

Report

Reflections on OELP (Organisation for Early Literacy Promotion)

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Founded in January 2008, the Organisation for Early Literacy Promotion (OELP) vision statement reads as follows:

"To enhance the quality and responsiveness of the educational experience for all children regardless of their home backgrounds, so that they can learn with fullness and actualize their full potentials as active and empowered members of the contemporary world."

A recent two-day visit to OELP in Rajasthan with my 3rd year students of Elementary Education Programme set me thinking about the issues related to emergent literacy. Why is it that the majority of Class 4 or Class 5 children in MCD schools in Delhi are unable to read and write, while in the remote villages of Rajasthan, with OELP's intervention, children of Classes 1 and 2 are able to do so?

I will begin with some of my observations within and outside the OELP classrooms:

1. Attitude of OELP teachers: Not highly educated themselves, these are a bunch of happy teachers, who have a positive

attitude that all children can learn to read and write if they get sufficient opportunities and exposure. These teachers also have tremendous self-belief and the drive to make a difference.

2. Use of mother tongue: Teachers largely use the mother tongue and its variations to talk to children and gradually integrate Hindi in their communication with the children. Classrooms have a non-threatening environment and are pleasantly engaging. Teachers use flash cards with the names of the children that they shuffle each time to get a child to come forward to lead an activity, play a game, read a poem or a story, respond to a question or get the child to ask questions from his peers.

3. Print-rich classrooms: In order to promote literacy development, the classroom have marked corners and spaces such as "kavita ka kona"; "kahaniyo ka kona"; "baccho ke naam ka kona"; "calender ka kona"; "ganit ka kona", etc. These are used for displaying various printed materials, posters, charts and children's writings. "Zimmedari ka kona" makes children responsible for various

tasks, such as distributing notebooks, papers, files, pencils, etc., on a rotational basis.

Apart from these designated corners, each class room has 6 sets/groups of letter charts that have been "scientifically designed" to help children recognize letters and form meaningful words. We were told that these letter charts, called "varna samoocha groupings" had evolved through an organic process, over one year of sustained engagement in the early grade classes. The OELP team felt that barakhadi had too much information for the children to process, and was inevitably mechanical in nature. Therefore, varna samoochas, with a limited set of alpha syllables, vowels and abbreviated vowel markers or matras were created by breaking down the barakhadi through an active process of dialogue with the teachers, using intuitive knowledge and experience with young learners. OELP claims that an important consideration in designing these samoochas has been the ease with which the sub-lexical units combine to generate words that are from the children's own spoken language repertoire. The OELP teachers told us that they spend almost 3 months on the first varna samoocha, after which the children rapidly begin reading the other charts and materials. For example, children engage in word play by looking for sound-symbol combinations that generate the names of colours or rhyming words.

4. Reading stories: Teachers read out stories to children everyday. While some of the stories relate to a particular theme that OELP changes every week, about 10-12 story books find a corner in their classrooms. These books are changed every week, and children have the freedom to select any book that they want to read themselves during designated hours. Typically, each child gets to read about 30-40 story books in the classroom every month. Further, visits to libraries are

organized thrice a week, where many more books are available. This gives the children more choice to read according to their interest.

5. Opportunities for drawing, free writing and responding to questions/stories: The children are at different literacy levels, and the teachers have grouped them without them being aware of it. Group names (for example, sooraj, chand, sitare) are often called out so that children sit in their respective groups for an activity suited to their level. The use of mother tongue names for animals/persons/things is accepted in their writings. "Anubhav lekhan" is done everyday where children freely express their thoughts and experiences.

6. Profile folders: A folder with the worksheets of each child's monthly progress charting the child's process of reading and writing is always available for reference. Assessments are done thrice a year to help teachers understand the areas where each child requires help, thus using assessment records for learning. While some records assess recognition of letters, or decoding and joining letters to form words, detailed assessments are also done to record, for example, whether a child is able to make meaning in a written text, or whether s/he is paying attention to the cover page of a story, reading the title, the author or illustrator's name, or the publisher's name.

7. Libraries: These function more like community libraries for children and their family members. They are managed by the children with the help of their teacher. These spaces are not just for reading story books, but also for doing puppet shows based on the stories that children have read, role plays, playing antakshani based on story names, reading to each other or writing their own stories, all at a pace that children decide on their own. One of the libraries that we visited has a stock of 17,000 books, mostly fiction for various age

groups. OELP also organizes "kahani melas" with the involvement of the local communities.

While I am not personally convinced about OELP's focus on the knowledge of phonemes and phonemic awareness for laying the foundation for learning, it appears that using an eclectic approach is indeed helping children to read and write. It is difficult for me to understand how the varna samoocha groupings are different from barakhadi. The groupings of the varna samoocha rely on the same processes of breaking down language, identifying and memorizing meaningless letters, decoding the sound-symbol connections, and developing mechanical skills, as the barakhadi. Therefore, I strongly feel that what is really working for the children and their reading is not the varna samoochas, but the focus on self-selected reading for pleasure.

With access to well-stocked libraries and story books in the classrooms from the very beginning, the children are discovering their reading interests and developing reading habits. The power of stories is evident when children run to pick up story books in a state of heightened enthusiasm, and take their time to select the storybooks, especially in the library. Some of the Class 2 children mentioned that they had read almost 40-60 story books. Illustrations fascinate them and sometimes also help them to predict what they are reading as they can make the connections between the text and the illustrations. They also mentioned that they go back home and read or narrate the stories that they find interesting to their family members. Their mothers, who are too shy to come out of their homes, often request their children to issue books for them. A fascinating spiraling effect seems to be taking place where the children are becoming the promoters of literacy development in adults as well.

Krashen has emphasized the significance of comprehensible and compelling input in second language acquisition. According to his comprehension hypothesis, we acquire language largely through a subconscious process: when we understand what we read, when we get comprehensible input. In my view, story books are the most potent form of reading. By encouraging the children to listen to and read story books, OELP is helping them not only to discover their own comprehensible input, but is also teaching them how to select compelling or interesting input. This self-selection of story books is generating and creating a "sustained reading culture" that will be instrumental in children leading literate lives, hopefully for life!

To understand more about Krashen's Second Language Acquisition Theory, read the previous journal of LLT: Volume 8 Number 1 Issue 15, January 2019.