



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

The Indian context

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF 2005) articulates the vision of a State that seeks to universalize schooling and address key contemporary education issues. Access to script based literacy is one such key education issue. Within a textually and technologically mediated contemporary world efficient reading and writing have become essential tools for learning both within and outside the school. For a large number of children from socially marginalized communities this world remains out of reach since they are unable to attain mastery over reading and writing skills. Although such children bring to school classrooms a rich repertoire of language, background knowledge, identities, discourses and life experience, they have been found to achieve at lower levels than their more middle class peers within schools. The Position Paper of the National Focus Group on the Teaching of Indian Languages (NCERT 2006), noted with grave concern that many children in this country leave schools with dismal levels of proficiency in reading comprehension and writing skills even in their own native languages.



As more and more children in India are brought under the mantle of schooling, we find many of them 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 concern. Young learners from marginalized backgrounds are particularly vulnerable, as they struggle to build tentative and fragile relationships with the world of school and with the larger world of written words. Sixty odd years after attaining independence we find that there are still large numbers of young learners in this country who are struggling to meet the expectations of schooling, while many others who are unable to cope and simply drop out of the school system.

Current thinking on Early Literacy

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 from resource poor and socially marginalized communities have been found to achieve at lower levels than their more middle-class peers. One important reason for this poor performance is said to be the gap between the school and home environments of such children.



Literacy programmes and schooling within the sixties and seventies saw a great divide between the “oral” world and the “literate” world. The “literate world” was largely viewed as a logical, rational, efficient one, and on the other hand the “oral world” was considered to be irrational, ignorant and unscientific. This model assumed literacy to be an autonomous set of skills, which were to have effects regardless of variations in use and

meanings across cultures. More recent perspectives on literacy have however have found that this model does not match reality. The newer thinking in the last two decades or so has begun to acknowledge diversity. There is recognition that local people and children have their own funds of knowledge and are able to use literacy in ways that are different to those assumed within schools. This understanding has also led to a realization that within the real world there is often a complex interplay between the spoken and written forms of language, and there are in fact multiple types of literacies.

This new thinking has led to awareness that much of the earlier literacy discourse was dominated by the requirements of schooling. Other forms of literacy practices and uses in the real world have not been acknowledged adequately. Within recent literature there is a realization that school classrooms often provide limited opportunity for acknowledging children’s identities and do not give enough space for natural ways of using language and making meaning.

The Emergent Literacy and other socio-cultural perspectives on Early Literacy have drawn attention to the importance of early exposure to print based activities in the first few years of a child’s life for building foundations for meaningful reading and writing. This body of work has emphasized that unless young children acquire literate behaviors through using print and interacting with other literates within their social environments, they are often not able to go beyond a mechanical and incomplete mastery of the written code. As a consequence they are unable to engage efficiently and with understanding with the processes of reading and writing. For children who come from different or marginalized cultures in which there is limited opportunity for children to actively engage with print, the transition from the spoken cultures of home environments to the written cultures assumed within schools can be extremely challenging. Such children require special support to be able to achieve success in school.



Gordon Wells (1986) has traced young children's literacy development on a long-term basis through the Bristol Language Development Programme. The findings of this fifteen year longitudinal study revealed a significant relationship between home background and literacy experience. The study



concluded that children, who shared informal and meaningful reading and writing interactions at home in their early childhood years, were more confident and fluent readers later on at school. It was able to demonstrate that growing up in a literate family environment, in which reading and writing are naturally occurring activities, gives a child a particular advantage at the start of her formal school education.

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

The Emergent Literacy perspective emphasizes that it is through exposure to a variety of informal reading and writing experiences at home that young children begin to experience and make meaningful relationships with different forms of reading and writing much before they enter school (Teale and Sulzby 1986). These experiences may take the form of imitating a grown up reading a newspaper or book; recognizing some familiar written words or alphabets on hoardings, labels or television; pretending to read or write letters or messages; making pretend lists or listening to read aloud stories and so on. Experiences of this nature help very young children to make natural and meaningful connections with written words while participating in daily life social interactions.

