EMERGENT LITERACY

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This Practitioner Brief is part of a series brought out by the Early Literacy Initiative anchored by the Azim Premji School of Education at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad.
On a regular weekday morning in August, students of Grade 1 are excited and impatient as they line up outside class. The teacher has nearly finished setting up the room. The walls of the classroom are decorated with charts of *aksharas*, poems, story cards and to-do lists. A soft-board exhibits children’s work. Another wall displays patterned cards with the names of all 20 children in the group.

The teacher sets down boxes with different kinds of paper, colours and other stationery in a corner labelled ‘लिखने का कोना’ (writing corner). Once she is ready, she welcomes the children inside.

Teacher: “सायमा, क्या तुम आज हमे बैग का कोना दिखाओगी?” (“Saima, will you please show us the Bag Corner today?”)

Saima walks to the front left of the room, and reads from a label on the wall, tracing the words with her fingers.

S: बैग का कोना | (The bag corner.)

T: बहुत बड़िया! (Very good!) 

The children leave their bags in the Bag Corner and arrange themselves in a circle. After every child has joined the circle, the teacher asks, “Who would like to tell us about the other corners?”

Many children raise their hands. As the teacher calls out their names, different students walk up to different corners around the classroom. A label on the wall, put at the children’s eye-level, denotes each corner.

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1 The example has been inspired and adapted from observations at Organization for Early Literacy Promotion, Ajmer
The children trace the writing with their fingers and read out—

Child 1: कविता का कोना (Poem Corner)

Child 2: लिखने का कोना (Writing Corner)

Child 3: कहानी कोना (Story Corner)

Teacher: कहानी कोना? (Story Corner?)

The child looks at the label again and murmurs, “कहानी कोना |”.

The teacher walks around him, picks up a book from a hanging books line, and repeats, “कहानी कोना?”

The child takes the cue, looks at the label, and replies, “किताबों का कोना, किताबों का कोना!” (Books’ Corner, Books’ Corner!). And his hand trace the words again.

This group of students have been members of Grade 1 for a month now. They belong to a low-literate rural community in India, where most children do not attend pre-school and do not come from print-rich environments. What we have just read describes their early morning ritual at school.

**The Emergent Literacy Perspective**

When do children begin to become literate? If we were to ask you this question, you might think back to when you learnt to read and write; or you may think of your students and say, “3 years,” or “7 years”, or “5 years”. By contrast, the emergent literacy perspective suggests

![Figure 1. Picture of a four-month old reading. Image Courtesy: Shailaja Menon](image)
that with adequate exposure to print, children could start learning to read and write from birth. How can this be? A new-born cannot even hold a pencil, a four-month-old doesn’t know the aksharas. However, the emergent literacy perspective expands our understanding of what it means to learn to read and write.

Learning to read and write, according to this perspective, is more than learning the aksharas or to spell words correctly: we learn a lot more about print before we learn these specifics. A baby surrounded by books and print at home learns from a very young age that print holds meaning for the people surrounding her. She may see her grandfather reading the newspaper every morning. She may see her father filling out a form or reading a hospital report. She may see her mother reading bus numbers, or writing a letter, or counting out money. If she is in an environment where children’s books are available, she may learn to hold those books and look intently at pictures while someone reads them aloud to her; and later on, read them herself (see Figure 1).

Marie Clay, the well-known educator from New Zealand who coined the term Emergent Literacy, defined it as the skills, knowledge and attitudes children develop about reading and writing before they become conventional readers and writers.

