The policy and practice of early literacy acquisition in the akshara languages

Shaher Banu Vagh, Sonali Nag and Rukmini Banerji

India is a country of many pluralities as reflected in its linguistic, geographic, religious, cultural and socioeconomic diversity. All of this poses significant challenges for its education system, which spans the spectrum from high-fee-charging privately managed schools to publicly funded government schools. Some schools along this spectrum are partially aided and some are not recognized by education authorities. Typically, the high-cost private schools provide English as the primary language of instruction, while government schools are more varied, offering instruction in one of the Indian languages and English. Even though in recent years there has been an increase in ‘affordable’ low-cost private schools, government schools continue to provide schooling to the majority of India’s children (ASER Centre, 2014). These schools, catering to the most disadvantaged amongst the urban and rural poor, are bogged down with systemic issues of poor infrastructure, inadequate teaching–learning resources and prevalence of multi-grade classrooms run by teachers only trained for mono-grade services. It is therefore noteworthy that by focusing on the pedagogy of reading and writing in the akshara languages in the Indian government schools, our discussion inevitably becomes linked to issues of socioeconomic ‘disadvantage’.

The Indian constitution legislates the provision of free and compulsory education for all children aged six to 14 years and places the primary responsibility of ensuring access to school, enrolment, attendance and completion on the government (Right to Education Act, 2009). Preschool education is not mandatory. Yet, there are several opportunities for preschool participation through programmes managed by the government, non-government organizations and the private sector. The first two are the largest providers of these services through Anganwadi and Balwadi programmes that tend to serve as feeder preschools for government and low-cost private schools. Anganwadis, as part of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), provide basic health services, nutrition and preschool education for children from birth to six years. As such, the preschool component in these programmes is diluted, because one Anganwadi worker functions as the teacher, basic healthcare provider and liaison between the community and government. Balwadi programmes offered by the government and non-governmental organizations for children aged three to six are more focused on preparing children for the demands of formal schooling. National rural estimates indicate that about 63 per cent of three-year-olds and 77 per cent of four-year-olds are enrolled in a preschool programme (ASER Centre, 2014). National
urban estimates are not available, but small-scale surveys indicate that preschool participation rates for children in urban centres are similar to rural estimates except that children in urban areas are more likely to attend a private preschool instead of government centres (ASER Centre, 2014). By five years of age the majority of the children in rural and urban areas tend to be enrolled in first grade.

What gets taught and how it is taught? Policy guidelines

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2005) tends to be the steering document providing guidelines for curricular focus and pedagogical approaches at the primary grades and beyond. The most recent iteration of NCF and the ensuing National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE, 2009) stresses a ‘constructivist’ and ‘participatory’ approach to learning as a means to redress the mechanistic instructional approaches of rote memorization, drill-based pedagogy and decontextualized, didactic and textbook-centric teaching approaches reminiscent of the behaviourist paradigm. Some of its guidelines specific to oral language and literacy development are the importance of: a) instruction in a child’s native language particularly in the primary years; b) multilingual classrooms; c) an integrated approach to learning to read and write; d) the use of diverse and authentic print-rich materials that value children’s cultures and experiences, promote language learning and facilitate children in abstracting rules of grammar; e) children as active participants; f) ‘expressiveness’ rather than just ‘correctness’ in oral and written language use; and g) linking language assessments to proficiency rather than the mandated syllabus. On teacher education, NCF and NCFTE mandate ongoing and onsite professional development as a means to prepare and support teachers to implement strategies in consonance with the ‘constructivist’ approach. Although states exercise autonomy in the development and implementation of the curriculum, the NCF tends to be the overarching guiding document.

Policy recommendations for the preschool stage emphasize the development of oral language skills in the child’s native language and on utilizing developmentally appropriate, flexible and individualized teaching practices to ensure holistic development and to prepare the child for schooling (National Focus Group on Early Childhood Education, NCERT, 2006). Some suggested activities for three- to five-year-olds are dramatic play, play with manipulative objects, talking and listening to stories, exposure to print in a print-rich but meaningful context and encouraging children’s interest in the functional aspects of written language such as the writing of their own names. The guidelines discourage activities that are designed ‘solely to teach the alphabet, phonics, and penmanship’ (NCERT, 2006).

