

# Language Learning and Early Literacy Building Capacity of Preschool Teachers

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## Abstract

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*A growing body of researches shows that teachers' knowledge and skills required to handle young children early literacy is crucial for children's smooth and successful transitions to primary school. The recent interventions under the study by the researcher entitled "Situational Analysis of DM schools and Designing of Model Preschools" in the four DM schools of NCERT provide additional insights about the significance of building capacity of teachers in language and emergent literacy. One of the prime objectives of this two-phased study was to design activity areas and promote early literacy in the preschools located at four Regional Institutes of Education (RIEs) of NCERT.*

*The preschool personnel of four RIEs were also interviewed and the findings indicated that the preschool and early primary teachers lack the disciplinary knowledge required to promote early literacy at the preschool stage. The present paper looks at the importance of early literacy in today's preschool education especially in the first five to six years of young children's lives. It is a basic human right of every child to get early literacy experiences through playful activities and games. It also examines various ways of implementing joyful and interactive activities to develop children's skills in early literacy across the preschool programme. The present paper focuses on how teachers' capacity need to be strengthened because early literacy is crucial to future learning and language is the basis to learn other subjects. It also recommends for strengthening the early literacy component in the training programs designed for the preschool and grade one teachers.*

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## INTRODUCTION

### Why Early Literacy in Preschool Years?

Early literacy is most popularly defined as—what young children know about reading and writing before they can actually read and write. In fact, early literacy skills begin to develop right from birth. Positive early experiences of a child with books and language provide the basis for success in learning to read. The first foundational years of a child's life are critical since the rate of development in these years is more rapid than at any other stage in an individual's life. About 90 per cent of brain development has already taken place by the time a child is six years of age, making the early years a crucial stage for intervention. Through studies, it is observed that from birth to age five the brain develops more rapidly than at any other stages of life. It is also most sensitive to influences from the external environment (such as cognitive stimulation, language development, care, imagination, etc.). Under the *Samagra Shiksha* scheme, the pre school program is recognised as a critical component of the current *Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat* programme, which focuses on basic early language and literacy learning, and early numeracy in early primary school grades, thus identifying the continuum from preschool to early school grades (Classes 1–3). Today the *Samagra Shiksha* scheme envisages the school as a continuum from Preschool to

senior secondary stage. The Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE Act) which came into effect in April 2010 also addressed Early Childhood Education under Section 11 of the Act which states “with a view to prepare children above the age of 3 years for elementary education and to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of six years, the appropriate government may make necessary arrangements for providing free pre-school education for such children”. Goal 4.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals 2030, adopted by the Government of India states that “by 2030, all girls and boys should have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education”. Add proper references and also provide the link of the website in reference section. There are many kinds of research that suggest that preschool experiences are linked with later primary school achievement and social and emotional wellbeing of children. Preschool education is a smart investment that a country like India should make to promote sustainable learning opportunities for all children. This would prevent the repetition of grades and dropout rates in primary classes. How young children acquire early literacy, has gained the attention of educators and policymakers. This can be clearly seen in the draft National Education Policy, 2019 (NEP) where the emphasis has been given to preschool education and

foundational literacy and numeracy. In the light of the current draft policy (NEP, 2019) the teachers and teacher educators in ECE are being asked to have an understanding of quality parameters of ECE, i.e., issues and challenges in ECE, how to provide rich, and meaningful early literacy experiences to all our young children who come to anganwadis and/or preschool centers.

UNESCO describes literacy as being capable of identifying, knowing, reading, developing, interacting, computing and using printed materials associated with different contexts. It involves a learning continuum to enable individuals to achieve their goals, develop their knowledge and potential, and fully participate in their community and wider society. Despite the fact that there is a strong relationship between early literacy learning and later academic success, very limited attention has been drawn on this aspect. Still, the pre-school and early primary grades teachers are not actually working together. There is a need to focus on how the teachers should work together for sustainable development.

