

Literacy Instruction in Indian Schools

—♦—
Shobha Sinha

The nature of relationship between literacy and development is very complex and challenging. More so because defining either term is not easy. However, a direct causal link between the two has been assumed in the past. This assumption was the basis of mass literacy campaigns launched by the third world countries with the hope that economic development will be facilitated. The reason for this assumption could be that the developed countries have had high levels of literacy; hence a direct causal correlation was assumed (Daswani 1994: 279–90). Close examination reveals, however, that this assumption is too simplistic. Daswani (1994) describes this assumption as 'fallacious' and provides examples to demonstrate complex patterns of literacy and development. For example, even the Western model needs to be re-examined as economic development in the Western countries preceded mass literacy, not the other way around. Some South-east Asian countries, for example, Thailand, have high levels of literacy, yet not corresponding economic development.

In theoretical terms too, the earlier notions of 'consequences' of literacy and its transformational abilities, in cognitive, social, and other sense received challenges. Earlier literacy was viewed as a cause of these changes. However, later this view was criticized for being too deterministic and its neglect of context of literacy usage. Therefore, now instead of focusing on the consequences of literacy the need is to focus on the uses of literacy,

thus, differentiating between the causal and instrumental conceptions of literacy. Further, to understand the relationship between literacy and social development, as Olson and Torrance (2001) argue, we need to view literacy in broader terms regarding its forms and functions.

Right now an unqualified belief regarding the consequences of literacy has been replaced by a deeper understanding about its complexities. As Daswani (1994) points out, literacy related programmes have altered from simple literacy programmes to programmes dealing with a wider notion of literacy. This change was in response to issues such as poor response to campaigns, policies that disregarded the motivations of the participants, and inability to sustain literacy practice. This raises questions about the quality and context of the literacy programmes. One of the concerns that both the policy makers and scholars have had to contend with is the definition of literacy. It is clear that literacy is not a static, monolithic condition that will automatically transform the life of an individual or that of a society. Among other things, it is important to consider the level of literacy one is dealing with. A distinction is necessary between literacy that is 'embedded in a system of social functions and cultural processes whereas alphabetical competence is only a technical skill' (Triebel 2001: 21). This is an important distinction because in many literacy campaigns literacy was viewed in a very simplistic manner and the goals were to provide minimal skill of reading and writing without any concern about its usage and meaning in a person's life.

Despite the fact that literacy is no longer viewed as an unqualified path to economic and social development, it cannot be denied that it affords many possibilities and hence is an important concern in keeping with the theme of this volume. The possibilities need to be explored by educators as in itself some skill of decoding and encoding will not transform much of the social reality. Freire's contribution to the field of education was important as he went beyond viewing literacy as a mechanical skill and viewed it as a means to 'liberation' (Freire 1985). He emphasized not reading the word but also reading the world.

In this paper literacy will not be viewed merely in quantitative terms but also qualitatively. Thus, literacy is not defined merely as a technical, mechanical skill but rather as a practice that can empower a person. First, I will begin with a broad overview about literacy practices in India. Then, I will discuss the role of schooling followed by a discussion on the issues and problems in terms of school literacy in India.

LITERACY IN INDIA

The literacy rate in India has shown a steady increase from 18.33 per cent to 64.8 per cent from 1951 to 2001 (Census). However, this increasing rate conceals some depressing facts. One of the facts is that with the corresponding increase of the population the absolute number of illiterate people has not decreased. Also, there is a considerable disparity in terms of regions, gender, and between urban and rural populations. A further aspect of the grim story is that the ones who do qualify as literates do not necessarily have the quality of literacy which one deems necessary in the sense of realizing oneself or promoting critical consciousness in any degree. According to Kumar literacy in India has a 'restricted, rather enfeebled meaning' (2004: 121). The tendency is to define literacy in minimalistic terms. The extent of literacy knowledge includes, being able to display some basic ability to decode texts and write, for example, in terms of signing a document (Agnihotri 1997: 199–206). Thus, if literacy was to be defined as the 'ability to understand and produce written texts which in some sense would empower the individual and open up new areas of investigation, the literacy rate would drop dramatically, possibly to less than a quarter of the population aged seven and above' (ibid.: 199). It is evident that the percentage of literacy is actually inflated due to a very liberal criterion for literacy.

