

## Home-school Literacy Connections in Early Childhood Years

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents a contemporary understanding regarding relations between literacy development experiences of children across home and school in India. The paper focuses on literacy learning during early childhood years (birth to eight years) which marks the beginning of literacy education for the child. The paper highlights the need for holistic understanding of literacy in early years, which is informed by children's authentic learning experiences in different contexts like school and home. Learnings from this paper can benefit educators and parents interested in organizing meaningful literacy development experiences for their children.

**Keywords:** *Literacy; Early Childhood Education; Home Language; Pre-school*

The early childhood years, is the period from birth to eight years of age (UNESCO, n.d. a) when there is rapid development and growth. Neurological studies have shown that early years are an important time for development of brain and neurological pathways. The developing brain has certain "sensitive periods" of development when the development of certain areas of the brain is particularly vulnerable to the influence of environmental experiences. If during this time, the child is deprived of suitable environmental support or challenged by negative experiences, it can have adverse consequences. For example, research has shown that the early childhood years are a sensitive period for language development and that early exposure to a language results in better proficiency in that language as compared to late exposure. Thus, a strong foundation during the early childhood years increases the likelihood of positive outcomes in learning, behaviour and lifelong health (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). For this reason, understanding and supporting development during these years is crucial for development in all areas, including for language and literacy. During early childhood years, development in oral language, reading and writing all take place at the same time and thus language learning is also a part of literacy (Kennedy et al., 2012; Singh et al., 2016).

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The meaning of literacy is dynamic as per the changing social-cultural realities. Literacy is not limited to reading and writing skills but is understood as a “means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world” (UNESCO, n.d. b). Literacy during early childhood years extends to all areas of children’s lives including home, school (NCERT, 2006) and community (Hoffman & Whittingham, 2017).

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model of development represents a child’s environment as consisting of different systems that interact with each other, with the child at the center influencing her development over time. When applied to learning to read, the system closest to the child (microsystem) comprises the child's personal relationships with teachers or parents. The exosystem consists of the education system of the country where the child lives, while the mesosystem (which lies between exosystem and microsystem) is the system which consists of the association between relationships and would reflect on how parents affect the child's relationship with individuals in school (McBride, 2016). Since home-school relationships are significant for holistic child development, in this paper focusses on the following:

- Language and literacy practices at home and school for the early childhood years
- Home - school interactions that contribute to children’s developing literacy

### **LANGUAGE CONNECTIONS ACROSS HOME AND SCHOOL**

It is well accepted in the field of education, that children’s experiences and home culture need to be part of children’s learning in school (NCERT, 2006; Ministry of Education, 2020). Understanding how the child’s home language, which is an important part of the child’s culture, is accepted in the school, gives us insight about how successful the school culture is in incorporating children’s out-of-school learnings in their literacy curriculum.

School is considered an important place for literacy acquisition in India. Especially, as for many first-generation learners there are limited opportunities to interact with print at home (Sinha, 2010). Some of the practices that are prevalent in pre-primary and early primary school for literacy development are reciting rhymes, singing, role-playing, copying *aksharas* & words in notebook, listening and telling stories among many others (Jayaram, 2008a, 2008b; Menon et al., 2017). In Indian pre-primary and primary classrooms, two official or school languages are taught. Of these two or more languages in school, one language assumes the medium of instruction as per the policy. The National Education Policy, 2020 recommends the use of home language as medium of instruction in primary school years (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, research has shown many instances when planned policy documents do not translate to on-ground realities. Asynchrony between home language and school language of the child leads to the language disadvantage which in turn affects comprehension and learning in the classroom (Agnihotri, et al., 1994; Jhingran, 2009; Mohanty, 2009).

In a study conducted in two primary schools of Odisha that followed different multilingual education approaches, it was reported that even though the home language was being used by the children in school they were not encouraged to use their home language for the purpose of academic discourse. This reinforced the notion that some languages are considered more suitable for academic learning than others (Nag, 2018). In another study which looked at literacy pedagogy in pre-primary and class 1 levels of a school in Delhi, it was found that children’s use of oral language was limited and not extended to academic learning purposes (Sen, 2017). Literacy instruction mainly focused on mechanical decoding

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of letters and sounds, along with a disconnect with the child's home reality takes away the child's curiosity to make meaning by observation and experience. A part of the longitudinal *LiRiL study* used ethnographic methods to conduct case-studies exploring the literacy and language experiences of marginalized children in home and in school. One of the main findings from these case studies point out the disjuncture between home and school language dialects, that of Kannada dialect used at home and that used in school were reportedly different, spoken at home from that at school, resulting in a lack of meaning in the child's schooling experience (Menon et al, 2017). Thus, many studies have shown that home language does not get appropriate emphasis in the context of early childhood education despite it being recommended in the education policy. And so, this has a direct impact on literacy learning during early childhood years.

### **PRACTICES ACROSS CONTEXTS THAT SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LITERACY DEVELOPMENT**

Research has shown that literacy practices at home contribute to the child's literacy development (Kalia, 2007; Li & Tan, 2016; Purcell-Gates, 1996). An example of such a study was carried out in Bengaluru about pre-school children's reading practices at home. The study found that bilingual children's oral language and literacy skills in English language had positive correlation with their exposure to English books at home (Kalia, 2007). In Indian homes family members and children engage in many activities and practices like storytelling, rhymes, conversations, shared-book reading, direct teaching, playing and so on, which support children's literacy development (Chatterjee, 1999; Joshi & Shukla, 2019; Kalia, 2007). Tapping into this, an innovative way in which families have been involved in children's literacy is through family literacy programmes. A programme espousing this method was carried out in rural areas of Bihar and Rajasthan by the NGO Pratham, where it was found that children in families where the mother was offered literacy classes along with training to promote involvement in their children's education at home, showed some positive effect on language development of children (Banerji, Berry and Shotland, 2014).

Research has shown that many literacy practices in children's homes are not reflected in school activities and that there is a need for greater recognition of these practices in early childhood education policy and curriculums (Marsh, 2003; Mottram & Hall, 2009). Some new practices, strategies and interventions have been undertaken so that children's families and early childhood education teachers collaborate for children's literacy development. When an early childhood care and education curriculum was co-created by teachers and community members/parents of indigenous communities of Odisha, it had implications for language and literacy learning of children. Together the stakeholders decided to emphasize home language in the early years. Furthermore, so that children were also ready for schooling, they were introduced to oral Odia (state language) in the last year of early education (Joshi, 2021). Experiences of Chetna Vikas Balwadi or pre-school programme in Mandwa community, have shown how long-term interactions between home, school and community have created a relationship which benefits children's literacy development. In this pre-school, while print literacy is not emphasised much, literacy practices like storytelling, exchanging verbal notes between home and school, singing traditional songs and enacting folktales draw from strong traditions of oral communication at home as well as community (Gokhale, 2005). Such efforts which promote home and school collaborations offer inventive strategies in which literacy learning during the early childhood years become more meaningful for the child.

### CONCLUSION

This article highlights the need for a more holistic understanding of literacy in the early years, one that accounts for the fact that children's literacy development takes place across contexts in both home and school. Literature review of current language and literacy practices across home-school-community contexts emphasizes that authentic literacy experiences that are connected to the child's life beyond school have a positive correlation with literacy development at school. Research has also highlighted the need for placing appropriate emphasis on home language for literacy development in the school context. Home language plays the role of connecting the child's experiences at school to life at home. Learning from practices that are prevalent at home and meaningful to the child and integrating them in school activities or curriculum benefits the children's literacy development.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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