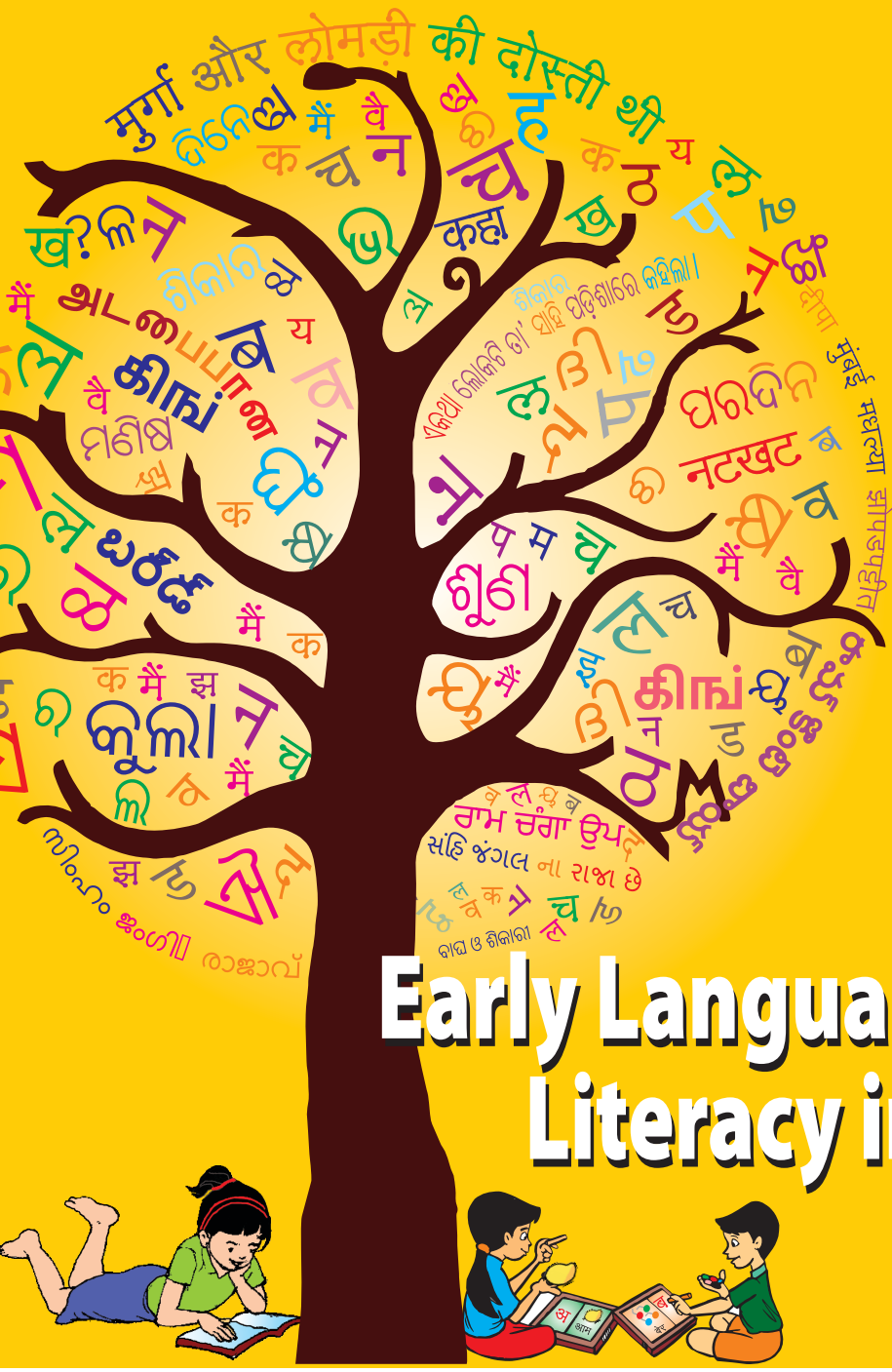
A Position Paper



Early Language and Literacy in India

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EARLY LANGUAGE AND LITERACY IN INDIA

A Position Paper

2016

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Contents

Preamble

Early Language and Literacy Position Paper was conceptualized to address issues related to early language and literacy learning for children in the age group of 3-8 years in India. It builds upon the previous policy documents related to language while articulating new positions on issues that have not been discussed comprehensively. So far, there has been no document that articulates the connectedness of the pre-primary age group of 3-6 years with the early years of schooling (6-8 years) in the area of language and literacy.

Document has been created through a consultative and collaborative process. The idea first took shape during a consultation organized by the Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development (CECED) and CARE India in February, 2014. A concept note was presented to the experts for the development of the Position Paper. Later in the year, CISSD and USAID came together to partner on the project, "Start Early: Read in Time" under which a Technical Core Group (TCG) was constituted, where members volunteered to participate in this process. In November of 2014, the first draft of the Position Paper was presented to the TCG members. Based on the feedback by the members, revisions were made and another draft was presented to the TCG members in February of 2015. Experts debated on issues regarding the stance to be taken with respect to the multilingual fabric of the country vis-à-vis the aims of language and literacy. In April of 2015, a small group of TCG members volunteered to work on the Position Paper. A two-day workshop was held in which these issues were debated and discussed. Finally, the Position Paper was rewritten

and presented to the TCG members in June 2015. The members provided more feedback for contextualizing the issues highlighted by the Position Paper. The paper was reviewed by eminent experts & policy makers in December, 2016.

One of the key ideas that sets apart this Position Paper from other documents is the articulation and advocacy of a "principle based approach" as opposed to advocating for one "method" over-another. This position paper is envisioned as a document that will enable policy makers and educators (practitioners and academicians) to develop a set of informed actions based upon the principles of language and literacy development in young children.

Executive Summary

Early childhood (birth to 8 years) is a critical period of development and significant for educational outcomes in later years, especially in language and literacy. This position paper takes up the question of how to enhance language and literacy education for 3-8 year olds in our country. This is because the educational sector in India is now faced with the challenge of moving the conversation from access to quality. It views the pre-primary age group of 3-6 years as continuous with the early years of schooling (6-8 years), and considers both in tandem. This position paper is envisioned as a document that will enable policy makers and educators (practitioners and academicians) to develop a set of informed practices in the area of language and literacy development for young children. There is currently no position paper in the country that addresses issues related exclusively to early literacy.

Young children are not seen as "ready" for learning to read and write. The multilinguality has not been tapped as a resource in the classrooms and the continuities between oral and written language are not understood and are largely ignored. Early childhood educators have a large role to play in addressing these concerns by strengthening the pre-primary and primary years of language and literacy education, both in terms of teacher education, as well as classroom processes and practices. In this position paper, we take the stance that literacy is not an end in itself, but is a means to most other learning, and social and economic empowerment. Given the large proportion of Indian children who grow up in non-print environments and may have a plethora of local knowledges and skills, a key challenge for early childhood educators is to

consider how to articulate conceptions of literacy that place a high value on their oral language skills and yet develop a strong foundation in reading and writing. Thus, conceptions of literacy need to be seen as building upon oral language skills of learners rather than just as a process of encoding and decoding of the script (with or without meaning). We propose that skill development in learning to read and write is a necessary step but not a sufficient aim of language and literacy education. A more central aim should be to enable students to use language and literacy skills and practices to participate meaningfully and in an empowered manner in society. In a highly socially stratified society like India, this means building access to culturally powerful ways of using language and literacy for many of our students.

The position paper has identified several elements that are central in this process of language and literacy learning. These include development of oral language and vocabulary, engagement with print (print awareness, connection to children's literature), sounds, symbols and words (phonemic awareness, phonics, letter knowledge, word recognition), comprehension and expression (comprehension, fluency, writing) and assessment of language and literacy skills. These elements need to be contextualized within the broader goals of creating independent and motivated readers who are able to participate meaningfully and in an empowered manner in our society. Further, it is essential to recognize that these skills need to be taught concurrently and not sequentially.

We believe that it is more fruitful to search for sound *principles* rather than for particular methods for teaching language and literacy. Principles take into consideration the *normative vision* (or aims) towards which we are working, the *contexts* of teaching and learning, as well as *effective means* to accomplish those aims. Some of the key principles identified in the Position Paper are that (1) oral language must be linked to literacy and must be taught concurrently with literacy skills, (2) there should be an emphasis on drawing and independent writing as forms of expression, (3) multilingual capacities of children must be developed, (4) aspects of each element that has been identified as essential for literacy instruction and learning must be integrated into a comprehensive, concurrent model of literacy instruction, (5) literacy instruction should be seen as a socio-culturally and socio-politically embedded set of practices and not as an "autonomous skill", (6) explicit modeling of literacy processes should follow a Gradual Release of Responsibility model which incorporates a variety of *instructional routines* for teaching literacy, such as, Read Aloud/Modeled Writing, Shared Reading/Writing, Guided Reading/Writers' Workshop, Independent Reading/Writing.

The Position Paper thus highlights a clear paradigm shift in understanding the process of teaching reading and writing to young children in both policy and practice. It identifies some specific implications for policy makers, curriculum developers, teacher educators and teachers, parents and community members. Some of the key recommendations are: (1) smaller class sizes, with a dedicated teacher across all grade levels (especially for preschool and grades 1 and 2), (2) orientation workshops/ trainings for Education Department officials from the District and Block levels and teacher education programmes for building the conceptual understanding required for supporting a comprehensive early language and literacy programme, (3) availability of children's literature in graded form including large 'read aloud' books, and other print materials in the form of charts, cards, etc. which should be contextually developed in vernacular languages and in English and made available at a reasonable cost to all schools, (4) assessment mechanisms within class and in public domains should incorporate this comprehensive shift, particularly in terms of inclusion of reading comprehension and critical thinking along with reading fluency as important competencies to focus on, (5) multiple languages spoken in a particular region must be carefully considered when planning curriculum and instruction, (6) a range of contextualized high quality audio-visual material on classroom teaching-learning processes should be included in teacher education programmes and classrooms, (7) continuity in the curriculum with the primary years-needs to be given due priority in the national and state policies and curriculum frameworks, (8) culture and language congruence between children's home and school should be seen as critical for all children, (9) the focus of instruction in the classroom needs to be on reading with comprehension and critical thinking, not just decoding. This includes using a variety of strategies such as storytelling, free and guided conversations and activities like language games, rhymes and riddles for vocabulary development and verbal expression, activities for sound and visual association, phonemic awareness and directionality within a print-rich environment, (10) teachers should be provided insight into attitudes and belief systems of their students and how it affects the performance of the children.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

Current theorizing suggests that early childhood (birth to 8 years) is a critical period of development for many aspects of human functioning (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2010). The foundations for future development and learning are laid down during the 3-8 year age-range, which cover the pre-school years and the first few years of elementary schooling. These years are increasingly viewed as critical to educational outcomes in later years, especially in language and literacy (Barnett, 1995; Browne, 2009; Duncan, et al., 2007; Kennedy, et al. 2012). This position paper takes up the question of how to enhance language and literacy education for 3-8 year olds in our country.

