting. This was perhaps one reason why several young learners in Class 1 were

found to spend a long time as silent, non participating spectators. Gordon Wells (1986:227) attributes this ineptitude that some children display within classrooms to the particular role that language plays in the construction of shared meanings. He claims that in most cases these shared meanings differ between home and school, and it is this that creates problems and not any lack of language competencies or resources on the part of the children. During informal home visits we discovered that perhaps the only direct form of reading and writing that some families engage in is the reading of religious texts; often these are memorized and recited. Therefore the actual engagement with written words seems to be minimal. However, technologically mediated aspects of reading and writing such as through television, commercials and mobile phones did find some space as textually mediated aspects of social interactions in the children's homes or neighbourhoods. These are mostly internalized by the children as motifs of popular culture or of the commercial world, such as the names of films or soaps on television, hoardings, labels on consumer items in shops or in TV commercials; names of popular songs on audio cassettes or CDs, textually mediated messages on mobile phones; engagement with wall posters and calendars. Most of these are viewed as negative influences by parents. A small percentage of children in the selected schools are from the indigenous population, since most local children prefer to go to the small private schools which have mushroomed in the area, and view the MCD schools in disparaging terms

A large number of children from the 6 ELP Phase 1 schools live in shanties or slum clusters close to the school. Many mothers are employed as domestic help in the neighbourhood high-rise housing complexes, or in small scale industries like garment or pickle making. Some are self employed as petty traders. Many fathers are employed in construction work, or in small scale industrial units which have come up in the urban villages located in the area. Much of this employment is insecure, contractual and short term or daily wage work. Many parents work long hours and do not have time for their children. Most children, especially girls are compelled to work to supplement the family income or to sharing the responsibilities of domestic chores and care of younger siblings. Thus, these

young children grow up in such harsh realities, and share family burdens as responsible partners. While some families live within small communities who belong to the same geographical region and share a common language and social and other practices; there are many others who are cut off from their communities and shared feelings of alienation, insecurity and powerlessness within the hostile world of violence, substance abuse and petty crime in which their children grow up. Several parents spoke with nostalgia about their "real homes", while in contrast, their children, seemed to identify more with the urban world that they live in. Most parents when spoken to, valued schooling, and education and many worked hard to provide extra tuition to their children, since they were unable to provide any form of academic support. They saw education as a vehicle for upward social mobility.

Classrooms, in all the six schools are controlled, authoritarian spaces, which are deeply entrenched within a behaviourist paradigm, in which teachers are engaged with delivering a predetermined curriculum, which is more or less synonymous with "covering" chapters of the subject textbooks, while students remain passive recipients, who respond within predefined frames and expectations. Recent state initiatives have catalysed a process of textbook renewal and curricular reform, some of which has been introduced through the current Hindi textbook series. As mentioned earlier most teachers were found by ELP to be resistant to accepting the learner centered pedagogies, which have been incorporated into these textbooks. Systemic control and rigidity in the inspection framework seemed to be aggravating the situation. ELP has had to actively engage with such resistance through continuous dialogue with teachers and education authorities, since time slots for weekly review meetings were not available. This dialogic process though challenging, has been pivotal in building some degree of shared understanding between the teachers and the project team, towards using opportunities within the existing curriculum to develop ideas for print rich classrooms and related methodologies. The social distance between the teachers and the children is wide. In addition to being poor, most children belong to socially disadvantaged groups. In contrast the teachers are from the educated middle class, and

tend to be either patronizing or disparaging in their attitude towards “these slum children”, who most teachers believe to be limited in their capabilities. There isn’t much space for school accountability to parents, with low performance levels being attributed by schools mainly to inadequacies in the learners and their families; and conversely, related anger and frustration being expressed by some parents during home visits, based on their inability to contest these dismissive attitudes on the part of the school and teachers.

#### **Some questions with which ELP began<sup>4</sup>:**

1. How might out-of-school identities and social practices be leveraged in the classroom in positive ways?
  - a) What resources do young learners from diverse backgrounds, cultures and socioeconomic groups bring to the classroom?
  - b) What are the connections between ways of reading and writing and ways of talking, acting, interacting, valuing, and being in the world?
2. How does one account for lack of in-school success and out-of-school success for the same child? What are the considered notions of success and possible areas for rethinking?
3. How can classroom processes address students whose critical consciousness as members of disadvantaged social groups may not be predisposed to display the competence they possess?
4. How can teacher agency be enhanced to encompass and mediate classroom processes that honour learner diversity and democratic functioning, and make success achievable for each child?

#### **The theoretical perspectives of ELP interventions**

As a teacher or practitioner who has worked with varied groups of children for several years, I believe that classroom practices are often driven by intuitive responses borne out of the experience of being with children. Insights and reflections based on these intuitive responses help to generate more sustained classroom pedagogies. It is important for any search

for meaningful engagement with early literacy, to reflect upon and locate itself within current thinking. This process of articulating underlying theoretical perspectives has been an integral part of ELP’s search for conceptual clarity and consistency within the thinking through which different dimensions of language and literacy learning are being viewed in the ELP interventions. This is all the more essential in a field, which is vast, complex and ridden with contentious issues, debates and contradictory or conflicting viewpoints. The conceptualizations of early literacy in the ELP intervention have been viewed within an overarching theoretical framework which positions itself within socio-cultural and constructivist perspectives, which privilege meaning over mechanical skills; with literacy seen much more in terms of socio cultural and historical processes within which individual internal cognitive development occurs. The ELP interventions have drawn from five broad areas of theoretical influence, to view all language uses, whether grounded in speech or in written/visual texts, as situated within larger social interactions and practices which shape the events within which language is used, and cognitive and linguistic strategies are employed to construct meanings. The ELP interventions need to be viewed as exploratory, and evolving within the complex and vast terrains of early literacy. The theoretical perspectives within which the ELP interventions have evolved are being discussed with the objective of outlining how each of these has influenced the designing of the ELP intervention at two levels a) for the beginning level young readers and writers and b) for the slightly more advanced young readers and writers. The broad focus areas of the ELP interventions along with the theoretical influences that they have drawn upon are as follows:

