

To cite this paper, please cite as:
Dyer, C. (2008) Early years literacy
in Indian urban schools: structural,
social and pedagogical issues.
Language in Education 22 (5) pp.
237-253.

Early years literacy in Indian urban schools: structural, social and pedagogical issues

Caroline Dyer

POLIS, University of Leeds

c.dyer@leeds.ac.uk

Early years literacy in Indian urban schools: structural, social and pedagogical issues

Abstract

Literacy has been a crucial aspect of education as a human right for over fifty years, but this basic right remains unassured for at least 700 million adults worldwide. In 1999, UNESCO acknowledged that schools are not making the expected contribution to increasing national literacy rates or providing individuals with the literacy skills they need. The relationship between schooling and literacy is an acute issue in India: the absolute numbers of non-literate adults, many of whom have failed to become literate at school, continue to increase; and high proportions of children are not achieving adequately in literacy at school. The paper presents a socially situated examination, drawing in part on collaborative action research, of how a small sample of primary teachers approach literacy teaching and learning in socio-economic contexts of disadvantage. The paper identifies structural, social and pedagogical constraints to effective literacy teaching and learning in schools and in conclusion, draws out the implications for teacher development of a relative neglect of literacy teaching and learning in Indian vernacular languages.

Keywords: teacher education, India, literacy

Early years literacy in Indian urban schools: structural, social and pedagogical issues

Literacy, development and formal schooling

Literacy remains a human right ‘still denied to nearly a fifth of the world’s population’ (UNESCO, 2005: 17); progress towards assuring this right has been patchy and much has yet to be done. Post-colonial governments in developing countries and aid agencies alike see literacy as a skill essential to national economic and human development (Dreze and Sen, 1999). In addition to its links with developing human capital (see commentary in Paran and Williams, 2007), literacy is seen for women in particular to contribute to lowering fertility and infant mortality, and improving nutrition, although the relationships between literacy and human development in these respects is rather less well understood than their widespread reiteration would suggest (e.g. Stromquist, 1998; Rose and Dyer, 2006). Since literacy reflects power relations in wider society (Street, 1995), it is no coincidence that those who suffer socio-economic disadvantage (for example because of their female gender and / or their poverty, locality, caste and/or class, disability) are often those most disadvantaged in terms of literacy.

A key rationale for the massive expansion of formal schooling in ‘developing’ countries has been its assumed role in ensuring the literacy of the current and future generations. However, it is also increasingly recognised that formal schooling does not necessarily provide the kinds of literacy that students need – or, in some cases, even provide literacy at all (UNESCO, 1999; UNESCO, 2002; UNESCO, 2005). UNESCO (1999: 1) comments that: ‘(1) data on world literacy rates are misleading, and underestimate the nature and scope of literacy problems; and (2) neither increases in primary schooling nor adult literacy programs have been very effective at reducing illiteracy’. The 2005 Education For All Global Monitoring Report, while considering questions of how literacy is measured, further underlines the need to investigate schools’ role in developing children’s literacy abilities. Globally, where more accurate measurements are not made, reporting uses a proxy for adult literacy: children who have attended five years of schooling are assumed to have become functionally literate. There is growing evidence that schools’ performance renders this proxy very problematic – to the extent that the international statistic of 771 million adult illiterates, which includes figures calculated using this proxy, may reflect only half, or even perhaps a third, of the real picture (UNESCO, 2005). Yet, as Paran and Williams (2007: 2) point out, despite the many claims

for the importance of literacy to human development, ‘in developing countries, where it might have had most to contribute, fundamental research into reading is relatively scarce.’

Literacy teaching and learning in Indian primary schools

Although India’s national literacy rate is rising, and reached an average of 62% at the last census count in 2001, women’s literacy still lags on average 20% behind men’s, and the absolute numbers of adult non-literates continue to increase (UNESCO, 2002). Learner retention figures in state-managed primary schools shed some light on these statistics: up to half of children enrolled in Year One are not retained through to the end of Year Five, with much of the drop-out occurring in the transition between Years One and Two. Retention in school is however not necessarily a guarantee of attaining lasting literacy skills, since studies reveal consistently disappointing levels of learner achievement in literacy. A comprehensive national study (Aggarwal, 1998) found, for example, that in Year One, about 21.8% of children in a national sample of state-managed schools achieved less than 40%; the proportion of similar underachievement rose in Year Four to 66.3%. Aggarwal (1998: 13) notes, therefore, that ‘two third children of class V should not have been there as their competency levels were too low in language’. Even these grim figures may present a favourable picture of realities. One of India’s largest non-governmental organisations, Pratham, has this to say: “There is another story behind the official figures, which never makes it to government reports or the press. Pratham has conducted door to door surveys of 6-14 year old children in nearly 100,000 slum households of Mumbai and six other cities of Maharashtra (one of the better providers of education in India). Only 6% of these children are not in school. Yet, the numbers show that about 23% children can read paragraphs with varied fluency. 33% can read words but not sentences. 27% can identify alphabets but no more, and the remaining 17% can read nothing. Compared to this, in North Indian cities of Jaipur, Delhi, Allahabad, Lucknow and Patna, our experience shows that the numbers of children reading paragraphs and words drop to half” (Pratham website, 2003; see also Mathrani, 2005). The quality of early years literacy teaching and learning in state-run schools is also a matter of social equity, since these provide schooling for children of the socially most disadvantaged communities, and particularly girls – to an extent that in India, government provision is now almost ‘synonymous with disadvantage’ (Sarangapani and Kumar, 2005).