One of the key objectives of education is the achievement of all goals that depend upon the ability to read and write. The Indian Census (2011) shows that India has made dramatic strides in this regard over the past several decades, raising the national literacy rate from a mere 18.33% in 1951, to over 74% in the 2011 census (Census of India, 2011). However, this is still lower than many developing countries across the world (UNESCO, 2012).The primary educational reforms instituted in the country during the 1990s and beyond (e.g., District Primary Education Programme; Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan; Right to Education Act, 2009) have revolutionized access to schooling in the 6-14 year age range across the country. Data indicates that the

enrollment rates for children rose from 89% in 2003 to 93% in 2007 (Government of India, Planning Commission, 2010).

In complex domains, every achievement uncovers a fresh set of challenges. The educational sector in India is now faced with the challenge of moving the conversation from access to quality. Several non-governmental organizations and individuals have also conducted original and innovative work on early language and literacy education in different parts of the country. These are remarkable achievements in the context of the history of this country. However, the challenges to providing high quality language and literacy education in this country are many. A few of these issues are briefly introduced in this section to build a rationale for this paper. They will be dealt with more fully in later sections.

1.1.1 Conceptions of Literacy

One set of challenges relates to limited conceptions of what we mean by "literacy". In the conception of literacy used by the Census of India (2011), the ability to sign one's name or to learn to decode the script at a basic level is seen as evidence of literacy. Most educators are not likely to be satisfied with such an understanding (Ramamoorthy, 2002). Some may view literacy as the ability to read and write with comprehension, in order to study and succeed at school for later economic prospects in the job market. However, even this conception is inadequate because here literacy is seen as an end in itself. In this position paper, we take the stance that literacy is not an end in itself, but is a means to most other learning and social and economic empowerment. If the intent of education is to enable to live to their fullest potential in modern-day societies, and to be able to participate as citizens of a democratic society, then, literacy needs to be aligned with those goals and viewed as a broader and more complex construct—one that encompasses social, cultural, economic and political domains. Many children in our country live not just in poverty, but also under conditions of social oppression. Education and literacy should serve as vehicles for economic empowerment; but should also provide ways and means to dialogue with, and where necessary, resist, critique and change oppressive circumstances in the lives of individuals and communities.

Examining further conceptualizations of literacy—we also need to keep in mind that even very young children acquire attitudes, skills, values and dispositions that are central to their later success. Given the large proportion of Indian children who grow

up in non-print environments and may have a plethora of knowledge and skills, a key challenge for early childhood educators is to consider how to articulate conceptions of literacy that place a high value on their oral language skills and yet develop durable and engaged relationships with reading and writing. Thus, conceptions of literacy need to be seen as building upon oral language skills of learners as well rather than just as a process of encoding and decoding of the script (with or without meaning). The aesthetic potential of language and literature should also be explored.

1.1.2 Curriculum, Pedagogy and Teacher Education

A second set of concerns is related to educational outcomes that suggest deep underlying problems with curriculum, pedagogy and teacher education. Worryingly, statistics published by large scale assessment and evaluation reports (ASER 2012-2013) suggest that many children in our country are not able to acquire even the most basic proficiency of decoding the script. ASER data suggest that 54% of the students surveyed are unable to decode a second-grade text in fifth-grade. Although the report focuses on rural areas, according to ASER (2013), the trends apply to the urban areas as well. The findings of the Planning Commission Evaluation Report on the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2010) indicate that only 42% at a second grade level were able to read letters in their local/regional language script. Similar results have been reported in the PISA, 2009 pilot (OECD, 2010) conducted in the states of Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, where reading scores for Indian students are close to the bottom of the pile. Despite the limitations of these large-scale studies, their results suggest that many children in India are struggling to acquire even the most basic proficiency with reading and writing, leave alone being able to use reading and writing as a means to achieve higher level personal and societal goals.

Teachers and parents expect that when children enter school they will learn to read and write. When several children are not able to do so even after spending quite a few years in school, the reasons are sometimes sought in the child and the child's background. Teachers rarely question whether their knowledge, beliefs, approaches and strategies for teaching literacy could contribute to these dismal educational outcomes.

The school environments of most children compound the difficulties in acquiring literacy. The rigid curriculum, the premium placed by the system on standard language, the devaluation of the child's home language, the tendency to treat the

child as *'tabula rasa'* discounting the rich understanding of oral language and other competencies the child brings to the classroom, the perception of multilinguality in the classroom as an obstacle to the teaching of language and literacy rather than as a resource, the primacy of the textbook over the child's lived experience and the absence of the child's voice in the classroom—all serve to alienate the child from the process of engaging with literacy as a meaningful process. Each of Cambourne's (2000) 'conditions of learning' (immersion, demonstration, engagement, expectations, responsibility, approximation, use, response), which are so effortlessly and vividly created for the infants as they begin oral language acquisition, are repeatedly compromised when it comes to helping the child to acquire literacy.

It would be unfair to see the teacher as solely accountable for this situation. There has been a lack of engagement at the systemic level in India, with understanding the processes of, and strategies for, literacy acquisition. Teachers often are assigned non-teaching assignments such as pulse polio, election duty and other duties (Government of India, Planning Commission, 2010). Additionally, teacher education programmes rarely have an explicit focus on engaging student teachers with pathways of children's language and literacy development; nor do they adequately orient them towards approaches to teaching early language and literacy. Without a sound understanding of the nature of language and literacy learning and the theoretical premises on which the various approaches of literacy instruction are based, teachers do not have the wherewithal to act with agency and to choose approaches suited to individual and group needs.

This is, therefore, an area in need of urgent attention from educators. Early childhood educators have a large role to play in addressing these concerns by strengthening the pre-primary and primary years of language and literacy education, both in terms of teacher education, and classroom processes and practices.

1.1.3 Multilingual Educational Contexts

A third set of issues are related to the rich, multilingual fabric of India, which continues to daunt educational policy-making and pedagogical decision-making. India has over 1,500 mother tongues, of which 122 are counted as major languages (Vanishree, 2011). Of these, only 41 are taught in school, and only 33 are the medium of instruction at the primary level (Mallikarjun, 2004). Additionally, the situation on the ground is complex, with diverse languages being clubbed under one regional

language. For example, in the case of Hindi, about 20 languages, which have been grouped under Hindi, had more than one million speakers each in 1991. These include Bhojpuri (23.1 million), Chhatisgarhi (10.6 million), 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 (Jhingran, 2005).This implies that many children enter-school with a language and dialect different from that of the school. This is especially true of early childhood settings, where children are transitioning for the first time from home to school. Additionally, learners also use trans-languaging[1] in order to mediate their understandings (Garcia, 2009, 2011), which has no place in the curriculum.

Several policy documents have been formulated to address the issue of multilinguality in Indian classrooms. The Kothari Commission (1966) recommended the three language formula, but it faced difficulties in being translated into classroom practice. In recent years, the National Focus Group on Teaching of Indian Languages (2006) and the National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) (2013) have recommended that mother tongue/home language/local vernacular of the child be the primary language of interaction in the ECCE programmes, while simultaneously exposing children to several languages in a meaningful manner. Yet, the economic aspirations of the population in the post-globalization era are shifting the reality on the ground towards English as the medium of instruction, especially in private schools. English is often taught by teachers who are not proficient in the language themselves. This shift has significant implications at multiple levels (cultural, political, pedagogical and personal) for our society.

From the viewpoint of ECCE, the expectations from early childhood educational settings are not limited to facilitating the transition from the oral to the written cultures. Ideally, these settings also carry the responsibility of helping children navigate different oral languages and dialects, often languages and dialects with no scripts and poorly prepared teachers.

[1] Trans-languaging is the practice by bilinguals where two or more languages are interchangeably used in a fluid and flexible way to convey meaning (Garcia, 2009)

1.1.4 Lack of focus on literacy in the early years

The ECCE policy has a vision of universal access to ECCE settings. India has 158.7 million children in the 3-6 year age range (Census, 2011), who will potentially avail of the universal access instituted by the policy. Yet, early childhood settings are seen, at worst, as creches for day-care and nutritional supplementation; and at best, as child-friendly spaces for stimulation in different domains. There is no rigorous articulation of the aims or vision for language and literacy education in early childhood settings. Young children are not seen as "ready" for learning to read and write; and the continuities between oral and written language are not understood and are largely ignored. Contrary to this, scholarship conducted in the West suggests that conventional reading and writing are contingent on the development of a variety of other skills, attitudes and values that are emergent from birth in literate societies (Goodman & Goodman, 1977; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Marie Clay (1967), proposed an "emergent literacy" approach characterized by looking at children "in the process of becoming literate" (Teale & Sulzby, p. xix)". For example, children learn through shared book reading that books can be read for pleasure, that print contains meaning, that print has directionality, that writing and drawing can be used for expression and communication, that there are different genres of texts, and much more. When children come to formal educational settings from non-print contexts, they come without all this background knowledge and understandings about how print works. The onus is even greater on these settings to provide access to opportunities to develop such understandings that are not contingent upon the conventional mastery of the script. However, it is important to note that children coming to school from non-print contexts have a wealth of skills, knowledge, stories, songs, music and sheer vitality that children from middle-class families may not have. If this wealth is acknowledged and celebrated, it could enrich and vitalize the school community.

2 The Space for this Paper

It is in the above educational and political context that this position paper on early literacy has been developed. Other policy documents in the recent past have also pointed to the need to consider early language and literacy more seriously. The *Padhe Bharat Bhade Bharat* initiative by the Government of India has articulated a vision for early reading and mathematics, mainly for Classes 1 and 2. It states its first goal as *"to enable children to become motivated, independent and engaged readers and writers with comprehension possessing sustainable and lasting reading and writing skills and achieve learning levels appropriate to the class of study"* (p. 1). The National Council of Educational Research and Training has developed *Learning Indicators* (2014) that focus on class-wise learning outcomes, thereby supplementing the stage-wise curricular expectations in the *National Curriculum Framework* (2005) and the syllabi developed in concurrence with the NCF. None of these policy documents explicitly address the pre-school age group of 3-6 years.

There is currently no position paper in the country that addresses issues related exclusively to early language and literacy. By bringing the focus to this area, this position paper will build on certain positions that have been stated in previous documents, even while it articulates new positions on issues that have not been discussed in the past. It views the pre-primary age group of 3-6 years as continuous with the early years of schooling (6-8 years), and considers both in tandem. This position paper is envisioned as a document that

will enable policy makers and educators (practitioners and academicians) to develop a set of informed practices in the area of language and literacy development for young children.

