Interview

Sadhna Saxena (SS) and Neema Chaurasia (NC) talk to Shobha Sinha (SHS)

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NC: Dr. Sinha, you have had a long experience of working in the field of emergent literacy. What drew you to this field, initially?

SHS: No, actually initially, I was not drawn to this field. While doing my B.Ed. from CIE, I taught English in the high school for my practice teaching. After that I taught in a school in different grades including fourth and fifth. In that school, they gave primary grades to less experienced teachers! Soon, I proceeded to do my Masters in Education from America where I found out that most interesting things were happening in elementary education. So, I ended up in the department of elementary education in the University of Illinois for my Ph.D., because most of the interesting reading courses were offered there. While teaching in a school in India, I had developed an interest in children who came from low socio-economic and low-literacy homes. So later, when I was looking for research assistantship in the Center of Study of Reading in the University of Illinois, I became interested in a research study which was dealing with what at that time they called "at-risk of failure" pre-school children from low socio-economic homes. I got my assistantship in that project, but I didn't realise how much one needed to understand about early literacy till I was asked to go and observe children when they engaged with literacy. That was the point when I became interested in emergent literacy and worked in the area.

NC: Could you please tell us what is meant by emergent literacy and about its roots in psychology and other disciplines?

SHS: See, generally research in literacy is multidisciplinary. Its roots are in cognitive psychology, psycholinguistics, literacy theory and developmental psychology. Initially a lot of work using developmental approach was in cognitive development and oral language, and then it came to literacy. In the 1980s, work from

anthropological perspective and other perspectives started looking at social and cultural aspects of literacy. Because, after all, every child does not have identical experiences with literacy and language at home. For example, Shirley Brice Heath's work was very influential.

SS: Could you please elaborate on the relationship between developmental psychology and literacy?

SHS: Piaget's work in developmental psychology had been there for a long time, but people didn't connect it with literacy. Literacy was following its own track at that time and was influenced by behaviourism. See one approach in literacy which existed earlier was that you teach something step by step, and they learn mostly about phonics because the early definition of reading was that reading is decoding. So the job is simple, you teach them decoding they'll know how to read. So you did a lot of stuff with phonics and sub-skills, you know, you drill them.
The contribution of developmental psychology was that it drew attention to many things which you don't overtly teach children. First of all, it considered the age from birth to six years very important; that was Bruner's contribution; years which were neglected in reading. What happens during those years? Let me explain development by an illustration. For example, this whole concept of "approximation", which you accept in oral language. When a very small child doesn't speak the word exactly as adult say it, you don't panic. You don't start correcting/rejecting him. But in literacy, you will see that even very knowledgeable people start panicking when the spelling is wrong, even in Grade 1, or when a child can't read the word exactly. There were interesting studies and one researcher had noticed that in a literate society, many children who were not taught overtly, could read. So what was happening with these children? How

exactly did they learn to read? If a child is surrounded by print, it's safe to assume that the child would think something about it. In developmental perspective, first of all you look at reading from a child's point of view/perspective and secondly you don't see approximation as errors, you appreciate that they have reached there. You are willing to accept the fact that the children will take note of their environment whether its language or other things and they think about it, they use it and they'll make their own rules about it. And you don't impose an adult view on them, you see and appreciate it from their point of view. One formula I teach my students is, see how different children are from you, which is very easy to see as they are not reading or speaking like you, but also think about what they know about reading and writing.

SS: So, developmental perspective teaches us the importance of approximation in reading. I would still ask you to please tell us more precisely what is meant by emergent literacy?

SHS: Three or four points. First of all, that you don't see literacy as either-or, that the person is literate or that person is not literate. Just as in oral language, you don't say to a child that NOW this child is speaking, at three or four years or whenever. You value even the earlier attempts of the child and you respond to them. So, in early literacy, one of the things was getting rid of this either-or dichotomy. You see literacy development in a continuum including even earliest attempts, in reading and writing. For example, this classic case when a researcher didn't pay attention to her child, the child wrote R U DF, for "Are you deaf?"
Of course this is not how adults write. But here you start seeing what is the child actually paying attention to. And it's not really bad, the child listens to the main consonants and how they are conveying the meaning. Now, if you don't use an

