

# The Journey of an Early Literacy Programme<sup>1</sup>

*Keerti Jayaram*

## **Introduction**

The journey of the early literacy programme has unfolded through a sustained and intensive engagement inside classrooms and through engagement with children, teachers, parents and communities over a period of eight years. The approaches and classroom practices within the programme have evolved in organic ways, with new components replacing older ones as we gain fresh insights. We are inclined to view this process as a knowledge-building exercise with a focus on building the qualitative aspects of the programme. In this paper, I will focus on the continuing attempts of OELP (Organisation for Early Literacy Promotion), Delhi to translate theoretical ideas into classroom processes in ways that make them accessible to education practitioners and are practical to implement on a larger scale. The possibility of replication of OELP interventions has been an important concern and therefore we have attempted to align ourselves to the mainstream system, to the extent possible, so that future scaling up within the system continues to remain in the realm of feasibility.

## **The Context**

During the course of the year 2006, OELP began as a search for ways of building strong foundations for meaningful early literacy in young children, from vulnerable and marginalized socio-economic backgrounds in a semi-urban area on the outskirts of Delhi. In 2008, OELP was relocated to a drought prone area in rural Rajasthan where this work is still in progress.

Most of the young children that OELP works with grow up within oral traditions which are socially entrenched within highly stratified caste-based kinship patterns. They live in a harsh physical landscape within which communities eke out a living through daily wage work at the nearby marble industry or through rain-fed subsistence agriculture. Migration is rampant, especially during the harvest and sowing seasons when entire families shift to neighbouring states to provide the daily wage agricultural work force. The world that these children grow up in is entrenched in narrative and anecdotal modes of spoken communication and therefore the shift to the more dis-embedded and de-contextualized written forms of communication that are prevalent inside classrooms, we have found, is challenging not only for the young learners but also for the adults in their communities (Donaldson, 1978).

## **Our Understanding**

Early literacy is a fairly new area of work within the Indian context with indigenous research on early literacy acquisition within the diverse Indian languages and contexts difficult to come by. OELP has therefore drawn from the insights available within the larger body of research and literature on early literacy and language learning. During the initial years of conceptualization and setting up, OELP drew heavily from Marie Clay's work on Emergent Literacy, which sensitized us to the importance of early home experiences for building the foundations for early

literacy. Our work inside classrooms has reinforced the fact that children are differently equipped for schooling.

Based on the above thinking, it became important for OELP to identify and address the special literacy learning needs of the children we were working with who had minimal opportunity for natural engagement with print during their early growing up years. Further, we realized the value of incorporating developmentally appropriate practices related to emergent literacy especially for new school entrants, who had not undergone a preschool programme. OELP chose to locate itself within a Vygotskian socio-cultural perspective with literacy being viewed as one of the meaning-making processes of language development in which the children's homes and social worlds have an important role to play. The issue of transition from home languages to the language of school also became an area of intensive engagement. Through our classroom-based interventions however, we experienced that mere access to schooling did not make the classroom an inclusive space for learning. We began to take cognizance of more recent perspectives on literacy which argued that literacy does not consist of autonomous or neutral cognitive processes but instead is a social and cultural practice (Street, 1984). This body of work sensitized us to the fact that who you are matters inside the classroom (Bloome & Dail, 1997). Based on the findings of the National Reading Panel (2000) and the literature that has subsequently emerged (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pearson, 2001), OELP chose to locate its work within a Balanced Approach with an emphasis on both meaningful engagement with language and literacy in natural ways and a structured skill building programme which focused on building foundation skills as well as higher order skills. This will be discussed in greater detail in a later section (OLEP's three-pronged approach).

## **The Challenges**

Dealing with dynamic and complex cultural and social-linguistic contexts and a stratified society has continued to pose a challenge. We continue to come across many children who are engaged in classroom processes in mechanical ways. Involving them actively in classroom processes has been a challenge for us. Some stumbling blocks that we have encountered include:

1. Social distance between school managements/ teachers and the learners who come from the lowest rungs of society.
2. Low self-esteem in learners and their communities which is often reinforced by teachers' beliefs and perceptions about the learners.
3. Classrooms are most often sterile and may even be hostile or threatening spaces for many young school-goers.
4. Issues based on home to school transitions such as the shift from spoken forms of communication to pictorial and print-based forms and in the case of many learners a shift from familiar home languages to the language used for classroom transaction.
5. Classrooms which are entrenched in rote learning methods with minimal conceptual understanding and opportunities for thinking and active, meaningful learning.
6. Teachers who are ill-equipped to deal with interactive pedagogies for building higher order skills and do not have the classroom management techniques required for engaging children actively and meaningfully with the learning content;
7. Predetermined learning content and benchmarks for tracking learner progress which have been derived within macro contexts in a 'one size fits all' manner, and which are often a mismatch with the needs of the learners.

