



Reading and Writing During Early Childhood

Partha Sarathi Misra

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the importance of developing and nurturing children's ability to read and write during the pre-school days and to explore the possibility of initiating strategies for creating literacy environment for the young children of the non-literate societies. Literacy is held in high esteem in all cultures, and that it is the symbol of prestige and power is proved by many a rhyme, popular saying and folk tale. Let us take the examples of a popular Bengali rhyme and a Hindi saying:

'likha pada kore jei

Gadi ghoda chodesei'

(He who reads and writes, travels by cars or on horseback)

'likhai, padayi nehi shikhogi,

Tow gadhey ki tarhei rahogi'

(If you do not learn reading and writing, you will live the life of a donkey)


The Bengali nursery rhyme equates reading and writing with the ability to travel by cars or on horse back while the Hindi saying implies that reading and writing differentiate a man from an animal.

How do children start reading and writing? During my childhood, I was often intrigued by the story of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, a great educator and social reformer, who reportedly learnt English numerals even before going to school. According to legend, Iswar Chandra, accompanied by his father, was walking to Calcutta from his native village in November 1828 to be enrolled in a school and as he passed each milestone, he looked closely at the numerals, made mental pictures of those numerals, so that by the time he reached Calcutta he had learned them. Later as an adult, I observed how my kids were drawn to various symbols painted on toys, household goods and how they tried to grasp the printed messages conveyed by written words on

signboards, hoardings, wrappers and the boxes of sweets and the bottles of medicines. I was amazed to notice the slow and unobtrusive ways in which literacy dawned on them even before they were initiated to formal reading and writing on the day of Vidyarambham.

Vidyarambham which marks an auspicious beginning of a child's journey to literacy is generally performed in literate Hindu families. During this ceremony, children are made to sit on the lap of an elderly person, who writes the invocation to Lord Ganapati on the child's tongue with a golden ring and make her write the same with the right index finger on a bed of sand or rice. Many people believe that children should not start reading and writing until and unless this Vidyarambham ceremony is performed! This highly elitist practice ignores the inherent capability of a child who is endowed with an inborn ability to decipher the meaning of symbols and acquires visual literacy right from her birth. The ability to interpret and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image is acquired by a child from her immediate environment. When children look at printed symbols and are drawn by their shapes and colours, they begin to see patterns, they notice when a word belongs to a picture and they can also find out when two words are identical. They 'construct ideas about reading, and writing that are not taught to them, are not modelled for them, and are not yet conventional' (Teale and Sulzby, 1992:52).

If enriching the child's experience is the ultimate goal of early childhood education, parents should not hesitate to introduce reading and writing to their inquisitive children even at a very tender age. If parents can ignite the curiosity and interest of their children in words and in print, they should respond to that interest (Clay, 1991:29). In literate societies, children's urge for reading or the desire to make sense of the printed words comes from



children's listening to stories read to them by their parents. Listening promotes reading, it prepares the ground for the development of the children's visual perception when they are immersed in the print environment.

That there is an intimate relationship between the linguistic development and the cognitive development of the children is an established fact and children have a natural tendency to make numerous language discoveries in consonance with their cognitive development. While playing with other children or interacting with adults, they make numerous experiments with their linguistic skills to socialize themselves appropriately by using socially appropriate norms of the language. They learn how to use words to describe concepts such as present, past and future, up and down or near and far. If they can catch hold of a pen or a pencil they tend to make innumerable dots or small lines on the walls, floors or on the surface of any object available in their immediate vicinity. Making marks with a pen or pencil on any surface presupposes their exposure to similar marks on some objects. 'They make marks which are founded on a motivated relation between meaning and form, signified and signifier' (Kress,1997:73).

How does a child react when she gets a book? She grabs it, opens it, catches hold of a page and often tries to tear the page. Sometimes, looking at the book all by herself, the child will look at the pictures, will talk to them and will pretend reading them. The child who has no idea of the alphabet till now makes no distinction between the picture and the letter of the alphabet. Both are images in print which speak. Pointing at a picture, a child often asks her parents, "What does it say?" The day the child realises that pictures or the printed pages say something interesting, she starts her journey to literacy. Basic literacy concepts like print is spoken words that are written down in a particular way, printed words carry meaning, reading is done from left to right or from the front to the back of the book start dawning on the child only when she is given a chance to handle books, to play with books and to speak to books without the mediation of the parents or the care givers. Goodman (1992:6) has rightly observed, "The beginning of reading and writing occurs in individuals when they develop the awareness that written language makes sense." Input rich environment can only develop this

awareness which is a precondition for emergent literacy. The Early Childhood Education Curriculum Framework (2012), prepared by the Ministry of Women and Child development, Government of India has also emphasised the importance of developing emergent literacy during the early childhood.

Any discourse on literacy is often conditioned by our preconceived notion of a literate society and a literate environment. A child in a literate society breathes literacy, she is immersed in literacy and grows up with literacy as an integral part of her all round development. But what about a child of a non-literate society? Is there scope for literacy development among children of parents who are illiterate. In many Indian families, parents cannot dream of the luxury of providing a print-rich literacy environment to their children. The report of the Consultancy on Early Literacy held in Delhi from 25-28 April 2011 observes that for "many children their first active engagement with the written forms of language occurs only when they step into school. Such children need to be gradually initiated into the world of reading and writing, in informal, meaningful and non threatening ways. As these new school goers observe, interact informally and participate freely and purposefully in drawing, scribbling, reading and writing activities in their classrooms, they begin to sort out and acquire knowledge and concepts about the written forms of language."

In order to familiarize the children of non-literate families with the print and to prompt them to read and write on their own, the Anganwadi centres which cater to children in the age group of 0-6 can play a pivotal role in the Indian context. Unfortunately, the Anganwadi workers are not properly trained in the theory and practice of emergent literacy and consequently, they cannot scaffold the literacy experience of the children. The pre-school activities done in the Anganwadi centres are often the simplified versions of the formal reading writing activities done in a formal school setting. While educating parents about child growth and development, the Anganwadi workers can motivate them to provide their children with a print rich environment with the locally available resources. It is not uncommon to see tribal children playing with beads in the courtyard trying to form shapes of different letters which they have noticed

in the Anganwadi centres. Children coming to Anganwadi centres should be encouraged to draw and scribble and the Anganwadi workers should read story books to the children. It has been observed that Anganwadi workers are so overburdened with survey work and nutrition related activities that they find little time to read story books to the children. Irrespective of the socio-cultural background, all children have a natural tendency of responding to different shapes and paintings in their own ways depending on their

previous knowledge and experience. The reason why the children of the disadvantaged section of our society do not learn how to read and write is the threatening manner in which the reading writing activities are introduced by their care givers. If we can introduce reading or writing as a performing art expressing the creative urge of the little children, there is no reason why these children should not be motivated to read and write as a joyful activity.



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Partha Sarathi is a Specialist in Academics and Pedagogy at the University Resource Centre of Azim Premji University at Bangalore. He has been working with Azim Premji Foundation since July 2011. His areas of interest are language pedagogy, stylistics, English language teaching and teacher training. He can be contacted at partha.misra@azimpremjifoundation.org