emergent literacy perspective, you'll reject it because it is wrong, this is not how we write. But if you look at it from [the] children's point of view, they know some things, they are not zero. The researchers did studies of children's scribblings, and they noticed that the children knew things like directionality, and their early writings look a little bit like words although they are not real words. The researchers studied scribbling in different languages like Hebrew, English and all; and found that children's scribbling actually resembled the language in which the children were being raised. So, the child observes and tries and we don't reject that. I think it is a pity that if you don't use a developmental perspective in literacy, you lose all that data. I mean two children who are showing different levels, you reject both of them thinking that they are not correct. Second thing is that in early literacy, you also include more functional aspects of reading and writing. So a child does something with reading and writing with the help of another adult probably. Maybe an adult can write what a child dictates, or later on the child writes the main sounds of her name, or you read a story and the child enjoys it. Maybe the child doesn't read it alone, she reads it with an adult, who reads it to the child, but it is still reading. Maybe the child rereads it with somebody else, the story that an adult has read to her and she is kind of guessing based on the pictures, that is pretend reading. I have known parents telling me that children are not reading, they are just pretending to read. But in emergent literacy we would call it reading, developmental reading. These are their legitimate attempts to literacy. Even when the child dictates a story and somebody else writes it, the child's effort is there because she composed it and she can see that in writing.
Let me give you an example of a very interesting assessment process. Suppose two children are dictating a story to you and the first one just keeps on dictating,

does not pay attention even when you are writing slower than her speaking. The other child stops when she sees that you have not yet written. The two children's behaviour is different. The first one doesn't know what print and sound correspondence is, the other one has figured that out. So, it is yet another developmental stage. To sum up, approximation is accepted, which is a legitimate thing, it's not either-or, it is in a continuum, it's functional, and you can do it with a more expert person. All of this is fine!

SS: It's very interesting as it opens up a new conceptual understanding of literacy, where every effort by a child, whether in writing or reading, is development.

SHS: We see, even though people have not studied child development or language development, how do they talk even with very small children? You match your language with what children are saying, approximate it, and complete it for them; and you never say that children don't know. In fact, parents are very proud even if their child can say part of the word. They will brag about it, sometimes even bore people with stories about how their child said something. But the moment you go to a classroom, in a formal setting, you forget what you already know about children and expect exact things.

NC: Historically, how did the understanding evolve from a step-by-step process of decoding to a continuum or emergent literacy?

SHS: Around the 1950s and 60s, the impact of Chomsky's work was felt in many fields, and around the second half of the 1960s, when the seminal work of Goodman came out, things started changing.
One of the things that Chomsky did was to very systematically attack the behaviourist psychology of Skinner, who was so dominant at that time. What used to happen in early literacy at that time

was step-by-step practice of different parts, like visual perception, auditory discrimination, visual discrimination, and so on. You saw it mostly as visual, you look at the symbols and convert them, basically you decode, and that was reading. Goodman viewed it very differently; and one of the phrases that he used was, "reading as psycho-linguistic guessing game" (Goodman, 1967). Now look at this change; from the accurate perception to what he was talking about—guessing game.

SS: This is while reading?

SHS: Yes, while reading . . . the reader does something, quite a bit in fact. One of the reasons why the reader has to be very active is because accurate mapping of the oral language into the text is not possible. Let me give you an example. You take a word like "nirapraadh" (नारिपराध), it's one word, right? I give this word sometimes to my students and they say "nir-paraadh" (नारि — पराध). That's not wrong actually, but if you say "nirapraadh" – नारि — अपराध, you are using your prior knowledge of the word to choose this alternative. So even in Hindi, where we are very proud that we do exact mapping, it is not possible.
And another shift that was happening was that instead of merely decoding, they started seeing reading as comprehending. They were now thinking about the active role of the reader. They thought about the prior knowledge (schema) that you bring to reading. You can "read" a sentence, but you may not know what it means. In their experiments, researchers developed those kinds of sentences. For instance, one was, "The notes went sour because the seams split". Now if you look at each word, they are quite simple—notes, went, sour, seams, split. We know all these words. And yet sometimes, the sentence just doesn't make any sense. But if you are thinking about a musical instrument such as bagpipes, all of a sudden it makes complete sense. So they did a lot of experiment, which established that the

background knowledge of the reader about the topic was very significant.

SS: See, when you say that one thread is coming from the Chomskian critique of behaviourism, as a result of which the focus shifted on the reader, the effort that the reader makes. But where do you place Goodman's work and Frank Smith's work in this?