Ongoing national effort to change the nature of classroom teaching, within a wider systemic context of decentralisation (see Dyer, 2005) has broadly focused on introducing competency-

based learning, textbook reform, and encouraging teachers to adopt a ‘joyful’ approach to teaching and learning. The National Policy on Education (1986, revised in 1992) spearheaded national efforts to diversify from rote learning approaches towards classroom environments characterised by ‘joyful’, ‘activity-based’, and ‘child-centred’ learning. Adoption of a competency-based approach saw the introduction of ‘Minimum Levels of Learning’ (MLLs), intended to ‘ensure access to the education of comparable standard to all learners irrespective of caste, creed, location or sex’ (NCERT, 2000: 37), which are expected to ‘be achieved by one and all’ (NCERT, 2000: 38) and function as a measure of accountability (ibid).

Kumar (2005) notes that with the post-colonial development of a public education system, the textbook became enshrined as the ‘icon of sacred knowledge’, purveyed by teachers employed by a distant bureaucratic authority. Teaching involves transmission of content to be learned by children and regurgitated to achieve examination passes. Initial elementary¹ teacher education itself reflects this ‘knowledge’- driven approach; and the example of pre-service language work in diglossic Brahmi languages such as Gujarati and Hindi (Patel, 2004) is a pertinent example. Almost all elementary school teacher education takes place at pre-service training colleges, or their equivalent, in two year post-higher secondary education certificate courses. Pre-service language work directs its effort towards improving student competence in the codified written standard of the High language variety. Familiarisation with the content of children’s textbooks is part of the course; but overall initial teacher education does not address theory and practices of children’s literacy learning substantially, and is in general weakly focused on pedagogy (Dyer et al., 2004).

Current policy intends to reconstruct the role of teacher as facilitator of learning rather than transmitter of knowledge (NPE, 1986-92). This important shift implies a need to focus more sharply on pedagogical issues in general but has not so far extended to a detailed debate about early years literacy in vernacular languages (Burte, 2005). Progress in this direction is constrained by both the relative paucity of qualitative research and analysis of processes of teaching and learning in Indian elementary classrooms (but see Sarangapani, 2003); and the relative lack of research into the characteristics of vernacular languages in India, and how these might influence children’s literacy acquisition (but see Nag, 2007; Patel, 2004). This paper contributes to this debate by providing socially situated ‘thick’ description of teacher practices and perceptions of literacy teaching and learning in government-run urban primary

¹ Following the Indian terminology I use the term ‘elementary’ to mean Years 1-7/8 of schooling and ‘primary’ to denote Years 1-4/5; early years refers to the ‘primary’ level.

schools in a large city in Gujarat, in western India. It focuses in its conclusions on the implications of its findings for both initial and in-service teacher education. In common with Bloch (1998: 5), I view literacy development as ‘a social, political and cultural process which begins with meaningful interactions with written language’ (see also Street, 1995; Paran and Williams, 2007). Mindful, however, of the well-established links between socio-economic disadvantage in childhood and low literacy levels in adulthood, this paper is concerned also with the quality of formal education for children from historically disadvantaged groups – including lower caste or Dalit children, and children from Scheduled Tribe groups, whose inclusion in formal education remains fragile (e.g. Subrahmanian, 2003; Vasavi, 2003; Velaskar, 1998).

Literacy pedagogy: observations on practice

The data informing this paper are from a nine month literacy-focused action research initiative with a group of 25 Year One teachers, all female except one. These teachers all worked in Gujarati-medium schools run by the municipal corporation – schools that serve children who are disadvantaged by low caste status, combined with low family income, but demonstrate according to Patel (2004) relative linguistic heterogeneity. This project was nested with a larger, three year comparative study of processes of teacher education in the states of Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh (see Dyer et al., 2004). In keeping with the situation described above, emerging teachers in six institutes across the three States acknowledged that they did not actually know how to develop literacy competencies in children, other than by delivering the contents of the textbook.

The study was conceived as a joint action research project with characteristic steps of identifying and formulating the research ‘problem’, planning action to address it, carrying out and monitoring that action step, evaluating it and revising general plan with a view to further action (e.g. Elliot 1991). It began with three objectives: i) to record what teachers do as they start children on reading and writing; ii) to encourage teachers to reflect on the effectiveness of those activities; and iii) to record how teachers use the materials available in the classroom (textbooks, library books, teaching learning aids) to support the teaching of reading and writing; and would then move to an action phase. Accompanied by classroom observations and teacher interviews, this work would provide a platform for teacher reflection and action on practices that were perceived to require change. Officers of the municipal corporation endorsed the project and selected 25 teachers whom they felt who would enjoy participating.

Five did not continue to attend but the others were enthusiastic participants. They were released for one meeting (of about two hours' duration) per month.

This approach connected with the state-provided professional development opportunity of Cluster Resource Centres (CRCs). The CRC provides opportunities for teachers to meet regularly to discuss practices in peer-led sessions, and in theory complements formal in-service training. However, formal in-service training cascades expert-designed inputs via off-site residential courses to batches of at least 50 teachers, resulting in low transfer of training messages to classroom contexts (Dyer et al., 2004). This reflects both limitations in planning training in general, such as a lack of needs analysis or impact evaluation, and effective cascade training in particular (see also Wedell, 2005); and issues in relation to the quality of teacher educators delivering that training (Dyer et al., 2004). However, findings from the larger project suggested that synergy between the two teacher development approaches is constrained by a further factor: teachers associate training with receiving 'expert input' (quality of that input notwithstanding), and do not see themselves, or their peers, as a resource. If the CRC idea is to take hold, teachers will need to develop new skills of describing, reflecting on, and sharing practices and outcomes of their responses to in-service training. This in turn could be expected to contribute positively to policy intentions of improved teacher accountability for children's learning achievements.