2.1 Oral Language and Literacy

Before proceeding further, it is important to clarify the usage of certain terms in the paper. This position paper views oral language and literacy as overlapping domains that are used extensively in both classroom settings and in literate lives for communication, expression and knowledge generation. In this paper we have used the term 'oral language' to refer to listening, speaking and interpreting non-verbal cues for communication; and the term 'literacy' for the processes of reading and writing; both for self empowerment. However, we take the position that listening, speaking, reading and writing (LSRW) develop concurrently rather than sequentially, with listening and reading being the receptive aspects of communication and speaking and writing its expressive aspects. 'Thinking' is the key in the process of developing these skills. The development of literacy is strongly predicted by the development of oral language, such that we cannot discuss literacy without considering children's oral languages (Coll, 2005). Therefore, even though this paper addresses "early literacy", this presumes a development of oral language.

There are both similarities and differences in the acquisition of language and literacy. Both are acquired within a social context, during meaningful interactions, experiences and activities, motivated by the child's desire to communicate with others as they see others using language and literacy for real life purposes. The differences in acquisition stem from the fact that written language is not simply oral language written down. Writing systems were developed relatively recently in the evolutionary history of human beings, such that it is unlikely that we are "wired" to acquire written language in the manner in which we may be evolutionarily equipped to acquire oral language. Another key difference between the two lies in the de-contextualized nature of written language as compared to the contextualized nature of spoken language. Therefore, the acquisition of literacy is not likely to be as spontaneous and effortless as the acquisition of oral language. Children need to be explicitly taught to read and write, while explicit instruction has only a minor role in acquisition of oral language. This is one key reason why this position paper is focused on literacy which builds upon oral language skills.

2.2 Audience

The target audiences for this position paper are policy makers, teacher educators and other groups (governmental and non-governmental) that work with teachers, classrooms and children in the early years. The focus is conceptual, and not methodological in nature. Therefore, it may not be directly useable by teachers in classrooms; but interested individuals should not be discouraged from reading and gaining a nuanced understanding of conceptual positions and stances within the field.

2.3 Objectives

- Understanding Indian contexts of language and literacy learning and teaching for children aged 3-8 years
- Building shared understanding or perspectives on core aims and principles of early language and literacy development
- Articulating implications for teaching practices, professional development and community engagement
- Articulating implications for policy development and advocacy

Contexts which frame Children's Language and Literacy Learning 3

3.1. Developmental Context

The process of oral language acquisition appears to be the result of a complex interplay between inborn capabilities and environmental inputs. Chomsky (1986) suggested that children have an in-built capacity to acquire oral language (the Language Acquisition Device), such that, they do not need formal instruction to learn to speak. In fact, parental interventions in children's incorrect grammatical productions were shown to be ineffectual in correcting young children's speech. The thrust of Chomsky's argument is that language development is strongly constrained by an internal logic and internal mechanisms for development. However, Tomasello (2003) discounts Chomsky's nature of language and proposes that an interactive cognitive and social skills development underlie linguistic competence. He conceives that it is the presence of these social and cognitive skills that enables children to use language for social purposes—and not the presence of autonomously linguistic capacities alone.

Domains of development that are strongly constrained by nature often have "critical periods" for development, such that, if appropriate environmental stimulation is not presented during a particular time period, that particular functionality does not develop. "Wild" children (Curtiss, 1977; 1989) who have grown up without adequate exposure to oral language during the early years have been used as evidence for the existence of critical periods in language development; many of

these children failed to achieve normal proficiency in oral language after receiving substantial inputs in language beyond their early years.

A milder version of this argument would suggest that there are "sensitive", rather than "critical" periods of development – an extended age range when language will be learned most easily; after this period, language can be learned, but with greater difficulty and less efficiency. Proponents of a critical period for language development would suggest that this period ends between ages 6-9 years (Lenneberg, 1967); while those who support sensitive periods (Lamendella, 1977) would say that children most easily and efficiently acquire their first oral language before puberty. This is also roughly the time period specified by second language learning theorists who suggest that children learn second languages most easily if they are introduced before puberty (Johnson & Newport, 1989).

Before we take a position on these issues, it is important to add a few nuances to this discussion. First, it is clear that oral language learning, while biologically directed, also receives significant and substantial inputs and shape from the environment. Two-day old infants have been shown to be more sensitive to prosodic elements of their mother tongue than to other languages, suggesting that they pick up sensitivity to their mother tongue in their fetal environment (Mehlar et al., 1988). Likewise, by approximately 8 months to one year of age, infants show decreased sensitivity to phonemes that are not a part of their oral language environments (Werker & Tees, 1984). Further, oral language environments differ in the quality and intensity of exposure that they provide, leading to differing oral language learning outcomes in children. The noted educator, Jerome Bruner (1983) suggested that every biologically determined Language Acquisition Device (LAD) needs its socially provided Language Acquisition Support System (LASS). This support system is not an add-on to the language acquisition process, but is integral to it. Bruner suggests that children learn language in the context of familiar routines with familiar caregivers. Advocating for a social interaction hypothesis, Kuhl (2007) proposes that language processing from the early phases of language acquisition, one that is universal to one that is more language specific involves an active social interaction process. Adult-child interactions in the West have shown that middle-class adults routinely draw children's attention to objects, events, and the like; query them about it; label the objects and events for the child; and give feedback to the child on their utterances (Hoff, 2006; Ninio & Bruner, 1978).

Is this happening in non-middle class, non-Western contexts of the kind that many Indian children live in? There is no published empirical work conducted in India to help us to answer this question. We know from the controversial works of Bernstein (1964) and others (Huttenlocher, et al., 1991) that children in lower socio-economic contexts in the West are spoken to less and with more "restricted codes" of speech by adults at home, than are middle-class children. Heath (1983) has suggested that children from different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds learn different "ways with words" at home, different discourse styles, such that the discourse of middle-class children matches up more with the styles of using language at school. Rogoff (1990) uses the metaphor of "apprenticeship" in order to describe the learning process of children. She conceives that children are active in the process of learning as they observe and participate with other members of the society, learn the cultural nuances of a society and in turn construct their own ways to deal with the socio-cultural settings. Many children in Indian classrooms begin preschool and school with not just different languages and dialects, but with different discourses or style of language use, that may not match that of the classrooms. Thus, it becomes imperative to provide them with an optimal environment for language and literacy learning—one that enables them to meaningfully construct their own understandings.

Critical periods related to second language learning are also not without controversy. Marinova-Todd, Marshall and Snow (2000) have critiqued the idea of critical periods in second language development by pointing out that there are multiple factors that contribute to successful second language learning, many of which may be correlated with age, but are not determined by it. For example, the environments in which older learners learn the second language, the proficiency levels expected from them, and their levels of motivation to acquire the second language may all contribute to their apparent failure to be proficient in it. Further, older learners are not a homogenous group – there are many within that population who acquire native or near native-like proficiency, suggesting that the critical period hypothesis, if applicable, is not likely to be a strong constraint. We have taken the time to discuss this at length here, because it has implications for the choice of languages in the early childhood classroom – implications that we will return to in the curricular section.

A final consideration related to oral language is the relationship between language and thinking. While some theorists (e.g., Piaget, 1959) see concepts and language as separate domains of cognition, Vygotsky (1962) and other sociocultural theorists

(e.g., Bruner, 1983) have suggested that thought (concepts) and language are interlinked systems by the age of 3 years. According to Vygotsky, every word is a concept; concepts are thoughts; hence it is impossible to separate out thinking from speech. Young children often think aloud in order to problem-solve; later on, this speech gets internalized and becomes "inner speech". Thinking, therefore, is mediated by speech (external for younger children and inner for older children and adults), and is primarily social in nature (since it uses social signs, such as words). Children's talk, in this conception, is a vehicle for their thinking. This is an important point that we will return to in a later section.

The discussion thus far has focused on different aspects of oral language development that are pertinent to early language and literacy learning. Our discussion suggests that learning oral language is strongly mediated by both biological (innate) and socially mediated processes. While all children learn oral language (syntax, semantics, phonology and pragmatics) given minimal inputs during a sensitive period of development, the nature of verbal interactions between adult caregivers and children vary greatly across socio-economic and cultural contexts. The ways of using oral language of certain social groups map on better with school usages of language than others. The evidence on strong critical periods for second language learning is contested, suggesting the need for a more nuanced understanding for the need to introduce young learners rapidly to multiple languages. Finally, some influential theorists suggest that thinking is strongly mediated by language, and that talk may be a key means by which young children think.

Next, we consider developmental aspects of early literacy learning. In the 1960s, influential educators (Goodman & Goodman, 1977) suggested that learning to read and write were parallel to learning to speak. If young children are immersed in literacy rich environments, they will naturally and effortlessly pick up written language, even as they do oral language. Today, evidence from multiple sources (Connor et al., 2004; Retuzel, et al., 2005; Rupley et al., 2009) suggest that children require a fair amount of explicit and systematic scaffolding and inputs in order to become fluent readers and writers, suggesting that nurture, more than nature plays a determining hand in successful literacy learning. What we mean by "literacy" is itself socially determined and shaped (Street, 1994), and varies from context to context.

As noted earlier, children in middle-class Western contexts are immersed in literate environments from birth. "Literacy events", like bedtime stories form a part of the

infant and young child's daily routines in these cultures, such that, the child is socialized to certain ways of understanding, relating to, and taking from literature at very early ages (Heath, 1983). In such cultures, literacy is "emergent" from birth; very young children can be seen attending to books that are read aloud, turning the pages of a book, gazing intently at pictures, and scribbling in preliminary attempts to write to express or communicate (Sulzby & Teale, 1988; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Scholars in the West have been able to show developmental trends in children's emergent attempts at book reading (Sulzby and Teale, 1986); and writing (Clay, 1979).

Clearly, such scenarios of literacy development are rare, even in middle-class Indian contexts, where books and book reading and sharing are not familiar cultural routines. Oral traditions of story-telling are strong in several societies and families in our country. These potentially help children build strong narrative and expressive skills; as well as to relate aesthetically and pleasurably to literature and language art forms. However, they still fall short of introducing children to literate worlds, unless they include a written or pictorial component to them. Children in India typically do not learn literacy through the emergent route described in the Western literature. Many children encounter print and words for the first time presented to them in their school textbooks. The social practice of literacy is organized toward the mastery of the script and rote learning of lessons—one of the biggest hurdles in learning to read and write.