Wells (2003) refers to these early experiences as an extended "apprenticeship" into literacy, through which young preschoolers engage with literate family members in joint activities in which written texts play an instrumental role. The adult's aim is often not to teach their children to read and write per se but instead, to get the child to actively participate and contribute to a print based activity, to the



extent of her current capability, while the adult manages those parts that are beyond the child. He goes on to say that the first and most basic idea that young children have to grasp is that there is a systematic and constant relationship between the patterns of graphic symbols and the "words" to which they correspond. As has been frequently pointed out, very young children often make this discovery first with respect to familiar signs and logos that they see in their surroundings, on hoardings, labels or on television.

In the case of alphabetic languages, there is a further level of correspondence to be understood - that of the sound- symbol correspondence which is intrinsic in phoneme-grapheme relationships. In some communities, systematic attention is given to learning the letters of the alphabet and their associated sounds; in others, the instruction is much more incidental (Heath 1983 as cited in Wells 2003). For many young preschoolers this breakthrough is often made through the process of learning to write their own name and the names of other significant family members.

As young preschoolers observe, interact informally and participate in print based activities in their homes and social groups, they begin to sort out and acquire knowledge about the print itself. For



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



All children, however, do not have access to print based experiences in their early childhood and they are therefore differentially prepared for schooling. Children who have exposure to informal print interactions and assistance, of the kind discussed in the previous section, are likely to enter school already well advanced along the road to literacy. Some of these children are in fact independent readers and writers by the time they enter school. Such children, who have had exposure to reading and writing in their early childhood years, come better equipped with the knowledge and skills required to deal with school learning, than their young counterparts who are actively engaging with print for the first time only when they enter school classrooms. For a very large number of young learners in this country, their first active engagement with the written forms of language occurs only when they step into school and therefore they remain at a major disadvantage in school.

The above understanding was borne out by the experiences of ELP inside many classrooms, particularly in rural areas. During our classroom based interactions with school beginners, we came across many of them who were subdued and appeared to be feeling threatened and so were reluctant to read or write. We found such children are often not able to view written words and alphabets as something meaningful and connected to ‘them’ or ‘their lives’. Instead, they experience these as unfamiliar and something connected to ‘school work’. Therefore, they relate to reading and writing in mechanical and superficial ways. Many are caught in the pressure of expectations. Closer observations of their reading behaviors revealed that most of these children tend to read mechanically and on the basis of rote memorization of letters and words. They read in meaningless ways and without much understanding of the content. We found it required sensitivity and the careful building of a non threatening classroom, to motivate such children to engage with reading and writing activities in meaningful ways.

In a compelling book entitled ‘Other People’s Words’, Victoria Purcell – Gates presents a case



study of a single child, Donny, who belongs to a poor, urban, Appalachian community in America. This is a community that is deeply entrenched in oral traditions, and therefore even to this day there are Appalachians who have not learnt to read and write. Donny comes from one such home in which there is minimal engagement with reading and writing. In this book the author captures the immigrant state that Donny finds himself in, once he enters school. It is a world that is completely alien for him, since he has had no active exposure to reading and writing in his early childhood, and so has learnt very little about written language during his preschool years. Once in school he struggles to participate in classroom activities, however his participation is limited to the mechanical engagement with written symbols and forms, since he has not learnt to view print as something personally meaningful. This affects his school performance and he gradually gets left behind in class and begins to be seen as a failure.

The author, who was at the time, the director of a university based Literacy Center, decided to spend a period of two years as a teacher, guide, and friend with Donny and his family. This gave her the opportunity to closely observe the family and build a deeper understanding of the reasons for Donny's failure to engage meaningfully with reading and writing during his the first two years at school. Through this journey she was able to build in-depth connections between the marginal impact that school instruction has on Donny's reading and writing performance and the wide gap between his almost non print world at home and the world that is assumed by the school. As one reads this book, one begins to draw parallels and see the faces of the many 'Donnys' inside our own young learner classrooms. Young children, like Donny, who are encountering written alphabets and words for the first time in school. In fact, Donny begins to take on the garb of a worrisome, but rampant classroom phenomenon in this country.

