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Literacy Development in the Foundational Years of School: Teachers' Experiences

Abstract

Literacy skills develop over a period of time as young children interact with their environment in a variety of ways including the use of sounds and symbols. Literacy is a culturally valued and socially situated skill set developed in resourceful, responsive learning settings. This paper is an attempt to interpret the socio-cultural conceptualisation and practice of literacy by researching teachers' lived experiences and understanding of literacy development in selected schools of Delhi.

Introduction

Literacy development includes the use of language in different modes for different purposes. It is an ongoing process. A child starts acquiring sounds and words since the time of birth within the socialcultural context. Young children listen new words in their sociolinguistic environment, and use those words in day-to-day conversations to express themselves. Providing a language-rich environment is crucial for literacy development. Spoken, written and printed words, drawings, symbols, gestures, body movement, melodies, digital texts and formats are all means of the sense-making experience to children as they learn to use them in their social settings.

Children use speech as a tool of thinking. They can be observed thinking out loud while solving a problem. For instance, a young child talks about the puzzle pieces and their placement while putting them on the puzzle board. This speech later gets turned into inner speech or a tool for thinking (Vygotsky, 1986). This way language use or literacy fosters thinking and vice-versa. Oral language is considered the foundation of other forms of literacy like reading, writing, drawing and so on (Kumar, 2000). This means that responsive early childhood

settings provide ample opportunities for children's oral language development.

Oracy and literacy in the *National Curriculum Framework, 2005* are conceived as "tools for learning and for developing higher-order communicative skills and critical thinking" (NCERT, 2005, p. 38). The function of language literacy is seen to further abstract thought and knowledge acquisition. At the same time, the ability to have effective interpersonal and intrapersonal communication and articulation of inner thoughts is seen as an expression of literacy. Government policies and documents define literacy on the basis of functional ability of a person aged seven or above to "read and write with understanding in any language" (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2011, p. 80; Ministry of Human Resource and Development, 2020; Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2020). The purpose is to fix a minimal benchmark of literacy to gather data on literacy rate in the country. This definition clearly has not considered young children below the age of seven as literate. Thus, a more holistic, multimodal approach to understanding meaning-making in early years needs to be applied.

Multimodal approach to literacy development is based on the premise

that meaning-making experiences are facilitated by different representational and communicational resources, and language is just one among them (Kress & Leeuwen, 2001). Musolf (1996) described children's physical movement of running, jumping and laughing together as equivalents of talk or conversation. Such jumping and running may not appear as meaningful and a social activity to adults as much as it is to children (Corsaro, 1986). In the early school context, multimodal approach to literacy development supports children's experience of learning and development. Through such performance of running or laughing together, children generate a feeling of control over their lives. Sociodramatic play is linked to early literacy development in the way that it is "characterized by symbolic representation, imaginative use of language, role-taking, social interaction, and sustained play activity" (Roskos & Christie, 2011, p. 74).

Literacy is based on skills and practices that are considered more valuable than the others in societies, and therefore literacy can also be understood as a set of culturally defined practices and skills (Menon et al., 2017). It is seen that literacy activities in the classroom are based on more valued skills in the society, that of reading and writing. The skills of reading and writing are generally associated with success in academic examination as well as securing employment in adult life.

Children's understanding of literacy activities and its meaning is influenced by their use of reading-writing activities in everyday life at home, in school and other contexts (NCERT, 2006). Literacy development for many children is fostered at school as they enter the pre-school with a sense of sensitivity to letter and word forms or 'concepts of print' (Clay, 1998, p. 111). This perspective suggests that children have already learnt to use language in print when they enter pre-school and they make a back-and-forth movement between individual learning and collective learning (McLachlan & Arrow, 2017). While this may be true for

children with some exposure to print at home, it is not the case with many others who may hold a book for the first time in the school.