Project workshops usually followed a format of introduction by a member of the project team, then work on diaries in small groups (5-6) to engage teachers in discussion about practice, tea break, and a plenary session. Teachers were invited to write their diaries when they found time, and to record what they were actually doing in their classes. The focus of the first eight project months was largely within the very first area of the action research cycle (identifying the research 'problem' and 'reconnaissance') as teachers learned to reflect with others on practices. At first, when the project idea was explained to them, their expectation was that the project team would immediately deliver 'new methods and techniques we can use to overcome the problems' with no phase of needs analysis. Teachers had never before been asked to describe what they actually do in classrooms and initially voiced concern about recriminations if they reported honestly. The Corporation chairman and a supervisor assured them there would be none.

Confidence and sharing skills grew with each meeting; after eight sessions, we had a strong evidence base about practices and perceptions. As we moved towards an experimentation phase related to addressing developmental needs, the Municipal Corporation abruptly

withdrew permission to carry on. Although teachers contested this decision, the authorities claimed there were no evident gains from the project, since they expected to see new teaching-learning aids or material project outputs. Since there had been no further Corporation attention to the project following the first session, however, the project team's refusal to pay any 'facilitation' fee to the key officer who gave teachers leave to attend seems likely to have been a deciding factor, along with official adherence to the 'input' model described earlier. This official negation of the progress made in the initial phase undermined the action research approach completely. It was an unwelcome illustration of the bureaucratic heavy-handedness that forms a strong theme in teachers' accounts of their teaching practices; and further evidence of what Sarangapani and Kumar (2005: xvii) generously describe as the 'guarded' approach taken by state education bureaucracies to 'allowing outsiders to work directly in their schools'.

Working environments in schools

The physical conditions of Corporation schools rarely assured conditions conducive to good quality educational processes. Usually situated in congested urban areas, classrooms were crowded, poorly lit, noisy, and under resourced, with some teaching but few learning aids (Dyer, 2000) other than those recently made during in-service training programmes. Project teachers routinely had 60 children to teach, but frequently also had over 100 (the national teacher: student norm is 1: 40). They reported this was because Principals believe that as subject matter at Year One is limited, it is better, if there is a teacher shortage, to combine two Year One classes and deploy one teacher to higher Years where the curricular load is heavier, and examinations closer. One teacher reported in her diary:

17.9.99 In total, 2 classes of 110 children were present. Could not do letter or number teaching properly individually. Today I told the story of the tortoise and the hare. Showed them story pictures, asked small questions in between as I told the story. Made them sing a children's song [...] Got them to write whatever letters had been taught previously, and taught numbers 1 – 10. Wherever I felt necessary I tried to teach individually but it was very difficult with so many children there.

18.9.99 Today too like y.day there was the problem of too many children. Made them stand in line according to their height and did some PT. Hands in front, top, side...touch toes, hands on head, shoulder, tummy. Children worked well according to my instructions. Gave understanding of standing to attention and at ease. Revised the week's work; got them to read and write words made from letters *n, m, k, r, j, g, t, d*. Helped when necessary and corrected mistakes.

Working days are also lost when primary teachers are deployed out of school on government work such as census counts, running poll booths, undertaking polio drives, and so on. Constant demands of extra-curricular duties underline the weak *professional* status of primary school teaching in India and reinforce teachers' status as general civil servants (Kumar, 2005); and this in turn is linked with endemic problems of teacher absenteeism and low motivation (e.g. PROBE, 1999, and UNESCO, 2005). Although the undesirability of such duties is officially recognised, the curriculum is still designed for a number of working days (180) that rarely matches realities. Table 1 shows how many days the project teachers worked in March 2000, and how many children were enrolled. It also shows that average attendance is lower than numbers enrolled: hidden in the statistics is a 'floating' population who attend irregularly and would benefit from support to help them catch up with what they have missed.

[Table 1 about here]

How teachers view children as learners: socio-cultural relationships

These Corporation schools cater to children of families with very low socio-economic status, while teachers are usually of a higher caste (see also Subrahmanian, 2003; Vasavi, 2003). Caste status, as well as the children's poverty, seems to be a central reason for teachers to locate these children within a discourse of deficit:

T5 In private schools they take interview. These students are ready, they are prepared by their parents at home. They are the cream. While here these are children who are left, ones who don't do anything at home. Or else a lower level course should be prepared for them. If you teach the same thing to private school students, where they have the best students... when we teach the same thing to children with low catching power... the course for them should be simple. (25.2.00).

Teachers have mixed feelings, however, since they are sympathetic to the circumstances of labouring families: 'How do these labourers live? How can they give their time when they are tired after work?' (T6). With little or no support from home, children depend entirely on the attention they get at school, exacerbating for the teacher the pressures of large class sizes and few working days:

[Discussion is about teaching vowels which teachers have been doing for 4 months. Teachers are saying 25% students are still getting it wrong. SS is the researcher.]