English in the primary school years

Government schools provide instruction in any one of the 46 Indian languages and English, an associate official language (Dutta and Bala, 2012). Children attending non-English medium schools also learn English as a second language. The grade at which English teaching commences varies depending on the state or union territory (UT) policy. In a majority of the states and UTs (21 states and five UTs) English is introduced in the first grade. Despite English being an aspirational language, the quality of English language instruction in government schools and overall level of learning is less than desirable (Dutta and Bala, 2012; Nag et al., 2014). A recent national rural survey indicates that about 30 per cent of children in grade 3 are unable to correctly identify four out of five upper-case letters and just 47 per cent of children in grade 8 are able to read a simple sentence such as ‘I like to read’ or ‘What
is the time?’ and of these only 63 per cent can define the meaning of words read (ASER Centre, 2014).

A thorough discussion of these issues merits its own chapter. In this chapter, we focus on literacy acquisition in the akshara languages. In the following sections we offer a brief overview of the phonology and orthography of the akshara languages using examples from a northern Indo-Aryan language, Hindi and a southern Dravidian language, Kannada. We discuss the insights about literacy development provided by reading acquisition research in the akshara languages and describe typical instructional practices in mainstream government schools. Of particular interest are the links between policy, research and practice, and the implications of these findings for literacy development in India.

The akshara languages

Phonological and orthographic representations

India’s linguistic landscape is marked by 22 official languages but an overall count of close to 780 languages (Devy, 2014). The Indo-Aryan and the Dravidian language families, which we focus upon in this chapter, have distinct orthographies but are derived from the ancient writing system of Brahmi and thus share many common features.

In the Indic orthographies, the basic orthographic unit (the akshara) represents sounds at the level of the syllable with constituent parts of the akshara encoding phonemic information. Hence, these writing systems have most commonly been referred to as an alphasyllabary (Salomon, 2000). Akshara can be vowels (/V/), consonants with an inherent (unmarked) vowel (/Ca/), consonants with other vowel markers (/CV/) or with the vowel suppressed (/C/), consonant clusters (or conjoint consonants) appearing with an inherent or marked vowel (e.g. /CCa/, /CCV/, /CCCV/). Examples of the different types of akshara are presented in Table 19.1. Although the akshara systems make provision for a phonemic consonant (e.g. in Hindi, the use of the ‘halant’, a marker placed beneath the consonant to mark vowel suppression as in य /k/), in practice it is not uniformly used and is rarely introduced in early literacy instruction. A basic symbol set, referred to by different names such as the varnamala/varnamale of Hindi/Kannada, comprises the primary forms of vowels (/V/), consonant–vowel pairs (/Ca/, /CV/) and a handful of conjoint consonants with the inherent vowel (/CCa/), which visually may or may not be decomposable into constituent phonemic units (e.g. the Hindi /ksha/ in Table 19.1).

Vowels in an akshara orthography have two representations, a primary and a secondary form. Vowels appear in their primary form in syllable initial positions (with some exceptions), and in their secondary form as diacritics called matra/gunita (Hindi/Kannada). Hence, a second symbol set is a well-structured consonant–vowel matrix referred to as the barakhadi/kagunita (Hindi/Kannada) comprising consonants with the full complement of vowel ligatures (/CV/). A phonemic marker such as the vowel ligature can appear on the top, bottom, left or right of the consonantal base, thus resulting in non-linear visual representations of the orthographic units (see the vowel ligatures with the consonant base /k/ in Table 19.1 for Hindi and Kannada). Additionally, consonants within consonant clusters are also represented in their secondary forms, which typically involve halving the consonant when it is placed linearly or stacking consonants (see the CCV and CCCV akshara in Table 19.1). Both arrangements index vowel suppression in one of the consonants in the cluster. Thus a single symbol block (the singleton akshara) may represent two or more phonemic markers. The number of distinct singleton akshara runs to several hundred, given the highly productive
**Table 19.1** Orthographic examples of different types of akshara