Neuroscience research informs that neural development during early years is rapid and is foundational for learning and development. Neurons are basic building blocks of brain that function to communicate messages in and from the brain to the body. Synaptic connections among unused neurons decrease while "new discoveries (child's activity) maintain synapses" and therefore, early responsive "relationships with caregivers, stimulating environments and an engaged, active child" together form a "system that shapes brain development" (Gallagher, 2005, p.13). Research has established that a variety of sensory experiences are required for a developing brain to maintain its neural material (Jewitt & Phillips, 2000). Moreover, literacy development in early school years is contingent on responsive relationships at school, and thus quality of teacher-child relationship has a bearing on it (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2009).

A study in government schools of Delhi found that teachers were confused when they were confronted with language textbooks that had meaning making at its center rather than teaching script decoding skills (Jayaram, 2008a, 2008b). Another study in a self-financing school in Delhi, noted that in a trilingual early literacy context, teachers would position their pedagogical accounts within the social-context of large class size, parental expectations and short daily duration for literacy instruction (Sen, 2017). Thus, understanding teachers' understandings and experiences are important. This is one of the missing pieces of the literacy puzzle of Indian education system, where many children find it difficult to gain basic skills of reading, writing, comprehension (ASER, 2019).

Research findings discussed in this paper are a part the doctoral research study being conducted by the Department of Human

Development and Childhood Studies, University of Delhi. This paper presents a slice of findings for one of the objectives dealing with the understanding of teachers regarding early literacy in school. The following sections discuss epistemological assumptions, research design and methodology of the study as relevant to understand the context of this paper. It also describes the methods used and provides data analyses.

Research design and methodology

This study is embedded in the interpretivist research paradigm. It means that humans interact with each other and construct a shared and individual meaning of the reality. This social construction of meaning is made possible by the use of language resource. Social reality can be accessed through language as people exchange thoughts, experiences, perceptions and opinions through talking in shared language resource (Willig, 2013; Charmaz, 2014). Words become realities in the social world. The sociocultural perspective of literacy development considers that it is within the cultures of their communities, families, schools that children become literate (Kantor, et al., 1992). This also means that literacy development experiences are organised within the sociocultural background of schools that are located within the larger context of national policies, curricular frameworks, legislations, programmes and cultural ethos. This study is an ethnographic exploration of teachers' lived experience in early literacy school setting, in an attempt to interpret their literacy development experiences as co-constructed in everyday school activities. The objective is to understand what meaning do teachers assign to their practices in the context of early school literacy.

Context and participants >

The research sites are three primary schools in East Delhi. One is a private, unaided school with air-conditioned classrooms, amphitheater, playground and functional

library facilities. Two of the remaining schools are managed by the local municipal body and did not have a functional library. The official languages in these schools were English, Hindi and Punjabi. Punjabi was the third language in the municipal school alone, introduced in the Class III. The medium of instruction in the private, unaided school was English for all classes. One government school used only Hindi language as the medium of instruction. While the other school had each class divided as per English language instruction medium and Hindi language instruction medium. The average class size was thirty-three across the three schools.

The schools were purposively selected from among low-to-medium fee-charging private and no-fee charging municipality schools, the consideration being that majority of children attend low-to-medium fee charging private schools or government schools in Delhi. The schools available in one residential area of East Delhi were identified and contacted for permission.

Fifteen teachers of the three selected primary schools were the participants in this study. They taught children in the age group of 3–8 years, in the pre-primary classes I and II. All teachers had the requisite teaching educational qualifications. Eight teachers had teaching diploma in elementary education, seven had Bachelors in Education or Bachelors in Elementary Education. Additionally, eight of the teachers had a master's degree. Four teachers had more than twenty years of teaching experience, three teachers had more than ten years of experience, eight teachers had under ten years of experience, of whom two were teaching for the first time in school.

Data collection method of interview

Interview as a method of researching the experiences of teachers is based on the assumption that language resource can be utilised to access teacher's lived experiences (Willig, 2013). The interviews were carried out with the belief that the participant teacher



had “experiential expertise” regarding literacy development in school (Smith et al., 2009, p. 65).

Each teacher was interviewed thrice over a period of six to nine months. Interviews spread over a longer period accounted for “idiosyncratic days and to check for internal consistency” of what the teachers said (Seidman, 2005). The interviews were primarily bilingual.