- SS Hum... 25%. So why is this problem occurring?
- T1 It is not possible for us to do revision with all of them. The grasping power of all the children is not the same... no!!
- T 25% of the children have more problems.
- SS OK... so what do you do, then?
- T3 We have to teach them personally because nobody teaches them at home. At home they don't do anything. Next day they come back the same. They don't even open their bags. They go home and forget what they have learnt.
- SS Yes...
- T3 How can it increase? We should also have that much time. That is why some remain *kachha* [literally, unripe]. Why do they remain *kachha*? When sufficient time is not there for each one of them.
- T5 All these children are without cream!! All the fat has been extracted already.
- T3 We have to take them personally...or else some children don't write if we just say. But personal with each one... even if there are 10-12 children... even then...
- T5 If they are asked to do something for tomorrow at home they forget to do it. At home nobody asks them what lesson has been given. If there was someone at home to take care and ask... they would make the child to do work. But if there is no one at their home to take care and ask. They forget and next day come back the same. And if we ask why haven't you brought it... they say miss, I forgot (25.2.2000).

Teachers, by consistently locating explanations for difficulties within the social context, overlooked any pedagogical explanations for slow progress - such as, for example, whether their teaching facilitates children's understanding of the sound and symbol formation of the *akshara* which is critical to reading in Gujarati (discussed in Patel, 2004; see also Nag, 2007). T3's remark about working personally with each child suggests that she recognises the importance of individual attention but does not feel it is possible. Overall, their remarks reflects a general view that time is critical in making the difference for 'these' children.

In discussion, teachers correlated symptoms of poverty, such as irregular attendance interspersed with working, and poor nourishment and resultant low concentration, with low learning achievements. The following excerpt highlights the issue of how infrequent student attendance compromises progression; and illustrates also some of the teachers' efforts – and frustrations – at working with parents to address these issues:

- T6 Their memory power is less. Some are malnourished and come with an empty stomach so their learning capacity is less. Some don't come regularly so they miss in between. When we teach them the next step, some do not know even the previous one because they were not present.
- T9 Sometimes they come, sometimes they don't. They come with an empty stomach. They come without combing their hair properly, in torn clothes. Don't even take care about books. They tear their books.

CD What can we do about this?

T10 We can tell the parents. We have to torture the parents. We tell some parents when they come to pick their children up from school. But some parents don't come at all. So we cannot talk with them about this. (23.10.99).

Mingled with these sympathetic understandings of the pressures of poverty is however an approach that constantly stresses the difference between a teacher's expectation and what each child has achieved. While patterns of interaction such as those described in the following excerpt from observation notes might be seen as a matter of style, they demonstrate little respect for the efforts children were making:

The teacher starts checking the work. She sits on the children's bench and checks. She asks 'what have you written? You have just written this much?' She slaps him. She takes a slate from another child and checks. While checking his work she says 'write in good handwriting. You have very bad handwriting'. She takes another's notebook and says the same. She also instructs 'bring a notebook with squares. This is no good'. Now she goes towards the back, sits on the bench and checks one boy's work. Without saying anything she rubs out whatever he has written and draws squares in his slate, gives it back to him and tells him to write. She takes his neighbour's slate and tells him 'is this the way to write? Such poor handwriting! You have very poor handwriting'. She feints a slap and the boy raises his hand towards his face as he tries to protect himself. She goes to the last bench and takes a slate from one boy's hand and draws squares. She comments, 'get another slate, can't you? You can't see anything clearly on this slate'.

Labelling of children was universal: teachers placed children in essentialised categories of 'intelligent', 'average' and 'weak' students. They did not differentiate, in this labelling, between 'weakness' or 'intelligence' in different subject areas and their discourse did not embrace a notion of children having differing learning styles. These different manifestations of a deficit discourse both to, and about, these learners, is detrimental to the equitable treatment of all children not least because it conditions the amount of effort teachers are prepared to make to work with children from lower socio-economic strata, especially those whom they judge 'weak'. It is an endemic problem across the Indian government school system (see also discussions by Sinha 1997, Subrahmanian, 2003; and in Chopra and Jeffery, 2005; Ramachandran, 2003).

Processes of teaching and learning

Observations by the research team in project classrooms and teachers' own reports suggest that, with variations in their styles, all adhered to the transmission approach that current reforms aim to displace. The following excerpt provides an illustration (Figure 1):

Figure 1: Processes of literacy teaching and learning

[The first letters of the Gujarati alphabet are *k, kh, g, gh* and teachers usually teach the consonants of the alphabet first, followed by vowels (*k, ka, kaa* etc). They usually explain onset consonants with the equivalent of *g* is for Ganesh, *a* is for apple. This has been proscribed in revised textbooks that present the alphabet in a different order, introducing orthographically less complex symbols first; and teachers are not to say ‘*g* is for...’].

2. 3. 2000

Children on roll: 39 (27 boys, 12 girls); presence today 25 (18 boys, 7 girls). Children sit in rows on the floor.

[The teacher (T) informs me that yesterday she gave the children practice on simple words, without any vowels. She says that every day she asks the whole class to chorus the alphabet and numbers 1-100, and that she is teaching them according to the exercises in the book. Yesterday that involved recognising particular letters and circling them from a list. Today they are practising the vowel ‘*a*’ and she has already written words (*mara, raja, jada, darakh* and *vad*) and a sentence (*maa raam raam kar*) with the vowel in them on the board. Students have to see the word and write it in a box on their slate.

8.00 T ‘All of you write it like this on your slate’.

Children settle to copying the words onto their slates. Teacher sits on her chair, at the table in front.