#### **1. Facilitative classroom environments to promote the active engagement of children in the processes of building phonological foundations and for meaning-construction.**

The ELP intervention evolved in response to the finding that many children within the classrooms were reading without understanding and in mechanical, superficial ways<sup>5</sup>. It has been based on the premise that reading and writing are empowering processes that mediate between the child and the world, and through which children can make sense of the world

in their own ways. Effort has been made to reflect this understanding in the approaches to early literacy acquisition which developed subsequently through engagement with classroom practices. These approaches underscore the importance of providing classroom based, non threatening opportunities to young learners within the initial years of schooling, to enable them to actively explore new learning materials and construct their own meanings on the basis of their differing mental models and linguistic resources, and their natural predispositions to make meaning. Classrooms saturated in a variety of print materials and interactive spaces, are designed to allow children to discover script based literacy as another medium through which they can express their experiences, ideas and feelings independently. Within the ELP intervention, classroom learning environments were developed over a period of time with the involvement of the class teachers to provide a variety of displayed stimuli, referred to as “print elements”. These are used to catalyse active engagement with reading and writing in a variety of ways that are non-threatening and easily accessible for young learners who come from oral traditions and who are often encountering engagement with written materials for the first time. The facilitative classroom environments with the ELP interventions have been designed at two levels as follows:

**a) The intervention for the initial beginner classrooms (Class 1):** At this level the children interact actively with a linguistically controlled print environment which is designed by ELP to facilitate a gradual acquisition of the foundation knowledge and skills which are required by beginning readers and writers to make a smooth and successful transition from their oral cultures at home to the print culture at school. The classroom environment for beginners is linguistically controlled and includes supportive graded visual materials such as posters, charts and word walls. It has been carefully designed for the purpose of scaffolding gradual and active phonological explorations, as well as meaningful engagement with the sound-symbol mappings and orthography in the Devanagari script. This linguistically controlled and active classroom environment is considered by ELP as necessary scaffolding required for making success with meaningful reading and

writing achievable for these initial readers and writers, most of whom are actively engaging with print for the first time. The intervention materials and methods aim to ensure that this process is ‘empowering’ and not ‘over powering’ for these young learners, so that they are motivated to actively engage with further reading and writing.

**b) The intervention for the more advanced young readers and writers in the later classes (Classes 2 and 3):** The print environment in the higher classes is designed for children to interact more freely with open ended and interactive print elements or spaces, such as interactive attendance charts, word walls, riddle corners, poem corners, displayed writings, message corners, interactive calendars, post boxes and so on. They engage with these through games, activities or simply opportunities for looking at, sharing and talking. The idea is that they imbibe a culture of print which draws upon their diverse languages, experiences and particular interests, in meaningful and constructive ways, with emphasis being laid on the active and intentional roles of these young learners while engaging with the displayed print materials in their classrooms.

***Underlying theory:***

Literature in the field of Early Literacy and Language Education has identified a major paradigm shift during the sixties and seventies, from the earlier dominant behaviourist perspective to a greater cognitive orientation. The behaviourists view learners as rather passive respondents to their environment, and gave little attention to the inner processes of the mind. Within this perspective, learning is indexed by overt responses or behavioural outcomes, in response to controlled or planned interventions or exposures. This narrow view of literacy sprung out of a socio-cultural and political ambience saturated in the ‘school readiness’ discourse. It is a reductionist view of early literacy that fits well with an approach to learning that views teaching as a mere transmission of knowledge and learners as empty vessels; where all children are taught the same thing on an inflexible schedule in a format of one-size-fits-all (Cooper and Jones 2005).

The cognitive psychologists, on the other hand, view the mind as central to learning and study the inner thought process

as a central focus. They view learners as active participants, who act on, rather than simply respond to, their external environment, as a part of the learning process. Work in this perspective adopts a comprehensive view of early literacy within which children are recognized not only as decipherers of the codes of print, but also as thinkers, theory builders, and meaning-makers, who are fully capable of unraveling the complexity and wonders of literacy. Available literature in Early Literacy in the eighties suggests that constructivism (based on theories by Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner) offered clear broad philosophical and psychological positions for the shift in thinking which highlighted the active role of a reader in the process of constructing meaning, while engaging with written texts. As opposed to non-constructivist approaches to learning that focus on transferring knowledge to learners, constructivism positions the learner as an active seeker of knowledge and meaning (Berger 2005). According to this view learning involves more than memorization of facts or the acquisition of certain skills, it includes the use of higher level thinking skills, such as making connections, comparing, decision-making, and problem-solving. For work in the area of Early Literacy this perspective suggests that reading is a dynamic process that is accomplished by the reader in interaction with the text, the task, the purpose and the setting or reading situation, and that reading efficiency requires active and flexible approaches, which address these varied factors. Several theories and their concomitant approaches and models, from varied disciplines coexist within a constructivist perspective, and serve to add different dimensions to the broad shared understanding of the active and intentional role of a learner within the processes of language and literacy acquisition and learning (Pearson and Stephens 1994)<sup>6</sup>. Thus literacy and language learning began to be viewed within the context of natural processes of acquiring language, with attention being given to the active, intentional roles of the learner<sup>7</sup>. This was a clear departure from the behaviourist approaches. Within the thinking that emerged children are no longer seen to be passive recipients who need to be “taught reading” by an expert, but are thought to be naturally motivated to make sense of the written texts they encounter, provided that these have a meaningful purpose for them. This view believes