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hindi</th>
<th>Kannada</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary forms of vowels</td>
<td>अ आ इ ई उ ऊ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>/a/ /aa/ /i/ /ii/ /u/ /uu/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary forms of consonants</td>
<td>क ख ग घ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with the inherent vowel (CV)</td>
<td>/ka/ /kha/ /ta/ /ra/ /dha/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consonant with ligature vowel (CV)</td>
<td>का कि को कु कुु</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>/kaa/ /ki/ /kii/ /ku/ /kuu/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consonants with inherent vowel (CCa, CCCa)</td>
<td>स्प ष स्त स्त्र</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>/spra/ /ksha/ /stha/ /tya/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consonants with ligature vowel (CCV, CCCV)</td>
<td>क्कु क्ह्या क्ष्र</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>/kku/ /khyaa/ /strii/ /ddhaa/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
nature of consonant clusters, rendering the orthographies as ‘extensive’ (Nag, 2007, 2013). However, an important feature of the akshara orthography is that, except for the inherent vowel and a few conjoint consonants (such as the Hindi /ksha/ in Table 19.1), all akshara units can be deconstructed into their constituent phonemic units. The non-linear alignment of the phonemic markers and the presence of multiple phonemes within a single akshara unit tend to increase the visual and phonological complexity of akshara (Nag et al., 2014).

Akshara in words encode phonological information in several ways. Table 19.2 gives examples of phonology–orthography mappings for Hindi and Kannada. Another example is the open and closed syllable word pair, /maa.taa/ (mother) and /maal/ (goods). Both are two-akshara Hindi words (<CV.CV> and <CV.C>), the latter distinguished as a body and coda encoding. In multisyllabic words, the mapping of akshara to phonology is determined by the process of re-syllabification whereby the post-vocalic consonant of an initial closed syllable initiates the next akshara, forming a coda-open syllable unit, e.g. /laksh.mii/ (good fortune, <CV.CCCV>) or a coda-body unit, e.g. /laksh.ma.N/ (a name, <CV.CCCV.C>; also see Table 19.2). The process of re-syllabification results in the formation of a wide range of consonant clusters as well as mismatched phonology–orthography mappings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hindi</th>
<th>Kannada</th>
<th>Akshara mappings</th>
<th>Akshara to phonology mappings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>तत्ता</td>
<td>तत्ता</td>
<td>&lt;la.taa&gt;</td>
<td>/la.taa/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;CV.CV&gt;</td>
<td>/open syllable.open syllable/</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>तस्वीर</td>
<td>तस्वीर</td>
<td>&lt;la.kshmii&gt;</td>
<td>/la.ksh.mii/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;CV.CCCV&gt;</td>
<td>/body.coda.open syllable/</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>तस्वीर</td>
<td>तस्वीर</td>
<td>&lt;la.kshma.N&gt;;</td>
<td>/la.ksh.ma.N/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;la.kshma.Na&gt;</td>
<td>/la.ksh.ma.Na/</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;CV.CCCV.C&gt;;</td>
<td>/body.coda.body.coda/</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;CV/CCCV.CV&gt;</td>
<td>/body.coda.open syllable.open syllable/</td>
<td></td>
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Literacy acquisition research in the akshara languages: challenges and implications for learning to read

Literacy acquisition research with fluent and beginning readers offers insights on the cognitive-linguistic underpinning of reading development in the akshara languages. The evidence suggests that although the mapping of phonology to orthography is near perfect, mastering an akshara system presents several orthography–specific learning demands.

Young learners have to master an extensive set of orthographic units that tend to extend the ‘learning to read’ phase (Nag, 2007; Sircar and Nag, 2013; Tiwari et al., 2011). While the acquisition of the simple akshara (V, Ca) is rapid over Grades 1 and 2, the acquisition of more complex akshara, that is akshara with ligatures (CV, CCV, CCCV), seems to extend well into Grade 4 (Nag, 2007; see Table 19.1). The pace of acquisition is, however, confounded by socioeconomic disadvantage and poor school quality and nature of instruction (Nag, 2007). Further factors in mastering the complex akshara are related to: (a) visual complexity driven by the use of ligatures that are non-linearly aligned in individual akshara, (b) phonological
complexity encoded in multiple phonemic markers, (c) frequency of akshara in children’s literature and d) the lack of explicit instruction on many of these akshara that are left to incidental learning from encounters in print (Nag, 2013; Nag, et al., 2014; Sircar and Nag, 2013).

The late acquisition of complex akshara parallels the slower emergence of phonemic awareness (Nag, 2007; Patel, 2004; Sircar and Nag, 2013). Fluent readers tend to demonstrate greater phonemic processing skills, suggesting that analytical skills that help readers deconstruct an akshara into its phonemic constituents accompany the greatest gains for accurately and efficiently decoding the complex akshara (Nag, 2007; Nag and Snowling, 2012). The shift to an analytic strategy is important given the high variety of complex akshara and the fact that the complex akshara (with a few exceptions) are not individually taught. It is, then, not surprising that the ability to read complex akshara tends to set the pace for reading development and failure to do so is indicative of struggling readers (Nag and Snowling, 2011). Importantly, in keeping with the alphasyllabic nature of the orthography, both syllabic processing skills and phonemic processing skills continue to be significant predictors of reading accuracy through the middle school years (Nag and Snowling, 2012).