Assumptions of the Emergent Literacy Perspective
The emergent literacy perspective makes a few critical assumptions about how children become literate:

1. Young children learn the functions of literacy through observing and participating in real-life settings in which reading and writing are used.
2. This requires active participation in meaningful activities.
3. It also involves interaction with meaningful others.
4. Young children don’t first learn to read and then learn to write; rather, they learn about both reading and writing simultaneously, and development in one supports the development of the other.
5. These abilities are linked to their oral language.
6. Learning to read and write occurs continually over time and, upon close observation, we see children go through many developmental phases in learning to read and write.
We start with the assumption that all children, including those from low-literate settings, are active meaning-makers, naturally motivated to observe and interact with the print in their environment. Through this engagement, they pick up things that will help them along the way to conventional literacy, including ideas about how language and literacy work. They build on the oral languages that they bring to the classroom. They learn the functions of print—why we use print in our daily lives (e.g., to read road signs, make lists, read newspapers and books). They learn that there are rules for how print works, that many scripts may go from left to right, or from top to bottom. They learn to be attentive to the sounds in their language—how some words sound like others (rhyme, or words that start with the same sounds). They learn about aksharas and how to put them together to make words and sentences. They may learn that their initial attempts at scribbling could lead to drawing and writing. There is so much to learn about the world of print!

We won’t attempt to cover all these aspects in this brief. Instead, we will focus on three key areas and hope that it will lead you to expand your understanding about the others. We will look at:

1. Creating awareness about print
2. Providing opportunities for emergent reading
3. Providing opportunities for emergent writing
Creating Awareness about Print

As we mentioned earlier, children from low-literate communities do not have a lot of exposure to print at home or in their surroundings. Thus, it is important that as their teacher you provide students opportunities in the classroom to learn concepts about print.

**Concepts about Print** is an awareness about how print works: that print conveys meaning, that it is used for different purposes, and that it has different features, forms and conventions.

The different kinds of understanding related to print are described next.

**Understanding the Relevance of Print**

Consider what generally happens when children enter schools: they are taught the *varnamala* in a rote fashion for months at a stretch. Teachers may not even read out books, stories or poems to them. In such cases, it is unlikely that children will come to see reading and writing as meaningful—they may not realise that the letters or *aksharas* they are learning come together to form words and sentences that tell a story or provide meaningful information. Here is an exchange between a researcher and a second-grade child about a picture book, reported verbatim from Menon et al.’s (2017) Literacy Research in Indian Languages (LiRIL), a study conducted in Yadgir, Karnataka.

*Researcher (R) (Holding up a picture book): “What is this?”*  
*Child (C): This is a “Copy” to read (“Copy” is the colloquial term for a notebook.)*  
*R: What will you find inside this?*  
*C: Words.*  
*R: What will you do with these words?*  
*C: Read them, then copy them down.*  
(Excerpted from Subramaniam, Menon & Sajitha, 2017, p. 7).

You can see that the child had no idea that one could look for meaning, a story, in the text. Children with print awareness, on the other hand, understand that learning to read and write helps them convey meaning just as spoken languages do. They also know that print can be
used for different purposes like communicating with others, recording information, or reading for pleasure and entertainment. Hence, perhaps the most crucial thing for children to learn about print is that it *carries meaning* and *has relevance* in their lives.

**Understanding How Print Works**

It is important that students also learn how print within books works. Examples include:

**Directionality.** All print moves in a particular direction. The direction of reading and writing in English and Hindi is from left to right, while in Urdu it is from right to left. When we reach the end of a line, we *sweep* back to the beginning of the next line. Show young children how this happens; otherwise, they may write or read in random sequence.

**Learning how books work.** Children, especially those from low-literate homes, may need explicit help with understanding how books work (see Figure 2). This understanding would include:

- Knowing the different parts of a book (e.g. front, back, spine) and how to handle it (where to start reading and how to proceed).
- Knowing that pages of a book, with English, Hindi and many other Indian languages, are read from left to right and top to bottom.
- Pictures, charts or other graphics may accompany text. One has to look at all these elements to form meaning from the book.

*Figure 2.* A young boy browsing a book, holding it upside down, which shows limited understanding of how books work. **Image Courtesy:** Akhila Pydah
Concept of a word. When we speak, we may let several words run into each other. Many children may think of these groupings as one word and may write them that way (a young child might write “thetisy” for “that is why”). On the other hand, children may also read akshara by akshara, not knowing to pause between words. The sentence, “मेरा नाम राम है” can be read out as “मे-रा-ना-म-रा-म है”, and reading it this way, without grouping aksharas into words, might hamper a child’s understanding.