that reading is a constructive process, in which the meaning of a text is not contained in the written words on a page instead; but is constructed by readers through a process of integration of the written text with the prior background knowledge through which they view these texts. The background knowledge and experiences of readers thus came to be regarded as crucial elements in the process of understanding written texts and in giving them meaning. It is becoming clearer through reading research that individual readers do not read in the same way (Anderson 1984)<sup>8</sup>. Similar views are echoed by Gordon Wells (1986), based on fifteen years of longitudinal research, he arrives at the conclusion that knowledge cannot be transmitted but has to be constructed afresh by each learner on the basis of experience and strategies, which are not limited to the classroom. This research indicates that the transmission model of teaching or any unilateral definition of what is to count as worthwhile knowledge and how it is to be constructed, undervalues the contributions that learners can make, in terms of their own experience, interests and methods of learning, and instead it forces the children into a passive role. Wells (ibid) concludes that young learners, who enter school, require opportunities to become reflectively aware and be able to formulate the sense they make out of new learning materials and experiences in their own ways, so that they can extend their command of language to include the written mode in meaningful ways. This important work emphasizes the active and participative roles that young learners need to undertake to become effective and successful “meaning makers”.

## **2. The use of the classroom as an authentic social setting for promoting reading and writing and building shared meanings in real ways**

The ELP intervention has tried to capitalize on the classroom as an authentic social setting, or a living context within which shared meanings are constantly being constructed. This has been addressed in two ways:

**a) A special focus on beginning readers and writers.** An important component of the ELP classroom for this purpose has been a specially designed *Pathan Saathi* or peer coaching programme for which a daily time slot is made available. This programme is based on the pairing of a beginning level learner

(level 1) with an advanced level learner (level 2) from within the same class, and a carefully designed framework which aims to facilitate intra psychic constructions of script literacy within the beginning learners, through social interactions with their more advanced peers.

**b) A focus on addressing the diversity within young readers and writers in the later classes (Classes 2 and 3).** The intervention elements and settings aim to intertwine the life in the classroom and varied language usages, with social interactions based on print. Various print elements / spaces are planned as stimuli to get children to actively engage with each other in interactive ways through the written form. For example, children respond to each other through displayed messages, or use written words from the word walls (including their own words) for playing word games or participating in word activities; they write and respond to displayed riddles, 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, and then share ideas and experiences related to the story through conversations or by writing, drawing and responding to these stories through readers 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. The idea is for young learners to realise 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 in ways that are meaningful and purposeful for them.

#### ***Underlying theory:***

A vast amount of work in Early Literacy in the last two decades has been within the socio- cultural tradition and was influenced by the ideas of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. For the purpose of Language Development and Early Literacy Programmes, Vygotsky's theory has the important implication that a child's attitude, perception and motivation towards

literacy are strongly influenced by her immediate social world, her family and her social community. In Vygotsky's work (1978; 1987) there is emphasis on higher mental functioning, especially speech, which according to him appears first on the social plane and is then internalized into the personal, so that even a young child is viewed as having a symbolic life which is rich, saturated with meaning, and that it is essentially through this that a child mediates with the world. The child therefore, is seen as constructing her symbolic world, and the issue that this process be meaningful is highlighted. This theory has been found to have implication for the internalization of printed words by young children, through authentic social interactions and communication within a specially developed classroom print environment or in other words for the intra psychic constructions that are facilitated through social interactions with others, implying that the emergence of the symbolic life is not viewed as a 'natural' outcome of some pre-determined genetic timetable, but is rather the result of internalization or socialization from the social/inter-personal sphere and both the structure and content of a child's symbolic life are shaped by the inter-personal interactions a child finds herself in. According to the Vygotskian viewpoint children internalise the social rules of meaning at home and within their social worlds and then extend these rules to the texts encountered in schools.<sup>9</sup>

Ethnographic studies have revealed that young children construct concepts about the functions of symbols and print based informal experiences which are facilitated by interactions with others in their social environment. Anne Hass Dyson's (2001) long-term studies of early writing development acknowledge especially well the resources that young children bring to their writing from their social worlds, including linguistic and symbolic tools appropriated from popular culture. Dyson has argued for the permeability of the curriculum, where teachers imagine their classrooms in such a way as to continually welcome the diverse resources that children of necessity bring to their writing. While this research is situated physically within classroom walls, the conceptual framework embraces children's out-of-school lives. Dyson's work suggests the ways in which children themselves bring

their outside worlds into the school through their writing and the oral performances that encircle literacy events.

**3. Print environments at home influence early literacy learning and have serious implications for home-school transitions and on the need for classroom processes to encompass children's out- of - school experiences.**

Print rich classrooms are designed classroom environments to facilitate and scaffold transitions to the print world of school, especially for young learners from non mainstream or marginalized backgrounds who may be interacting actively with print for the first time, and who do not have the support of a reading and writing culture at home.

Within beginner classrooms these print environments generated by the ELP intervention, are linguistically controlled to provide a gradual, interconnected and meaningful exposure to print elements such as letters, syllables, words, and texts in ways that equip initial literacy learners with the cognitive and linguistic knowledge and skills required for meaningful engagement with reading and writing. An important aspect of this print environment is the emphasis on providing space for beginning learners to use their diverse out-of-school language and symbolic resources while interacting with the initial processes of reading and writing in the classroom.