Agnihotri has traced the history of literacy teaching in India. Literacy was part of the agenda in many social reform movements and later on during the struggle for independence. Many national leaders, including Gandhi and Tagore recognized the importance of literacy in national reconstruction. However, later on, after the zeal associated with independence struggle was over, the adult literacy programmes assumed a more limited functional character. During the post-independence period, the literacy agenda was taken up by government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Unfortunately, meaningless and boring material, along with narrowly conceived understanding of literacy (such as reading and writing one's name and address), poor financial resources, and lack of vision contributed to the low success of these programmes.

In India discussion about literacy leave out almost entirely the role that schools play in making a person literate. The major problem is seen in terms of vast numbers of illiterates and the major response is in terms of adult literacy campaigns. Kumar (2004) points out that the term 'literacy' is completely appropriated by adult education in India and policy documents as well, as research journals are silent about literacy in the context

of school and children's education. While one does not question the important role of adult literacy programmes, yet, one wonders why an obvious context where children acquire literacy is entirely disregarded. With very few exceptions the literature is silent about the kind of literacy experiences that children get in the school context.

This is a strange omission, considering the important roles schools play in literacy acquisition, especially in a country like India. Teale and Sulzby's (1986) research studies in children's early literacy development in countries with high levels of literacy reveal that children also acquire literacy in informal settings where they get opportunities to interact with literacy in meaningful ways and hence hypothesize about its nature. However, in India, most low socio-economic status children, especially from non-literate homes do not get opportunities to informally interact with print. Additionally, they may not get formal support in their homes in terms of coaching or tuitions, even though these may be of dubious educational quality. Hence, these children are entirely dependent on schools in acquiring literacy. Therefore, the role of schools in terms of acquiring literacy is all the more critical in India. If children do not get adequate help in school they are bound to remain illiterate unless they go to an adult literacy programme in their later years. Their survival in school becomes severely at risk if they do not successfully acquire literacy in early grades. They will suffer not only in the language classes but also across school subjects, for example, social studies and science. They might also be compelled to drop out because the subsequent years of schooling will demand more and more literacy knowledge for survival. It is clear that literacy is a basic requirement to continue in schools. In fact, N. Kumar (2000) has examined the relationship between the high drop-out rate and children's experiences with literacy in the school.

According to Olson and Torrance (2001: 10) 'schooling and literacy are essentially coterminous in modern societies' and the 'literacy levels in a nation are closely tied to years of schooling'. It is important to investigate the nature of reading instruction in Indian schools and the likely reason for it. It is a difficult task because as pointed out earlier very little scholarly work is available in this area.

LITERACY IN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

The problem of the drop-out rate has plagued primary education in India. This problem has been investigated by many researchers. In the past, mostly the background of children was cited as the reason for dropping out

Literacy Instruction in Indian Schools

(K. Kumar 1993). K. Kumar (1992) pointed out the need to examine school related factors to fully understand the problems of drop outs. He contends that poor literacy pedagogy may account for it. The recent Annual Status of Education Report conducted by NGOs reports lesser drop-out rate in rural areas. However, the figures related to reading are far from heartening. According to this national level survey, reading tasks were classified as reading at a paragraph level (at Standard I level of reading difficulty), reading a simple story (Standard II level of reading difficulty), reading words, and reading letters. Some of the findings are that 35 per cent of all children could not read a simple paragraph and 52 per cent of children could not read a story. With younger children (7–10) age group the number is even higher: 48.2 per cent could not read level I paragraph and 68 per cent were unable to read level II stories. Forty-four per cent of the children could not read simple Standard II level paragraphs. There are wide variations across regions. The figures are based merely on children's decoding ability and do not take comprehension into account. Yet children performed very poorly. Many systematic studies are not available on comprehension. However, some studies that are available reveal poor performance in reading comprehension. Thorndike (1973) in his study of 15 countries found that Indian students performed poorly in comprehension. Even though this study was conducted a while ago, there is no reason to believe that the situation has changed. Recent studies do not show great improvement. For example, Narasimhan (2004) conducted language comprehension tests for children from the elite schools of Mumbai. The test included narrative, expository, and instructional texts. He found the results 'unexpected' since the children belonged to elite schools of Mumbai, yet their performance displayed a wide spread and the average was poorer than what they achieved in public exams. He explained that the public schools coached children to perform successfully in the examinations but failed to prepare them to negotiate unfamiliar texts and tasks.