8.25 One by one children start coming to her to get their slate checked. Most others carry on with the task; some do not write but sit quietly. As she checks each slate she asks each child to read what is written. N comes first; she ticks each word and sentence and says ‘very good. Now you read each word’. He reads *mara, raja, jada, darakh* and *vad* but reads the word of sentence separately. G comes and has her work corrected; she also reads the sentence as separate words. There is no remark on this by the teacher. The children return to their places and carry on doing the same thing.

One boy comes with *k, kh* written on his slate; she writes *g* on his slate and asks him to trace over it. After few seconds he comes back, she says ‘Now you can write’. He nods. She writes *g* on his slate again and asks him to write it five times. After five minutes he comes to show here. She asks him what he has written. He says nothing. She says ‘*Ganpati nu ...?*’ He says ‘*g*’. She says again ‘*Ganpati nu ...?*’ He says ‘*g*’. She says ‘write it’ without looking and rubs the slate. Then she calls another boy who was sitting on the side holding a blank slate and pen to come and show. She asks ‘why haven’t you written anything?’. He stands silently looking at the slate. ‘Write *k, kh*’. He stands silently. She writes ‘*k*’ on the slate and says ‘trace this’. She tells me, ‘This boy doesn’t even understand what I tell him’.

In the following examples, the sequencing of content this early in the school year shows that teachers are teaching *akshara* in alphabetical order, which in Gujarati is sequenced according to the physical production of sound. This is not the same order as the new textbook which introduces orthographically less complex *akshara* before those that occur earlier in the alphabet, which teachers were supposed to be following:

16.9.99 subject - Gujarati: content - letters *k, kh, g, gh*

Standard One children: A and B together A= 38; B= 28 total 66

Show letter card *k* with picture of *kamal* [lotus]. First of all, make them draw horizontal, slanted, vertical lines and curves. Show them letter curves by drawing them. Write *k* on their slates and ask them to copy (T 16).

Some teachers wrote what they thought they ought to be doing, rather than what they were doing, but this too was insightful about which approach they felt they should be adhering to:

T5 16.9.99-30.9.99

The educational methods of what I did with children this week:

In Year One it is necessary to have the method of individual reading so that children can read properly. Children's reading speed can be increased by using flowers and leaves, or the sets for reading development. By using games, recognition of letters is solid – after that children can read and do writing properly. If children are asked to write repeatedly, they can write properly. Repetition of curves like horizontal, vertical, slanted, half circle. When children write *k* in a mirror image, if you make columns in their note books, and make them write, they start writing properly.

The above citation clearly articulates this teacher's theory that individual *akshara* recognition must precede writing. The following diary example again shows alphabetical sequencing, and goes on to demonstrate that these reading and writing exercises do not seek to draw in children's experience, or engage in meaning making. The language used to generate writing practice is entirely that of the teacher, unrelated to the language children themselves might offer:

8.10.99 after recess, made children speak simple letters and letters with *kana* (vowel a) as I wrote on the blackboard. Then told children to identify the letters written on bbd: *k, ka: ch, cha; t, ta*

I observed that 10 children of the class recognised the *kana* but they speak wrong. For example, for *ka ne kano ka* they say *ch ne chano cha* and *ta ne tano ta*. Explained to these children with clear pronunciation by making them sit in the separate group. Simultaneously also made use of toys.

During this period, gave *kana* cards to the bright children of the class. They read them and simultaneously write the words 5 times.

Average learners just read alphabets with *kakka*. For them I used alphabet toys. Then individually made them read words written on blackboard. Like *kaan, naak, haath, vaad, chhar, aanth, baar, laav, khaav, taav, bhaathm shaak, gaay, gaam, bhai*. Then told children to speak and write. Made children write each word 5 times. Average children wrote each word 5 times. Then made the 12 bright children sit with each child and bright children made each average child read.

Slow learners of the class will see the pictures drawn in the class and will write letters. Lastly gave them clear understanding of letters.

Lastly at 5 o' clock, I sit with children on the floor and listened their talks. Asked reasons for not doing homework to those children those who don't bring homework. Lastly, made them sing a song about good children. Told them to do their homework after washing their hands and feet and taking some snacks. Then did a small prayer and dispersed.

Despite the difficult classroom contexts, diary excerpts illustrate that some teachers had adopted the more active approaches to teaching that policy is advocating. Teaching and learning have been enlivened by the introduction of some aids, and the use of games although effort remains broadly directed towards encoding and decoding:

T7 To teach step one, for the introduction of the letters *n m k r*, I'll make children sing rhymes [...]. Like this, all the letters are introduced by rhymes.

Then I write a letter in big writing on the bbd, then give letter cards and give recognition. For example, after making *n*, what is this letter called? They'll give you an answer, *n*. Come on then, whose name starts with *n*? If some child's name starts with *n*, you'll get an answer. That way, through letter cards letters are introduced. After that, four corner card game – put letters in the four corners, make a circle of children, make them run, and through this game they learn. With that, write this letter *m n r k* and after the game, words based on those letters, like *man, ram, nam, naram, kamar, naman, kar*, etc – to be read individually.

T5 Made them recognise letters by letter cards. Put the consonant and vowel cards together and showed them what it means. Put cards in the magic bag and took out one after another and got them to recognise them. Made children stand in a circle and put cards in the middle, then banged the tambourine so they ran round and then stopped, asked them to say the name of the letter they stopped by.