In the later classes, an open ended print rich classroom environment is designed to allow the more advanced young literacy learners to freely bring in their diverse real world experiences, home languages and meanings into the classroom, as they interact with the several elements/ spaces /materials which have been provided in the classroom in ways that they are comfortable with, and that serve a purpose that is defined by them. The idea is that these will provide acceptance to the children's language, experiential and symbolic resources, so that children can draw upon these, as they negotiate the unfamiliar worlds of classrooms. The print rich classrooms provide sites which are located outside the framework of the formal curriculum, as buffer zones, so that children can familiarize themselves with the nuances of script literacy, in ways that are more open, and meaningful for them, and are not restricted by the language demands of the curriculum or

school. At the same time these classroom settings also offer scaffolding for curricular content, so that children are provided support to be able to negotiate the curriculum successfully, while simultaneously engaging with alternate freer print based explorations in purposeful ways that are defined by them. Exposure to children's literature forms an essential component of the print rich classroom, as a powerful tool for capturing the imagined and real inner worlds of children.

***Underlying theory:***

In the 1960s and 1970s, scholars from traditions outside education—such as anthropology and linguistics—looked beyond schools to family and community settings to understand how schools might reach students from cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds that differed from the mainstream. A major finding from the initial work was that children who have been socialized in diverse contexts come to school differentially prepared and positioned to respond to the demands of school. Children differ in the personal histories that they bring to schools, since their families differ in the ways that children participate in the language and culture of their communities. Consequently they experience school differently and the result is success for some and failure for others. The conclusion reached by educators was that many school problems of minority students could be explained by discontinuities, and specifically by differences in how language was used, between a child's home and school communities (Hull and Shultz 2001)<sup>10</sup>. Hymes (1974, cited by Hull and Shultz 2001) proposed the concept of an "ethnography of communication," which focused on the communicative patterns of a community and a comparison of those patterns across communities. Studies in the ethnography of communication tradition were largely concerned with understanding how mainstream schools could reach out to the families and communities of non-mainstream children. Their approach was to look for patterns of communication within non-mainstream families and communities. The term 'non mainstream' referred to pupils from linguistic, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds that were different from that of the standard mainstream school. Within this tradition researchers worked with teachers to uncover the dimensions of their

difficulties with students and to understand students' perspectives on their school experiences. This research has suggested that any investigation of school phenomena requires the study of structures within classroom and school, as well as, in the children's homes and wider communities<sup>11</sup>. It also supports arguments in favour of multilingual classrooms, which are viewed as extensions of the practices of multilingualism and mixed codes that exist as natural phenomenon, within children's social lives outside the classroom (Agnihotri 1995).

In her seminal ethnographic study, Shirley Brice Heath (1983) documented how children from three different cultural milieus learned to use language and literacy in unique and diverse ways. Heath's long-term study of three contiguous communities over a decade in the 1960s and 1970s illustrated how each community—a Black working-class community, a White working-class community, and a racially mixed middle-class community—socialized their children into very different language practices. Heath documented each community's "ways with words" and found, for instance, that members of the White working-class community rarely used writing and generally viewed literacy as a tool to help them remember events and to buy and sell items. Although parents in this community collected reading and writing materials so that children were surrounded by print, the parents rarely read and instead used reading and writing mostly for functional purposes. In contrast, although residents of the Black working-class community did not accumulate reading materials, reading was more seamlessly integrated into their daily activities and social interactions, and literacy was accomplished jointly in social settings. Heath concluded that "the place of language in the life of each social group [in these communities and throughout the world] is interdependent with the habits and values of behaving shared among members of that group" (Heath 1983:11). When children from these communities entered school, only the middle-class students whose language use was similar to that of the teachers were successful. Heath thus demonstrated how children from different communities were differentially prepared for schooling that promoted and privileged only

middle-class ways of using language. She thus made an early argument for researchers and teachers to identify what kind of literacy was valued in schools, and the ways in which children from varied backgrounds needed to be adequately equipped for success within school.

More recent research within the fields of sociolinguistics and cognitive psychology has looked at the impact of a child's home on learning to read. Research has also shown that early interactions that a child has with print in her family setting have a powerful impact on success in literacy and language learning at school, and conversely, the disadvantage within school, of those who do not have access to print usage within their early social environments.

In a remarkable piece of work Purcell Gates (1995), worked closely with the White Appalachian community in print rich America, to bring out the startling revelation that this community remained untouched by the print environment around them, and their children did not have the early exposure or the cultural support that enabled an entry into the print world; and more importantly these children did not fully understand that print functioned as a linguistic semiotic system. This study established that unless these issues are addressed for children from non mainstream contexts, they may continue to remain on the periphery, and be unable to cope with home-school transition, and more specifically with the specific print related demands of schooling.

"Children born into cultures that are low literate and/or restricted in their scope of literacy find themselves in an immigrant state. Learning to read and write is not as "natural" for them. The process requires much more attention, effort and time. Their social and cultural lives do not support this effort, but rather exist separately and often compete with it..... The vocabulary is too hard and removed from their daily lives; the convoluted syntax of exposition and complex fiction is unfathomable. Without a great deal of support, motivation and effort, their level of literacy skill attainment is bound to be low compared with that of their peers who are natives of the more educated literate world" (Purcell Gates 1995: 183). There are profound lessons to be learned from such current research.

