



**TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY LANGUAGE AND  
LITERACY EDUCATION-TOWARDS INFORMED TEACHING PRACTICES**

**Seema Sharma<sup>1</sup> & Priya Khurana<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Assistant Professor in Education, Aditi Mahavidyalaya, University of Delhi*

<sup>2</sup>*Assistant Professor in Education, Aditi Mahavidyalaya, University of Delhi*

**Abstract**

*Early Language and Literacy Education (ELLE) is a major predictor and precursor of the child's lifelong learning. Reading and writing being the foundational skills provide a strong base for the child's later educational pursuits. ELLE is a significant academic subject with its own knowledge base in the western context whereas in India it still struggles to find its space. Several governmental and non-governmental organizations have conducted noteworthy work on literacy education resulting in remarkable achievements. However, the challenges to providing effective language and literacy education are many. The present teacher education programmes fail to adequately orient the teachers towards approaches to teach literacy. This calls for urgent attention from early years practitioners to address these concerns by strengthening literacy education in schools. It is here that the continuing professional development programmes come into fore to fill up the lacunae between current pedagogical trends and prevalent practices in school. Thus, in the present paper the researcher has attempted to build a case for teachers' professional development in ELLE to equip them with the required competencies to cater to the literacy needs of young children.*

**Key words:** *Early Language, Early Literacy, Language Education, Literacy Education, Teacher Education, Professional Development*



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### ***Introductory Paragraphs***

Early Literacy refers to the acquisition of reading and writing abilities that children develop, without formal instruction, before they begin to read and write in a conventional way. It actually begins at a much earlier age than most expect.

Effective early literacy intervention is the major predictor of the child's lifelong learning. It plays a key role in enabling the kind of early learning experiences that research shows are linked with academic achievement, reduced grade retention, higher graduation rates and enhanced productivity in adult life. In fact, achievement of all goals of education depends on the ability to read and write.

### **Awareness and Understanding of Literacy**

Examining the conceptualization of literacy it would not be wrong to say that literacy has come a long way since the Doordarshan advertisement (Purab se surya uga, faila ujjara.....) of Each One Teach One movement under Rashtriya Saksharta Mission (1988). Initially, literacy was understood as the ability to sign one's name or to learn to decode the text (Census of India, 2011). This had inadvertently become the evidence of literacy. Later it began to be viewed as a skill necessary for academic purposes and economic independence. However, this conception was also criticized by the literacy researchers as being inadequate. They argued that literacy can not be seen as an end in itself when in reality it is a means to almost all other learning. The effective language and literacy skills pave way for human empowerment. The position paper on Early Language and Literacy (2016) also takes the stance that **literacy is not an end in itself, but is a means to most other learning and social and economic empowerment**. It further stresses that if the intent of education is to enable people to live to their fullest potential in modern-day societies, and to be able to participate as citizens of a democratic society, then, literacy needs to be aligned with those goals and

viewed as a broader and more complex construct—one that encompasses social, cultural, economic and political domains.

### **Early literacy-A world view**

‘Emergent literacy’, as a comparatively newer premise in the context of early literacy, is a term first used by Marie Clay to describes young children’s interaction with books and other print material leading to the development of pre-reading and pre-writing skills, even before they read or write in the conventional sense. Emergent literacy is a significant factor in the early learning success. Literacy learning begins very early in life. It develops through constant interactions with people and the environment. If the experiences of children are supported by adults through meaningful interactions, then new vocabulary in context is learnt by the child leading to effective literacy acquisition.

### **Early Language & Literacy-The Indian Context**

Reading and writing are foundational skills; without being able to read, write well, a child cannot progress in the education system. Unfortunately, learning to read and write is still a rocket science in India. The quality of literacy education has been steadily on the decline in spite of some major policy interventions. Literacy outcomes are unacceptably poor, particularly in Government and rural schools. Though, the governmental efforts such as **UEE, SSA, RTE** etc. have borne quantitative fruits, qualitatively we still lag far behind. The major policy documents in the recent past have also pointed to the need to consider early language and literacy more seriously. The **Padhe Bharat Bhade Bharat** initiative by the Government of India has articulated a vision for 3 R’s i.e. early reading, writing and mathematics, mainly for Classes 1 and 2. It states its first goal as ‘to enable children to become motivated, independent and engaged readers and writers with comprehension