While the issue of language disadvantage has been clearly identified as an area of concern within the Indian context, a parallel concern which has not received as much attention is the shift that a large number of young children are required to make from the oral cultures in their homes to the print culture of a classroom. Recent research indicates that this transition does not come naturally, and can be very challenging for children from backgrounds within which they often do not have any support for reading and writing in their home and social environments. Within the mainstream school situations that ELP has worked in, i.e. within the government primary schools located in the urban context of Delhi as well as, schools in rural Rajasthan, we found many children who are barely able to read and write with understanding at the end of Class five. Recent studies undertaken within the Indian context have also highlighted the social and political bases of educational deprivation as a major factor for India being one of the largest zones of illiteracy (Vasavi 2003) Such studies have emphasized the importance of understanding the socio-cultural contexts within which school learning takes place, in order to be able to identify and understand the special literacy learning needs of first generation learners and equip them to



engage meaningfully with reading and writing.

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

With the Right to Education Bill being passed by Parliament, all children in the 6 to 14 years age group,



in this country, are to be brought under the mantle of schooling. Once Education is a Fundamental Right, it becomes mandatory for the State to provide free and compulsory education. Although the disparate schemes that are being passed off as ‘education’, are highly questionable, there is at the same time a wide spread acknowledgement that merely enrolling children into schools is not enough,

and it is equally important to ensure that children engage meaningfully and successfully with schooling. This can only happen if children from diverse backgrounds are able to experience school as a positive learning experience, which widens their knowledge, skills and confidence levels. This also requires teachers to be sensitive to the special needs of children who are interacting with print for the first time and equip them with adequate skills and knowledge for engaging successfully with reading and writing. It goes without saying that unless new entrants experience success within school learning and develop positive self esteems, they are not going to be able to learn to read and write confidently and independently.

Children bring to the school their real world experience and knowledge, along with competencies in the usages of spoken language, i.e. of their home language or mother tongue. They also bring their imaginations, curiosities and natural inclinations to be purposefully engaged. These are resources that equip young children to engage with their new classroom experiences in meaningful ways. Classroom



learning environments need to encompass these outside-the-classroom experiences and resources that children bring into the classroom. If a young child’s home language and the world that it encompasses, does not find acceptance within the classroom, it is unlikely that she will participate meaningfully in the classroom processes; instead it is more likely that the child will internalize rejection, and adopt the role of a benign spectator or non- participant who does not want to risk failure (Purcell- Gates 1995)



The Early Literacy Project (ELP)

How did the Early Literacy Project (ELP) evolve?

The Early Literacy Project (ELP) was born out of the several years of classroom experience with young learners from marginalized communities who read and write mechanically and are unable to make any sense of what they are reading and writing. Many of these children are studying in schools in our capital city, Delhi. This project developed as an exploratory search for methods which could build strong foundations for meaningful reading and writing in Hindi, for children who do not have support for reading and writing at home. It began in Classes 1, 2 and 3 in six Municipal Corporation (MCD) Schools in Delhi, and was implemented for one year, from July 2006. The children who attend these schools are mostly children of migrant, daily wage workers, from various parts of the country. After a year of intensive and sustained work inside classrooms within this urban context, ELP was relocated to schools in rural Rajasthan, where we worked inside classrooms in eight government primary schools in a drought prone area, as well as, in eight non formal bridge schools. These bridge schools function at night and aim to provide support to children who have not survived the formal school and have ‘dropped out’, or children who work in the day or help with household chores and so are unable to attend the day school. The ELP intervention in rural Rajasthan is currently being up scaled to 115 non formal bridge schools covering more than 2500 children from the most vulnerable sections of rural society.