The importance of early literacy experiences has been found to be significant while dealing with literacy behaviours. Literature coming out of the field of Emergent Literacy has confirmed that very young learners generate a network of competencies and strategies out of early reading experiences in their homes which power subsequent independent literacy learning. Such children come better equipped to deal with school learning than others who are encountering print for the first time when they enter school. These research findings have implications for the literacy acquisition of children who do not have such early literacy exposure (Teale and Sulzby 1986). Researchers of language development and early literacy, who view literacy learning as a meaning-making construction, rather than learning of letter-sound relation, have demonstrated that literacy learning begins long before formal instruction in school (Wells 1986; Clay 1991).

#### **4. Classrooms designed to incorporate “literacy as a social practice” through the provision of a variety of purposeful and authentic contexts within which it can be situated.**

One important aspect of “Print Rich Classrooms” within the ELP intervention which are set up in Class 2 and above, is that they have been visualized as settings for locating varied “literacy practices” which are located within the authentic and real life situations encompassed within the classroom, such as free play, social interactions with peers or games, and which provide meaningful and purposeful contexts for ‘embedding’ reading and writing practices in classrooms. These may take the form of spontaneous learner initiated activities as well as informal activities initiated by the class teacher. They are however distinct from the more focused and directed, skill based reading and writing activities which occur within the curricular framework and are mediated by the teachers. These “literacy practices” include a variety of print based social interactions, which begin to occur spontaneously over a period of time in response to the print elements placed on the walls through the ELP intervention. Such practices draw upon the children’s out-of-school real life language and experiences. For example, in one classroom the daily routine of waiting for an interesting, written “morning message” from their teacher, slowly grew into children writing messages for each other, and

then further into a message corner, as a hub of written interactions, which drew upon the children’s daily life experiences and knowledge of the world and provided space for written and pictorial forms of children’s natural, home languages. These “practices” may take on a variety of forms, such as: spontaneous word games devised from word walls (which were found to occur naturally in some classrooms during the lunch break); or the use of letter writing and the use of the class postbox for pretend play. The idea is to saturate the classroom with print elements, and evolve a classroom print culture that encompasses several “literacy practices”, which are mediated by the children themselves and which not only draw upon resources from their worlds outside the classroom, but also reflect the social dynamics and power relationships that exist amongst the children within the classroom. However, this does require that the teacher play an important role as a sensitive catalyst, who sets up and responds to a facilitative classroom print culture by continuously acknowledging and encouraging these spontaneous “literacy based social practices” as important forms of engagement with print within classrooms.

#### ***Underlying theory:***

In the early 1970s, psychologists Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole organized a research project in Liberia to investigate the cognitive consequences of literacy by drawing on local cultural practices within the Vai Community. The content of their experiments was designed to make it possible to find people who were literate but had become so outside school, or who were literate through school, or bi-literate in two scripts acquired informally, and so on. Scribner and Cole’s research team gathered ethnographic and survey-based descriptions of language and literacy use, and they also administered a complex battery of experimental tasks designed to tap the cognitive processes traditionally believed to be connected to literacy, such as abstraction, memorization, categorization, verbal explanation, and the like. Scribner and Cole did not find that literacy was responsible for great shifts in mental functioning. But they did demonstrate that particular writing systems and particular reading and writing activities foster particular, specialized forms of thinking. For example, Qur’anic

literacy improved people's performance on certain kinds of memory tasks, whereas the Vai script literacy gave people an edge in certain varieties of phonological discrimination. In addition to sorting out the specialized effects of particular literacies, Scribner and Cole identified the equally specialized effects of schooling in and of itself, apart from literacy—namely, the enhanced ability of schooled people to offer certain kinds of verbal explanations. In *The Psychology of Literacy*, (1981) Scribner and Cole explain in some detail the framework that they had constructed to interpret their data, a framework centered on the notion of “practice”. They defined a practice as “a recurrent, goal directed sequence of activities using a particular technology and particular systems of knowledge” (ibid: 236).

Brian Street (1984) countered the above research with the claims that literacy could not be viewed as neutral, decontextualised, cognitive and technological skills. Instead he posited the “ideological” model with the claim that all aspects of literacy are contextualized within specific literacy practices which are socio-culturally determined. With this redefining of literacy as a social practice, the focus in current literature shifted from the earlier ‘great debates’ over phonics versus whole language to the ‘second generation debates’ which brought a shift in thinking, from viewing, reading and writing as individualized cognitive processes to a wider perspective which is located within socio-cultural, historical and socio-political discourses. The Theory of Social Practice evolved by the New Literacy Studies (NLS) uses literacy practice, as the basic unit for conceptualising the link between the activities of reading and writing and the social structures in which they are embedded (Street 1984; Barton and Hamilton 2000). NLS challenges the standard view which works from the assumption that literacy in itself – autonomously – will have effects on other social and cognitive practices. NLS makes a distinction between “the autonomous” and “the ideological” models of literacy, and claim that literacy as a social practice varies from one context to another, and that these practices are not neutral but are contested in terms of power.

As a response to the apparent disconnect between ‘the cognitive’ and ‘the social practice’ theoretical lenses, Purcell-

Gate et.al. (2004 63-80) have argued for a transactional relationship between literacy development and literacy practice, with the cognitively based individual literacy development viewed as occurring within the socially determined literacy practices. These researchers claim that “the cognitive (basic skills) and the social (discourse, opportunities, and so on) are not by definition mutually exclusive” (ibid: 83). They draw attention to literacy instructional methods which are primarily envisioned towards the real life use of print by learners, rather than being focused on in-school performance based on predetermined literacy achievement measures. Similar thinking is reflected within the ‘critical literacy’ perspectives, within which literacy is not seen as a unitary skill on a single developmental scale, but as repertoires of practice that are learnt in use over time, with assistance from teachers, parents and peers. In other words that literacy requires the mastery of the operational aspects of cracking the code, which is located within an understanding of how to use language in particular situations and to analyze the effects of particular textual practices. This perspective aims at helping learners understand that responses to texts are not really individual but are socially constructed (Comber et. al.2002).