A semi-structured interview guide served as a “virtual map” helping the researcher to be an attentive listener, more flexible and a responsive interviewer (Smith, et al 2009, p. 59). The interview guide had components that were designed to draw out teachers’ views and understanding on a range of issues pertaining to literacy pedagogy, children’s literacy work in the classroom and selection of literacy activities conducted.

Field notes were documented in addition to interviews. Observations from the field were recorded in the field notes diary, after the field visit, on the same day. This would help to contextualize interpretation of teachers’ experience in the given socio-cultural context.

Data analyses

Thematic analysis of interview data was carried out. The interview transcripts were analysed for teachers’ responses and categorised according to emerging themes and patterns. Responses were sorted into categories and codified using relevant theoretical frameworks to systematically refine and review themes and patterns related to literacy development in school.

Methodological journal in which the methodological dilemmas, pathways and research decisions were recorded along the fieldwork fed into analytic work. I continued to elaborate on codes as new questions were asked from the data while assigning them to categories and concepts.

In accordance with the ethical code of conduct in social sciences research, all participants were provided with research

information before they gave their consent for participation. It was an ongoing practice to seek participant’s consent all through the fieldwork period.

Literacy development in school: teachers’ voices

The discussion presented here is a conceptualisation of a response to the research question: what are the teachers’ understanding and experiences about literacy development within the school setting.

Though ‘literacy’ is a commonly used term, different teachers viewed it differently, according to the context and age of their students. The meaning of literacy for teachers was also determined by what they considered its purpose and importance in a child’s overall development and education. Their own pre-service training and continuous professional development, education and teaching experiences also informed their ideas about what constituted as literacy activities in the school context. Moreover, the school emphasis and culture and the curriculum/syllabus and textbooks they used to teach also informed their idea of literacy development in school. Here I discuss the different ways in which the participant teachers understood and related with early literacy.

Preparation for next class

A common thread in teachers’ experiences of working in early literacy classrooms was that of preparing children for the next class. This preparation, however, was unique and highly coloured by the school culture and vision about literacy development. In one school site, this preparation constituted training in copywriting, understanding basic print concepts of directionality, recognising alphabets and *akshars*, tracing shapes, drawing lines and colouring on paper. Writing was considered as the most important of all literacy skills. As children progressed from one class to the other, the number of

workbooks and textbooks prescribed as per the school curriculum increased. Children who could write by copying from the teacher's writing board were considered developing literacy skills. Teachers commented that the purpose of preschool is to make children ready for early primary classes and so on. This means that the activities that were conducted in their classroom were carried out with the intent of preparing the child for the next class or level of schooling. A preschool teacher explains:

“When you (researcher) will come in November, you will see that they have started writing their diary (a note for work to be done at home). Although I write it on the board, yet they will learn to write within the lines, so they are ready for Kindergarten.”

Some teachers shared that focusing on the text-decoding skills was important to their teaching practice. They insisted that children would not understand anything as narrated and illustrated in the language textbook unless they could read the text. Illustrations were not seen as aiding meaning-making and comprehension. A teacher asserted that only words conveyed meaning in a textbook. A Class II teacher shared the reason why they did not use the available language textbook in their class:

“They (children) cannot read long stories given in the prescribed language textbooks. To read such long stories, they need to know the alphabet sounds and learn to blend those sounds.”

Few teachers complained about the quality of content in textbooks. The long stories, as per a few teachers, did not account for children's not-yet-developed skills to decode the text. When asked whether children liked short stories for their brevity, it was observed that it was linked to the limited development of children's literacy skills and not a limited attention span. There are state-prescribed textbooks that are viewed as non-usable by the teacher. In this situation, the pedagogical intent of the available text resource is lost. The school curriculum required both English and Hindi language learning, but a teacher

cited the reason of limited instruction time. They explained that acquisition of text decoding skills in one language consumed most of their teaching time and that second language instruction was not relevant to their class. For this reason, they had decided not to teach the second language and had asked children to not carry the English book to school when it was not needed.