SHS: Frank Smith, in fact, if I remember correctly, actually acknowledges Chomsky's work. They were all influenced by that. And they were, I think, also getting a bit saturated by people who were working within the behaviouristic framework. Many of reading researchers were beginning to see that a strictly behaviouristic perspective was not able to explain the complexities of reading process. So they clearly acknowledged Chomsky's work.

SS: But people are able to learn reading and writing through phonics and decoding method. How?

SHS: But you have to ask yourself if that is all that they were doing? It is true that even now in schools, the focus is on phonics, but is that all the exposure that children from literate homes are getting?

SS: So the emphasis in the classrooms may be on phonics, but actually a lot more is happening in their lives, because of which such students end up learning reading and writing.

SHS: Yes, if you come from a literate environment where things are happening, and you are also seeing print everyday around you. I think the phonics method is more damaging to children who come from low-literacy homes. However, exactly the opposite argument is made generally, that they need to know phonics, otherwise where will they pick it up from? Only phonics, that is. And I have a lot of problems with that because children need

to see that literacy is functional, and it should be interesting. All these messages, children don't get in school.

SS: I think it is important to underline this fact that children coming from low-literacy background are forced into a very rigid process of phonics and decoding.

SHS: Yes, nowadays, they use the term balanced approach, but sometimes you feel that the swing is more towards phonics and decoding.

SS: What is 'whole language approach'?

SHS: It is not easy to define all these things, that is the whole language approach or the balanced approach. Goodman had written this book, What's whole in whole language? He says that first of all, all the language systems should go together—syntax, semantics and phonics—because the language is broken if you remove any one of those components. But he also elaborated later in his work, that for a language to be whole for anybody, it has to be relevant and interesting. If you are just drilling something, he said, it won't be a whole language.
In India, we should be really worrying about why comprehension did not hold a major place in reading instruction. And why do we just look at it as a product, why don't we try and engage with the process?

SS: So, reading is for comprehending and meaning making, not first uttering the words "correctly"?

SHS: I would go even further. I follow Rosenblatt's writings, who says that you engage with the text in multiple ways. Sometimes we feel that we read to get the information. But we also engage with the text for "lived through" experiences in stories and literature. Why don't we teach that to our children?

SS: Shouldn't this be common sense, that reading is for comprehension?

SHS: They will all tell you that reading is for comprehension and you wait, you'll get there one day. First, children need to learn decoding and all that stuff! They just don't understand that in a conducive environment, the moment children see written text, they begin engaging with it, reading it.
One very poignant instance in Professor Krishna Kumar's "Ashok ki Kahani" was about a 2nd standard child in Madhya Pradesh reading lines about "ye pathaari ilaka hai", which is where he lives. Every day he crosses that area to reach school, but he makes no connection. He doesn't know that you can connect it with your life, or with surroundings or anything like that. I would really like you to note this point, that comprehension and engagement hasn't become a very important part of the reading discourse in India, which has its consequences.

SHS: You see, if you look at the discourse of reading, it is not very well developed in our country compared to others, but it is getting more attention nowadays. And I must say that in the "Padhe Bharat, Badhe Bharat" and "Mathura Pilot Project", an NCERT initiative, they do talk about comprehension very specifically. But when the draft of "Padhe Bharat, Badhe Bharat" was circulated, one NGO was very angry, and wrote that reading is decoding. All the other things like print rich environment should be put on a supplementary list, the key thing is decoding. So, where do you hear about comprehension as a main source of concern or worry? Where do you hear people talking about engaging with the text?

SS: And what about research in literacy?

SHS: First of all, compared to what we need to do in terms of literacy, we are doing very little. Then there are no

systematic efforts in research and theory building. Since I came here in 1996, most of the time I am making an argument about the importance of literacy, literacy education, literacy research, lamenting that it is ignored. Our knowledge base is very weak. Some people do literacy work intuitively, some good work also. But systematic knowledge base, theory-building, this is not something that we have done.
Lack of understanding on the developmental perspective is just appalling. I remember reading an article where children's "early writing" was described as "crude attempts to writing" [sic]. If you had a developmental perspective, will you call early writing a "crude attempt to writing" [sic]? This is because we don't have a research culture. If you had studied more intensively about invented spellings and all, which has been around for a while, why would you call children's early writings "crude attempts to writing" [sic]?
One more important thing is that a lot has to be invested in building teachers' knowledge; the teacher has to be knowledgeable. Also, the question is, how much do we trust our teachers? Also, are we capitalizing on ideas that work in our country? Do we have even descriptive accounts of that? Not having a research culture is really detrimental to our own understanding.