However, if we re-define literacy and re-imagine its possibilities in the Indian context, such that meaningful and engaged connections to literate practices lie at the heart of it, then the current route to literacy learning may no longer be considered an appropriate one, even for our contexts. In the new scenario, we would want young children to be able to see that print has meaning, that it can be used for communication, for expression, to achieve certain ends in the world. We would like them to notice that there are different genres of texts; different elements to a story; and different styles of writing as they learn to read and write. Many of the children who come to early childhood settings come from home environments devoid of print, and lack this cultural capital of relating meaningfully to the written word. The onus is arguably greater in this context, to provide the emergent exposure to reading and writing, than it is in more literate societies. We take the position that young children should be provided with opportunities to participate as emergent readers and writers for an extended period of time (e.g., 3-6 years of age) before being expected to develop into conventional readers and writers (6-8 years of age).

3.2. Social and Linguistic Context

India has a very complex societal structure. The presence of diverse cultures, castes, classes and languages adds a rich flavour to its sociological fabric. It also adds immensely to inequities within the social system—inequities in opportunities for education, employment and income based on caste, ethnicity, languages, and other factors (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008). Illustrative examples of those marginalized within Indian society include Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, certain religious communities, migratory communities, women, as well as those involved in certain occupations. Some of these groups are recognized constitutionally as marginalized, while others are not. The majority of people belonging to Scheduled Castes and Tribes continue to be subject to economic exploitation and restriction to menial occupations that sustain and reinforce their marginalized social positions. Members of these groups who live in rural contexts are predominantly landless and impoverished agricultural labourers. Adivasi communities are among the most historically disadvantaged social groups due to their spatial isolation and cultural and linguistic differences (Béteille, 1991). A majority of adivasis continue to live below the poverty line, have poor literacy rates, suffer from malnutrition, disease and are vulnerable to displacement and human rights violations. Within these groups, girls have a double disadvantage on account of their gender and community. There are a number of factors that affect girls such as, caste-based discrimination and abuse, child marriage, cultural practices and customs, and restriction of mobility.

Certain scholars have pointed out that we cannot afford to understand or respond to the concerns of marginalized groups merely in terms of pedagogy. Nambissan (2000), for example, has pointed out that the curricular and pedagogic concerns in the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (2000) has failed to understand the historical nature of social deprivation, especially of adivasis and dalits. The children from these families are largely first generational learners and still continue to face exclusion and deprivation in schools. This has implications for the children's ability to succeed in schools. Differences in family background become relevant as soon as the children are assessed at school primarily on tests of familiarity with written materials or of metalinguistic literacy awareness (Wells, 1986).

Children from marginalized communities are often subject to wide-spread discrimination by their relatively upper caste teachers (Balgopalan & Subrahmanian, 2003). Research data (CARE, 2014) reveals that a substantial number of students

from Dalit[1], and other backward castes and communities attend government schools. This population of children is being educated largely by teachers from the general category. This often becomes a hurdle in terms of teachers' attitudes towards the students, such as, poor expectations of their success. The children learn to see themselves as non-achievers in such educational set-ups.

India is also home to a very large number of languages and dialects. According to the 2001 census, there are 122 languages and 234 mother tongues in India, which is a very conservative estimate, given that only languages with more than 10,000 speakers are included in this count (Vanishree, 2011). Only 22 of these are Scheduled Languages that serve as the official language of the states. Forty one of the languages are taught in schools, and 33 serve as medium of instruction at the primary levels (Mallikarjun, 2004). Indian languages broadly represent five language families (Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Asiatic, Tibeto-Burmese and Semito-Hamitic; and are written in 14 scripts. Several languages (e.g., Kannada, Kodagu and Konkani) share a script (Mallikarjun, 2004). Many scripts used by Indian languages are alpha-syllabic in nature; as opposed to the alphabetic script used by English. Research related to the acquisition of these scripts (developmental and pedagogical) is minimal.

India has an official three-language policy that asks that all children receive instruction in the regional language, and in Hindi and English in non-Hindi speaking states; and in Hindi, English and a modern Indian language (preferably southern) in the Hindi-speaking states (National Policy of Education, 1968). The policy has been highly ineffective on the ground because of complex socio-political and linguistic factors. Menon, Viswanatha and Sahi (2013) have noted that there are several aspects of hierarchy related to languages in India, such as, the dominance of English vis-à-vis other Indian languages; the dominance of Hindi over other regional languages; the dominance of official regional languages over the minority languages of that region; and the dominance of the standard written form of the language over other dialectical variations of the language under consideration.

It is in this complex linguistic context that most young learners in India enter pre-primary and primary schooling. The position paper on the teaching of Indian languages (2006) points out that many children in this country arrive in school with

[1] Dalit: part of the Scheduled Caste, the term includes all historically discriminated communities of India out-caste and Untouchables and are listed as the Scheduled Castes in the Constitution of India.

multilingual competence and are disenfranchised because the language of the school does not connect to the languages of their homes and communities. Children from a minority language or dialect are especially at a disadvantage because their home language or dialect is not considered in the school setting at all, which, in addition to cognitive considerations, might also affect the child's self-esteem (Agnihotri, 2007). The position paper on the teaching of Indian languages (2006) states that it is imperative that we provide for the education of children in their mother tongues, and that we orient teachers to use multilingualism as a resource, and not as a constraint in the classroom.

Despite these recommendations, there is a strong aspiration for English, since it is viewed as a vehicle for upward social and economic mobility. Such aspirations cannot be discounted entirely, especially when considered in tandem with the concerns expressed by dalit scholars that the oppressed not be asked to carry the burden of maintaining the mother tongue, while the elites continue to enjoy the privileges conferred by English (Prasad, 2010). We cannot respond to the complexity of the linguistic situation in India by considering only the developmental/cognitive advantages conferred by education in the mother tongue, on the one hand; or, only the socio-economic mobility conferred by English, on the other. Both need to be considered in tandem in developing a considered response. We recommend a flexible policy of multilingualism, with a goal of achieving balanced bilingualism and bi-literacy (at a minimum) through primary and secondary schooling.

At the pre-primary level, we recommend that young children receive primary instruction in their mother tongue; however, they can be exposed to a variety of spoken languages, such as, other dialects of the region, the regional language and English. This exposure can take place through read-alouds by teachers of stories and texts in different languages; informal and formal conversations and discussions with peers, teachers, parents, and guests; through song, play and audio-visual media of various kinds. Although research addressing this issue is difficult to find, we recommend, based on that young children be exposed to only one script during the initial years. If the mother tongue of the children does not have a script, the script of the regional language can be used. At the pre-primary level, children should be introduced to the script by immersion in meaningful activities through shared storybook readings, shared writing, use of invented spellings, drawings and writing, and play. Accuracy, fluency, and mastery of the script can begin to be emphasized

during the early years of primary schooling, while the aims of the pre-primary years and the early primary schooling should be on establishing language and literacy learning as meaningful, relevant and communicative activities. While English and other languages can be presented orally in the environment from the beginning, scripts related to additional languages should be introduced gradually, and once basic proficiency in reading and writing the first language has been established. Transitioning from the mother tongue to other languages as the primary medium of instruction is not recommended during the early childhood years.

There are several reasons for making these recommendations. As noted earlier in this section, many children arrive in Indian early childhood settings with multiple disadvantages of caste, community, gender and languages. Many of them are first-generation school learners, for whom the transition from the oral cultures at home to the print culture of school, where "funds of knowledge" (Moll, et al., 1992) from home are not considered, can be a significant challenge. Marginalized children are often not able to connect their 'worlds' with the 'words' in ways their middle class peers are able to (Heath, 1996). They do not come with familiarity with print concepts or 'print awareness' which their more privileged counterparts have picked up through their everyday interactions at home and in their social worlds during their early childhood years (Kaul, Bhargarh, & Sharma, 2013). Using the mother tongue or regional dialects in the classroom permits young children from diverse backgrounds to function with competence, rather than with a sense of failure in the classroom. They are also more likely to see language and literacy acquisition meaningful and relevant if they are able to connect it with their own lives. By emphasizing communication and expression over accuracy in the 3-6 year age range, we permit young learners to move away from skill-and-drill kind of activities to those that emphasize meaning-making. At the same time, accuracy is not neglected and gradually gains more importance in the curriculum over time. Scripts consist of abstract sets of symbols that young learners need to master gradually. Once one script has been mastered, meta-linguistic skills related to understanding how scripts work (e.g., that abstract written symbols carry meaning) can be gradually applied to the learning of new scripts. Finally, at a pragmatic level, it eases the burden of equipping early childhood educators to simultaneously teach a variety of scripts to young learners.

3.3 Curricular Context

Education has traditionally been the purview of the elite in Indian settings, with only a miniscule proportion of the population accessing formal schooling or becoming literate (Rao, et al., 2003; Chaudhary, 2009). Even today, disparities in access to educational opportunities and types of schools available to children coming from families of different social and/or economic strata across the country are well documented (Nambissan, 1996, 2010). Hence, all traditional "models" of language and literacy instruction that were prevalent in Indian contexts were historically used with only a small segment of the total population. Further, scholarly debates about the merits and demerits of different methods or philosophies of reading and writing have been largely absent.

Access to English education by middle-class families is well documented (Ramanathan, 2007). The demand for English can be gauged by the growth of 'English-medium' pre-schools for very young children, even in remote parts of India. Often, the curriculum and practices in these preschools are in contradiction to the developmental needs of children. Teachers lack training in second language pedagogy; moreover, many of them lack proficiency in English themselves which is a prerequisite for a teacher to teach the language. In most cases, children's first exposure to English, even as a medium of instruction, is with the alphabet and script, rather than with the spoken language. As a result of the unfamiliarity with the language of the text, children may learn to decode letters and words but find vocabulary and comprehension challenging. There is no differentiated pedagogy for first, second and third languages in our schools and these are all taught using the same approach.

Many Indian scripts, unlike English, have a regular correspondence between symbol and sound. Berntsen (2003) has pointed out that traditional methods of teaching reading and writing have built upon this correspondence. Scripts of Indian languages have usually been taught by the *varnamala* method—in which *moolaksharas* were presented sequentially according to the traditional order of the *varnamala*. Each *moolakshara* would be associated with a word starting with that letter (Berntsen, 2003). Once all the *moolaksharas* had been introduced, children would be introduced to their combinations with secondary vowel signs (*maatras*) – which is called the *barakhadi*. Each *akshara* would be presented with all possible vowel combinations (e.g., *ka, kaa, ki, kee*, etc.). Following this, attention would be turned to conjunct consonant sounds (*samyuktaksharas*), then words, sentences, and passages

(Berntsen, 2003). The pedagogy used during the presentation emphasized choral repetition and copy writing, until the letters are acquired both orally and in writing.