LITERACY PEDAGOGY IN INDIA

To understand this type of performance by Indian children it is important to examine literacy instruction in the classroom, particularly in the early years. One has to mainly rely on textbooks to get ideas about the nature of pedagogy. Teachers heavily depend on textbooks for teaching so it is a good indicator of what happens in the classrooms.

In India, literacy pedagogy is primarily traditional. The focus is overwhelmingly on sounds rather than meaning. Again, even though much

descriptive study of classrooms is not available, yet some conclusions about literacy pedagogy can be drawn by analyzing primers since instruction in India is heavily dependent on textbooks. In a study where 10 Hindi primers were analyzed to understand the nature of early reading instruction (Sinha 2000: 38–43), the analysis revealed a total absorption with graphophonics. Lessons were constructed around particular sounds, not themes. So, generally they began with a list of words featuring a target sound. For example, in a lesson the following words were listed: car, rice, government, asthma, evening, sword, year, and black. This puzzling collection of words were featured together because in Hindi they have a common sound 'a' (rhyming with the sound 'a' in car). Thus, in Hindi the words are: car, *bhat*, *sagar*, *sarcar*, *dama*, *sham*, *talwar*, *sal*, *kala*. The list of thematically unconnected words is followed by sentences where maximum words are used with the target sounds. For example, in a lesson with 'o', the sentences are as following:

Dhol bajao. Chor bhagao. Shor na machao. Paathshala chalo. Kitab kholo. Bolkar padho. Dekhkar likho. Tote ko ram ram ratne do. (Beat the drum. Scare the thief. Don't make noise. Go to school. Open the book. Read aloud. Look and write. Let the parrot say ram ram.)

Due to their obsession with sounds to the exclusion of everything else, the texts are unfocused and at times blatantly absurd. For example, *aam par chadh* (climb on a mango), *gilas sir par mat rakh* (don't keep the glass on your head).

These texts actually teach 'not' to seek meaning while reading. If one reads these texts for comprehension, then the experience will be very bizarre because there is no coherent text to comprehend in the first place. If a child depends on these texts exclusively to learn to read, she will get the message that reading is a very meaningless, mysterious, and rather absurd process. Occasionally, when the texts even paid attention to the theme, the style was not very readable or interesting. It lacked flow and the content though coherent was not interesting.

In another study, Kaushik (2004) examines first-grade teachers' assumptions about early literacy. She found that the views of the teacher corresponded to the views presented in the textbooks. They focused on the sequential learning of letters, blending of letters to form words. Decoding was conceptualized as the main goal of reading and practice of each sound was to be the focus of each lesson. Teachers were tenacious in their beliefs about the sequential nature of literacy. They were primarily concerned

with correct pronunciation and correct formation of letters while writing. Any deviation from the print was viewed as an error.

THEORY AND RESEARCH ON READING

Traditionally, reading was viewed narrowly as a decoding process, that is, of finding oral equivalent of written language. Thus, the graphophonics (letter-sound correspondence) aspect of reading was emphasized in literacy instruction. The early literacy instruction consisted of teaching children to sequentially master the sub-skills of reading. Thus, children were expected to master the letter-sound correspondence and learn about blending to decode words. There was also a tendency, as Teale and Sulzby (1986) suggest, to focus on the formal and not the functional aspects of language while learning to read.