Teachers knew that speaking and listening are two of the four skills associated with literacy development, but did not think these need to be practised at school as children do them anyway at home, while homes do not give any opportunity to work on reading and writing. Teachers believed that children find it easy to hear and narrate and sing songs, stories, rhymes. The excerpts above also illustrate use of songs and poems, most commonly as 'time out' because children enjoy them and participate lustily; and more rarely, as in the example of T7, to link sounds with written symbols. Children's own language is not understood to be a pedagogical resource.

Further discussions about what children find 'easy' and 'difficult', raised issues in relation to teacher expectations of what Year One children should formally be learning, particularly since many of these children do not attend pre-school and are often first generation learners. Teachers reported children can do letters with '*kana*' ['aa'] and write dictation of simple words, sentences and letters. They can speak simple sentences and answer 'yes' or 'no', copy sentences, and read lessons from the text book. When the discussion turned to what children find more difficult, they noted that children are not able to pronounce rhyming words and can't read difficult words. They cannot read 'u', 'uu', 'e', 'ee' and find it difficult to manage conjunct-consonants, joint words, and some vowels. Most teachers felt that writing remains difficult and children find it difficult to write a sentence and read a long sentence. They believed that the most difficult competency is reading, but also that writing independently is hard. Words that are orthographically complex are difficult for them to write, and so is writing the answer to a question. Teachers' diaries reflect their expectation that children should know all the letters of the alphabet within a very short time after arriving at school.

Another issue that emerged clearly was that teachers did not know what to do with children who did not learn well by the methods they used. The most commonly adopted strategy in

response was repetition, which they do not have time to do, as noted earlier, although occasionally ‘intelligent’ children were deployed to teach those who were behind. Working with children towards the end of the school year to see what they could do, and what they understood of what they were doing, revealed wide differences among children and usually at least 10-15 children in each class who had not mastered some of the first symbol – sound relationships that had been introduced (see also Patel, 2004). While some ideas about children’s progress were based on perceptions with which the project team did not necessarily agree, teacher judgements about whether children were ready to proceed to the next class were anyway irrelevant. The ‘automatic promotion’ policy commonly pursued in Gujarat means that all children can go up to the next class until the end of Year Four, when the first examinations are sat, regardless of their achievements. Even so, poor achievement is a disincentive to continue with schooling, making a child prone to falling further and further behind and ultimately dropping out.

Developing literacy teaching and learning: implications for teacher education

The evidence from teacher diaries, discussions in workshops, and school observations, suggests that literacy work remains firmly embedded within a content-transmission approach. Teachers focus narrowly on skills related to reading and writing, and develop those skills largely, but not exclusively, by coding and decoding exercises. Even in the face of pressures to complete the textbook, teachers evidently viewed the real work of Year One as ensuring that children are familiar with all the letters of the alphabet, teaching consonants first and then vowels. This involves extensive practice of the physical skills of forming letters, on which writing depends; by repetition over time, children form letters correctly. This approach is consistent with a ‘traditional’ sequence, where ‘*akshara* learning is completed as a precedent to reading’ (Nag 2007: 20) in an ‘artificial compartmentalisation’ (ibid, p. 22) of *akshara* and reading practice: Nag (ibid) proposes instead that they should occur in parallel, in order to provide varied contexts for children to ‘apply rule learning to recognise the *akshara*’. However, the traditional sequence corresponds well with the ‘transmission’ approach to teaching, as the teacher imparts her knowledge of how this letter formation is done correctly while tightly controlling both content and processes of instruction. This helps her to sustain uphold the cultural construction of a teacher-student relationship characterised by discipline and order – despite classrooms where there are often far more learners than there should be.

The language of children's daily lives, according to this model, has no particular relevance (see also Bloch's 1998 study in South African school for similarities). There are several reasons why this should be challenged. Language differences notwithstanding, there is increasing agreement in literacy research that meaning-making in relation to text is an essential component of effective early years literacy learning (e.g. Barratt-Pugh 2000). In the Indian context the question of meaning-making has an extra dimension in relation to social equity and the stigmatised caste identities of children in schools such as these. As some teachers' accounts here show, these children's lived experience can be interpreted in terms of social deviance to be corrected (Velaskar, 1998); their knowledge and interests have long been excluded from textbooks reflecting 'mainstream' social norms (see Kumar, 2005); and their own language is an untapped resource for literacy work. While teachers' words often underline how these children are seen to lack social and economic capital in contemporary Indian society, Patel (2004), testing children from these same Municipal Corporation-managed schools in this same city, found no evidence of lower levels of cognitive-linguistic development than peers from more advantaged backgrounds. Teachers' theories of literacy acquisition themselves, by excluding children's language and experience, serve to uphold rather than challenge long-entrenched social inequities.

Another question that surfaces regularly in these teachers' accounts is that of time. Investigating the variable of the quality of reading instruction in Kannada-medium government schools Nag (2007) found that in poorly functioning schools, such as those in this case, the pace of literacy acquisition lagged about one year behind that in better functioning schools. In the present case, current management practices often leave teachers with many more children per class than the national 1:40 norm and little time to devote to individuals. Yet teachers set targets for first year children that seem all the more unrealistic given that, in the absence of pre-school provision, this first year will be most children's first exposure to formal schooling; and that parents are not necessarily able to provide academic support at home. Initial teacher education appears not, therefore, to have helped teachers map the sequence of language development on to the time available over the first years of primary school. As earlier noted, these expectations seem to be shaped by their focus on the need to perfect the *akshara* as a pre-requisite for reading. This construction overrules the pace and content of learning suggested in the textbook, whose revised order of presenting *akshara* according to orthographic criteria seemed to have no credence; the otherwise close adherence to the textbook in the case of literacy teaching competes unsuccessfully with teachers' deeply held beliefs about how literacy needs to be taught.