The same method has been applied uncritically to the teaching of English, although the English script does not necessarily have a direct correspondence between all symbols and sounds; and even though the names of the English letters are different from the sounds that they make, the "alphabet method" is commonly used to teach English, where letters of the alphabet are introduced sequentially, and associated with words starting with the same letter (e.g., *a* is for *apple*). The different sounds associated with a letter are rarely emphasized (e.g., 'a' makes different sounds in *cat*, *cake*, and *car*).

Sen (forthcoming) examined the processes of teaching literacy during early years in a trilingual environment where children in the age group 4 to 6 years, in pre-kindergarten and class 1, were formally taught English, Hindi and Urdu simultaneously. The medium of instruction in the school was English. The findings indicated that reading and writing activities were carried out in strikingly similar manner across the two classes as well as across the three languages. Learning, including reading, was seen by the teachers to be the process of memorization through imitation and repetition and children were seen as very good at being able to memorize.

Three points should be noted in this discussion. First, across socio-economic levels, the assumption has been that children need to master the script before learning to make meaning. This *sequential* model of language and literacy learning has led to widespread instructional practices that make language and literacy learning a mechanical and not very meaningful activity for young children (Menon, 2014; Menon, in press). Comprehension, or making meaning, is assumed to happen naturally once the child has acquired the script and is able to read passages; hence, even for older children, meaning-making is rarely emphasized in language classrooms (Sinha, 2012). Second, oral language has not been seen as linked to the learning of early literacy. The acquisition of script is seen as largely unrelated to the oral language(s) that children bring into the classroom hence, prior linguistic knowledge/skills/experiences have not been conceptualized or used as a resource in the classroom. Third, there has traditionally not been much focus on teaching language or literacy to children below first grade, except in nursery and kindergartens programs accessed by the middle and upper income groups. Teaching and learning of language and literacy in the kindergarten proceeds in a similar fashion – based on sequential introduction of

letters, association of letters with words, choral repetition and copy-writing. Nursery rhymes are also a common part of the kindergarten language curriculum, as well as the acquisition of specific vocabulary words (such as colors, parts of the body, etc.).

More contemporary approaches to early language and literacy learning have now moved to the simultaneous presentation of groups of *aksharas*, with an attempt made to form small words from these *aksharas* from the outset. The intent is to enable children to move to the word level almost immediately upon starting school. However, even in these more progressive approaches, the three issues noted earlier about early learning settings in India exist—neglect of the child's oral language; neglect of comprehension; and neglect of language and literacy learning in very young (3-5 year old) children. Children even in these more progressive, reform-oriented classrooms spend the major part of their time copy-writing the script and combining letters to form words, sentences and finally, passages (Menon, in press).

Aims of Language and Literacy Education 4

The aims of language and literacy education should be closely linked to the aims of education as a whole. Education has intrinsic, emancipatory and instrumental value in human life. Common to all these is the idea that education will provide a means for human beings to flourish in different ways. Democratic societies link human flourishing to the development of a set of inter-related values (such as, commitment to justice, freedom, equality, concern for others' well-being - NCF, 2005); capabilities (such as the ability to reason independently and learning to learn); and preparation for economic and civic participation.

Keeping these broad aims of education in mind, we can propose that skill development in learning to read and write is a necessary step, but not a sufficient aim of language and literacy education. A more central aim should be to enable students to use language and literacy skills and practices to participate meaningfully and in an empowered manner in society. In a highly socially stratified society like India, this would mean building access to culturally powerful ways of using language and literacy for many of our students. The normative vision should be to create empowered citizens who can use language and literacy to live lives of dignity, and who can use these capacities to shape their own lives and the lives of their societies and communities meaningfully (Luke, 2000).

The aims of language and literacy education need to be conceptualized in a holistic manner. The specific aims that would support this broader vision are as follows:

a. ***To create relevance for entering literate worlds***. Currently, many children in India are first generation learners, or learners from highly disadvantaged and marginalized communities. Therefore, establishing relevance for entering literate worlds is a key task that needs to be undertaken. The aim should be that children see reading and writing as meaningful and connected activities that have relevance for their lives inside and outside of school.

b. ***To create a sense of engagement with literate worlds***. "Engagement" is being used here to signify an intrinsic motivation for language and literacy learning. The concept of engagement is closely related to that of relevance, since learners are more likely to engage and persist with activities that are perceived to be relevant to their lives. It is different from the currently used term of "joyful" learning, since joy is not always a precondition to learning; although engagement often is.

c. ***To develop multilingual capabilities.*** India is a multilingual society. If the vision is to sustain and enrich the multilingual character of our society, then a key aim of language and literacy education should be to provide sufficient opportunities for developing the multilingual capabilities of children. At a minimum, balanced bilingualism should be an aim of language and literacy education in our country.

d. ***To develop the ability to comprehend language in oral and written forms***. All children (even 3- year olds) come to educational settings with the ability to comprehend the mother tongue at an interpersonal conversational level. However, educational settings expose children to different levels of complexity and demands in terms of language use. First, children may be exposed to languages and dialects other than their mother tongue in these settings. Second, they may be exposed to more formal ways of using even their first language. Third, slightly older children (ages 6-8 years) will be exposed to written language, and will be asked to derive meaning from a variety of written texts, ranging from simple stories to more complex informational pieces. Comprehension (or, meaning-making) is a central aim of language and literacy education, and must be nurtured in all these contexts.

e. ***To develop a sense of aesthetic engagement with language***. Comprehension is often understood as the extraction of meaning or information. While this is an important aim, equally important is to enable children to respond to the aesthetics of language in oral and written forms. Children should be exposed at an early age to poetry, literature and other forms of language-as-art in order to cultivate these capabilities.

f. ***To learn to navigate written scripts with fluency***. Children should be gradually familiarized with different scripts in an age-appropriate manner. A key aim should be to make children fluent at accurately decoding and spelling simple texts by the age of 8 years. Several specific aims are subsumed within this broader aim, such as, nurturing the ability to accurately discriminate sounds of spoken language, the ability to recognize letters and letter-sound relationships, the ability to blend discrete sounds into words, and the ability to segment words into discrete sounds.

g. ***To learn to use language and literacy effectively for a wide variety of purposes***. Children should be taught from a very young age that what is learned in educational settings has wide applicability to their lives. Demonstrating the link between in-school learning and their lives outside of school will need to be built robustly into the curriculum in developmentally appropriate ways.

h. ***To learn to engage critically with literate worlds***. If a central aim of education is to enable individuals to lead empowered lives, then they need to be taught to engage critically with ideas and texts in educational settings. This can begin at the very earliest of ages. For example, young children can be encouraged to discuss lived experiences in a developmentally sensitive manner.

Essential aspects of Early Language and Literacy Development 5

While language and literacy has the broader goal of creating independent and motivated readers who are able to participate meaningfully and in an empowered manner in our society, there are several elements that have been identified as being central in this process. Several of these key elements were identified by the National Reading Panel or NRP (2000) (i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension) and the National Early Literacy Panel (2008) (i.e., alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid automatic naming, writing or name writing and phonological memory) in the United States. While these components are essential for language and literacy development, the NRP was also criticized, especially owing to the methodology used in the selection of the research evidence (Cole, 2003). Some of the key elements not included were reading motivation and children's interest in reading. Motivation plays an important role in helping children connect to classroom instruction and for students to believe that they can become readers (Gambrell, 1996). According to Gambrell, the argument is made that "motivation is strongly influenced by one's expectation of success or failure at a task as well as the value or relative attractiveness the individual places on the task" (1996, p. 518). A literacy program that builds upon motivation of children also helps them to be intrinsically motivated (Guthrie, et al., 2009). As mentioned earlier in the paper, language and literacy skills need to be taught concurrently and not sequentially. The following section lays out these very (skills) aspects identified

from diverse sources that are critical for language and literacy development and need to be addressed simultaneously.

5.1. Oral language and vocabulary

5.1.1. ***Oral language:*** Oral language development in the early years plays a foundational role in literacy development during the later years (Coll, 2005), especially in the first language (Bromley, 2000; Clay, 1991; Pellegrini & Galda, 2000). Oral language development also comprises of other skills that play a role in literacy development, such as phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and so on (Scarborough, 2009). Emphasis on oral language, especially the native language is even more critical for students who do not speak the dominant language of the classroom. Oral language can help to connect literacy with children's own lives, aspirations, etc. (Noronha, personal communication, January 18, 2016).

5.1.2. ***Vocabulary***: Vocabulary knowledge is a significant variable for development of effective text comprehension and also for predicting later literacy skills. Both oral language and vocabulary development should be seen as quality indicators in early childhood programs. Research by Dickinson et al. (2003) has provided evidence that oral language skills, especially vocabulary development, play an important role in phonological awareness and also predict development of reading comprehension later on. Ashton-Warner (1963) developed the 'organic' activities approach to reading and writing in which she began with teaching to children, the words which *they* wanted to learn and used this 'key vocabulary' to introduce children to writing and reading. These strategies could include the teacher writing down words that children use according to different categories and gradually build upon those concepts (Noronha, personal communication, January 18, 2016).

5.2. Engagement with print

5.2.1. ***Print Awareness*****:** Understanding how a book functions is not intuitive and there are certain conventions for book handling. Marie Clay (1979) identified these conventions as "concepts about print" which are precursors to the process of reading. Some of these conventions include, the directionality of print in a book (left-to-right, top-to-bottom, front-to-back, return sweep), differences between pictures and print, uses of punctuation, and characteristics of a letter and a word. These conventions,

according to Clay, help in the process of learning to read by making the child familiar with the text. Similar conventions would also apply to texts in languages where script functions differently, for example, in Urdu and Arabic, print is read from left to right.

5.2.2. *Connecting with Children's Literature*: Reading aloud of good literature to children generates their interest and motivates them to pick up books on their own. Motivation is a critical component for students to believe that they can become readers (Gambrell, 1996). Reading stories to children regularly helps in literacy learning (Bus, Van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995). Teachers need comprehensive and well-structured materials that are directly tied to student texts. Appropriate texts essential for beginning readers should be at their level with engaging illustrations.

Being able to connect to literature is key to generating interest among children. Hence, it is imperative that literature selected should be culturally relevant (Fox & Short, 2003; Harris, 1992) that allows children to make connections (Nodelman, 1992). In India, several organizations and publishers have published delightful and engaging books for children. Some of the prominent ones among these are books by the National Centre for Children's Literature (NCCL), books by Eklavya, Barkha series by NCERT, Katha books for children. These books reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of the country and many times also reflect the social and cultural contexts children may encounter on a daily basis that allow for or need discussion in classrooms.