This approach to reading was criticized on several grounds. The behaviouristic view of learning, with its emphasis on sequential mastery of sub-skills and drilling fragmented language into meaningless units. Consequently, learning to read ended up being a tedious and mechanical process which was uninteresting and irrelevant for children (Goodman 1986). The other problem with this approach was that it excluded any functional use of language. Unlike oral language development where children acquire and use the language simultaneously, here they were expected to wait to use it till they fully acquired the formal aspects of the written language.

During the 1960s and the decades following it, breakthrough work was done on reading which questioned the belief that reading was merely decoding (Pearson and Stevens 1994: 22-42). The powerful influence of Noam Chomsky in language influenced the field of reading as well. Initially psycholinguistics, and then other disciplines such as cognitive psychology questioned the bottom-up approach of reading which constituted adding letters to form words, adding words to form sentences, and so on. Reading came to be viewed as not merely a mechanical activity of decoding but a sense making activity. Literacy was not confined to phonics but encompassed the whole act of reading, including comprehension. According to Smith (1971) too much attention to letters was seen as detrimental to the comprehension process.

In terms of learning to read, a developmental perspective, emergent literacy, based on a different and broader conceptualization of reading gained prominence. Right from the beginning reading was seen as a sense making activity. Children became literate by actively generating hypotheses

about print around them. A child's early attempts at reading and writing, for example, scribbling, invented spelling, or pretend reading were seen as legitimate literacy engagements and were not rejected as being different from conventional reading (Teale and Sulzby 1986: vii–xxv). The instructional implications of this approach were not drill and sequential mastery of phonics but engagement with literacy in a meaningful and holistic manner. Authentic tasks were recommended to promote literacy development in children. According to Hiebert (1994: 391), authentic tasks 'involve children in immediate use of literacy for enjoyment and communication. They are not tasks that have typified school literacy instruction, in which pieces of literacy...have been practiced for some undefined future use'. Additionally, Goodman (1986) argues that literacy learning would be considered easier if it was sensible, interesting, and relevant to the life of children.

This type of theory building and research was developed primarily in literacy rich environments such as North America and New Zealand. A recent review of research in various countries shows the constant concern about process by which children learn. If we look at this type of research, what we see in terms of pedagogy in India appears disheartening. It is clear that what goes on in the name of early reading instruction in India is closer to the more traditional model of teaching reading and is unaffected by the research based on constructivist approaches to reading. Apart from the meaninglessness, the literacy instruction suffers by not giving legitimacy to children's early engagement with literacy. Children's activities such as pretend reading and invented spelling are subject to correction. The problem is that teachers do not have the theoretical tools to assess the developmental nature of children's literacy. This problem is not confined to teachers. Children's early attempts to writing were accepted but labeled as 'crude' while describing a major literacy programme in India (Bannerji et al. 2004: 62–69). Another problem with these pedagogical practices is that they are totally based on formal aspects of writing and ignore the functional aspects of literacy altogether. Children who have literacy at home get to see how literacy impacts life continuously. However, a child from a non-literate home does not get a chance to see its functional aspect. He/she may have heard that literacy will be useful to them in some future date but at the moment the school fails to reveal to them what one can do with literacy.

One can safely conclude that the contact with literacy in the school context is dull and boring. The exercises are sheer drudgery. The consequences for children who depend on schools to acquire literacy are serious.

They really have to be more than willing to suspend the disbelief about literacy and its merits in order to survive schooling. Mostly children and their background get blamed for not providing literacy experiences at home. However, instead of blaming illiterate parents it is important for the schools to realize their responsibility towards these children and provide support in the form of print-rich environment, meaningful interactions with literacy, and opportunities for using literacy in rewarding ways. It is important to find how these goals can be realized in Indian classrooms.