Conventions. Conventions like punctuation marks affect the meaning and expression conveyed by text. For example, the text “What happened?” might indicate a casual curiosity, while saying, “What happened?!?” might indicate an urgent need for information.

Knowing about Forms of Print Material
There are many forms of print: books, pamphlets, charts, labels and signage, notices, lists, letters and so on. Children have to understand the organisation, purposes and conventions of these various formats so that they can use them effectively.

Creating Print Awareness through a Print-Rich Environment
One way to help children learn more about how print works is to create a print-rich environment in the classroom. In the vignette presented at the beginning of this brief,

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2 Refer to ELI Practitioner Brief, Creating a Print-rich Environment in the Classroom, for more details on the types of print and the different ways to use them in the classroom. The brief can be accessed at http://eli.tiss.edu/handouts-publications/
we saw that as students interact with the print in their classroom (e.g. reading the labels for spaces), they come to understand that it serves a purpose and works in specific ways. Table 1 lists the kinds of print you could put up in your classroom and their use or function.

Table 1
Types of Environmental Print Recommended in an Early Language Classroom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Environmental Print</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Print That Labels Things or Spaces</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Labels that tell students what things are or where things belong—‘blackboard’, ‘writing corner’, ‘space for notebooks’, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Print That Reminds Students What to Do</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Little notes of instructions, such as rules for the classroom, daily duties, print that reminds students how to use a particular thing or space (e.g. “Please keep the books back in the same place after reading them” and “Shh…you are in the reading corner”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Print That Informs Students</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Alphabet / varnamala charts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Picture-dictionary charts with names and pictures of common things (see Figure 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Word walls with cards of words your class commonly uses or encounters (e.g. <em>amma, mama, baba, gaay, ghar, paani, kitaab</em>, etc.); you can add pictures so children can make connections more quickly (see Figure 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Children’s names displayed in a large and bold type on a wall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Children’s work (like their drawings, writing, art etc.), with descriptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Print that Asks Students to Respond or Contribute</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Daily attendance sheets (see Figure 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sign-up sheets (where students sign up for a task)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Class schedule, used every morning to discuss the plan for the day with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Shared writing charts[^3^], which are accounts of shared experiences the teacher helps the class compose and write</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Poem charts and story posters based on texts students have recently read or heard; students love “reading out” these posters to friend</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[^3^] Shared Writing is described in detail later in the brief.
Spaces for Reading and Writing: Reading-, Writing- and Word-study Corners

These corners help children explore and interact intimately with print and literate worlds.

- A **reading corner**, or classroom library, is well-stocked with children’s books for students to browse and read on their own.

- The **writing corner** is a space where students can scribble, draw, write, cut-and-paste, stamp, and otherwise engage with print using a variety of material.

- In the **word-study corner**, children get material and opportunities to make and break words, think about how sounds and symbols are connected. You can club it with the writing corner, if there is a space constraint.

**Figure 5.** This is a picture of a daily attendance chart. Children have not yet learnt to write their names, but they are able to identify it and sign against it using symbols such as dots, crosses or the first *akshara* of their names. Kamala Nimbkar Balbhavan, Pragat Shikshan Sanstha, Phaltan, Maharashtra.

Sometimes, teachers create a print-rich environment in the classroom but forget to *use it meaningfully*. A print-rich environment is not a decorative display of print. If children are to engage meaningfully with it and learn from it, then print needs to be used meaningfully throughout the day. Let’s recall the vignette at the beginning of this brief: the teacher incorporated the use of labels or written instructions into the classroom routine (children identify spaces for bags and leave their bags there every day). You could think of similar ways to engage students with classroom print.

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4 The ELI practitioner brief on print-rich environment presents the required material and suggested activities for each of the three corners.
It is also best to position print at children’s eye-level and make it easily accessible. Keep the classroom print dynamic and responsive to what is happening in class. This means regularly changing or updating displays according to students’ learning needs and progress.