Spelling development research provides additional insights into the orthographic effects of the Indic alphasyllabaries. The simple akshara are the easiest to spell and to read. Complex akshara pose a challenge and their position in a word has implications for spelling accuracy (Bengali: Sircar and Nag, 2013; Kannada: Nag et al., 2010; Hindi: Vaid and Gupta, 2002). Re-syllabification, which results in mismatched phonology-orthography mapping (as illustrated in Table 19.2), imposes additional processing demands that are greater for spelling than reading (Nag, 2013). Spelling errors are also commonly noted for vowels, which may be due to overlooking its phonemic marker or confusion in the phonemic markers representing short and long vowel pairs, some of which differ only in visuo-spatial orientation (e.g. see the representations in Hindi for /ki/ and /kii/ in Table 19.1). Analyses of errors for vowels and the complex akshara also further implicate the role of phonology and the use of analytic strategies rather than mere global akshara recall. Further, diglossia, a phenomenon ubiquitous across India, also influences spelling accuracy and adds another dimension to the debate about phonological versus orthographic influences on spelling ability. For instance, in Bihar speakers of regional dialects tend to not distinguish between the phonemes ‘sh’ and ‘s’ or between ‘dh’ and ‘r’. As a consequence, the Hindi words written as shaadi (marriage) and padha (read) are articulated as ‘saadi’ and ‘para’.

Reading comprehension has been much less explored relative to the acquisition of akshara knowledge and decoding. Evidence from Kannada and Gujarati indicates that even prior to gaining complete mastery of the akshara, young learners do read with comprehension (i.e. are able to retrieve factual information) underscoring the importance of a strong lexical repertoire (Nag and Snowling, 2012; Patel, 2004). However, substantial contributions of decoding ability and phonological processing skills are noted even in the middle school years, given the extended phase of akshara learning (Nag and Snowling, 2012).

What, then, does the learning to read process in the akshara languages entail? The research by Nag and colleagues suggests that instruction in the primary grades, beginning first grade onwards, necessitates the acquisition of symbol–sound mappings for the singleton akshara; that is the primary forms of vowels and the consonants with the inherent vowel and subsequently the matrix of consonant-ligatured vowel units. Key learning demands at this stage are the ability to discriminate between phonetically similar symbols (e.g. /s/, /sh/; /n/, /N/ in Hindi and Kannada) and the learning of the wide array of CV units represented in the barakhadi/ kagunita matrix. The later emergence of phonemic processing skills suggests that children initially view these singleton akshara as global rather than de-constructable units, most likely
because (a) the vowels and the consonants with the inherent vowel cannot be visually deconstructed and (b) instruction for those consonant and vowel units which can be deconstructed tends to centre on the global symbol. However, with increasing exposure to and acquisition of akshara children begin to abstract the embedded phonemic information, and move from being global to analytic users of the akshara. The nature of instruction also facilitates the shift from global to analytic strategies. The evidence suggests that despite the early prominence of the syllable, a phonemic level of abstraction is essential if mastery of the akshara, an extensive set, is to be complete and efficient. Such phonemic abstraction of the complex akshara is especially useful when mismatched phonology-orthography mappings have to be decoded and encoded. Thus, successful reading in the akshara languages entails the use of both large and small grain size units of phonology with the more easily accessible large units, the syllables, being the starting point for the understanding of symbol–sound mapping principles. This suggests that the quality of early orthographic representations is likely to be different from the later orthographic representations; these, in turn, have differing implications for reading and spelling. Lexical bootstrapping ensures, for example, that the task of reading is relatively easier than spelling the same word. Moreover, the ability of young learners to read with comprehension despite the extended period of akshara acquisition suggests the vital role of lexical bootstrapping in scaffolding comprehension. Better comprehenders tend to demonstrate not just better reading accuracy and phonological skills but also higher lexical awareness, vocabulary depth and inflection knowledge. These several lines of research then underscore the importance of language proficiency from the early stages for successful decoding and reading comprehension.