LITERACY RESEARCH IN INDIA

Often it has been argued that one cannot just lift ideas or pedagogical practices of the developed countries and apply it to different contexts. This is certainly true. One can easily argue about high levels of literacy in these countries and the print-rich environment that is readily available for exploration to children. But on the basis of these arguments it is still not appropriate to dismiss this body of research, especially when this area has not been explored at all in educational literature.

In India a major part of the problem is that the focus on processes and pedagogy of reading is absolutely negligible. Part of this situation can be explained as a general problem with Indian education. N. Kumar (2000), while describing the educational projects in Banaras claims that most failed due to 'pedagogic inefficiency'. She further goes on to state that:

[T]his taking-for-granted of children's responses and assumptions of their passivity has cost the adults dear. The educators assumed that their intentions were going to be executed once they had broadcast their intentions. How these intentions got translated into children's experiences and, further what they meant to children in terms of learning interested no educator... (Ibid.: 2000: 23)

It seems that in India the lack of concern about actual pedagogic practices is nothing new barring some notable exceptions, for example, the science programmes in Hoshangabad. Literacy pedagogy has not occupied the mind of the educators or institutions in any significant way. A look at course structures in the universities bears out this neglect.

Here, it is important to note that in the recent *Handbook of Reading Research*, Volume III, there was difference in the way reading process and pedagogy were focused on in countries like the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand on one hand, and Latin America

on the other. In the former, there were discussions of research on processes and instructional strategies, whereas the latter did not focus as much on it. Santana (2000: 41–52) noted that the nature of educational research in developing countries differs ideologically from the research in industrialized nations since research is also a form of social practice and hence sensitive to the context. In fact, when the research draws too much from the industrialized nation then it might be guilty of ignoring the context. India has some interesting parallels with Latin America. For instance, research is not a priority here as well. However, it is not enough to dismiss the lack of instructional research on the grounds that we obviously differ from the industrialized nations. It is critical to understand how children read in the Indian context, what type of instruction goes on in the classroom, what does innovative ideas mean in terms of classroom practice, and so on. These are questions that educators deal with on a daily basis. Ignoring them on the basis of contextual difference is not good enough.

In this context, it will be pertinent to discuss the role of the education department in the universities. Unfortunately, they are so preoccupied with teacher education that they do not find it necessary to contribute to the research. In fact, to some degree, commitment to research is seen as being detrimental to teaching. There is some quality work in policy studies and textbook analysis but classroom studies and instructional studies are either negligible or of low quality. The problem is that even teacher education suffers due to a lack of substantial material to refer to. This situation is due to many problems: A mindset which does not permit the teacher educators to see the value of research, the poor structure of these programmes which does not allow the faculty to participate in ongoing research in schools. This is a serious gap because universities do have a critical role to play in building knowledge in this field.

TEACHER EDUCATION AND LITERACY PEDAGOGY

Lately, the notion that children drop out of schools and perform poorly due to low motivation and lack of parental support has been challenged and school factors are examined as a cause of failure for students to remain in schools. This shift is welcome because it identifies a very important factor in children's performance in education. However, the implication may be seen as blaming the teachers. This is not appropriate because one has to examine the knowledge and expertise that teachers bring to the field