Relating to the larger picture

To begin with ELP tried to build some clarity on what is reading and how should it be taught. This has been a highly contentious area within which a large number of conflicting and contradictory viewpoints prevail. The seventies and eighties were witness to the bitterly fought ‘great debates’ of ‘whole language’ versus ‘phonics’ which focused on how to introduce letter sounds and word identification skills, and whether these should be taught in a structured and sequenced way or not. The proponents of whole language view reading and writing as meaningful activities and strongly advocate that reading be ‘picked up’ by young learners in natural ways though immersion in a print environment in the same ways that children ‘pick up’ spoken language from their social environment.

The phonological perspective, on the other hand, supports the need to first equip the children with the phonological knowledge and skills required to engage with the written code. The underlying assumption is that once children acquire decoding skills they can use these to engage meaningfully with written texts. The corresponding classroom approaches generally consists of introducing the young learners to smaller units of written texts, namely letters, words and sentences, in planned and graded ways. 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 opportunities for engaging with sound segments, letter sound correspondence, vocabulary and spelling development and comprehension.



Over the last decade or so, the earlier ‘great debates’ have in fact made way for ‘second generation debates’. While the earlier thinking viewed reading and writing as individualized linguistic and cognitive processes of decoding and meaning making; reading is now looked upon a “social practice”. More importantly, reading is no longer considered to be a neutral act but instead is believed to be influenced by the social contexts and the social practices within

which the reading and writing activities takes place. ((Street 1984; Barton and Hamilton 2000). In other words hidden within a reading event are issues of social identity, power, and differentiation of rights and responsibilities. At stake in any reading event, is who can do what, in which situation, when, with whom, and with what social consequence, be it within a school classroom or outside. (Bloome and Dail, 1997).

Within young learner classrooms in which children are from varied and sometimes marginalized backgrounds, it is therefore, important to consider whether the norms in the classroom discussion and transactions permit diverse and multiple usages and interpretations of the reading texts and materials. It is also equally important to assess if there is equal opportunity provided for children from diverse social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds to use their real life experiences to read and write freely, in their own ways and without any sense of fear or threat.

Based on this thinking, ELP found it important to gain first hand experience of classroom practices over a period of time. This has helped us to explore and try and build insights about some possible ways in which classroom reading materials and practices can be grounded in an understanding of children’s natural language learning processes, their home backgrounds, and their daily life experiences. It was for this reason that the ELP methodologies are evolving organically over a period of time through sustained engagement with a diversity of learners and learning processes that occur inside classrooms.

The rural experience in early literacy

One of the main objectives of ELP is to develop classroom interventions which equip young children to build strong foundations for reading and writing with understanding in Hindi. Within the rural schools that ELP has worked in, we have found many children who are unable to understand much of what transpires in the class, since they speak *Marwari* while the lessons are in Hindi. Most teachers in these schools translate the school texts for the children. Getting





the children in the village schools to relate to print in meaningful ways has proved to be challenging. There are many children even in Class 5 who are at the beginner's level. They do not have even a basic understanding of the sound- symbols relationships inherent in a script. This makes it almost impossible for them to engage with an unfamiliar text. We were gripped with the challenge of equipping such children to build script knowledge in meaningful ways.

For beginning level readers and writers the focus of the ELP intervention therefore has been on engaging young learners with the sounds and symbols of the Devanagari script, in ways that are not mechanical, but instead facilitate a meaningful and active engagement with print. Through our intensive and sustained interactions with young children and teachers ELP developed the *varna samooha* methodology. The aim of this methodology is to equip young literacy learners with the linguistic knowledge and skills required for processing the sounds and symbols of the *Devanagari* script; and at the same time provide opportunities for developing the cognitive skills for constructing meaning while engaging with written forms.

The *varna samooha* approach, which will be discussed in more detail in a later section, combines a structured programme with opportunities for free exploration. Through controlled exposure to limited groupings of alpha-syllables children are encouraged to actively explore alphabets, syllables, words and sentences and their pictorial representations in a variety of ways. The idea is that they should be able to experience the



relationship between spoken sounds and their written forms. Next, they learn to combine these to construct their own words, whether these are in their home languages. In such ways children are motivated to use their inner resources and language experiences while interacting with reading and writing activities. This we have found helps them to express their words, ideas, and real life experiences through written and pictorial forms, and at the same time experience the classroom as an accepting space.