**Providing Opportunities for Emergent Reading**

Many of us may have seen children *pretending* to read books, even though they don’t know how to read letters or words. What are they doing? Perhaps they are looking at the pictures and trying to make sense of them. Perhaps they are trying to imitate adults around them, turning pages, tracking print with their fingers as they *read*. Perhaps they remember a book read aloud to them by an adult and are retelling the story from memory. Or perhaps they have actually learned to read a few words and are attending intently to the print.

*Emergent reading* refers to a whole range of behaviours children exhibit with print and books before they learn to read conventionally. Through many exposures to print and books, and through many interactions with the adults and other children around them using this print, children learn useful things about how to read. Print awareness, discussed earlier, is a part of this learning, but there are other aspects as well.

Initially, while pretend-reading books, children may focus only on looking at individual pictures. Slowly, they may realise that the pictures are connected and they may try to tell a story from the pictures. Through meaningful interactions with books in the presence of supportive adults and peers, children gradually begin to understand that the *story* lies in reading the pictures and text together. This is a new understanding.

If the adults around the child narrate stories to her and read books to her, she will also learn that stories have a predictable structure—that they have a beginning, middle and end. She may realise that stories always have characters and actions. With repeated exposure to storytelling and read-alouds at home and school, she begins weaving her own *narratives* (stories).
Supporting Emergent Reading in the Classroom

Games to build children’s phonological awareness. Even before children learn to read aksharas representing different sounds, it is important that they become aware of how sounds work in the spoken language. You can play a variety of quick, interesting games or use oral recitations of poems and rhymes to build this phonological awareness in them.

Engaging with classroom print. As we discussed earlier, engage your students with classroom print, such as by pointing out labels, reading out poems and stories, engaging with displays of their work, playing interesting games with words on the word wall and picture-dictionaries. Don’t worry about whether children are actually reading the letters or words. Let them read from memory or by sight. Over time, they will begin attending to words and letters.

Shared Reading. Choosing a big book, or a story or poem poster with large font and illustrations. Read the text multiple times over a couple of days, and track the text word by word with a pointer as you read it out (see Figure 6). Children follow along and join in wherever they can. This helps them understand concepts about print like directionality, how to turn pages and how to attend to pictures and print together. In later readings of the text, you can point out specific features of words, letters or punctuation.

5 Refer to ELI practitioner brief Supporting Phonological Awareness in Pre-primary and Primary Classrooms for more on the concept and the many ways to support it: http://eli.tiss.edu/handouts-publications/

6 The ELI practitioner brief on print-rich environment presents many suggestions for engaging students with classroom print.
Daily read-alouds. Children best learn about print when they are reading and writing in real, authentic contexts (Clay, 1991). Participating in read-alouds of good books is one such powerful experience. It benefits all aspects of literacy learning. But, at the most fundamental level, it shows children how print represents spoken language, how one handles a book and how to make meaning out of a longer, connected text. And all this happens in a warm, pleasurable context. So try to read aloud with your students every day. Use a wide variety of books – it will help them see different ways of communicating meaning through print.

Picture reading. Children can be encouraged to read pictures. Single pictures with lots of interesting action in them can help children generate stories. But it is equally important to give children wordless picture books that show a sequence of actions that help them weave a story as they read.

Reading corners or classroom library. Allow students to freely explore and browse through books of their choice in the reading corner. Remember to include books you have already read aloud to the class. Encourage children to look at the illustrations, ask questions, retell stories from books they liked from read-aloud sessions, or write or draw in response to those books.

Word cards. These consist of words and their illustrations. As we said earlier, even when children are unable to decode, they will guess the names of words by looking at the pictures. You can play word games using these cards. For example, ask students to sort the cards by beginning sounds or ending sounds. Later, when you introduce aksharas, write a couple of them in different spaces on the floor; ask students to say the name of the word or picture on each card and place it in the correct space for the beginning (or ending or middle) akshara. Display these cards in an easily accessible place (e.g. a word wall) and encourage children to refer to them when they want to read or write some of these words.