Policy implementation in practice

Literacy instruction: policy, practice and research

The policy mandate for native language instruction is complicated to implement given India’s linguistic diversity. Several languages tend to be grouped under a single ‘mother tongue’. For instance, for speakers of Rajasthani, Bhojpuri, Maithili and several other languages, Hindi is designated as their ‘mother tongue’ for schooling (see Figure 19.1). However, children who speak these diverse languages struggle to interact in the Hindi language classroom. A related issue is the presence of regional variations that amounts to a diglossic situation when children have to converse in the standard varieties taught in schools. The complexity of the learning situation is further compounded by the lack of pedagogical strategies to deal with the diverse linguistic profiles in the early years language classroom even though the NCF (2005) states that multilingualism ‘must be used as a resource, classroom strategy and a goal by a creative language teacher’ (p. 36).

A common refrain noted in policy, practice and research circles for the primary school years is the reliance on prescribed textbooks in mainstream classrooms. Surely, there is nothing wrong with teachers following the mandated curriculum. However, concerns have to do with the sole reliance on a single print resource. Added to this is the use of decontextualized instructional strategies and pace of instruction that is dictated by the curriculum rather than by the diverse learning needs of the children in the classrooms. In the absence of formal assessments in the primary school years textbooks also tend to be used as a metric for progress and as a means to judge teacher performance.

Reading instruction typically begins in the first grade with the learning of symbol–sound mapping for the primary forms of vowels and consonants with the inherent vowel. These
mappings may also be reinforced via the word association method where children memorize the singleton akshara along with a word that starts with the target akshara, e.g. ‘ka’ for kamal/kamala (lotus, Hindi/Kannada). Following closely, the consonant with the ligature vowels are taught as syllable strings with a common consonant base and changes in the paired vowel marker, e.g. ‘ka, kaa, ki, kii’ (see Table 19.1). Instruction of the phonemic markers may vary with customary practice tending towards global more than analytic strategies; this is an approach evident in the currently prescribed textbooks for the Hindi- and Kannada-speaking states of Bihar and Karnataka as well. Young learners may extract insights about the phonemic markers from visual and aural comparisons of the consonant with vowel ligature units when engaging in rhythmic choral recitations and copy-writing activities. Word formation involves focus on the constituent akshara by de-constructing and re-constructing words. There is consensus that learning to read in traditional mainstream classrooms is a decontextualized, sequential and stage-like process (Bhattacharjea et al., 2011; Dyer, 2008; Jayaram, 2008a, 2008b; Nag, 2007; Patel, 2004). Little or no effort is devoted to ensuring that children can generalize beyond the akshara-word associations or use the symbol–sound mappings in a generative manner. Put differently, although policy mandates (e.g. NCF, 2006) recommend a ‘constructivist’ approach, in practice teachers tend to employ a transmission model of teaching where students are passive recipients rather than active meaning-makers.

Writing is an important component of the language classroom and is greatly valued by parents and teachers right from the preschool years (Vagh, 2009), perhaps because it is a tangible aspect of literacy acquisition. Some first-grade state textbooks incorporate ‘pre-writing’ skills such as drawing lines and circles and colouring, but this tends to be a token practice. Writing, in the preschool and primary grade years, mostly occurs in conjunction with learning the symbol–sound mappings and spellings via copy-writing tasks focusing on

Figure 19.1 Percentage of children from nine Hindi-speaking states whose home language is different from the school language based on rural state-representative samples

Source: ASER, 2011
mechanistic aspects of accurate formation of the akshara and neat handwriting. Homework in the preschool and primary school years also mainly entails copy writing. Moreover, when children engage in expressive writing, the focus is on correct spelling and syntax and less on writing as a mode to express, create and communicate.

Teachers’ central role is to oversee the recitation and writing work and the focus in these activities is on correct enunciation, accurate symbol–sound mappings and neat handwriting. Errors in akshara identification or in copy writing or the inability to keep pace with the instruction are addressed through additional practice and at times through peer tutoring. Lesson plans are not the norm and sole reliance on textbooks is ubiquitous (also see Bhattacharjea et al., 2011; Dyer, 2008; Patel, 2004; Saigal, 2012).

Although whole-class instruction is typical, teachers may at times assign copy-writing work differentiated by ability levels. Differentiated teaching is uncommon and individualized instruction is difficult given the large class sizes. The Right to Education Act (2009) mandates one teacher for every 30 children in the primary grade classrooms; however, multi-grade teaching is prevalent. For instance, in 63 per cent of rural schools, grade 2 children were observed sitting with one or more other grades (ASER Centre, 2014). Much variation is noted at the preschool level as well; in a study of 40 preschools for example, class sizes varied from ten to 40 with an average class size of 21 (Vagh, 2009).