##### **5. Designing the intervention in ways that acknowledge that the early literacy classroom is not a neutral space and therefore focus on building sensitivity to the diverse needs of young learners from different socio-cultural backgrounds**

By focusing on home-school transitions and viewing print based and print rich classrooms as sites that facilitate these transitions, the ELP interventions at all levels aim to: a) provide focused, explicit methods which equip beginning learners from diverse marginalized backgrounds with the specific skills and knowledge required for successful engagement with the complexities of script based reading and writing b) generate a non threatening and equitable classroom climate, which provides acceptance of diversity in language usages and literacy practices, so that these may coexist in mutually interactive and enriching ways within classrooms. Print elements and spaces are visualized as opportunities for active engagement with

reading and writing by all children, regardless of their home backgrounds, in ways which are not defined by the considerations based on the curriculum, or the pedagogies that it encompasses, but are designed to mainly respond to the need for diverse young learners to freely explore print elements in natural ways that they are familiar with, and which they can use successfully and confidently, so that classroom can become a place to which they are able to respond to positively.

An important aspect of the ELP intervention is the facilitative role of the teacher in generating and mediating such active and equitable classroom settings and related activities based on them. This process attempts to bring in a shift in the existing teacher controlled classroom practices, towards making them more learner centered and inclusive sites that provide acceptance of each young learner's identity, along with an acknowledgement of their home languages, real world experiences, and meanings within the classroom; these are all processes that are likely to challenge the existing social roles and power structures in the classroom.

#### ***Underlying theory:***

Amongst the different literacies practiced at various sites, the proponents of the New Literacy Studies (NLS) argue that school literacy has come to be the defining type of literacy. Street (1995:107-115) refers to the process of "pedagogization of literacy" as the institutional process associated with school, which has increasingly begun to define literacy practices outside school, and is leading to the invisibility and devaluing of alternate home and community based literacy practices. This is corroborated by ELP's recent experience in rural Rajasthan during Phase 2, which has revealed that the abundant and rich repertoires of culturally rooted songs, stories, couplets and verses, are not acknowledged as language and literacy resources within indigenous communities, who consider themselves as "uneducated and illiterate".

Working within the NLS perspective, James Gee (1999) focuses attention on the centrality that questions of identity, motivation, and ability to function have for students, for learning language and literacy. In his critique of the National Academy of Science Report, Preventing Reading Difficulties in

Young Children, he claims that "one cannot coherently debate ways of improving reading and leave out the social, cultural, institutional, and political issues and interventions as if they were 'separate' from literacy" (ibid:360). This is based on his understanding that literacy is much more than reading and writing, and is in fact a part of a larger political entity that he calls "Discourse" (with a capital D). Discourse, in this sense includes ways of "saying-writing-believing-being-doing-valuing". Gee maintains that there are primary discourses, which are learned at home, and secondary discourses which are attached to institutions or groups that one encounters later on such as schools; and that discourses are not all equal in status. Some are socially dominant, because they facilitate economic success and carry social power; while others are non-dominant (1989a, 1989b cited by Delpit 1992)<sup>12</sup>.

Lisa Delpit (ibid) cautions against two deterministic aspects of Gee's arguments; first, that discourse cannot be overtly taught, particularly in a classroom, but can only be acquired through enculturation at home or by 'apprenticeship' into social practices; and second, that an individual who is born into one discourse with one set of values may experience major conflicts when attempting to acquire another. According to Delpit, students without cultural capital tend to struggle, because they must learn new language codes and value systems, many of which are implicit. She believes that teachers should directly and explicitly educate such students about styles, codes and values that exist within the culture of power, and that these teachers must at the same time also reinforce to students the value that their own culture holds. Using the success stories of disadvantaged persons, who have successfully acquired dominant discourses, she attributes the ability of some students to transcend the circumstances into which they were born, directly to the role played by their teacher. In all the cases the teacher was found to have explicitly and successfully taught what Gee calls "the superficial features" of the dominant discourse i.e. the grammar, style and mechanics. In addition to this, these teachers also taught the more subtle aspects of dominant discourse, such as writing neatly, thinking carefully, maintaining socially acceptable decorum etc. She thus emphasizes that:

“...teachers must recognize the conflicts between the students home Discourse and the Discourse at school. Teachers need to be aware that often students who appear to be unable to learn are actually “choosing to not learn” or in other words “choosing to maintain their sense of identity”. Some students reject literacy because they feel the literacy Discourses rejects them, and so they choose not to learn, so as not to be denied a sense of who they are. The teacher can however reduce this sense of rejection by transforming the classroom Discourse, so that it contains a place for the students’ selves. To do so they need to saturate the new Discourse with a purpose that is meaningful for the learners; and acknowledges the students’ social and cultural heritage” (Delpit 1992: 298).