The clearest implications of this study are for teacher education at both pre- and in-service stages. As a first priority, there is a need to be recognised that literacy is central to children's abilities to access the whole formal school curriculum; and primary schooling needs to establish a firm foundation of literacy abilities not only for further school study, but also for adulthood. All training would benefit from reorientating the current narrow focus on reading and writing towards language and literacy, more broadly conceived.

At the initial preparation stage, the need for competence in scholarly levels of High Gujarati is questionable. Rather, teachers need robust theoretical understandings of how children acquire literacy, preferably, as Bloch (1998) suggests, framed within a coherent understanding of early childhood development. In the linguistic context of diglossia, this would need to include practical strategies arising from understandings of the pedagogical implications of the gap between High and Low language varieties.

While coding and decoding are an important aspect of developing appropriate *akshara* knowledge (Nag, 2007), they are currently prioritised at the expense of other aspects of language awareness that support reading and writing. There is strong evidence from socially-situated literacy research that meaning-making is important in reading acquisition. At its simplest teachers could invite children to contribute words to practise with, or jointly develop a story – two simple means of providing children the understandings which underpin reading of how the sounds of their spoken language link with their symbolic representations on slate, blackboard, and paper.

Underpinning the notion of meaning-making is however a view that children's learning is what is important; and this requires a considerable re-orientation of teacher education in general towards pedagogy, as well as literacy in particular. This is especially challenging in relation to hierarchical social ordering and the tendency of 'mainstream' schooling processes not to validate the knowledge of the least privileged groups. But teacher education might itself spark debate on educational inclusion by encouraging students and practising teachers in a critical engagement with how texts construct and represent the world (Freire and Macedo, 1997; Jeffery, 2005).

In general pedagogical terms, teachers need strategies for stretching those who learn faster, and supporting those who learn more slowly. Both pre- and inservice education would benefit from engaging teachers in critical analysis of their own concepts of 'intelligence' and 'weakness' – labels that dominate the discourses of practising teachers – along with

developing teachers' pedagogical responses to children's differing paces and styles of learning.

However, in order to provide practical classroom strategies and useful working theory for teacher, teacher education itself needs to overcome its own lack of awareness of the cognitive demands of *akshara*-specific characteristics for children learning to read in Indian vernacular languages. Nag (2007: 9) argues that although these demands are not yet not fully understood, the pace of acquisition of orthographic knowledge could be expected to be relatively slower than in alphabetic languages, since *akshara* knowledge acquisition requires 'mastery of a large orthographic register and the ligaturing rules that govern this'² (see Patel, 2004 for a discussion of these issues in Gujarati). This has clear implications in addressing teacher expectations of the speed at which literacy learning should progress, and it may shed some light on why teachers express problems with the teaching of vowels. Teacher education would clearly benefit from further empirical research into how teachers approach ligaturing and why this aspect of literacy teaching presents such difficulties; and why teachers are teaching Gujarati by a consonant-vowel patterning that is appropriate for alphabetic but not Brahmi languages (Patel, 2004).

The action research aspect of this study underlines the ambitious nature of the policy intention of changing the role of a teacher so s/he becomes a facilitator of individuals' learning. At present, the project demonstrated that when children underachieve, teachers seek explanations for this in terms of factors extrinsic to their own classroom roles and practices. Teachers' accountability to learners, necessarily supported by reflexivity about how teaching and learning relate for each child, need to be nurtured. In relation to in-service education, the project illustrated that through externally-facilitated peer reflection, teachers engaged in thinking about practices in ways they had not done before, and gained skills in describing and sharing their own practices. Teachers' knowledge of what they do is often tacit, and articulating it is a difficult but vital aspect of understanding the theoretical constructs that underlie their attitudes and practices (see also Loughran et al., 2003) and thus identifying directions for change. Time, trust and professional support for Cluster Resource Centre leaders to facilitate such joint reflection will be important elements of consolidating the Cluster approach to in-service education.

² She notes that in Kannada, for instance, this takes some four years, compared with an average of about one year in English.

It would, however, be invidious to suggest that, even with significant changes addressing some of the points made above, improved teacher preparation in isolation can have all that much impact on improving the effectiveness of teaching and learning literacy in the early years. Until public schools' funding and managing bodies also take ownership of their responsibility to provide appropriate working conditions and support for schools that serve the most disadvantaged groups in society, their (in)actions lend credence to teachers' view that promoting the learning of *all* children in their classrooms is an impossible task. The consequences for social equity and literacy in adult lives are already evident.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to Swati Shah for her support to the action research project and for generating much of the data on which this paper depends; and to Uma Iyer for her help in getting the project going. The research was funded by the UK's Department for International Development.

References

- Aggarwal, Y. (1998) *Quality concerns in primary education in India: where is the problem?*, <http://www.dpepmis.org/downloads/quality1.pdf> (accessed 23.2.04).
- Barratt-Pugh, C. (2000) The socio-cultural context of literacy learning. In Barratt-Pugh, C. and M. Rohl (eds). *Literacy learning in the early years* Open University Press: Buckingham/Philadelphia.
- Bloch, C. (1998) *Literacy in the Early Years: Teaching and Learning in Multilingual Early Childhood Classrooms*. Occasional Paper, No. 1. University of Cape Town: Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA).
- Burte, P. (2005) PRISM – a turning point. In Kumar, M. and P. Sarangapani (2005) (eds.) op cit, pp. 7-12.
- Chopra, R. and Jeffery, P. (2005) (eds.) *Educational Regimes in Contemporary India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Dreze, J. and A. Sen (1999) *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity* (8th impression). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Dyer, C. (2000) *Operation Blackboard: policy implementation in Indian elementary education*. Oxford: Symposium Press.
- Dyer, C. (2005) Decentralisation to improve teacher quality: District Institutes of Education and Training in India. In Dyer, C. and P. Rose (eds.) Decentralisation for educational development: editorial introduction *Compare* 35 (2) pp. 139-152.