## The Three Pronged Approach

The three features in the boxes seen in Figure 1 are discussed below:

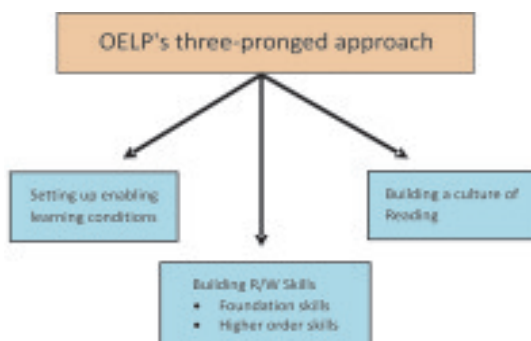


Figure 1. OLEP's Approach

### A. Setting up Enabling Conditions for Learning inside Classrooms

This is a priority as it is the foundation on which the OLEP interventions have evolved. It includes:

- Equipping teachers with effective management techniques for multi-level classrooms which allow for inclusive, active and independent participation in classroom processes
- Providing opportunities for children to bring their real world experiences and home languages into the classroom
- Equipping teachers to build a non-threatening classroom environment
- Equipping teachers to observe children and be responsive to their individual needs towards success achievable for each learner
- Setting up a carefully planned literacy rich environment in the classroom.
- Equipping teachers with methods for using the classroom literacy environment effectively in a variety of ways which address children's learning levels and interests and which stimulate thinking and learning
- Providing access to rich children's literature
- Providing a balance between choice and structure and open and closed activities

which are based on mutual respect and cooperation.

- Developing mechanisms for monitoring the classroom learning environment and learning processes

### B. Building Reading/ Writing Skills

This component includes a structured programme for building:

I. Foundation skills

II. Higher order skills

These are addressed simultaneously and not sequentially.

#### I. Foundation skills

- a) **Skills required for school-based learning** to equip new school entrants to make a smooth transition from their familiar informal home environments to the more formal and rule-bound aspects of a school and classroom.
- b) **Skills required for meaningful reading and writing** for meaningful engagement with a written script, in our case the Devanagari script. The focus of this programme component is to provide learners with planned, competency-based opportunities for engaging effectively and simultaneously with the phonological processes which are required for efficient decoding and the inner processes required for meaning construction. The main thrust of OLEP's interventions is to make the processes of decoding more meaningful. The approaches being used enable us to tap the diverse home languages of children which include Marwari; Bhojpuri; Malwi; Bengali; Punjabi. We have attempted to evolve a developmentally appropriate, holistic programme for addressing the issues of transition from oracy to print, and home language to school language, for first generation literacy learners from vulnerable social backgrounds. This programme has

been developed through intensive engagement in classrooms over a period of eight years.

## II. Higher order skills

We will look at this aspect in a later section (Classroom Pedagogies).

### C. Building a Culture of Reading

This is being addressed through availability and use of rich children's literature within classroom reading corners and village-based libraries, along with a focus on using effective methodologies such as read aloud; shared reading; guided reading and free reading.

### Key Programmes

#### A. Early Literacy Programme

- 1) A two-year foundation programme for Classes 1 and 2
  - The Class 1 units of the Foundation Programme are thematically designed, with books for read aloud and word activities integrated into each theme
  - The Class 2 units are based on combined usage of children's literature and curricular materials.
- 2) Remedial programme for Classes 3 to 5

This is a competency-based programme which is being implemented in community-based learning centres that support children for mainstreaming.

#### B. The Reading Programme

This is being implemented through classroom reading corners and a network of village based libraries with a focus on building a culture of reading.

### Transferring OELP's Conceptual Understanding to Practitioners

Based on insights from available literature research and our sustained field experience, we

at OELP believe that *becoming literate cannot be limited to learning the alphabet or being able to read or write and respond to prescribed texts.*

We believe that *becoming literate means:*

- Being able to think independently.
- Being able to make sense of what one sees, hears or reads.
- Being able to share one's ideas, thoughts and feelings through spoken, pictorial or written communication.

These ideas are presented to the teachers and other practitioners diagrammatically in the form of OELP's hand (figure 2), which makes them more tangible and easier to understand. Please see the diagram.

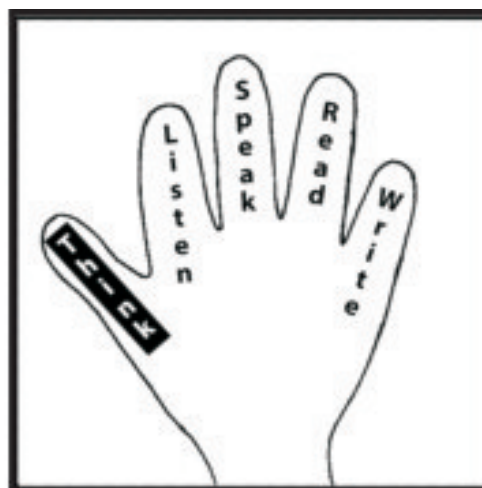


Figure 2. OELP's Hand for R/W

Teachers are helped to draw parallels between the pivotal role that a thumb plays for increasing the functionality and efficacy of each of the four fingers in a hand; and the role of thought (thinking) as the key factor for imbuing meaningfulness to the four aspects of language and literacy i.e. listening; speaking; reading and writing. In other words teachers are able to reflect and understand that *these four aspects of language and literacy become active and meaningful only through their consciously planned linkage with "thinking"*.

