

Essential Pillars of a Comprehensive Literacy Programme

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Three pillars of literacy

Orality, orthographic expertise¹ and exposure to a variety of texts – together constitute a comprehensive literacy experience for children. These three pillars are neither incremental nor causal in nature. They are, in fact, spirally intertwined and if early readers experience them simultaneously, it helps them to become motivated, independent readers.

Language plays a major role in contributing to a child's efforts at learning to read and is the child's premise for constructing meaning, knowing about the world and negotiating with life experiences. Since language becomes an object of thought for a child, orality becomes a fundamental prerequisite for literacy learning.

Moreover, we must also be aware of and accept *India's multilingual reality*. Every Indian is a polyglot, with a world of oral utterances. Most children, as they grow and interact with the world around, get exposed to a unique linguistic fluidity in some way or the other. To build a solid foundation for literacy, space for child's language and orality in the classroom must be created.

Along with the opportunities for oral language development and orthographic awareness, it is important to expose children to a variety of meaningful texts. Sadly, books are often looked upon as icing on the cake, something 'good to have' rather than 'must-have', to complete the literacy experience for the children. Exposure to a variety of texts is a must, not only for deeper extended comprehension but also for developing fluency.

Three pillars of literacy in classroom practice

These three pillars of literacy need to be well understood, deconstructed and taken into the classroom. To do this, some steps are:

Effective oral language exercises

These encourage children to think critically and build upon the oral resources that children bring

into the classroom; help them to overcome the barrier between the local language and the school language.

- Discussion around a story: Children should be encouraged to engage with a story at all the three stages – before a story is read, while reading and after reading.

Before a story is read, children can be encouraged to predict what the story could be about through picture clues, title of the story etc.

While the story is read, it is helpful to stop at some interesting point and get them to do more predictions by asking them questions like *What do you think is going to happen now?*

After a story is read, children can be asked to retell the story in their own words, think of what the characters felt, expand the story, change an event to rewrite the story etc. Such after-reading activities could also be strengthened through writing tasks.

- Discussion around pictures: Pictures from anywhere, including newspapers, magazines, textbooks etc can be taken to encourage children to think creatively, construct a story, improve vocabulary and engage in active discussions. This can be done by posing some of the following questions during the discussion – What do you think is happening here? Why is this character doing this activity? Where do you think they will go after this? What do you think these two characters are talking about?
- Open discussions: Children love to talk about their daily life experiences, their future, their thoughts etc. Hence, it becomes very important for a teacher to use opportunities for discussion with children, some of which may be theme-based, and some spontaneous. This may include discussions on some local plants, animals, instruments they see around them, what they like to play in the evening, how are certain delicacies prepared etc.

¹Refers to the ability to identify patterns of specific letters as words, eventually leading to word recognition. It is when children gain this orthographic expertise that reading becomes an automatic process.

During discussions, children should be encouraged to use their mother tongue to express themselves freely because it is important that they learn to think critically and articulate their thoughts logically. They find it much easier to do if they have the freedom to do so in their mother tongue.

Literacy in Multilingual India: *Room to Read's* Experiences

Room to Read (RtR) implemented a well-designed multilingual programme in two districts, namely Sirohi in Rajasthan and Barwani in Madhya Pradesh. The process started with a detailed socio-linguistic survey of both the places, followed by an analysis of the findings to inform our practice on the field.