Unlike the sight word or whole word approach, the ELP methodology does not provide children with a predetermined word list to read and write, but instead each child learns to combine sound units (alphabets and syllables) to construct her own individual written words. This distinction is important as it highlights the active role played by the each child in constructing and inventing written words which are from within her particular language experience.

After a child has constructed a written word from within her own language experience she is required to draw a picture which illustrates its meaning. ELP considers this to be an important part of the process of meaning construction. This is also completely different to a word card with a



picture already printed on it, as is often the case in many classrooms. Within the ELP approach, the meaning that each child draws through these “word drawings” is unique for that child. For example, we found many children constructed the word *pani* (water) by combining the *aksharas* /pa/ and /neel/. It was interesting to note the range of drawings that the children then made to illustrate the meaning of the word *pani*. The individual drawings made by different children in Class 1 of a village school captured a range of meanings related to water, such as drops of water; a bucket, a tap, a river, a glass, an earthen pot and so on. Each drawing gives a glimpse of the unique mental image that the word *pani* captures for the particular child who has constructed the word.



By ascribing their own meanings through these drawing children begin to experience real and living connections with their written words. In one of the ELP village schools a little boy constructed the word *lalee* and then drew the picture of his goat to illustrate it. Later we discovered that his goat is named *lalee*. Children are thus provided opportunities within the ELP intervention to actively make meaningful connections not only between their spoken language and its written forms, but through these they make connections between the world of school and the world of home.

Conceptualization of ELP

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

- a) For young beginning level readers and writers the methodologies focus on building the knowledge and skills required for phonological processing and for meaning construction.
- b) For young readers and writers who are at a more advanced level the methodologies aim to strengthen reading and writing with understanding and develop a supportive print rich classroom environment to enhance and strengthen meaningful and purposeful reading and writing

The ELP Classroom methodologies

Class 1

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

- i) Phonological processes for exploring and building awareness of:
 - a) Sound units within spoken language, especially awareness of sounds corresponding to the alpha-syllables or *aksharas*.
 - b) The sound – symbol relationships within written language



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

Classes 2 and 3

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

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

Overview of the ELP intervention strategies

- Provide a balance between a structured programme for introducing young learners to the relationships between letters, sounds and meanings; and opportunities to children for freely and actively exploring these in a variety of natural ways.
- Utilize the inherent character of the *Devanagari* script, which provides a symbol (*akshara*) for each spoken sound. This is done by equipping children to first identify the sound units in each word through the process of syllabification, and then recombining the written forms of the syllables to construct the whole word. This process aims to facilitate efficient reading and writing since it breaks written words into speech (sound) units that young children can easily identify.
- Equip children with the skills of combining syllables (*aksharas*) to construct their own meaningful written words which match their individualized oral vocabularies, and further to visualize the meaning of each word through a drawing. So that from an early stage children begin to relate to written symbols as meaningful and connected to their worlds.
- Link reading and writing activities, inside classrooms, with the children's home languages and experiences so that they can build upon their oral vocabulary and connect to reading and writing in meaningful ways.
- Gradually over two years equip children, to make a smooth transition from their home languages to the language of classroom transaction.
- Once, the children have acquired basic script knowledge and initial reading and writing competencies, provide them with a supportive print rich classroom environment for actively engaging with a variety of informal reading and writing activities in non threatening and meaningful ways.
- In the older classes i.e. Classes 2 and 3 focus on strengthening reading and writing comprehension and other higher order skills like answering questions independently.
- Involve the regular class teachers in the process of developing these methodologies.