5.3 Sounds, symbols and words

5.3.1. *Phonemic Awareness*: Phonemic Awareness (PA) is the ability of children to understand that speech is comprised of a series of individual sounds and that these provide a foundation for phonics and spelling (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborne, 2001). It is the understanding that every spoken word can be conceived as units of sounds that are represented by the letter of an alphabet (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). PA skills help children to focus on the meaning of the word, not just on the letters in the sound (Griffith & Olson, 1992). PA skills can predict later reading achievement tasks (Burgess, 2006; Lonigan, 2006). It is important to note here that many Indian languages that use the *devanagari* script are alpha-syllabic in nature, i.e., *aksharas* or letters map onto both, syllable and phonemes. The role of phonemic awareness is less clear in the process of reading. However, as orthography relates to syllabic awareness—this in turn leads to phonemic awareness (Nag, 2007; Nag & Snowling, 2012).

5.3.2. Phonics: Phonics instruction is used to help children learn the relationships between the letters of written language and the sounds of spoken language. For example, children may be taught that the letter 'b' represents the [b] sound. This is especially useful for languages such as English that uses the Roman script which is alphabetic. It is important to note that phonics instruction must be provided only after children have grasped the phoneme-grapheme (sound/letter) relationship, because unless children have the phonological skills, they are not able to grasp phonics instruction (Snow et al., 1998). Again, for Indian languages, one needs to note that the script-to-sound mapping is more or less consistent in nature owing to their alpha-syllabic nature (Nag, 2007).

5.3.3. Letter Knowledge: Alphabet or letter knowledge refers to the child's knowledge of letter forms, names, and corresponding sounds. Alphabet knowledge predicts their later reading and spelling abilities (Schatschneider, et al., 2004). Students who are not familiar with letter names and sounds have difficulty in learning to read and could potentially be classified as having reading disabilities. Letter knowledge plays a role in the development of phonological awareness, because letter knowledge helps them to detect and manipulate phonemes. In Indian languages, the role of letter knowledge is complex. For example, the Kannada writing system consists of 400 distinct symbols that represent sounds (Nag, 2007) and most Indian scripts have a symbol count of 200-500 (Nag, et al., 2011). This places a higher cognitive demand on students of this language. A survey of class 4 students indicated that by class 4, students were able to demonstrate mastery of 80% of the symbols (Nag, 2007). This indicates a need to consider the structure of Indian languages carefully for classroom instruction. Jayaram (2008) has presented the *varna samooh* approach which has evolved organically and enables the teacher to introduce letter, words and texts simultaneously to students. Here, the Hindi *varnamala* (alphabet) is introduced in a structured framework where consonants and vowels (*varnas*) and the diacritical marks for the secondary vowels (*matras*) are introduced gradually to students.

5.3.4 .Word Recognition: Word recognition is the ability of a reader to recognize written words correctly and almost effortlessly, and this helps children to focus on the meaning as they read a text (Vandervelden & Siegel, 1997). This automaticity also helps children to recognize the words they are reading and also how to spell them while writing (LeBerge & Samuels, 1974). In many Indian languages, vowels mostly occur in their primary forms at the beginning of the words and are often represented

by diacritic marks (*matras*) attached to the consonant in the middle or end of the words—this adds to the complexity of processing the word visually (Sircar & Nag, 2011). This implies that children who are learning in one of the Indic scripts need a systematic form of instruction in word recognition. While little research is available from the Indian context, the *varna samooh* approach (Jayaram, 2008) can be cited as an example. In the *varna samooh* approach, after children have gained familiarity with some *aksharas* (combination of common letters and vowel sounds), they are introduced to words that are rhyming words or are thematically related through word walls, lists, etc. using word related activities. They are then encouraged to desegment or chunk the words by clapping to the beats of the words. The *akshara* chart is then used to introduce word construction by combining the *aksharas*.

5.4 Comprehension and expression

5.4.1. Comprehension: Comprehension is conceptually a constituent part of learning how to read. If students can read the words but do not understand what they are reading, they are only decoding, not reading. Comprehension is "the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language" (RAND, Reading Study Group, 2001, p. 12). Comprehension is a process when students create mental pictures of the text that they are reading to help them understand the meaning of what the text is (van den Broek, & Kremer, 2000). Listening comprehension is the child's ability to understand the meaning of the words/sentences s/he hears and to relate to them in some way. Listening comprehension enables students to understand concepts, memorize them, discuss them, and even paraphrase in their own words. It helps children to become good communicators. Luke and Freebody (1999) have articulated a minimum of "four resources" or roles that a reader can take vis-à-vis texts. These include code-breaker (coding competence), meaning-maker (semantic competence), text user (pragmatic competence) and text critic (critical competence).

5.4.2. Fluency: According to Rasinski, fluency is the ability of the reader to process the text (decode) and also read it with comprehension (deeper meaning), thus demonstrating the ability to focus on the meaning of the text while reading. Three components of fluency have been identified, including accuracy in word decoding, automatic processing and prosody (Rasinski, 2004).

5.4.3. Writing: In developing a language and literacy pedagogy, based on the work of Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963) and on the regularity of sound-letter correspondence in Marathi, Maxine Berntsen points to the effectiveness of writing down the experiences of children and helping them read it. In a similar vein, Jayaram (2008), using the *varna samooh* approach, talks about encouraging children to represent their words pictorially. This symbolic representation of meaning helps children in the process of reading and writing.

According to Clay (1979), allowing children to express themselves through drawing and scribbling helps them to be actively involved in the learning process by constructing their own systems of literacy. This view is opposed to the view of literacy learning which assumes that literacy learning only begins when a strict formal method of instruction is used and the child learns about the written word in those same stages as taught (Villaume & Wilson, 1989, Sipe, 2001). Clay points out that when children are left to write by themselves, they rarely copy but, instead they invent their own spellings. Invented spellings help the child discover the relationships between the sounds and letters (Sipe, 2001, Geeike, Cambourne and Fitzsimmons, 1999). The process of reading is more meaningful if the child reads what s/he has written (Chomsky, 1979).

Even before children come to school, they have seen writing used in their environment. When children are provided with opportunities to write in the context of their everyday lives, they are able to learn critical literacy skills such as concepts of print, functions of print and phonological awareness. Burns, Griffin, and Snow (*Starting Out Right,* 1999, p. 102) likewise consider invented spelling as a helpful tool.

It is important for parents and teachers to understand that invented spelling is not in conflict with correct spelling. On the contrary, it plays an important role in helping children learn how to write. When children use invented spelling, they are in fact exercising their growing knowledge of phonemes, the letters of the alphabet, and their confidence in the alphabetic principle. A child's 'iz' for the conventional 'is' can be celebrated as quite a breakthrough! It is the kind of error that shows you that the child is thinking independently and quite analytically about the sounds of words and the logic of spelling.

5.5 Assessment of language and literacy skills

Effective instruction responds to students' learning. To understand what students know and do not know, teachers must conduct ongoing assessments. Assessment in the early grades should be multi-faceted with a variety of tools that are culturally and developmentally appropriate and that connect with the instruction provided in the classroom. Early childhood educators recommend the use of anecdotal records, checklists and rating scales (Harp & Brewer, 2000).

According to Goodman (1978), teachers can attend to the literacies that children bring into the classrooms by "kid-watching," as opposed to standardized measures that may not necessarily help in assessment of learning. In the classroom, teachers need to use assessments in a variety of ways on a daily basis. This helps to check students for understanding and to independent practice. On a regular basis, they assess students to determine whether or not they have retained what they have learned and then adjust their instruction, as appropriate. In addition to the classroom assessments, education systems must be aware of students' and teachers' performance to provide sufficient support. Therefore, regional and national assessments could serve as indicators of a system's well-being and as a mechanism for accountability and making systematic changes for improvement. It is critical that teachers are trained in proper literacy assessment and on appropriate literacy pedagogy too.

The complexity of language and literacy learning considers the role of all the different components listed above to be significant. However, language and literacy programs need to keep the young learner in mind in contextualizing the instruction.

Approaches to Language and Literacy 6

This section will explore prominent perspectives on how best to teach early language and literacy to children. Discussions in the West about approaches and methods to teach reading and writing to children have often been marked by acrimony and debate (Chall, 1967/1983; Baumann, et al., 2000, etc.). As noted by critical commentators, practically any new method can be demonstrated to be superior to status-quo methods in use in classrooms. The large-scale Cooperative Research Program in First-Grade Reading Instruction study (also known as the First Grade Studies) found that the single most important factor that mattered in student achievement was the classroom teacher, and not any particular method (Bond & Dykstra, 1967/1997). This raises serious questions about whether the quest for the right method is a valid one, especially given contextual and situational variability.

In this position paper, we take the stance that it is more fruitful to search for sound *principles* rather than for particular methods for teaching language and literacy. Principles take into consideration the *normative vision* (or aims) towards which we are working, the *contexts* of teaching and learning, as well as *effective means* to accomplish those aims. In contrast, methods focus primarily on the means, and do not necessarily reflect adequately the aims or contextual variability. We start with a discussion of historically prominent approaches in India and in the West. Next, we describe post-method pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2001)—an approach that permits us to move from methods to principles. The approaches prevalent in India have been discussed in a previous section.

6.1. Language and Literacy Instruction in the West

6.1.1. The Whole Word Approach: A focus on decoding the script has dominated Western discourses for the better part of the twentieth century. Perhaps given the irregular nature of letter-sound correspondences in English, the favored method of teaching the script in the United States, for example, was called the "whole word" method, where a few, highly frequent words were presented over and over again, until a child could read them by sight. The repetitious presentation of highly frequent words and the controlled introduction of new words that was favored by this approach, led to the production of controlled vocabulary texts (such as, *Dick-and-Jane* readers) that dominated early language and literacy classrooms in the United States for a large part of the twentieth century (Hiebert, 1999). The language of these texts did not correspond to the natural rhythm and flow of oral language, and was later critiqued as "basalese"—a constricted, unnatural language that was unique to the texts of beginning readers (Bloome & Nieto, 1989).

6.1.2. Phonics-Based approaches: The idea of teaching letter-sound correspondences (phonics) also existed in the early part of the century; however, this method did not gain prominence until the 1960s, when it came to the forefront of the reading "wars" as described by Jeanne Chall (1967/1983). Two kinds of approaches to phonics instruction are identifiable in the literature. Synthetic phonics moves from letter sounds to words; while in analytic phonics, whole words are first presented and then analyzed into their components letters and letter-sounds (thus distinguishing them from the whole word method, where words are not analyzed into their letter-sound constituents). Both the whole word, as well as the phonics approaches, viewed the primary task of the language and literacy classrooms to be the teaching of "bottom-up" skills—words in the one case, and letters, letter-sounds and words built from these, in the second case. Phonics-based instructional approaches, such as DISTAR (Ogletree, 1976) gained prominence during the 1970s.