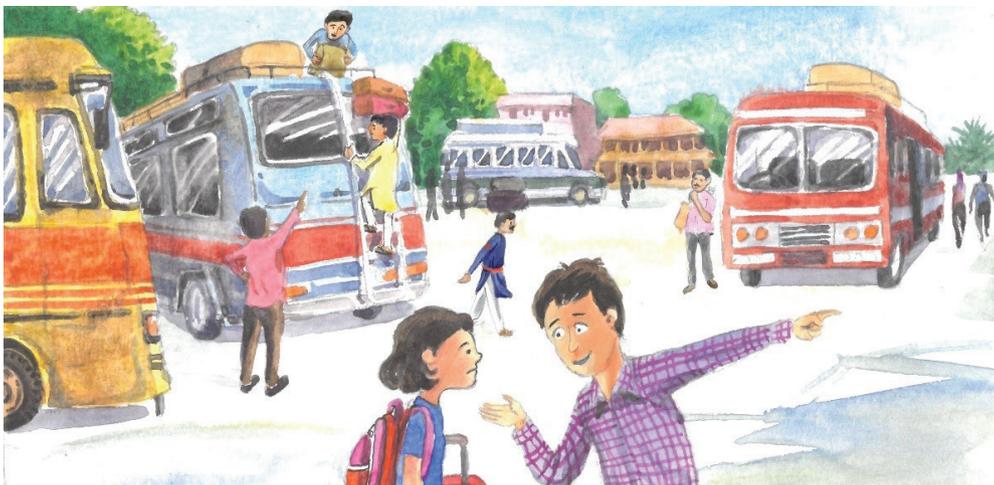
While the broad three pillars of literacy were the cornerstone of the programme, additional focus on the creation of multilingual material and use of the child's language as a resource was additionally focused on. Careful and conscious steps were taken to prevent the stamping out of any 'one' variant language, even though the school system was geared to give space to a dominant language. Stories in local language were written, word lists and word picture cards were created, local words were used for phonological awareness activities and both the teacher and the students were encouraged to use the local language for maximum discussions related to orality or text-based activities. Diversified language experience of the children was used as an essential component of the literacy classroom.

The existence of sound-symbol units is more or less

coherent in relationship in the alpha syllabaries. For instance, in the Devanagari script, the sound of the letter क would always be /क/ for all words like कमल, चकमा, महक etc. However, this is not true for English where the letter 't' may sound differently even in the same word, like 'station' etc.

However, this does not mean that teaching *aksharas* is easy. Even though in *akshara* languages there is a surface pattern, there are more than 400 combinations that children are required to decode almost instantaneously. Also, the visual symbol changes in different contexts. For instance, ई is used both as an *akshara* in ईख and as a vowel in की; the *akshara* त changes when it is written as त्य or as स्त्री. This informs our classroom practice in the following ways:

- Teaching whole units alone does not help. Explicit teaching of *aksharas* must be designed in a way that a child gets to see multiple combinations of *aksharas* in different words in a variety of enriching texts. Hence, a variety of good quality literature is a must for all primary grades.
- *Akshara* teaching should not be done hurriedly, but with a focus on teaching the entire sequence in the initial few months, followed by the teaching of reading words and sentences. Rather, the script should be taught in a planned and structured manner over the initial years of schooling.
- *Aksharas* need not always be taught in the traditional *varnmala* sequence. They can be divided into groups and then decodables (simple texts created using the taught *aksharas*) created to enable children to identify, blend and read words/sentences even when they have not been taught all the letters.



पायल की बुआ मायापुर में रहती हैं। एक दिन पायल उनके पास मायापुर गयी। पायल बस से उतरी तो बुआ नहीं थी। पायल को लगा वो गुम हो गई है और वो रोने लगी। ऐसे में पायल को युगल मिल गया। युगल ने उसे कहा - रो मत, नीलम बुआ पास ही रहती हैं। अहा! युगल बुआ को जानता है, पायल हैरान रह गई।

Five key components of reading

Decodables give a meaningful context and reading practice opportunities to a child, thereby, helping develop fluency with comprehension. Besides, international research shows that focus on five key components helps improve reading in children. Therefore, for effective reading abilities, it becomes important that classroom instruction be so designed that it focuses on all five of these elements in everyday classroom instruction.

1. Phonological awareness

This refers to the knowledge of the sound structure of any spoken word, that is, to understand that the word किताब has three sounds /कि/ /ता/ and /ब/; the first sound of महक is /म/ etc.

2. Phonics

The use of sound-symbol relationships in order to decode words, that is, to understand that sound /क/ is written as 'क'; when we combine the sounds /नी/ /ला/, we get a word that can be written as 'नीला'

3. Vocabulary

It is the knowledge of the word along with its meaning. For instance, the word लाल in

each of the following sentences has different connotations:

यह कपड़ा लाल है।

उसका चेहरा शर्म से लाल हो गया।

माँ ने कहा "यह तो मेरा लाल है!"