The challenge

Within any Early Literacy intervention, it is challenging for classroom pedagogies to combine considerations based on children's natural learning behaviours and capacities to make sense, explore and invent; with methodologies that equip young learners to engage adequately and efficiently with various aspects of script knowledge. Often primacy is given to imparting script knowledge based on a vast scholarship. In young learner classrooms there is a possibility that the resulting



pedagogies may take the form of teacher driven, controlled reading and writing, which focus on introducing young learners to the grapho-phonetic structures and the varied forms of the script through planned exposure to alphabets, syllables, words and practice routines based on these. The underlying assumption is that once children have acquired script knowledge, they will be able to engage effectively with it to meet their own language needs. The risk of such an approach is that since it is not embedded within contexts that are meaningful for young learners, it is unlikely to engage children actively, purposefully and meaningfully, and therefore, they are likely to respond in mechanical ways and superficial ways. The challenge therefore is that these abstract, structured routines of script knowledge are brought alive by drawing upon children's creative energies and inherent capacities to make sense. This requires the creation of classroom opportunities for meaningful and purposeful engagement with various aspects of the script, in ways which are sensitive to children.

The need to identify which linguistic unit plays a critical role in beginning reading. This has been a focus area of a vast body of current research in reading acquisition (See Patel 2004:35). Orthographies vary in terms of their written linguistic units. In alphabetic orthographies, such as those based on the Roman script, the phoneme, which is the minimal unit of potentially meaningful sound within the orthography, is used as the basic written unit. In logographic orthographies, such as Japanese or Chinese the visual notation is the smallest unit, representing either a morpheme or a word. Finally, there are orthographies where the basic written units are not only phonemes but also syllables, or sub-lexical units which contain at least a single vowel. *Devanagari*, or the script for Hindi belongs to this category (Nag-Arulmani 2003). The *Devanagari* script in fact makes possible a written symbol for each spoken sound in Hindi. Within the *Devanagari* script the linguistic unit that is most akin to spoken sounds is the *akshara* or alpha-syllable and not the phoneme.

The context

Within the rural schools that ELP worked in, many children are unable to understand much of what



transpires in the class, since they speak *Marwari* while the lessons are in Hindi. Most teachers in these schools translate the school texts for the children. Getting the children in these rural schools to relate to print in meaningful ways has also proved to be challenging. In some schools it took us a couple of months of work with children in Class 1 just to establish meaningful sound-symbol relationships for a few written letters.

In all the ELP schools we found that children are introduced to written Hindi through the *varnamala* (the equivalent of the alphabet). Young beginning level learners first learn to recognize individual vowels and consonants and are then introduced to the abbreviated vowels (*matras*) through structured word lists. Through individual reading observations inside classrooms we found that this tends to fragment the process of reading for young learners, since they are taught to break up words into alphabets and abbreviated vowels (*matras*). These components of words do not correspond directly to the sound units of words that they can hear. We found this process being undertaken by many beginning level readers in purely mechanical ways, without it making any sense to them. Many children were making use of their short term memories; so that with gaps in time,



such as during holidays they forget all that they have learnt, making it rather frustrating for the class teacher. Instead, when ELP based the introduction of the *Devanagari* script on the *akshara* (alpha- syllable) as the linguistic unit, we found it made much more sense to the children since they were able to identify the exact written forms for the sound units that they could hear within each spoken word. This process of

syllabification will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

The ELP approach for beginning readers is a multi pronged and structured approach based on the simultaneous introductions of letters, words and continuous texts. First of all the Hindi alphabet (*varnamala*) has been divided into six groups called *varna samoohas*. These *varna samoohas* are introduced to the children chronologically so that the children are thus introduced to a limited selection of a few Hindi alphabets and *matras* (abbreviated vowels) at a time (see visual presentation of *varna samooha 1* given below). These groupings have been designed to help young children understand the linkages between the sounds and symbols of alphabets, syllables, words and texts and to experience these in interrelated ways. The idea is that written characters do not remain as meaningless symbols which are just rattled off, but instead, children are able to relate to these as parts of meaningful words and poems, as



is shown in the visual for the first group or *varna samooha* 1 given below:

The children first learn to recognize the sounds and shapes of all the consonants and vowels which are being introduced within a *varna samooha*. This is done through a variety of activities. Next, they are introduced to all the possible combinations that are available in the *varna samooha* through an *akshara* chart (as shown in the visual). Daily recitation of the *akshara* chart is done with actions and in various directions, from left to right, top to bottom etc, so that the children become thorough in recognizing all the



aksharas. The children are next exposed to one or two words which



can be constructed by combining the *aksharas* which are available within the *akshara* chart. By basing the introduction of the *Devanagari* script on the *akshara* (alpha- syllable) as the linguistic unit, we found the children were able locate the exact written forms for their spoken words. The children do this through the process of syllabification of words, or the breaking of spoken words into their audible sound units. Children then match these sound units with their corresponding written *akshara* in the displayed *akshara* charts.