SS: How does this impact classroom teaching?

SHS: Once I was asked a question that in a class of 70, how can you do this? And my answer was, in a class of 70, every method, even phonics, would collapse. But let me tell you, even in classrooms that I have observed which had 20 or 15 children, there were problems because the basic understanding was not there. We don't realize that even if you have created somewhat more optimal conditions in terms of the student teacher ratio, teachers' understanding is still very

crucial. You actually have to invest in the teachers, trust them and trust the children as well. Even in a very conventional classroom, you can devote some time to Language Experience Approach, writing morning messages, reading aloud and letting children turn over the books, feeling comfortable with the content reading or their book talk. Start with that, at least give them scope for doing that slowly. Teachers also need to interact with each other and talk about their experiences. So you have to actually capitalize on teachers' experiences to develop a more robust program.

NC: Our school education is mostly exam-oriented. What kind of changes are required in the evaluation system to make literacy acquisition more meaningful?

SHS: Of course, evaluation is very closely tied to the size of the classroom. As I said, if you have a huge classroom, then evaluation based on observations becomes difficult. Observations are a very important part of early literacy assessment. Some of it was happening in the Mathura Pilot Project, though not to the fullest potential. Teachers were writing diaries or comments on what they saw children do. For example, if you have a reading corner in the classroom, how many children are going there? Or, which child is never going? But you need some support to do these kind of very important observations. By that I mean, one needs to observe what children are actually doing. What kind of texts they are inclined to read? What kind of discussions are taking place in the classrooms, and so on.

SS: Are some studies happening here in India?

PS: Yes some, but there is not much emphasis on engagement with reading; relatively more focus is on aspects like phonological awareness. In Delhi University some of my students and I have tried to do a few studies. In these studies,

we have tried to see what happens in literacy at the pre-school levels. The studies are done at different stages.

NC: Is the emergent literacy concept implementable in Indian schools?

SHS: Many researchers in India say that an early literacy model is not relevant to India because it is talking about a different, very literate context—countries like New Zealand, United States, UK, and all those places. My question is, how much do we understand our own context in India? I had to rethink the term "non-literate" when I did my field work in Jharkhand. Very quickly, I realized that this absolute term doesn't do justice, because children interacted with their school going siblings, their neighbours, and dealt with some form of literacy. So they had some ideas of literacy. Remember, I said that the onset of literacy is not schooling, its way before that. Therefore, first of all we need to study, really do a lot of research in what are children really thinking? What do they come with to school? And that itself is a challenge.

NC: Do these concepts, that we use in the classroom nowadays, such as "reading readiness", need either to be done away with, or to be thought about again?

SHS: Reading readiness has its own history of many kind of ideas. If you call children's attempts legitimate, then where is this question that they have to be ready for reading? They are already reading from the point that they start, to the point they become a conventional reader. It's a continuous development.

SS: Is reading readiness contradictory to the understanding of emergent literacy?

SHS: Yes, it is. Emergent literacy came challenging "reading readiness" heavily. You can look at some of the earliest reviews, like Sulzby and Teale (2003), Teale and Sulzby (1986), very famous ones,

which used the term "emergent literacy". They talked about the critique of reading readiness and why it didn't work. At that time, reading readiness was under a lot of behaviouristic influence, which was challenged. But unfortunately, this term is used even nowadays in programmes in India. We don't engage with the terms very seriously, we don't really get into the depth, its history. You should always be looking at its critiques, you should always be looking at the nuances.

SS: So, the important point you are making is that reading readiness was critiqued and discarded in the West in the 1980s itself?

SHS: Yes, it was. Originally, reading readiness comes from a maturational perspective, which was applied even to physical things, that if you can hop, skip and jump, then you are ready to read. It was all about motor coordination, then visual perception; implying that you could divide it into 30-40 subskills. When you capture all those, then you move towards letter, then finally you read. But one crucial difference in America was that even in very bad programs, there is a library culture. Somebody sitting and reading out stories to children, teacher reading a story, even if she did it only after lunch to settle down very noisy children. Here, none of these things are happening in the classroom context.