To bring quality in primary school education and enhance the literacy levels of primary school children, it is essential that the standard of preschool literacy level should be improved and continuity needs to be maintained in early primary classes. For this there's a need to pay attention

to few important parameters such as what experiences the young children are bringing from home, inputs of pre-service training and in-service training/workshops for teachers, parents involvement in pre-school activities (at the school and at home). Apart from this, the teacher-child ratio, classroom display, and overall environment, interactions among teacher and children on one- to- one basis, child to child interactions, play in small groups, availability of age and developmentally appropriate teaching-learning materials and pedagogical practices are some very important elements of quality preschool education that would help to attain early learning outcomes (ELOs). These parameters also would help to achieve other domains that are interdependent and interrelated namely—physical and motor, socio-emotional, linguistic, cognitive, and aesthetic appreciation development.

### **Objectives**

The major objectives of the research paper are to—

1. study the preschool language learning environment,
2. develop and equip early literacy materials for children in activity areas,
3. provide inputs to teachers by using a variety of materials, and learning strategies,
4. follow the interventions by using a sustainable monitoring mechanism with the support of RIE faculty.

**What were included in the Early Literacy Activity Area or Zone?**

The focus was on child-initiated play in activity areas where each activity area was created and organised keeping the literacy in the context. Each activity area was developed into an interesting and valuable place for early literacy learning. These were stocked with developmentally appropriate materials so that children would get an opportunity to use and see the labels and print in a variety of ways such as when making a card for the parents or grandparents, teachers used to encourage children to use alphabet stamps to print the letter with which their name begins for example— teacher calls out and say, “Beena, you have ‘B’ in the beginning, so try to find out the letter stamp with ‘B’ on it and print with it on the card.” Each area was equipped with a variety of print-rich materials—both information and graded storybooks, song picture books, big books, puppets, dolls, writing tables, running blackboard, chalks, crayons, lined and unlined papers along with writing tools (Thick crayons, markers, chalks). All areas have rug, small chairs and cushions. Each activity area was duly labeled with their names. These areas were further divided into zones using a rug or a shelf as a divider. Sometimes for example, in the block building area, children create own story about their construction (e.g., what they build with blocks). They also label and make signs for their buildings so as to make early attempts at functional writing. In these well-designed

areas, children use language to communicate and exchange ideas and thus would increase their fluency and vocabulary. Materials and supplies that are frequently were kept in clearly labeled boxes. The activity area also has a ‘word wall’, age-appropriate sight words chart displayed at the eye level of children, attendance signing chart, alphabet charts, number charts, classroom job responsibilities chart and storage shelves that were duly labeled with print and pictures for easy accessibility of play materials for children, and so on. Samples of children’s work were also displayed at the eye level. They had also introduced the ‘technology area’ although teachers still need to be guided about how to use it with children.

**What kind of Intervention Strategies were used?**

It has been assumed that pre-requisites of preschool personnel are well trained and qualified pre-school teachers who are groomed to handle young children and equipped with certain professional skills that helped them to offer high quality print rich and emotionally supportive early learning environments for young children so that they could reach their full potential. During the designing and interventions in these preschools, the preschool personnel of all the four RIEs has been guided on creating the print rich environment and duly labeled activity areas to provide meaningful experiences that were provided through variety of activities using activity areas in the

classroom. The teachers were guided to create a print-rich environment in the classrooms by using a variety of pedagogical practices to promote early literacy. The investigator created the eight activity areas in the model preschools. These were— reading area or language area, block building area, dolls area, discovery area (early science area), manipulative area, art area, writing area, music and movement area, water and sand play area. Apart from offering free play facilities in small groups to explore and interact with the materials in these areas, the purpose was to make these areas meaningfully print rich and thus care was taken to integrate language and early literacy learning into the classroom environment along with all aspects of a preschool program. Promoting literacy in these activity areas for example, putting labels along with numerals in these areas, adding literacy related play materials such as alphabet and number dominoes, blocks, alphabet puzzles, graded storybooks, story cards, etc. The investigator also organised a one week orientation program for all the teachers. Before the interventions, four days training program for the development of teaching-learning materials and three days short training program on emergent and early literacy for the preschool and grade one teachers of the sampled preschools was also organised. That was intended to raise teachers' capacity in pre-school education (PSE). Even the children were small and not able