In the mainstream primary grade classrooms, few opportunities are provided for oral language development, storytelling, children re-constructing stories, the functional uses of literacy and meaning-making. There is little use of open-ended questions to stimulate expressive language ability or to draw upon children’s experiences as a learning resource. It is not at all uncommon to observe children reciting and memorizing standard responses to questions based on reading materials. Comprehension demands also tend to be limited to factual retrieval, and inferential reasoning is not actively encouraged. Despite textbook reforms to incorporate more engaging, contextualized activities centred on meaning-making and requiring the active engagement of learners, instructional practice remains unchanged most likely because teachers fail to transact the essence of these activities in the absence of training that imparts its pedagogical intent (also see Bhattacharjea et al., 2011; Clarke, 2001; Jayaram 2008a).

At the preschool stage as well, despite the policy guidelines, most programmes tend to replicate teaching practices prevalent in primary grade classrooms such as the explicit teaching of the akshara using mechanistic drill work and rote memorization. The reliance on such activities is in part due to absence of adequate professional development for new teachers, a trickle-down of primary grade classroom practices and in part due to parental pressure to provide ‘school-like’ instruction (Muralidharan and Kaul, 1999; Prochner, 2002; Vagh, 2009).

However, within this milieu of traditional practices, some teachers at both the preschool and primary school level have made the shift towards relatively more engaging, contextualized and differentiated instructional strategies, primarily through participation in in-service professional development programmes. Innovations in instructional approaches have mostly been driven by non-government organizations such as Organization for Early Literacy Promotion, Pratham, The Promise Foundation and Vikramshila, often in collaboration with state governments. It is, however, beyond the scope of this chapter to describe and discuss these initiatives.

**Assessments**

Formal assessments are not the norm in the early years. Policy mandates formative assessments and a no-detention policy up until grade 8. However, in the absence of measurable
grade-appropriate competencies, teachers are challenged to make productive use of informal assessments. State-mandated systems like the Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) are seen by teachers as bureaucratic formalities rather than a means to review and revise lesson plans. The reality, then, is that teachers consider the completion of the prescribed syllabus to be the goal irrespective of children’s ability to keep pace with the curriculum. Recent national rural assessments indicate dismally low levels of reading, with fewer than 50 per cent of fifth-graders able to accurately decode a second-grade text (ASER, 2014). Such low levels of accomplishment merely exacerbate the learning problem, especially when teachers maintain instructional pace with the curriculum rather than student attainment levels.

**Teacher education and professional development**

Teacher education for the primary school years is typically a two-year post-higher secondary education certificate course. Although educational reform in the past decade has steered pedagogical practices towards a constructivist approach (NCF, 2005; NCFTE, 2009), and there is a growing body of work about the theory and instruction of literacy acquisition (e.g. Nag, in press), the transfer into practice is minimal and not well formulated. Typically, the prescribed curriculum or textbooks form the basis of training, and emphasis is on the standard language variety. Professional development programmes also follow the transmission model where teacher trainers are seen as the ‘experts’ and teacher trainees as the ‘recipients’. Current pre-service programmes also do not adequately prepare teachers for the contextual realities of mainstream government schools such as low learning-teaching resources, age variation within grades, low preschool participation, multi-grade classrooms, wide heterogeneity in learning levels, diversity in children’s linguistic profiles and home supports for learning.

Educational qualifications required for the preschool stage is lower. Typically, for Anganwadi and Balwadi programmes, teachers need to have completed at a minimum between eight to ten years of formal schooling. Recruited teachers then receive pre-service training that varies in duration depending on the organization offering these services as does the opportunity to participate in ongoing professional development programmes.

**Literacy resources: home and school**

A specific requirement for teachers is to work with children who have little or no exposure to print resources and literacy practices at home even though schooling is highly valued by the family. Some barriers to print access and parent involvement (see Figure 19.2) relate to the low- or no-schooling status of most parents, non-native school instruction, the disconnect between decontextualized school activities and the everyday uses of literacy, and parents’ low purchasing power.