6.1.3. Whole Language: After the turn of the mid-century, developments in allied disciplines and domains started to influence language and literacy education. Learning theorists moved away from behaviorism to more cognitive-based theories of how children learned (Shuell, 1986). The Chomskian theory of language acquisition gained prominence around this time; this theory suggested that children had an in-built capacity to acquire spoken language, given sufficient exposure. Building on

such ideas, a new perspective of how children read came to the fore, which was called "whole language". It evolved through the thinking of several theorists, prominent amongst them, Ken and Yetta Goodman (Goodman, 1967; Goodman & Goodman, 1977). The Whole Language approach suggested that reading is a parallel language system akin to speaking, such that exposure to, and immersion in, a rich linguistic environment was sufficient for children to acquire the written code of the language. Children were viewed as meaning-makers from their very first attempts to read, which implied that comprehension should be placed front-and-center in literacy instruction. The Whole Language movement caught the imagination of progressive educators in the West, and more recently, in India.

6.1.4. Balanced/Comprehensive Approaches: Since the phonics movement had also gained prominence in pockets during the 1960s and 1970s, this triggered a debate between the two schools of thinking in terms of understanding what reading is; how children learn to read; and therefore, how best to teach them to read. This has been popularly referred to as the "Reading Wars" (Chall, 1967/1983). Two influential reports at the turn of the 21st century summarized a vast body of research on the acquisition of reading and writing in alphabetic languages, especially, English, as taught mostly in the United States (Prevention of Reading Difficulties, Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; and National Reading Panel, 2000). Both reports advocated the use of a "balanced" or "comprehensive" approach to literacy instruction that pays attention to both meaning-making and helping children to master the code (script). Explicit and systematic methods of instruction were found (in these meta-analyses) to be more effective than incidental learning through immersion, or implicit methods of instruction. The report of the NRP (2000) identified five "components" of reading that need to be taught simultaneously – phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. The report has been critiqued on a number of counts – methodological, political and conceptual (Garan, 2001; Krashen, 2001). However, one of its key messages—that early literacy needs to be addressed simultaneously at multiple levels—has been embraced by many educators of different political persuasions in the West.

A conceptual evaluation of the balanced/comprehensive model reveals a mixture of both strengths and limitations. A key strength of this model is that it suggests simultaneous attention to both "top-down" (meaning-based) and "bottom-up" (sound-symbol) processes. It also breaks up the meaning-based and skill-based components of early literacy further into sub-components (such as, phonological

awareness, phonics and fluency), drawing educators' attention to important aspects of reading. The balanced approach calls for a balance in more than just skills. These are conceptualized as three key principles (Fitzgerald, 1999) in which first, teachers develop students' skills and knowledge, including decoding skills, their strategy knowledge for comprehension and responding to literature, and their affective knowledge, including nurturing students' love for reading. Second, instructional approaches are used that are inherently opposite such as, phonics instruction and reading workshop. Third, students read a variety of reading materials from trade books to leveled books with controlled vocabulary and basal reading textbooks. Fitzgerald further recommends that in a balanced literacy program, the teacher needs to focus on helping students gain "local knowledge," which includes phonics, syntax, and semantics; "global knowledge," which includes an understanding of the texts and reader response; and "affective knowledge" which includes building a positive attitude to reading and a desire to read (p. 102). The model also specifies a variety of pedagogical techniques, such as reading aloud, shared reading, modeled writing, interactive writing, that strike a balance between techniques that are mostly teacher-centered (reading aloud to children), to those that are mostly student-centered (independent reading) (see Appendix).

6.2 The Primacy of Principles of Language and Literacy Learning

In the recent years, while the balanced/comprehensive models of literacy have gained popularity, several components that might be considered to be quite critical to early language and literacy are not explicitly addressed in these models. A crucial omission is that of oral language—which is critical to all children, but especially to second language learners in the classroom. It also does not explicitly address the need to cultivate an aesthetic engagement with children's literature or texts. Readers engage with texts not just to retrieve information from them, but also for pleasure, literary engagement and so on. Omissions such as these can be easily addressed by simply adding these components to a revised conceptualization of the comprehensive model.

However, the very premise of the model itself has been critiqued as an acultural, ahistorical one. Should literacy be understood as a set of neutral competencies or skills that should be imparted to all children, regardless of cultural context? This is known as the "autonomous" model of literacy; and the balanced/comprehensive model

of literacy can be seen as an example of this. In contrast, the "ideological" model of literacy suggests that literacy be viewed as a set of cultural practices that can be linked to power structures within a given context (Jayaram, 2009; Street, 1995, 2003). According to ideological and socio-critical models, the seemingly "neutral" set of skills that are recommended by most models, represent the skills and practices most valued by the dominant power groups within a given culture, while other, less powerful skills and practices may co-exist within sub-cultures or cultures, but are misunderstood or ignored. The ideological model might suggest that children, even very young children, be provided with opportunities to understand the curriculum presented to them within a social, historical and political context (Luke, 1995, 2004). For example, rather than being included or excluded in the curriculum by default, dialect use could be examined and discussed in the classroom, and children could be encouraged to become critical consumers of the political, social and historical landscapes within which language and literacy use occur. Literacy, rather than being viewed as a set of neutral skills to be acquired, is a means for political, social and economic empowerment in this conceptualization. Luke and Freebody (1999), for example, have argued that children should be taught not just to "break the code", or to "make meaning", but should also be encouraged to *use texts* in their lives; and to *critique the texts* that they use.

Given the complex and complicated discussions that surround perspectives on what language and literacy are, how children learn them, and how they should be taught, this paper takes the position that we commit to *principles*. Kumaravadivelu (2002) argues that there are inherent limitations to the concept of method. Methods are based on idealized concepts designed for idealized contexts; while, learning and teaching typically happen in numerous, varied and unpredictable contexts that no idealized method can visualize or predict in advance. Methods are also focused narrowly on classroom instructional strategies that do not take into account political, economic and cultural factors that define contexts in which teaching and learning take place. Kumaravadivelu (1993) notes that teachers who claim to be adherents of a "method" may have widely varying theoretical conceptualizations or classroom procedures while teachers who claim to follow different methods may use very similar classroom procedures. Instead of searching for method, he advocates moving to a "post-method" pedagogy that is characterized by "principled pragmatism". This is not just an eclectic mixture of "whatever works"; rather, it involves commitment to a set of guiding principles or macro-strategies from which a variety of different micro-strategies or classroom practices could be derived in a contextually sensitive manner.

Using a post-method pedagogy would involve trusting teachers in at least two critical ways: first, to understand the macro-strategic principles that are recommended; and second, to use their vast pool of contextual and classroom-based knowledge to design appropriate micro-strategies based on these principles.

In Indian contexts, this might seem like a huge stumbling block given the paucity of well-trained teachers, and the historical and political lack of commitment to teacher autonomy. However, the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE, 2010), as well as prominent teacher educators (Batra, 2005; Dholaki, 2010; Kingdon & Sipahimalani-Rao, 2010) have pointed to the need to intellectualize the teaching profession by treating teachers as central partners in the educational process.

6.3 Principles of Good Literacy/Language Pedagogy

Principle 1: Oral language must be linked to literacy: Literacy instruction is intimately linked to, and builds on children's knowledge of oral language(s). Oral language use in the classroom helps young learners to build connections between home and school. Literacy should not be taught in a discontinuous manner from oral language. It helps children to build awareness of phonological and structural aspects of a language and connect meaningfully with reading and writing activities in the classroom.

Principle 2: Emphasis on Writing: The capacity to acquire oral language may be innate; however, there is no evidence that the capacity to acquire written languages is innate. Drawing and writing should be a means for children to express themselves. We need to provide planned and systematic opportunities for children to acquire the written symbol system.

Principle 3: Develop multilingual capabilities: In a multi-lingual society like ours, it may not be practically or conceptually defensible to separate out "first language" from "second language" literacy; rather, we should have a deep understanding of the different *processes* that support literacy acquisition, and should be able to design responsive programmes for groups of children based on their specific needs.

Principle 4: Focus on a comprehensive model of instruction: Evidence and history suggest that it might be best to not choose either the skills-based (bottom-up) OR the process-based (top-down) model as the "right" method of instruction; it might be best to integrate aspects of each into a comprehensive model of literacy instruction.

4.1 At a minimum, this model should incorporate attention to processes that build comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, word recognition, letter knowledge, and phonological awareness.

4.2 In addition, it must build appreciation for literature, and an ability to write in a variety of genres and for a variety of purposes.

Systematic instructional focus on each of these components is essential, keeping the aims of language and literacy in perspective.

Principle 5: Literacy instruction should be seen as a socio-culturally and socio-politically embedded set of *practices:* Literacy is not an "autonomous skill", but is a socio-culturally and socio-politically embedded set of *practices*.

5.1 Literacy is not just about code-breaking or meaning-making. Students should also be empowered to act as text users and as text critics.

5.2 Literacy pedagogy must move beyond relations internal to the text. Word-World relationships must be considered.

5.3 Discourse communities shape our language use; language proficiency can only be assessed in terms of our adeptness with particular discourses. Secondary discourses are likely to be more difficult for learners than primary discourses.

5.4 Different communities socialize their children into different ways of taking from texts, leading some to succeed, and others to fail, with school literacies.

5.5 We should give access to the codes of power to children from disadvantaged communities by teaching them explicitly.

Principle 6: Use a Gradual Release of Responsibility Model of literacy pedagogy: In elementary education settings, it may be wise to use a Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) model of literacy pedagogy that follows an "I do-We do-You do" approach (to the extent possible). This will require incorporating a variety of *instructional routines* for teaching literacy, such as, Read Aloud/ Modeled Writing, Shared Reading/Writing, Guided Reading/Writers' Workshop, Independent Reading/Writing (see Appendix). Explicit modeling of literacy processes helps children performing at varied levels; it creates a conducive social environment in the classroom by enabling a conscious inclusion of literacy tasks in pairs and small groups

Principle 7: Good literature should form an integral fabric of classroom pedagogy: Children should be exposed to good literature from the earliest of ages. Ensuring easy access to high-quality, age - and – grade - appropriate children's literature in classrooms through book corners or classroom libraries is an essential component of literacy instruction from the earliest grades. A variety of children's books (poems, picture books, storybooks, non-fiction) in home and school languages of the child should be regularly used in the classroom. Reading Aloud is a wonderful way to enable conversations in the classroom.

6.4 Learnings from some programs: Research in the Indian context has also identified some critical components that need to be considered for classroom instruction. Some organizations have developed a literacy program that takes into account, the local cultural and linguistic context of young learners. Some of these include *Eklavya* in Madhya Pradesh (2002), Pragat Shikshan Sanstha in Phaltan, Maharashtra, Organization for Early Literacy Promotion in Rajasthan (Jayaram, 2008), Muskaan in Bhopal and NCERT (i.e., their reading program).