A word truly becomes a part of a child's vocabulary only if she can use it independently in multiple contexts.

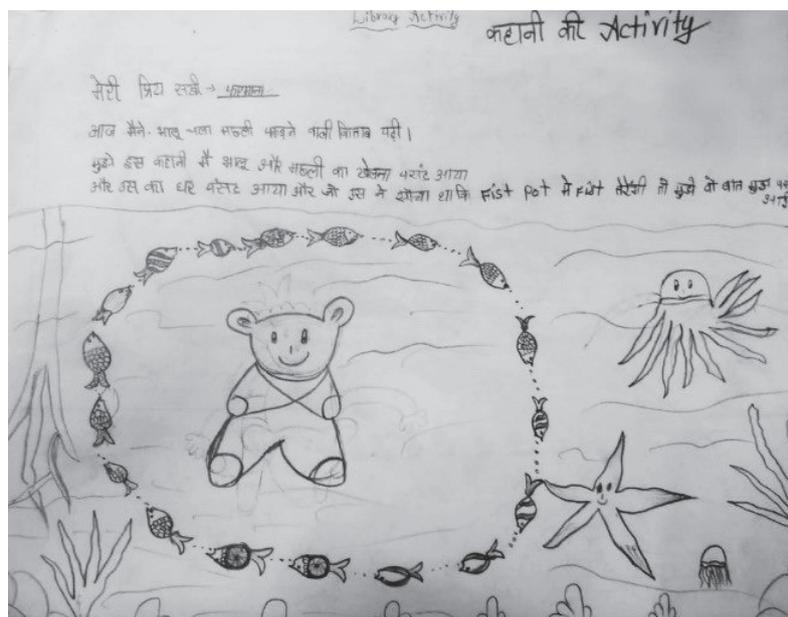
4. Fluency

This is the ability to read quickly and accurately with expressions, that is, to be able to read the sentence कमला बाज़ार गयी है in one go and not by breaking it into its component sounds like क, म, ला = कमला; बा, ज़ा, र = बाज़ार

5. Comprehension

Understanding the given text in order to construct its meaning, that is, to understand nuanced, possible different meanings hidden within the words of the text and to be able to go beyond the text

It must be recognised that reading and writing are connected to each other. Reading improves one's writing while writing reinforces reading. To become independent readers, children should also become independent writers. Hence, classroom activities must be designed in a way that children get opportunities to read a text and express their views both in the oral and written forms, so as to further strengthen their understanding and develop deeper comprehension.



Reading activities

Exposure to appropriate children's literature and development of a culture of reading within the school, home and community are imperative to give children meaning and pleasure in the process of learning to read. This can be done by setting up of school/ classroom libraries and ensuring effective reading activities. Some of the reading activities that can be done in libraries/classrooms are:

- *Read aloud* in which the teacher reads out the story and encourages children in discussion before the story is read, while the story is read and after the story is read.
- *Shared reading* in which the teacher and children sit and read a text together. This helps children in understanding how certain words are read and gives them the required practice.
- *Paired reading* in which two children form pairs and help each other in reading practice
- *Independent reading* in which children are encouraged to read books independently, as per their reading levels.

The recent guidance from the Central Government on *Padhe Bharat, Badhe Bharat* also recommends 150 minutes of language teaching per day, inclusive of first and second language instruction and a minimum 30 minutes of independent reading time. One must not think of this independent reading time as a luxury, rather view it as a compulsory activity in the primary grades.

Room to Read's long-term vision is to help children become independent readers and thus, empower them for lifelong learning, which is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goal of Quality Education to All by 2030. To achieve this, now is the time to concentrate our efforts towards providing well-informed, well-researched, well-designed, scalable and sustainable, early-grade interventions. Given that reading is the foundation of academic learning and that low reading levels are detrimental to learning, the challenge for the public education system is to ensure that children read fluently and with comprehension.



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