Playing games with akshara cards. Make cards with one akshara written on each one, and play letter games to draw children’s attention to the akshara symbol and its sound. To reinforce this learning, Organization for Early Literacy Promotion encourages children to create a train (or rail in Hindi) of aksharas: as children learn a new akshara, they draw pictures of as many words as they can think of beginning with that akshara. The क की रैल
may consist of *kap, katori, kainchi, kabootar, kaagla, kanghi*, and so on (see Figure 7). If students want, they can also attempt to write names of things against the pictures (emergent writing, see next section), or they can refer to picture-dictionaries or word walls for this.

![Figure 7. A child making his rail for the akshara फ़. OELP, Rajasthan](image)

**Providing Opportunities for Emergent Writing**

Just as children *pretend* to read before they can read conventionally, they also engage in various forms of *emergent writing* behaviours before they begin to write conventionally.

*Young children’s writing is related to their talk, drawing, reading, and pretend-play.* In her extensive work with young writers, Ann Dyson (1988) noted that young children interweave gestures, talk, drawing and scribbling when they first begin to write. They may pick up a toy truck, move it around on the ground, making “vrroom, vrroom, beep, beep, beep!” sounds as they zig zag the truck on the floor. They may also narrate a complex story about the truck to their friend, and finally make a few marks on paper, representing only a small part of what they are trying to convey.

Similarly, they might “write” *random scribbles* that don’t make sense to adults but when you ask them about their scribbles, they may have much to say (See Figure 8). Over time, they may begin scribbling letter-like forms, mixing these with their drawings\(^7\). These are

\(^7\) Refer to the ELI blog piece *Children’s writing: How does it emerge and why is it significant?* for phases of emergent writing in an Indian language. You can access it here: [http://eli.tiss.edu/childrens-writing-how-does-it-emerge-and-why-is-this-significant/](http://eli.tiss.edu/childrens-writing-how-does-it-emerge-and-why-is-this-significant/)
important first steps—it may take years before children are able to produce writing that looks conventional to an adult. However, it is important that you are attentive to children’s early attempts at writing and support them.

Figure 8. Scribbling of random shapes by a child in the beginning of Grade 1, and what she says about her writing as transcribed by the researcher and presented in translated forms in English and Hindi. Image Courtesy: LiRIL study report, Menon et al, 2017.

Children write about emotionally important topics. If you assign topics for writing in your classroom, you may have noticed that young children often appear to go off topic and write about issues emotionally important to them. In the LiRIL study (Menon et al., 2017), a child drew his father when he was asked to write or draw in response to the photo of a balloon-seller (see Figure 9). Notice how the child has labelled the image: “Mera papa mera” (my dad mine). Though he went off-topic, he was clearly using print to explore and express his feelings. Such attempts should be permitted; otherwise, children may not find writing to be relevant, and may be reluctant to write at all.

Figure 9. The writing prompt on the left and a child’s response to it—Mera papa mera (my father mine). Image Courtesy: LiRIL study report, Menon et al, 2017.
Children gradually learn about the relationships between symbols and sounds. Initially, children may not understand that letters represent sounds of spoken language. However, understanding this symbol-sound relationship is crucial to the development of literacy and there are many interesting ways of bringing children’s attention to it. With instruction and exposure, once children begin recognising this relationship, they start exploiting this knowledge to spell words.

![Figure 10](Image Courtesy: Poorva Agarwal)

Their early spellings may not be correct in the conventional sense, but these invented spellings demonstrate that children are trying to problem-solve the relationship between sounds and symbols. In Figure 10, a four-year-old writes “MAD” for “made”, “ORANJ” for “orange”, “WID” for “with” and “YELO” for “yellow”—such clever attempts to encode the sounds of his message in writing. It is critical that you encourage children in these initial attempts at writing rather than simply supplying them with the correct spellings. This will help to strengthen their foundational understanding about writing.

Supporting Emergent Writing in Classrooms

Children need to be encouraged to write frequently and freely through throughout the emergent phase (and beyond). Ensure that you give them many opportunities to write about topics meaningful to them, and support them in their attempts at writing. We discuss some
ideas that you can use in your classroom. Although we present these activities in separate sections, they benefit both reading and writing because both develop in an interrelated manner.