to actually read, but looking at the pictures, graphic images with print accompanying these, and other prints in the environment helps children make connections between what is heard and said and the written symbols of language. Thus, the teachers need to focus on how a young child learns and how to prepare each child of her classroom to move from preschool to grade one. For example, apart from promoting literacy in activity areas, read aloud, phonological awareness activities, labeling on the learning material boxes, attendance signing chart for children at the eye level and sign at the time of entry to the classroom were used. These were just a few examples of transactional strategies for early literacy. However, as said earlier, teachers need to learn about the pedagogical practices for strengthening the early literacy domain at the preschool stage.

### **How to support and enhance young children's early literacy experiences at the preschool stage?**

- Creating a print-rich environment and promoting literacy in activity areas at the preschool is the first and utmost priority of all the teachers. Accordingly, the teacher is supposed to plan how to use the environment to enhance children's learning. One of the most important responsibilities of the preschool and early primary grade teachers is to help young children develop skills in language and literacy.

- The way the children perceive, imitate and reflect on their experiences depends mainly on their skill of using verbal symbols. Secondly, a well-planned schedule or a preschool programme that has ample opportunities for both whole group and small group activities, teacher and child initiated activities such as storytelling by teacher and children looking at the books (print and picture) in the reading area or during circle time.
- Creating a reading area or language and literacy area is another important crucial area at the time of zoning of areas. Children need to be given lots of opportunities to listen, talk, pretend, look at, read aloud and explore writing so that they view themselves as literate.
- Storytelling or read aloud is a must do activity where the teacher reads the front and back cover, moves her finger beneath the print and draws children's attention towards print. Talking, singing, language games such as word games, sound discrimination games, matching sounds with printed letters, hunting the letters, etc., are some of the popular language and literacy games.
- Every part of the preschool education program should offer them opportunities for early literacy development. For this, teachers need to engage all her children coming from different backgrounds, having varying abilities and also connect with their families so that she could help them reach their full potential. The journey of early literacy begins before the child enters early primary school as the children listen to stories, sing songs or rhymes and play games in their social environment. Unfortunately, all the children do not get the appropriate literacy-rich environment during their early years.
- It is, therefore, the quality of the preschool environment which is very essential for language building interactions where children learn from age and developmentally appropriate play materials and resources. First of all, children need exposure to oral language experiences and activities, such as read aloud stories, reading labels and signs in the environment along with the teacher. The teachers need to further build the skills of children that they would require as they move to early primary grades. It is the pre-school teachers who have to take the lead and make major contributions so the children flourish in early literacy through play activities and experiences. In the study conducted by the investigator, storytelling is a daily activity of the preschool. Strong foundations in early literacy help children in making them ready for primary school education and develop a positive attitude towards lifelong learning. This is attained through the development of four basic language skills, i.e.,

listening, speaking, and in terms of early years of education, it is reading readiness and writing readiness.

- Developing a sustainable foundation in early literacy empowers young children to continue and complete their elementary and senior school education, and thus the chances to go for higher education increases to a great extent. Therefore, it is essential that whatever language experiences are provided need to be meaningful and functional so that children can use these for a range of purposes in their daily routine activities. The study also recommended linkages between pre-school and early primary grades as it is an area of concern for different stakeholders. It is recommended that there is a need to have a continuum in curriculum planning and transactional strategies with early primary

grades especially in language and literacy for a smooth transition.

To sum up, designing such training programs for both the preschool and early grades teachers is the need of the hour. It is a well-known fact that appropriate professional teacher development opportunities for building teacher knowledge in language and early literacy domains are critical to the future academic success of children. Children who have strong foundational skills in language and early literacy enter grade one smoothly without any stress and are ready to learn read and write age appropriately. All preschool and early primary grade teachers play a very important role in enhancing early literacy interests and abilities of young children in their care. Therefore, teachers should give appropriate attention to issues of continuity in language and early literacy pedagogy during transitions from preschool to early primary grades also.

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