For example in the case of the word *papa* a child does not hear the separate sounds of /p/ /aa / /p/ /aa/ but instead she hears the sounds of the *aksharas* /paal/ and /paal/. She then matches these sound units with their corresponding written forms in the displayed *akshara* charts. In this way she will soon learn to manipulate and combine the different *asksharas* in the chart to make words from her spoken language. Even young children in Class 1 pick up this process very quickly and use it effectively to construct meaningful written words from within their oral vocabularies and then draw pictures to show their meanings.



The ELP *Varna Samooha* approach lays emphasis on actively engaging children in the processes of exploring the relationships between the sounds and symbols of spoken and written language, and the ways in which these can be combined to communicate meaning. As described above, beginning level



literacy learners are provided with opportunities to actively manipulate written symbols (*aksharas*) to construct meaningful words which are from within their oral vocabularies. In rural Rajasthan we have found that the written words constructed by young literacy learners are often in *Marwari*, which is the home language of the children. This process equips children to build meaningful connections with the written forms of language from a very early stage. It also allows the space for children to bring their language experience and resources into the classroom so that the sound patterns and words from their real world outside the classroom find acceptance inside the classroom.

The ELP approach is distinct from the approach to Organic Reading proposed by Sylvia Ashton Warner (1963), in that the constructed words although from within the child's language repertoire need not have any subjective emotional significance for the child as in the case of the Organic Reading Approach. The focus is on the child's active process and conscious process of combining sound - symbol units to construct meaningful words. Pretty soon children are ready to juggle around with the sounds and shapes of the various letters and syllables that they find in the *akshara* chart and combine them in various ways to create their own words. For example, a child may combine *Inaal* and *Ineel* from the *akshara* chart to make the word *naanee* (grandmother), and then follow this up with a drawing of her grandmother.



It is fascinating to watch this process, and experience the joy of a child who has just actively constructed



her first written word. Once it dawns on the child that through the combination of written forms that she has put together she is actually representing something from her real world, be it a family member, a colour, or some object, she gets hooked ! From this moment onwards it becomes like a treasure hunt. We have found that little children willingly and enthusiastically spend long spells of time constructing their own words from the resources available in the *akshara* chart or *akshara* flash cards. During such activities the children's spellings and drawings are not 'corrected', so that they feel a sense of inner connection and ownership with their words and drawings.

Giju Bhai (1997), in his book *Prathamik Shala Mein Bhasha-Shiksha* makes a reference to a phase in a young child's reading and writing development, which he calls "*shabdon ki bahaar*" or "a springtime of words". He describes the exuberance with which young children, who have been able to unravel the



codes of the written script, want to engage with written words all the time. ELP discovered the same abundance in the children's active engagement with written words. They suddenly begin to actively engage with the print that they see around them. They keep hunting for different words from *akshara* charts and word walls. They compete with each other to find new words. They want to look at each others 'word drawings'. They play word games based on these written words. ELP believes that these young beginning level learners feel a sense of ownership of the written words that they construct. This is empowering for them.

Within ELP's *varna samooha* approach beginners are also introduced to sentences and texts through poem posters. They first learn to recite a few action rhymes / poems which ELP has created from the words available within a *varna samooha*. Their teacher then displays a poster with the same rhyme / poem, so that while the children recite it, they are able to follow the corresponding written text from the poster. Pretty soon most children in Class 1 are able read and then write the entire poem on their own. This is empowering for the children and encourages them to engage further with written symbols and texts. Some of the words from the poem posters are displayed in word walls and are used for word activities and for playing word games.