Teachers' ownership of the prescribed literacy materials and agentic practice

When teachers were involved in the process of curriculum development and literacy material creation, they owned the literacy development context more readily. This sentiment of having been an active part of the process of workbook creation was conveyed by a pre-primary class teacher that made them more aware of their literacy instruction practices. They were not particularly satisfied by the content in the literacy workbooks for children in their class. Nevertheless, they voiced their autonomous actions in the following comment:

“We really wanted less writing and more interaction. Though you have seen the book, that's not as up to the mark as we had wanted it to be...but as per the demand of the school curriculum, it's perfectly okay...so those books are good...we wanted children to use their brain...they should find independently, “where is that picture?”... In the book, I am giving things with p only. But they will find that there's b-b-b bench also (in p-p-park). So I ask them what else they see in the park.”

The teacher ensured that they asked students questions about the content, helping them expand their thinking and build linguistic awareness. Their intention was to plug the missing links in the available literacy workbook through a responsive, timely and aware questioning strategy. What is described by the teacher suggests that given their reflective and aware instructional practice, they were able to navigate the challenge posed by the prescribed literacy material. It also connotes that they had control over the pedagogical processes and



were not stopped by anything outside of their classroom.

Thus, some teachers' understanding conveys that textbooks, workbooks and primers are meant to facilitate comprehension in the process of literacy development. These available literacy materials are viewed as aids for bi-literacy development. Also, that it was a particular teacher's literacy experience that determined their perceptions about the textbooks. It also got highlighted that the teachers who participated actively in the process of development of prescribed textbooks and other literacy material, expressed ownership and autonomy with regard to literacy material and its use for learning.

Drawing for literacy development

Moving beyond language, literacy development as per teachers' experiences includes drawing and coloring pictures or figures as a meaning-making activity. Many teachers shared that they used drawings and illustrations in their literacy instructional practice. They used it as a visual aid for literacy instruction. Some preschool teachers also instructed children to draw objects along with *akshar* writing to make the sound-symbol correspondence as well as meaning making through illustration. A pre-primary class teacher explained their use of illustrations for literacy transactions in class: "The idea is to help students make pictures for the recognition of Hindi *swar* or vowel, and if they see the vowel from that picture anywhere else, they will be able to read it. Then, if they see an ambulance, they will know that it begins with a combination of vowel and consonant in Hindi."

Beginning in Class I, a few teachers tried contextualising children's experience by providing them opportunities to draw more than writing. They explained that many children in their class had limited, irregular to no preschool experience and thus, they needed to do more drawing and colouring activities in school before they were given writing drills. A teacher of Class I indicated

in their understanding that drawing was a precursor to writing skills:

"Colours are the best part...children enjoy colours and it helps them develop understanding about writing processes." Other teachers shared that they had observed that children's drawings were supplementing their literacy development and learning experience at school. However, drawing could only be done in the free period as described by a teacher of Class II in their comment below:

"I tell them to draw in their free period; they draw such beautiful pictures and what we studied in science class...they draw (illustrate) what they had read in books. They feel happy, I give them special time to draw in their old notebook." A teacher voiced that school activities were made to keep children busy and that giving them special time to make drawings was an important practice in their early literacy classrooms. Describing the significance of drawing activity, teachers explained the reasons. First, it was free drawing initiated by the child. This work on paper was not evaluated because it was done in their old notebook that was not used for class work anymore. Thus, no pressures of making the pencil move a certain set way. They could draw anything they wished. It also gave them break from the drill writing exercises. They may be really involved in the process of creating a visual, picture, representing an idea that could be either inspired by their science book imagery or totally unrelated to the textbooks and curriculum. The teacher showed some of the children's rough drawings to the researcher. It was interesting to note that teachers talked pleasantly about the children's drawings only when they permitted them to do so. They did not correct or evaluate those creative work of children because (a) it was not required as per school syllabus and (b) there would be a pile of notebooks and books for them to evaluate children's literacy work on the same day. That was communicated as a big relief for both children and teachers. Thus, the teachers in this study affirmed that drawing

and coloring activities promote and make literacy development enjoyable for young learners in their classrooms.