possessing sustainable and lasting reading and writing skills and achieve learning levels appropriate to the class of study'. The picture is not a very pleasant one in urban schools too. Recent researches indicate that children's reading comprehension and writing fluency levels are at an all time low still. Though, after massive intervention policies and programmes the need for reading has come to the fore but it is still limited to the decoding of letters. Writing instruction, explicitly, still has not been able to achieve that standing in the discussions of educationists. Worryingly in schools, writing is understood as being able to produce perfect letters on page and is synonymously used for handwriting. The opportunities provided to children for written expression are copying text from the blackboard, the mundane letter to a friend or an application to the principal to essays on a few routine topics. These tasks neither provide the required exposure to express nor do anything to enhance child's thinking abilities. In this background, enabling children to use reading and writing as a means to achieve higher level personal and societal goals seems to be a distant dream. The **National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT)** has developed '**Learning Indicators**' (2014) that focuses on class-wise learning outcomes, thereby supplementing the stage-wise curricular expectations in the **National Curriculum Framework (NCF) (2005)** and the syllabi developed in concurrence with the NCF. None of these policy documents explicitly address the pre-school age group of 3-6 years. It is noteworthy that it is during these years that the foundations of literacy are laid and can be effectively complemented with the provision of relevant and meaningful learning experiences to the children. The young children, thus, should be provided with opportunities to participate and engage as emergent readers and writers for an extended period of time (e.g., 3-6 years of age) before being expected to develop into conventional readers and writers (6-8 years of age).

### **Curricular Concerns in Literacy Teaching**

Literacy teaching in Indian schools presents a dismal picture. Though many policies and programmes have been continually implemented to support literacy learning and teaching in schools, the never ending pressure of completing the prescribed syllabus and engagement with other clerical tasks leave the teachers with no time to fruitfully implement the programmes. The limited competence of teachers, further results in non-achievement of objectives of these programmes. There are other factors also that compound the difficulties in literacy acquisition of children. As enlisted in the Early Language and Literacy Paper (2016) these are: **the rigid curriculum, the premium placed by the system on standard language, the devaluation of the child's home language, the tendency to treat the child as 'tabula rasa' discounting the rich understanding of oral language and other competencies the child brings to the classroom, the perception of multi-linguality in the classroom as an obstacle to the teaching of language and literacy rather than as a resource, the primacy of the textbook over the child's lived experience and the absence of the child's voice in the classroom.** All these serve to further alienate the child from the pleasure of engaging with reading and writing.

### **Current Status of Early Language and Literacy Education in India**

The real concern of Early Literacy in the Indian context is inappropriate, erroneous and untested instructional methods. Children struggle due to incorrect pedagogy of language teaching and de-contextualized textbook. What needs to be blamed is the blatant disregard in understanding intricacies of Early Literacy Education. Setting correct instructional methods for language acquisition at an early stage, thus, is the need of the hour. The present teacher education programmes fail to adequately orient the pre-service/in-service teachers towards approaches to teaching early language and literacy. Teachers go to the classes without sound

understanding of the nature of language and literacy learning and the theoretical premises on which the various approaches of literacy instruction are based. They do not find themselves sufficiently equipped to choose approaches suited to individual and group needs.

Early Language and Literacy Education, with its own theory and knowledge base, is a significant academic subject in the western context whereas in India the ground realities suggest that it is still in its infancy. There are Degree programmes exclusively focusing on Early Literacy Education in Universities outside India. A few are:

**Table 1: Programms on Early Language and Literacy outside India**

S.No.	Name of the Program	University	Country
1	PG Diploma Early Literacy / MA Early Literacy	University Wales	of United Kingdom
2	Master of Science in Education: Major in Early Childhood Literacy	University Wilkes	Of Barre, Pennsylvania
3	PG Diploma Children and Young People's Literacy, Language and Literature	University Strathclyde	of United Kingdom
4	Early Literacy Graduate Certificate Program	University Nebraska-Lincoln	Of Canada

These programmes mentioned in the above list are for reference purpose only. Apart from these there are many other certificate/diploma/degree programmes available for specialized

study in the area of Early Language and Literacy Education. Whereas, back home, in India, this is taught as one of the topics of one of the courses of Diploma/Degree programmes in Education. Here also, due to lack of well-informed, contextualized resources available for literacy education and the subject competence of teacher educators, the teachers do not get sufficiently equipped to teach literacy. Thus, literacy teaching is happening in a sporadic manner in schools which results in poor achievement levels of literacy in our schools.

The following table provides an overview of the placement of Early Language and Literacy Education in the initiatives of some national level institutions and publications.