**Opportunities to draw, scribble, write, talk.** Give children blank paper right from their first day at school and ask them to draw and write. You could ask them to draw or write about their house, surroundings, family; their response to a story you have shared with them; or an experience they have shared together as a class. Let children scribble if they wish to, or draw a picture. Once they are done, ask them what they have written. Write down what they say, and display this *dictated writing* along with their drawings in class (See Figure 11 and 12). You can read these examples of *dictated writing* back to the child, or share them with other children. This will help your students understand that their writing is valued and that what they write can be read by others.

![Figure 11. A three-year old’s emergent writing attempts and teacher’s notes to record the child’s utterances about their writing. Image Courtesy: Shailaja Menon.](image)

**Responding to classroom print.** As a classroom routine, children can sign against their names on the attendance chart (see Figure 5). Or they can volunteer for tasks in the classroom by signing up for them, or respond to a survey displayed in class.

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8 We only present a few key ideas here. The ELI practitioner brief *Supporting Children’s Writing in Early Grades* elaborates on the principles for teaching writing and offers detailed suggestions teachers can use to support students’ writing. Access the brief here: [http://eli.tiss.edu/handouts-publications/](http://eli.tiss.edu/handouts-publications/).

9 Examples of these are given in the brief *Creating Print-rich Environment in the Classroom.*
**Modelled and shared writing.** The class and you could compose a text together—about a shared experience or a class visit. You could write it down for the class on chart paper. By doing this, you are *modelling* how to compose and write the text describing their experience and thoughts. Modelled writing is an excellent time for drawing attention to the use of text features and conventions. Hang the chart in the class and use it for repeated shared readings. As you read and re-read the text together, children will learn many things about how print works and how to write. In later sessions, as you write, encourage children to *share* the writing process by adding a word, phrase, punctuation mark, or by showing how a new sentence should begin.

**Exposure to different genres of writing.** Over time, read a wide variety of books to children, and encourage them to write in different genres. On one day, they can write a descriptive story of a festival celebrated in their village. On another, you can show them how to write a letter to a friend telling her what the child appreciates about her. On a third occasion, you can help children create rules for the classroom, or support them in writing their first poems. Throughout this, remember that writing becomes conventional only over time. Let children scribble, draw and talk as they *write*, let them use *invented spellings*. And don’t expect their writing to look like yours. Support them throughout such exercises based on their need.

*Figure 12.* Another example of a teacher recording and displaying students’ utterances about their writing. Kamala Nimbkar Balbhavan, Pragat Shikshan Sanstha, Phaltan, Maharashtra.
Teaching letters using a variety of objects. As children gradually learn the script, you can use different activities and objects to teach child the shapes of letters. You could get them to trace shapes of letters in mud, sand, water and air. Or use stones or peanut shells and help children create shapes of letters. These materials could be kept available at the writing corner with stationery.

Talking about writing. Right from the start, engage children in conversations about what they have drawn or written. If the child has drawn or written only a part of her oral narrative, you can note down children’s stories as they dictate them to you.

Sharing the child’s work. Incorporate different ways in which the child shares her work with others—pinning her work on soft-boards, calling on her to talk about or show her work to the class, sharing her work with her parents and community, and so on.

Maintaining writing folders. Each child should have her own writing folder, which consists of her written work over the years. This helps document, share with parents, as well as track the student’s learning trajectory.

Conclusion

As we conclude, we must return to the assumptions of the emergent literacy perspective. Indeed, children can learn about print from their environments from a very early age. But this happens only when they are engaged in meaningful activities involving print with meaningful others.

In middle-class communities, this exposure is provided at home before the child arrives at school. Even for children from such contexts, it is important that the classroom continues to support the child’s emergent literacy. However, when children come from low-literate homes, it becomes critical and urgent that classrooms provide children with contexts in which they can develop the attitudes, knowledge and skills that underlie conventional reading and writing.

This practitioner brief discussed three ways to provide such exposure—by creating a meaningful print-rich environment, by providing opportunities for emergent reading and
opportunities for emergent writing—to create a robust emergent literacy classroom. We hope you that you can use these ideas to develop an emergent literacy curriculum for your classrooms.

References


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