This need for inclusive classroom pedagogies has been reinforced by Kumar (1989:76) through an analysis of an existing history textbook, by which he illustrates how “the experience of education under the prevailing curricular and instructional norms can serve to assist students who come from so called “backward” backgrounds to internalize symbols of backward behaviour”. Thus, cloaked within a reading event are issues of social identity, power, and differentiation of rights and responsibilities. In other words 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). The proponents of this view believe that deeper connotations of culture and power need to be addressed within the classroom, if we want all children to have equal access to learning<sup>13</sup>. Holznier (1968 as cited in Sarangapani 2003:68-69) has viewed each person as approaching the environment in which she moves, from her social setting, within limited and specific frames of reference or orientation. He maintains that social roles may be thought of as frames of reference. As per this viewpoint the structures of power within social settings regulate the frames of reference and allocation of situations to its members. It is these that get carried forward into the school or classroom, which is considered by him as an epistemic community. It is useful to juxtapose the setting up of the ELP print rich classroom against this backdrop. While this intervention aims to provide transition spaces between the world of the child and the world

of the school, i.e. the child’s real world and that of the curriculum, by giving cognizance to the knowledge and resources within the children themselves, however, in doing so, it brings in a redefining of social roles within the classroom, with transference of some tutorial roles from the teacher to the learners. Possible shifts in the social and inter-subjective interactions between the learners, are also likely to be facilitated by the non-threatening and inclusive aspects of this specially designed classroom environment. These processes, however, challenge the existing social roles and power structures inside classrooms and highlight the pivotal role required from a supportive class teacher for developing, sustaining and mediating effective and equitable print rich classrooms.

### **Locating the ELP interventions**

As discussed in the earlier sections above, within current thinking on early literacy, the relationship of the school to the social context of the child has been found to be pivotal in the process of acquiring literacy. Based on this understanding, the effort within the ELP interventions has been to allow methodologies for early literacy to emerge through active and sustained engagement inside classrooms with children who come from diverse backgrounds, so that these methods and approaches for reading and writing in Hindi develop in response to the specific individual needs and learning behaviours of the young children within the classrooms. Within the context of the MCD Schools, it became essential for the interventions to take cognizance of the special needs of most of the beginning level learners, most of whom do not have support for reading and writing at home, and need to be equipped with the foundation skills and knowledge required for effective engagement with reading and writing. As discussed at length in the earlier section, current literature on Early Literacy has recognized that children, who do not have a print environment at home, require explicit interventions which are directed towards facilitating smooth and gradual transitions from their oral cultures at home to the print culture at school.

Within Early Literacy literature, one perspective suggests that the most effective approaches for developing initial reading

and writing are those that combine systematic phonological instruction and awareness of sound segments (e.g. phonemes, syllables, onsets and rimes), letter sound correspondence, comprehension and vocabulary and spelling development along with varied and meaningful and active explorations of printed texts (Clay 1991). The ELP intervention for beginning literacy in Class 1 is placed at this position and underscores the importance of providing learning materials and methods within linguistically controlled classroom print environments, designed to facilitate phonological and orthographic knowledge and skills in systematic, meaningful and active ways that tap the children's out-of-school language and experiences, and enable the learners to build effective strategies for meaning construction.

For the slightly more advanced early readers and writers in Class 2 and beyond, the intervention has attempted to locate itself within overarching constructivist and Vygotskian socio-cultural perspectives that reinforce reading and writing as active and meaningful language processes, which are connected to the spoken language, experiential and symbolic social worlds of individual learners. Further, the classroom is viewed as a micro cosmic representation of the children's diverse social worlds and encompasses the power relationships that are inherent within it. It offers the possibility for a variety of authentic literacy practices within and outside the curricular framework. Through the setting up of print rich classroom environments, the ELP intervention aims to exploit these spontaneous literacy practices, so that the processes of individual literacy acquisition occur within the authentic social contexts which are available within the classroom. Within this vision the walls of the classroom are intended to be used as a buffer zone between the children's real worlds outside the classroom and the world that exists inside the classroom. In this way the print rich class attempts to facilitate a smooth transition from home to school for children from diverse linguistic and social backgrounds.

Close engagement with classroom processes has been crucial towards identifying and understanding some of the existing classroom reading and writing practices and learner processes, including strengths and gap areas, and then using

the insights based on these for conceptualizing and locating the interventions. For instance, ELP observed that most initial learners within Class 1 were engaging mainly with the mechanical and superficial aspects of grapheme-phoneme correspondence and were in fact memorizing these. The deeper symbolic and meaning related, connotations of the written forms of lexical and sub-lexical items, through any form of meaningful engagement, seemed to elude many of these young learners, and therefore these were not being internalized into their inner symbolic repertoires. As an example, in all the selected schools, in Class 1, the children were being taught the Hindi equivalent of the alphabet called the *varna mala* through the word association method, as is done in the "A" for "apple" approach; accordingly the children had learnt / ke / for "kabootar" (pigeon) for the first consonant / ke /, of the *varna mala*. During class interactions, especially in the subsequent interventions which are being implemented during ELP Phase 2, within government primary schools in rural Rajasthan, ELP has found that in the case of many beginners, this knowledge does not transfer to other words beginning with the / ke / sound. More importantly, we were rather startled to observe that in most beginner classes (which in many cases function as combined multi-grade classes), since the teachers had not made a concerted effort to relate the spoken word "kabootar" with its visual image, when the children were asked by the ELP team to draw a picture of a "kabootar", many children, did not make any attempt to draw a visual representation of a pigeon as required, but instead repeatedly wrote the symbol for the consonant / ke /. We thus discovered that for these children the spoken word "kabootar" had become synonymous with the graphic symbol for the consonant / ke /, and many of them did not provide evidence of either relating the symbol to the associated word or of having acquired the sound / symbol relationship that is intended through this approach. In a few cases this was so even after a brief informal discussion with the children about "kabootars". The children in this case provided no indication whatsoever, of the cognitive and linguistic mental processing required while engaging with graphemes. In other words these children had not grasped the basic idea of symbolic representation which is encompassed within the sound-symbol

mappings of a script.