These ideas have been used effectively by OELP for getting teachers in rural areas to appreciate that mere inclusion of activities for listening, speaking, reading and writing in the daily classroom programme is not adequate. It is only when we create planned, authentic opportunities for children to reason, reflect, draw inferences, predict, question or narrate in their own words that meaningful language and literacy learning occurs. Teachers within the programme, even at the Class 1 level are being gradually equipped to create such planned opportunities for each of these four areas of language and literacy learning, so that they generate higher order thinking. To achieve this, we film classrooms practices and discuss them during monthly planning and review meetings or capacity building workshops. Teachers are encouraged to reflect upon children's natural language learning processes and the implications that these have for classroom practice. The importance of drawing upon the diversity of children's spoken language resources, their experience, imagination, feelings and curiosity is emphasized so that language and literacy learning can become purposeful and meaningful for each child.

### Classroom Pedagogies

To translate this conceptual understanding into classroom practice, OELP uses the Four Blocks Approach. Four-Blocks is a Balanced Literacy framework which was created by Dr. Patricia Cunningham and Dr. Dorothy Hall in the late 80s. Four Blocks allows students to develop their reading, writing, speaking and listening skills towards becoming effective, literate communicators. It is an instructional delivery system for teachers, with a focus on "the HOW in teaching, and not only on the WHAT". Research affirms that Four Blocks makes instruction more effective and efficient and also helps teachers manage better the precious time that they have to interact with students. This

approach was recommended by Dr. Shailaja Menon from Azim Premji University and is being used currently by OELP in a modified form based on our needs assessment and context as shown in the following diagram:

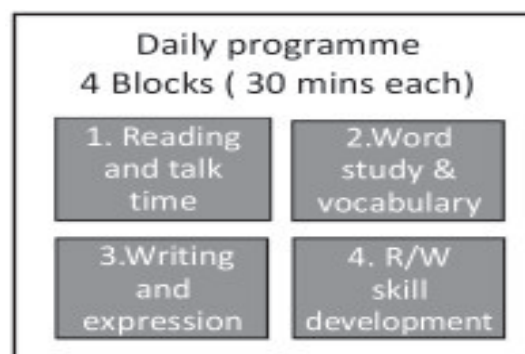


Figure 3. The Four-Block Approach

**A brief over view of the OELP Four-Block** (some minor modifications have been made in the time allotment for each block based on the specific needs of Classes 1 and 2 in our work area)

#### Block 1: Reading and talk time

Time duration - 30 to 40 minutes

This includes conversations and read aloud with a gradual shift to guided reading, shared reading and finally independent reading. There is a focus on strategies to be used for pre-reading, during reading and post reading; as well as questions that can generate higher order thinking.

#### Block 2: Word recognition and vocabulary building

Time duration - 20 minutes

This is done through a variety of activities and games, many of which use the displayed print in the classroom

#### Block 3: Writing and activities for creative expression

Time duration – 30 minutes

Children are encouraged to use a variety of natural materials to express their ideas in creative ways.

## Block 4: Skill building

Time duration – 30 minutes

Skill building focuses on both foundation skills (through OELP's structured approach for facilitating meaningful decoding) and higher order thinking skills (through planned worksheets and a variety of activities, many of which are based on the use of curricular materials).

Mechanisms for learner tracking and programme monitoring have been incorporated into both the above programmes. Individual learner tracking is based on a combination of the following:

- a) Quarterly competency-based summative evaluations
- b) Quarterly formative assessment through classroom observations
- c) Tracking based on individual profile folders

We are currently in the process of streamlining these assessment processes further so that we can bring greater rigour into tracking learner progress.

## Conclusion

Many of the newer early literacy perspectives and instructional practices challenge the deeply entrenched existing practices and belief systems. Without going into details it will be adequate to point out that teachers are often not equipped for their new roles. For example, engaging children in meaningful conversations; effective read aloud sessions; guided and shared reading and writing practices; questioning and use of various comprehension strategies are all new, culturally alien and unfamiliar instructional practices, which focus on the active and intentional roles of learners in the processes of learning. Our experience suggests that for many teachers these can be threatening. Some teacher educators have also been resistant to these ideas which challenge their comfort zones. Often, it has taken us time to build a level of comfort and understanding of some of these classroom

pedagogies. OELP is currently working on ways of sharing these ideas through modules of exposure-based training, as well as, audio-visual training packages based on video clips of actual classroom practice.

<sup>1</sup> We wish to acknowledge that this process of conceptualization and evolution of OELP's programme has benefitted from discussions during two Consultations on Early Literacy which were initiated by Sir Ratan Tata Trust for a select group of its partner organizations who are working intensively in this area.

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**Keerti Jayaram** is Director of the Organisation for Early Literacy Promotion More details are available at [www.oelp.org](http://www.oelp.org)

[oelpliteracy@yahoo.in](mailto:oelpliteracy@yahoo.in)