NC: How do you see the first language of the learners connected to the acquisition of early literacy, especially in a formal educational set-up?

SHS: See that plays a very significant role. For example, you take one approach that is very important, which is called Language Experience Approach. In this approach, a child tells the story, and a more experienced adult, generally the teacher, would write it down. The adult is supposed to write it exactly as the child is narrating. The child may not know the

written language exactly, but will be able to see the correspondence of the oral and written language, and many things can happen. In the first language, obviously it is going to work. The child can tell a full story which the teacher can write. But, it also depends on the approach. Sometimes, the first language also becomes alien, depending on the way it is taught in the classroom. "Ashok ki Kahani" is a case in point. If a child is reading a text like "chal ghar par jhat-pat", what will she comprehend? You don't comprehend independent words, it has to be a whole text. So, the approach is very critical. And you should know the theoretical reasons why you are accepting children's language. You are not being sentimental, sweet, gentle or magnanimous in accepting students' languages. Theory informs us that these are valid language systems.

NC: If English is forced on students, how does it impact their learning?

SHS: In a multilingual country like India, I don't think you can start with one language, whether it is English or Hindi, or some other language. For example, children of migrant population speak different languages at home. Now is it possible in a school to provide literacy in all those languages, even if there is a policy that they have the right to get instruction in their mother tongue? I am not quite sure how that's going to happen. But I favour that you begin in two languages, it doesn't have to be one language.
Also, we don't capitalize on children's ability to pick up another language without inhibitions. The root cause of the problem is that we reject a child's own language. In a typical Indian classroom, a child is constantly interrupted/corrected for reading/speaking in her language. Thus, the first thing is that the classroom becomes insecure for the child; and second is, due to insecurity, the child will start resisting. The child will feel that her

language is under attack. She will become silent and stop engaging.

There is something called additive model; you know your language and you learn one more. I say "roti" at home and learnt to say "fulka" here in Delhi, right? But we are stuck with things like why did you say "machhi" and not "machhli"? And that is a major damage that you do to a person. You or the teachers also need to learn, right? For example, I don't know Bhojpuri, but if I am with children whose language is Bhojpuri, I can also start engaging and learning about it, right?

Therefore, the model should be additive, that I have mine but I am also adding to it; and not that to learn this language, I have to give up mine.

SS: Are you saying that not using the additive model has consequences for reading and writing, along with devaluing the students' experiences?

SHS: Major consequences for reading and writing. See, reading and writing has simple rules that the more you immerse, the more you learn. And if in the class the children are constantly interrupted to speak properly or speak in one language, then they will feel scared and not speak at all. Remember, rejection is more because of your language than because of your dress. It is going to be the same in reading as well as in writing, constant interruption, correction and rejection. If we as teachers accept diversity, then students would also do that. One last thing, which I will say a hundred times, that there is need for honest research to understand a child's point of view.

SS: Any other issue that you would like to raise in the context of literacy that we may have missed?

SHS: Yes, there is one more thing that you have not asked me. It is about the discourse on script, which is very dominant in India. The argument is that our languages are alpha syllabic unlike English and Latin, which are alphabetic. So, our languages are more consistent; and the research that is done on English and Latin doesn't apply to us. One, this is a very narrow conceptualization of reading. For example, I said about Goodman that he was talking about semantics, syntax, everything. He was not discussing script only. Then how can you say that research is not relevant here? To me, the centrally important issue that we have to remember is: we are educators dealing with children, and not technicians of language. We need to know the children, their social background, their languages, their other developmental issues, everything; and we don't do that.

It was also said that they (the western societies) are more literate, unlike us. So first of all what I have to say is that we should document the form in which the print resource is available in our environment, and how children are viewing it. And secondly, that the context is different, so it doesn't apply to us, their script is different, etc., are not valid arguments. It is clear that literacy in the context gives children more opportunities for immersing in literacy and also, for hypothesizing. So shouldn't we give them more opportunities? Can literacy be achieved without such opportunities, through short cuts of having one book? Research shows that there are no short cuts to literacy. The opportunities will have to be created, more investment will be required to have more children's literature, more exposure to print and less rigidity.

NC: Thank you so much for all that you have shared with us, what we asked, as well as for adding to it. It was really an enriching experience.

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