To take one example, Jayaram (2008) developed an intervention for the development of phonological skills, orthographic knowledge and meaning construction among young learners. In this approach, letters in Hindi were divided into seven groups called *varna samooh* based upon their frequency of occurrence, sound distinction and written form. This *varna samooh* approach was used to introduce letters, words, and texts simultaneously. The intervention also focused on helping children to construct words from their languages and contexts, and introducing children to meaningful and grade-appropriate texts. Children who were not performing at grade level were paired with a peer (*Pathan Saathi*). Interventions such as these highlight an "integrated process" approach that must be adapted in all classrooms for young children. The diversity in the classroom also requires culturally sensitive and non-threatening classroom learning environments, which allow space and opportunity for learners to follow their own learning trajectories within some broadly defined learning parameters (Jayaram, 2008). The classroom pedagogy and teacher-student interaction need to be resonant with this reality and be sensitively responsive to it.

7 Implications

The previous sections provide the background, context and various approaches and ideological debates that have emerged over the years for early language and literacy development. Based on a critical review and analysis of these approaches, and related experiences, the paper has presented a clear position in terms of key principles that should guide the development of a curriculum for language and literacy in the early years. These require a clear paradigm shift in understanding of the process of teaching of reading and writing to young children in both policy and practice. Broadly speaking, these principles could converge into four main domains that need to inform any reform in this area.

a. The process of development of language and early literacy does not begin on entering school but has to be addressed along the continuum from early childhood to primary stage. This necessitates continuity in curriculum in a bottom up mode across the stages.

b. Development of language and literacy skills among children is closely interrelated and therefore requires a simultaneous, as opposed to a sequenced approach, which addresses both aspects comprehensively in terms of related knowledge, skills and attitudes.

c. Development of language and early literacy requires a trained teacher who can scaffold the learning opportunities for children by creating an interactive and enabling environment supported with adequate and appropriate children's literature and other print material to be a part of the child's learning environment.

d. Language and early literacy education should lead to not only development of these skills and competencies, but also to the development of critical thinking and reasoning.

These shifts in understanding of language and early literacy have clear implications for both policy and practice at different levels.

7.1. Policy Makers

In order to accomplish the goals of language and literacy in a classroom, it is imperative to have smaller class sizes, with a dedicated teacher across all grade levels (for preschool and grades 1 and 2). Additionally, orientation workshops/trainings for Education Department officials from the District and Block levels are strongly recommended for building the conceptual understanding required for supporting a Comprehensive Early Language and Literacy Programme. The support required for such as endeavor is at various levels, as indicated below:

7.1.1 Teacher education programmes, both pre-service and in-service, both at pre-school and primary levels must be supported by supplementary text and/or audio-visual materials, to advocate for and enable adequate understanding of this shift in perspective. These should focus on not only a shift in attitude and understanding of this approach but also on the 'how' of implementing this in the classroom including use of print materials, keeping the above four thrust areas in view. Since research indicates that on-site mentoring is more effective than one shot training, the training strategy or design should also address the training and support for mentors including the personnel from Block Resource Centres (BRCs) and Cluster Resource Centres (CRCs) and even the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) supervisors.

7.1.2 The new Education Policy needs to emphasize the importance of development and availability of children's literature in graded form including large 'read aloud' books, and other print materials in the form of charts, cards, etc. which should be contextually developed in vernacular languages and in English and made available at a reasonable cost to all schools. To facilitate this, guidelines should be prepared and possibly, the printing paper could be made available to publishers at subsidized rates. This would also equip schools with more appropriately planned reading materials than the kind many schools are currently procuring under the school library grants under the Right to Education or RtE (2009).

7.1.3 Assessment mechanisms within class and in public domains should incorporate this comprehensive shift, particularly in terms of inclusion of reading comprehension and critical thinking along with reading fluency as important competencies to focus on.

7.1.4 Given the dearth of teachers who are competent in English language, development of a range of contextualized audio visual materials using new

technological instruments needs to be promoted by the government, possibly in public private mode and made available with appropriate and adequate training to all schools, given that many states have now introduced English in grade 1.

7.1.5 If participatory democracy has to survive, we need to give a voice to the language of every child rather than a strict implementation of the three-language formula; it is the survival and maintenance of multilingualism that should be at the heart of language planning in this country (NCERT, 2006). The languages spoken in a particular region must be carefully considered in this planning.

7.2 Curriculum Developers

The critical importance of the early childhood stage and the need for continuity in the curriculum with the primary stage needs to be given due priority in the national and state policies and curriculum frameworks. The twelfth Five Year Plan has emphasized the need to conceptualize preschool and early primary grades as an *'early learning unit'* in terms of curricular organization. This concept needs to be taken forward by all curriculum developers at all levels. Curriculum should be meaningful so that children can connect to it, as opposed to isolated discrete activities that are "busy work" and have no relation to language and literacy learning.

7.3 Teacher Educators and Teachers

7.3.1 A strong teacher education component related to early language and literacy needs to be built into all government programmes. An important component of teacher education needs to be observations of exemplary classrooms, accompanied by explicit instruction in specific classroom pedagogies for building reading and writing skills and strategies. Development of exemplary demonstration sites is of great importance for this purpose. A range of high quality audio-visual material on classroom teaching can also be included in the teacher education process to link it to classroom practice.

7.3.2 It is essential to understand the contexts that frame language and literacy instruction. Culture and language congruence between children's home and school is critical for all children (and not just for tribal children in multilingual contexts). Given social, cultural and language diversity in India, classrooms also reflect this diversity. This can also result in a gap between home and school language. This is

not only typically seen in tribal contexts but across schools where English is now popularly the medium of instruction. These contexts in particular require language and early literacy education to be simultaneously addressed, instead of introducing English through the alphabet alone as is the common practice.

a. Most children do not come into schools from homes which can provide them with print-rich environments that can enable them to develop emergent literacy skills and an interest in learning to read and write. At the preschool stage, children benefit from reading and writing activities such as storytelling, free and guided conversations and activities like language games, rhymes and riddles for vocabulary development and verbal expression, activities for sound and visual association, phonemic awareness and directionality within a print-rich environment. Activity corners such as dolls' corners, picture-book corners and blocks and manipulative play corners for planned free-play opportunities can provide a foundation for book bonding, critical thinking, developing an interest in learning, as well as in persevering with the tasks at hand, which are crucial for school success.

b. The focus of instruction in the classroom needs to be on reading with comprehension and critical thinking, not just decoding. There are a variety of activities which can be utilized to foster reading with comprehension, including reading aloud, discussions with and amongst children and activities for meaning-making.

c. Print-rich environments should be provided to children through libraries set up in each classroom. Mini-libraries can be extended to communities as well, so parents/family members of the children can borrow books to take home. These libraries may have pictorial books and those with very little text, which can be 'read' to children by parents with limited literacy skills. It is critical to establish real-life connections for children to demonstrate the link between what is learned in school to their lives outside the school. Clear guidelines on selection of children's books should be provided (*Padhe Bharat, Badhe Bharat,* 2014).

7.3.3 Teachers should preferably be from similar language background as the children. However, this is very often not possible; in which case the teachers should be oriented to pedagogical methods that use the multiple languages within the classroom

as a resource; teachers should also be equipped to ensure a smooth transition of children from home language to school language.

a. In addition to approaches and methods for language and literacy development, teachers should also be provided insight into attitudes and belief systems of their students and how it affects the performance of the children.

b. Teachers should be given 'hands on' training with children in classroom situations about the implications of this comprehensive approach to language and early literacy for regular classroom practice. They should also be provided with training on classroom organization and management and interactive methods of engaging with children which have been identified as significant factors in influencing children's learning (Kaul, Bhargarh, Sharma, 2014).

7.4 Parents and community

Working with parents and communities about the objectives of the program and ways that they can support children is a must. This is even more important for parents from marginalized backgrounds, who may not feel equipped to contribute to the education of their children. For a partnership between school and family to develop and be sustained, it is important for them to understand ways to support children despite the limited time that they can provide and their financial constraints. Compiling folk stories, songs, riddles and rhymes with help of parents/grandparents and community members and converting these into texts for children in their home language and from their cultural contexts can be an effective way to help bridge the home-school language gap.

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Appendix

Instructional Frameworks Used in a Balanced/Comprehensive Literacy Program

Activities	Definition	Objectives	Materials
Reading aloud	The teacher reads aloud every day from materials that are at students' listening level but above their reading level.	To help students' listening skills, reading comprehension and vocabulary. Helps in building a literacy-rich environment and students can retell simple narrative stories.	Big/small books
Modeled writing	The teacher demonstrates the act of writing by thinking aloud as he/she composes a text in front of students.	To allow students to hear the thinking that accompanies the process of writing, such as topic choice, how to start the piece, looking for a better word, revising, and editing.	Large writing board, pens
Shared reading	Reading a text that is above the reading level of the students. The teacher reads aloud at a speed that allows the student(s) to join in. Either a big book is read or all students have a copy of the reading material.	To build upon children's interests and to increase their enjoyment and appreciation of stories, poems, rhymes, and chants.	Big books, charts, anthologies, magazines, stories.
Shared writing	A whole-class or small-group activity in which the teacher and students share the composing process. By recording what the class wants to say, the teacher reinforces concepts of print.	To help students learn about the writing process through structured conversations. The content of the message can be a daily message, response to literature, lists, and so forth.	Large writing board, pens

Activities	Definition	Objectives	Materials
Guided reading	The teacher reads (short selections) with a small group of students. Each student has a copy of the text and reads independently (orally or silently) as the teacher observes, coaches, prompts, and evaluates their performance. The teacher encourages students to think critically about the text and discusses it with the student.	To support and encourage the development of strategies for independent reading.	Little books, short stories, magazines, newspaper articles.
Guided writing	The teacher works with the whole class or a small group with similar needs and coaches as they write a composition.	To provide focused writing instruction to a small group of students in order to lead them to independent writing.	Small books
Independent reading	Students read with 95/100 percent accuracy, and they choose their own books and take responsibility for working through the challenges of the text. The teacher's role is to observe, acknowledge, and respond.	To provide opportunities to apply reading strategies, develop fluency, and build confidence as readers, and to work independently to improve reading achievement.	Class libraries, trade books, book clubs
Independent writing	Writing that students initiate through daily journaling, writing assignments, or notes to classmates, teachers, and/or parents. It provides students with the opportunity to practice their writing skills.	To encourage students to experiment with and explore the uses of written language.	Paper, pens

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