- Dyer, C. and A. Choksi with V. Awasty, U. Iyer, R. Moyade, N. Nigam, N. Purohit, S. Shah, S. Sheth (2004) *District Institutes of Education and Training: a comparative study in three Indian States* Report no. 55 in Researching the Issues series. London: Department for International Development.
- Elliot, J. (1991) *Action Research for Educational Change*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Freire, P. and D. Macedo (1997) *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Jeffery, P. (2005) Introduction: Hearts, Minds and Pockets. In Chopra, R. and Jeffery, P. (2005) (eds.) op cit pp. 13-38. , *Educational Regimes in Contemporary India*,. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Kumar, K. (2005) *The Political Agenda of Education* (second edition). New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Kumar, M. and P. Sarangapani (2005) (eds.) *Improving Government Schools: what has been tried and what works*. Bangalore: Books for Change.
- Loughran, J., I. Mitchell and J. Mitchell (2003) Attempting to document teachers' professional knowledge *Qualitative Studies in Education* 16 (6) 853-873.
- Mathrani, V. (2005) I can read and write. In Kumar, M. and P. Sarangapani (2005) (eds.) op cit, pp. 34-40.
- Nag, S. (2007) Early reading in Kannada: the pace of acquisition of orthographic knowledge and phonemic awareness *Journal of Research in Reading* 30 (1), pp 7–22.
- NCERT (2000) *National curriculum framework for school education* New Delhi: National Council for Educational Research and Training.
- NPE (1986/92) *National Policy on Education, with amendments made in 1992*. New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India.
- Patel, P. (2004) *Reading Acquisition in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Paran, A. and E. Williams (2007) Editorial: reading and literacy in developing countries. *Journal of Research in Reading* Vol 30 (1), pp 1–6.
- Pratham (2003) (<http://www.pratham.org/readindia/default.php>) accessed 26.08.03.
- PROBE (1999) *Report Public Report on Basic Education in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Ramachandran, V. (2003) (ed.) *Getting Children Back to School*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Rose, P. and C. Dyer (2006) *Education and Chronic Poverty* paper commissioned by the Chronic Poverty Research Centre / ODI, London.
- Sarangapani, P. (2003) Childhood and Schooling in an Indian Village. *Childhood* 10 (4) pp. 403-418.
- Sarangapani, P. and M. Kumar (2005) Improving Government Schools. Introduction. In Kumar, M. and P. Sarangapani (2005) (eds.) op cit pp. ix-xxxi.
- Sinha, R. (1997) Problematique of Equality in Indian Education: general introduction. In Sinha, R. (ed.) (1997) *Inequality in Indian Education*, pp. xv-xxxiv. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House PVT Ltd.
- Street, B. (1995) *Critical approaches to literacy in education, development and ethnography*, London: Longman.

- Stromquist, N. (1998) Agents in women's education: Some trends in the African context. In M. Bloch, J. Beoku-Betts, and R. Tabachnik (eds.) *Women and Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Power, Opportunities and Constraints*. Lynne Rienner: Colorado.
- Subrahmanian, R. (2003) Introduction: Exploring Processes of Marginalisation and Inclusion in Education. *IDS Bulletin* Vol 34, pp. 1-8.
- UNESCO (1999) *Literacy and International Development* accessed 19.2.04 at <http://www.literacyonline.org/explorer/overview.html>.
- UNESCO (2002) *Is the World on Track? Education For All Global Monitoring Report* Paris: UNESCO.
- UNESCO (2005) *Literacy for Life. Education For All Global Monitoring Report* Paris: UNESCO.
- Vasavi, A. (2003) Schooling for a New Society? The Social and Political Bases of Education Deprivation in India. *IDS Bulletin* Vol 34, pp. 72-80.
- Velaskar, P. (1998) Ideology, Education and the Political Struggle for Liberation: change and challenge among the Dalits of Maharashtra. In Shukla, S. and R. Kaul (eds.) (1998) *Education, Development and Underdevelopment* pp. 210-240. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Wedell, M. (2005) Cascading training down into the classroom: The need for parallel planning *International Journal of Educational Development* 25 pp. 637-65.

Table 1: Students enrolled, present, and average working days in March 2000

Teacher	boys enrolled	av. boys present	girls enrolled	av. girls present	total enrolled	total present	Working days (out of 26)
1	35	23	37	22	72	45	14
2					47	28	22
3					44	29	26
4					34	30	18
5					77	62	20
6					115	85	20
7	38		28		66	45	14
8					62	49	18
9					54	42	19
10					50	40	16
11	36	33	33	27	69	60	15
12	25	22	24	21	49	43	15
13					39	32	19
14	24	20	25	21	49	41	11
15	41	36	35	30	76	66	14
16	42	34	37	30	79	64	10
17	40	33	39	34	79	67	13
18					68	45	18
19	30		20		50	45	19
20					42	35	22