Literacy Instruction in Indian Schools

of reading. In India, the situation is very unfortunate. There is hardly any separate course for teaching reading and even the innovative Bachelor of Elementary Education (B.El.Ed.) programme does not adequately address the needs. One cannot condemn teachers for not trying out ideas that they themselves are unfamiliar with. Further, as discussed earlier, there is not much instructional theory-building and research. Students deal with theories in a broader sense and are supposed to find classroom applications on their own. That gap is not easy to cover so they mostly end up relying on familiar traditional practices. It is important to explore thoroughly what these theories mean in the context of the classroom. Thus, more discussions on the knowledge that teacher training helps acquire needs to be given important consideration. The discussion has not even started yet.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the preceding discussion that the situation related to literacy learning in India is very bleak due to poor pedagogical practices and research, among other factors. These areas have been ignored for too long even though there is a lot of concern about literacy in India. It is clear from the discussion at the beginning of this paper that mechanical knowledge about literacy does not translate into empowerment or development. As Narasimhan (2004) points out, literacy needs to go beyond social service and needs to develop a body of worthwhile professional knowledge. Therefore, it is important to engage with the process of acquiring literacy in a significant way and developing culturally sensitive and informed pedagogical practices.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agnihotri, R. K. 1997. 'Literacy Teaching in India', in V. Edwards and D. Corson (eds), *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*, pp. 199–206. Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Bannerji, R., M. Chavan, and U. Rane. 2004. 'Learning to Read', *Seminar*, 536, April (536): 62–69.
- Daswani, C. 2001. 'Issues of Literacy Development in the Indian Context', in D.R. Olson and N.Torrance (eds), *The Making of Literate Societies*, pp. 284–95. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Daswani, C. J. 1994. 'Literacy and Development in South-east Asia', in L. Verhoeven (ed.), *Functional Literacy: Theoretical Issues and Educational Implications*, pp. 279–90. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

- Freire, P. 1985. *The Politics of Education*. Massachusetts: Bergin & Garvey.
- Goodman, K. 1986. *What's Whole about Whole Language?* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Hiebert, E. H. 1994. 'Becoming Literate through Authentic Tasks: Evidence and Adaptations', in R. B. Ruddell, M. R. Ruddell, and H. Singer (eds), *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading*, pp. 391–413. Newark: IRA.
- Kaushik, S. 2004. 'Teachers' Assumptions about Early Reading', M.Ed. dissertation, University of Delhi, New Delhi.
- Kumar, K. 1992. *What is Worth Teaching?* 3rd edition. New Delhi: Orient Longman.
- . 1993. 'Literacy and Primary Education in India', in P. Freebody and A. R. Welch (eds), *Knowledge, Culture, and Power: International Perspective on Literacy as Policy and Practice*, pp. 102–13. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- . 2004. 'Literacy, Socialization and the Social Order', in T. Nunes and P. Bryant (eds), *Handbook of Children's Literacy*, pp. 711–20. Great Britain: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Kumar, N. 2000. *Lessons from Schools: The History of Education in Banaras*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Narasimhan, R. 2004. *Characterizing Literacy*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Olson, D. R. and N. Torrance. 2001. 'Conceptualizing Literacy as a Personal Skill and as a Social Practice', in D. R. Olson and N. Torrance (eds), *The Making of Literate Societies*, pp. 3–18. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Pearson, P. D. and D. Stevens. 1994. 'Learning about Literacy: A 30-year Journey', in R. B. Ruddell, M. R. Ruddell, and H. Singer (eds), *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading*, pp. 22–42. Newark: IRA.
- Pratham Resource Center. 2005. *Annual Status of Educational Report*. Mumbai: Pratham Resource Center.
- Santana, I. S. 2000. 'Literacy Research in Latin America', in M. Kamil, P. B. Mosenthal, P. D. Pearson, and R. Barr (eds), *Handbook of Reading Research*, pp. 41–52. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Sinha, S. 2000. 'Acquiring Literacy in Indian Schools', *Seminar*, September (493): 38–42.
- Smith, Frank. 1971. *Understanding Reading: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning to Read*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Teale, W. and E. Sulzby. 1986. 'Introduction: Emergent Literacy as a Perspective for Examining How Young Children become Readers and Writers', in W. Teale and E. Sulzby (eds), *Emergent Literacy: Writing and Reading*, pp. vii–xxv. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Thorndike, R. L. 1973. *Reading Comprehension in Fifteen Countries: An Empirical Study*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell.
- Triebel, A. 2001. 'The Roles of Literacy Practices in the Activities and Institutions of Developed and Developing Countries', in D. R. Olson and N. Torrance (eds), *The Making of Literate Societies*, pp. 19–53. Oxford: Blackwell.