The unfolding of the interventions within the context of classrooms i.e. through observations of classroom processes such as given in the example above; and in close contact with the ground realities inside classrooms, has been considered by ELP as vital for attempting to situate the intervention practices within the real worlds of young learner classrooms, and for addressing some of the complexities and challenges that teachers and learners deal with inside them. Consequently, the intervention approaches evolved organically within Classes 1, 2 and 3 as broad interdependent components, which are implemented chronologically as follows:

1. *Methodologies for developing meaningful reading and writing processes within beginning literacy learners (Class 1 and in some cases extended into Class 2).* The focus of these is on equipping beginners with the foundational cognitive and linguistic skills and knowledge required for reading and writing, namely for efficient and effective phonological and orthographic processing, as well as, for meaning construction.

2. *Methodologies for strengthening meaningful and effective reading and writing for the more advanced early literacy learners (Classes 2, 3 and beyond).* The focus of these is on promoting meaningful and varied print usage by designing interactive print rich classrooms, which are conceptualized as non threatening settings for facilitating authentic inter and intra subjective engagement with reading and writing by young learners from diverse backgrounds. The basic assumption being, that these young learners will acquire and strengthen their competencies in written language, in the same ways as they do for their spoken language i.e. through the purposeful and meaningful usage achieved through active engagement with their immediate social and physical environments.

A detailed discussion of the interventions at beginning level and at a slightly more advanced level is provided in the Second part of this paper.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is based on the responses received from children through Focus Group Discussions on the children's perceptions of reading, which were conducted school wise by ELP with 14 groups of children from Classes 2 and 3 across 4 ELP schools.

<sup>2</sup> John Gumprez and Dell Hymes have played a significant role in initiating research in the early sixties and seventies that brought together researchers from the fields of linguistics and anthropology to examine the relationship between children's language and school success. This was followed by President Lyndon B. Johnson's expansive Great Society programmess for the alleviation of poverty in the United States of America; through which the conclusion reached was that many school problems of minority students could be explained by discontinuities or differences in how language was used, between a child's home and school.

<sup>3</sup> Victoria Purcell –Gates (1995) in a compelling study has detailed the process of school rejection, through a case study of a single child from a non-mainstream, marginalized community.

<sup>4</sup> These questions have been inspired by the comprehensive review of out-of-school research by Hull and Shultz (2001).

<sup>5</sup> Baseline and mid term individual reading observations were conducted across the six schools. These were supplemented with individual reading sessions on a select sub-sample, to assess individual readers' miscues on three selected texts, through a tool which was adapted for use in Hindi by ELP. Although the suitability of the texts was decided after feedback from the regular teachers, the initial miscue analysis has indicated otherwise; therefore, suggesting the need for text analysis exercises to also include measures such as miscue analysis for mapping reader-text dynamics.

<sup>6</sup> Pearson and Stephens (1994) through an expansive and comprehensive review, trace the journey of literacy research and theoretical ideas over a 30 year period ending in the early nineties, while focusing on the varied multidisciplinary influences on reading and writing instruction.

<sup>7</sup> During the seventies Second Language Theory began to emphasize the difference between acquiring language ("picking up" a language) and learning a language ("knowing about" a language). An important implication of this thinking was that acquisition, or the natural ways in which children learn ability in their first language, became central to the pedagogy of language teaching programmes.

<sup>8</sup> Research in psycholinguistics, for example the work undertaken by Ken Goodman or Frank Smith in the late Sixties and Seventies, has shown that while constructing meaning readers are not bound to words and alphabets alone, but they also use various sources of information or cues, both linguistic and cognitive, to construct meaning. Readers access semantic, syntactic, grapho-phonetic and visual, as well as pragmatic (knowledge of the world) cues, by using a range of strategies, which can be inferred from their reading behaviours.

<sup>9</sup> Within Vygotsky's theoretical viewpoints the mediation means used by human beings such as language, writing, and mathematics, or 'tools' and 'sign systems' as he called them, are said to have significant consequences for how we think and how we interact with the world. Vygotsky also theorized that play - an integral part of children's culture - is a symbol system relevant to young children's literacy development. Within this theoretical perspective make-believe play, drawing, and writing can be viewed as different moments in an essentially unified process of development of written language.

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Suvasini Iyer for delineating some implications of Vygotsky's theoretical framework in the initial, proposed ELP research design.

<sup>10</sup> Hull and Schultz (2001) through the comprehensive review of research, on literacy in out-of-school settings aim to identify the conceptual advances in

theories of literacy that have arisen from non-school settings, and attempt to provide a conscious link between theoretical debates and work with classrooms that address literacy issues. The authors identify three major theoretical traditions as useful lenses for viewing this research. These are: 1) The Ethnography of Communication, 2) The Vygotskian and Activity Theory perspectives and 3) New Literacy Studies; with overlaps between these in many cases.

<sup>11</sup> There was a shift in academic enquiry in the seventies from Deficit theories which related educational underachievement among non-mainstream children to inadequacies within the learners themselves; to the new thinking which viewed underachievement within the framework of discontinuities between the child's home and school experiences, particularly with regard to how language was used. The argument was that children from non-mainstream backgrounds were less well-prepared and positioned to take advantage of the opportunities that schools had to offer them and school failure was therefore inevitable for many of them.

<sup>12</sup> The complexity of these ideas has been developed further by James Gee in his later works. In the book *Changing Literacies* edited with Coilin Lankshear, Gee (1997) elaborates on the ways in which Discourses are framed and re framed and compete with each other depending on their social settings.

<sup>13</sup> The works of John Ogbu, Lisa Delpit, Courtney Cazden amongst others, through the seventies and eighties highlight the importance of looking at the

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