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

The ELP intervention for the more confident, young readers and writers, has tried to capitalize on the classroom as an authentic social setting, or a living context within which children can interact with each other and share their thoughts and feelings in the written forms. Children are encouraged to actively



engage with a variety of displayed print in the class through activities based on these displays. For example, children respond to each other through displayed messages; or use written words from the word walls for playing word games; they write and respond to displayed riddles in the riddle corner, at times in their home languages; they share displayed

rhymes, play-verses or poems in various ways through reading and writing; they create their own poems based on poem posters as shown in the visual above; they read, look at and talk about pictures or displayed writings; they listen to stories being read aloud or they read story books from the reading



corner, and then they share their ideas about the story. All of these become informal and non threatening 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 teacher plays a pivotal role for facilitating and motivating the children to engage actively in these informal print based interactions.

It has been challenging to build print rich classrooms within the resource poor conditions in the rural schools, but even here word walls, morning messages and poem and reading corners have been fairly effective in generating meaningful print engagement. Within this context ELP has also devised need based activities for promoting reading and writing with understanding. These include “read and do” activities at the sentence level. The children individually read, understand and carry out the written instructions which are provided through a single or a set of sentences. These may be directions for making a drawing or carrying out an action. This game-like activity has been effective for strengthening reading with understanding.

Another important activity is “shared writing”. The children decide on a topic to write about based on their real life experience. There is a lot of talk and discussion on the topic and based on this the children jointly dictate one sentence at a time to their teacher, who writes these on the blackboard in the children’s words (even if these sentences are in their home language). The text that is generated through this shared interaction has a direct connection to the children’s real life experiences. Shared writing has also helped the children to make a gradual transition from their home language to the language of school over a period of one year.

We have also found that many children in these rural schools find it difficult to independently answer questions based on written texts. However, by basing questions on the texts which have been generated by the children themselves through their “shared writing” we were able to overcome this challenge fairly effectively. Based on this experience, equipping children with skills to independently answer written questions has become a focus area for ELP.

Story telling and exposure to children’s literature is another important component of the ELP intervention. Apart from providing children with enjoyment, these sessions provide children with opportunities to respond to stories and other forms of children’s literature through their feelings, imaginations, personal narratives or real life experiences.



Shyeda was a student of Class 3 in a Government School on the outskirts of Delhi. Her family came to Delhi some years ago, from a village near the Nepal border, in Bihar. The shift to Delhi was not easy for Sheyda. Her family under went several hardships. In addition to this she had to really struggle to



understand the Hindi that was used in school. She felt self conscious and did not want to speak in her dialect; as a result she was a very quiet child. During the early stages of ELP, Shyeda was hesitant to read and write. Slowly, as she got drawn into the world of stories, Shyeda began to read, write and draw more freely. Her teacher now noticed the gradual change in Sheyda's reading and writing abilities.

Storybooks are also regularly brought into classrooms in the ELP schools in Rajasthan. The children browse through story books. They look at, and respond to the pictures. They listen to read aloud stories and talk about them, and predict what will happen next. This talk around the stories is an opportunity for them to engage with each story in real ways. It also makes each story session a shared experience. The children are encouraged to freely respond to the stories by expressing their feelings or predicting what may come next. Their related personal narratives and imaginations make the stories come alive for them. The teacher encourages them to capture these feelings and responses by writing or drawing these in their own stories so that these classroom interactions with children's literature become opportunities for the children to make meaningful connections with the world of print

Conclusions

Through its work over the last few years in the urban context of Delhi and the rural context of Rajasthan ELP has identified some foundation processes and competencies for building reading and writing with understanding. ELP's experience suggests that once these are developed within the first two to three years of schooling, children begin to engage more confidently and with understanding with a variety of texts in Hindi. ELP's exploratory effort has reinforced a belief that if we want to regard schools as places where all children will learn, regardless of their home circumstances, then it is vital to build informed understandings of the specific socio-cultural contexts within which learning occurs, so that children are equipped to engage with school based learning in meaningful and empowering ways.

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