Mirroring the situation in the classroom, textbooks are potentially the only child-directed print encountered by children at home. The absence of rich-print resources when learning to read an extensive set of orthographic units doubly contributes to a protracted learning process. This is because it denies children exposure to print materials that can facilitate stable phonology–orthography linkages, provide exposure to diverse akshara and help generate insight into the context-dependent rules of akshara formation. In addition, it denies children the additional benefits of enhanced vocabulary, comprehension and world knowledge. All of this in turn have significant negative consequences for children’s ability to keep pace with the curriculum and results in a slowing down of reading attainments.
A substantial impediment to the access to authentic and meaningful text has been the absence of a robust body of accessible children’s literature in many Indian languages, despite the rich literary tradition for adult literature. The past two decades, though, have witnessed an exponential increase in the availability of low-cost children’s literature in Indian languages by several indigenous and not-for-profit publishing houses. The NCERT publishes some graded reading materials as well, for example the Barkha series. In recent years, efforts by non-governmental organizations, in many cases in collaboration with state governments, have infused the early language classroom with reading materials of many genres and formats such as story cards, autobiographies, world knowledge books and big and small books, for example Bodhi Vriksh Karyakram (2008) in Bihar and Chili Pili Cheela (2007) in Karnataka.

**Major challenges for current and future early literacy provisions**

The descriptions above of mainstream instructional practices suggest an obvious mismatch between policy frameworks for early literacy instruction and its implementation. Policy mandates focusing on oral language proficiency in the early years and a whole language approach to literacy instruction. However, classroom practices primarily rely on mechanistic reading and writing activities. Despite textbook reforms being aligned to policy recommendations, there is ineffective inclusion of creative and developmentally appropriate pedagogic intent into the practice of emerging or established teachers. The ensuing dilution in
curricular transaction is perhaps the most obvious dissonance between policy and classroom practices. While the importance of oral language development is widely acknowledged, its neglect in practice has adverse implications for literacy acquisition. A well-formulated teacher training programme about the pedagogy for reading and writing instruction is also sorely lacking, resulting in an over-reliance on the prescribed curriculum and fall-back on the deeply entrenched mechanistic strategies for the teaching of reading and writing.

A missing link in shaping the policy and practice of literacy development is the evidence generated from robust reading acquisition research in the akshara languages, which can alert practitioners to the distinct learning demands associated with akshara literacy development and set a realistic pace for its acquisition. The evidence calls for a focus on oral language proficiency, access to varied and extensive reading materials, and contextualized teaching strategies. Importantly, the evidence questions the absence of explicit analytic reading instruction strategies and a potential mismatch between intended and actual pace of akshara acquisition. The first major challenge for early literacy provision is in ensuring that oral language proficiency occupies a central role in the early grades, especially given the diversity in children’s linguistic profiles. Second, given the poor-print home environments of children attending government schools, it is imperative to increase access and exposure to a variety of reading materials. Third, teachers need to be trained to offer balanced and contextualized literacy instruction. Analytic decoding instruction will make explicit the strategies needed for encoding and decoding complex akshara, thus ensuring that these useful insights are not left to mere incidental learning. Such explicit instruction (not to be confused with the mechanistic approaches of rote learning) have to complement opportunities that value meaning-making and oral and written expression through the reading of diverse texts and creative writing activities. Contextualized instruction would draw upon children’s own languages, world knowledge and home culture to enhance oral language proficiency, text comprehension and make explicit the link between formal school activities and literacy use in everyday life. Fourth, given the high prevalence of multi-grade classrooms and wide heterogeneity in student learning levels, teachers have to be effectively trained to capitalize on the opportunity for differentiated teaching via multi-ability lesson planning.

The most recent government initiative ‘Padhe Bharat, Badhe Bharat’ (MHRD, 2014) aims to address some of these issues by putting the spotlight on the early years. Similar to the national curriculum frameworks it is aligned to a ‘constructivist’ pedagogy, although it is perhaps the first policy document that formally acknowledges the importance of phonological awareness. However, given the recency of this initiative it remains to be seen how the suggested instructional focus translates into formulating a pedagogy of reading and writing instruction to train teachers and inform classroom practice.

Notes

1 These issues are also applicable to the low-cost private schooling system.
2 Indian schools follow the three-language formula whereby children in non-Hindi-speaking states learn the regional language, Hindi and English, and children in Hindi-speaking states learn Hindi, an Indian language not spoken in their area and English. In practice, however, some states follow a two-language formula, and for some children none of the school languages are their home language.
3 India is a union of 29 states and seven union territories.
India: the akshara languages

References