Questioning for comprehension

Questioning as a strategy to evoke verbal response from children during digital story sessions was also viewed as a strategy to involve children in conversations about the characters, events in the story. A Class I teacher, while talking about their pedagogical practice, referred to a class activity where they made use of the phone screen to project audio-visual story for their students. They shared that they would bring the bluetooth speaker from home so all children would hear the audio properly even if the video was not visible to all. They further explained that they checked for narrative comprehension by pausing the story playing on the phone screen and asked questions to test children's understanding of the plotline:

"I keep asking questions during the storytelling session so that I get feedback about the story. Are they liking it... Are they following the story? When they answer, I resume playing the story on my phone." It was noted that children added to the story when the teacher asked them an open-ended question. At the heart of asking an open-ended question is the teacher's intention to provide opportunity for the child to articulate and imagine (Joshi & Shukla, 2019). This way the child remains an active participant in such shared meaning-making exercise. At the same time, when children ask questions in a group setting or class, teacher's responsiveness bolsters their confidence of expressing freely in diverse social situations. Concurrently, the teacher believed that six-year-old children in their class were old enough to pick up a storybook and read it. They explained that using their phone was merely a way of helping children develop listening and comprehension skills when in reality they did not have access to a variety of age-appropriate children's literature or texts in school.

Navigating parental expectations about literacy development

Another aspect is that of exclusive focus on helping the child first master decoding the languages driven by the parental expectations about literacy acquisition. How teachers managed to navigate through those demands has implications for school literacy development practices. Teachers experienced a disjunction between their training (both pre-service and in-service) and their practice in the given school context. This created dilemmas and confusions for the teachers that had a direct impact on the young learners' literacy development experience.

One of the schools did not lay much emphasis on the early introduction of writing tasks, but colouring activities were considered promotive for children in the pre-primary school years. However, teachers shared that parents demanded their child learns to write the alphabet and letters starting at three years of age in the pre-school. Thus, teachers experienced dilemma over introducing copywriting in their early literacy work at school. It seemed counter-intuitive for the educator to instruct a child to do copywriting drill exercises as evidence of learning work at school. Teachers at this site explained how they felt that children were not ready for such focused and enforced way of being with the text. A pre-primary teacher lamented:

"There is no writing work in the syllabus for three- to five-year-old children. Yet, I do a little bit writing with them, otherwise their parents are not satisfied... If it were upon me, I would have never pressurised children to write before they are ready for it." While reflecting on their learning from pre-service training, yet another teacher confirms her agony in the following words: "I fear it may put off children from learning altogether... they will not want to come to school... It is not good for their motor skills... This is what I have learnt in my training... soft tissues get damaged... Drawing is fine, but colouring is easier for them. You must have observed



that I give them drawings to fill with colours, first they will learn colouring and gradually learn to hold the pencil to write.” Teachers’ experiences suggest that meaning-making in the early literacy classroom gets sidelined because of factors external to the classroom. Some of the reasons why teachers reported being helpless was attributed to private schools’ practice of making children fill notebooks (writing exercises) beginning in pre-primary classes. They explained that parents would compare their child’s academic performance with those of other children studying in private schools and appeared fearful that their child would be left behind in the race of writing development. This also suggests how teachers’ agency is trampled upon by external influences, as they work to provide for literacy development in school. Influences external to classroom impact organization of literacy development experience for children. Thinking or meaning-making is central to learning, and this needs to be considered in the organisation of literacy experiences at school.

Conclusion

Literacy experiences at the elementary stage of schooling lay the foundation of future

learning and life as a responsible citizen of a democratic society. It is in the early years classrooms that children imbibe joyful feelings for language and literacy experiences along with developing foundational neural connections for languages in their sociocultural context. Teachers’ understanding, experiences and views about early literacy get translated into early literacy experiences of children in school. Teachers in this study expressed that they experienced conflict in their actions and beliefs regarding early literacy in school. Some of their actions seemed to be aligned by factors, such as the unavailability of age-appropriate and relevant literacy materials and parental expectations of literacy. They seemed to be held back from their own conviction about developmentally appropriate literacy practice. Teacher development programmes need to provide support for mitigating these contextual issues. It appears that teachers’ conviction of providing young children with the opportunities for exploration and self-expression in early years of schooling is constantly at war and dying because of the popular yet incomplete definition of literacy, as operating in the current education system.

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