**Table 2: Placement of Early Language and Literacy Education in Indian Educational System**

S.No.	Institution	Program/Publication	Year	Placement of Early Language Education in Curriculum
1	NCERT	Position Paper-Early Childhood Education	2006	Talks of pre-literacy and active games to promote early literacy
2	NCTE (Guidelines)	Diploma in ECCE	2010	COURSE VIII Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education Unit II Development of language and communication

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				Course	VI
3	NCTE (Guidelines)	Diploma in Pre-School Education	2014	Development of Language and Literacy in Children Does not talk about the Early Language component at course level. (Detailed scheme could not be procured)	
4	SCERT, Delhi	Diploma in ECCE	2014		
5	SCERT, Chandigarh	Diploma in Pre-School Education	2015	Development of Language and Literacy in Children Talks of learning indicators in Hindi and English for Classes I onwards. Works as a resource center for Pre- school and Primary Education.	VI
6	NCERT	Learning Indicators	2014		
7	NCERT-DEE	National Documentation Unit	2014		
8	NCERT-DEE	Barkha Series and other reading Resources (Padhne ki samajh, Padhne ki dehleez par, etc.) for teachers were developed	2007 till date	The resources were used during a pilot project in Mathura Schools for Classes I onwards.	

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This present status calls for urgent attention from early years practitioners as they have a vital role to play in addressing these concerns by strengthening the early years of language and literacy education, both in terms of teacher education, and classroom processes and practices. It is here that the continuing professional development programmes come into play to fill up the lacunae between current pedagogical trends and prevalent practices in school.

### **Teachers' competence – a decisive factor in Early Years Education**

Early Childhood Educators are expected to have thorough understanding of child development and various aspects of early years education so as to be able to

- provide conducive learning environment and rich educational experiences to young learners
- include all those who are less advantaged and vulnerable
- engage learners of varying abilities and from diverse backgrounds
- connect with and engage families and community

The quality of Early Childhood Education depends greatly on the educators and education received by them. Thus it becomes imperative to ensure that Early Childhood Educators are sufficiently equipped to provide the young people with an enriched learning environment to nurture their linguistic and socio-cognitive skills and values and prepare them for life long learning.

Researches reveal that the knowledge, skills, disposition and practices of teachers are significant factors in determining how much a young child learns and develops his literacy skills. Teachers are expected to have thorough understanding of language development and various aspects of early years education so as to be able to provide conducive learning environment and rich linguistic experiences to young learners which help foster reading, writing in them. Early childhood professionals have come to realize the importance of

language and literacy in preparing children to succeed in school, but the ground realities are quite different. The poor quality of language education in schools is a direct result of poor quality of teacher education and teacher training. Thus, the key to making improvement in learning outcomes is to invest in preparing better qualified teachers having sound knowledge of literacy pedagogy.

### **Teachers' Professional Development-A way forward**

Research (**Position Paper on ECCE-2006, NCFTE-2010**) indicates that the quality of the curriculum and variety of reference material used for early childhood education and the **kind of training teachers and teacher educators receive** as early childhood educators **have direct implications when it comes to ensuring the learning conditions for children**. Thus, there is need to evolve specially designed programmes at the degree and post-degree levels for the training of teachers and teacher educators. One possibility is to develop the M.Ed. as a teacher educator training programme with specialization in pre-school/elementary/ secondary teacher education. Also, specialized degree programs for early childhood educators can be developed to address the need of ECE sector.

When designed well these programmes/opportunities help teachers master content, hone teaching skills and address challenges that they face in the classrooms. Thus, quality continuing professional development (CPD) is necessary to ensure that teachers are able to meet the demands of diverse children needs, engage parents, as well as become active agents of their own professional growth. Also, sustained professional development of teachers is associated with more positive and stimulating teacher behavior and positive child outcomes.

**The policy paper on Early Language and Literacy (2016) explicitly states that there is currently no position paper in the country that addresses issues related exclusively to early language and literacy. It further reiterates that the position paper is envisioned as**

**a document that will enable policy makers and educators (practitioners and academicians) to develop a set of informed practices in the area of language and literacy development for young children.** This categorically points towards the ill-informed practices prevalent in the early literacy sector, as it is clear that in absence of any such document, research based programmes addressing the curricular and training needs of this area cannot be made available. **The paper on Early Language and Literacy (2016) also calls for orientation workshops/ trainings and teacher education programmes for building the conceptual understanding required for supporting a comprehensive early language and literacy programme.**

### **Conclusion**

Thus, in the light of the above discussion, it can be stated that a strong need for equipping and empowering the early years' cadre is felt. The dearth of contextual reference material and quality professional development programmes for teachers in the area of Early Language and Literacy Education needs to be compensated for. Thus, the author suggests developing a professional development programme pertaining to Early Language and Literacy Education for in-service teachers with the objective of equipping them with the required competencies to cater to the literacy needs of young children.

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