

Creating a Literacy Rich Environment

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What is a Literacy Rich Environment?

Looking at the bare peeling walls of my grade I classroom everyday, I wondered how I did not hate school. But the fact is that I didn't. My mind was rich with thoughts, and I lived most of my early life in the world of books. I thought I belonged there, and was one of the characters. Most adults thought I was crazy. But Baba, who introduced me to the world of books because he did not know what to do with a motherless child, did not think I was crazy. He told me stories, and encouraged me to think of the characters in the stories, to ask questions about them and to try and understand what it would feel like to be in their shoes. It was Baba who handed me a new book every Sunday and read it to me in bed.

What did Baba do, that made books a part of my world, lending meaning to the world within me and building connections to the world outside? He talked to me about books, told me stories, and read to me when he and I both looked at the pictures and print. Can I point to a day and time that I can say I began to read by myself? No, but all I know is that Baba soon stopped reading to me and I did not mind at all. I could read, and I would read; I would live in and through the world of the stories I read.

This is the experience of a child who is hooked to books and finds solace in reading. But the children in our schools either cannot read or donot read. They have not experienced the joy of connecting with stories. A literacy rich environment, such as the one experienced by

me would inculcate the love for books in today's children, getting them to seek connections between the world without and the world within.

What is a Literacy Rich Environment and how is it Different froman Input Rich Environment?

A literacy rich environment refers to building a culture of reading in the classroom. It does not limit itself to the physical environment of the classroom or the qualitative linguistic environment of the text but extends beyond the two and becomes a negotiation between the mind of the child, the text and culture. It therefore addresses both the physical and mental space that the text occupies. The text as a living breathing being is invited to participate and play in the classroom.

Why is a Literacy Environment Necessary for Reading Acquisition?

As mentioned earlier, a literacy environment does not only refer to the physical environment. It includes the environment of the mind, of working in the school, of self-identity, self-awareness, self-worth and expression. Such an environment can only be created in the culture that the child experiences both within and outside the class room; moreover, this culture must be connected to the pages of a book. In order to build these connections and to understand ourselves, it is necessary to bring the child's world into the classroom and connect it with

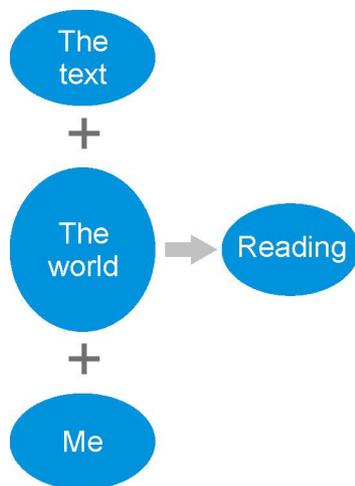
the world of stories. This can be done by writing down children's experiences.

How to Create a Literacy Rich Environment in the Classroom

Think about the message the literacy environment conveys to the children. Does it promote thinking? Does it cater to communication, and social and emotional development of the children? Does it invite children to discuss, ask questions, find their own learning journey, and share their discoveries in different ways to different audiences; does it give reading a purpose?

What Gives Reading its Purpose?

Reading is not a one way engagement with a text. It is a complex engagement between the world within the text, the mind of the child and the world of the child, to negotiate meaning and to question and understand the position of the text in the two worlds.



How can this Journey of Negotiation Begin?

This journey of negotiation can begin in two ways—by bringing the functionality of the text into the classroom and creating authentic literacy

environments which involve the world of the child; or by building an emotional connect with literacy.

To bring the functionality of literacy into the classroom we need to look at how print is viewed and how it functions in the world of a child. How does the child's family engage with print? These engagements and functions can become the starting point of our explorations. Children can collect reading materials from home, bring it to the class, talk about it and engage with it. Such materials or engagements will clearly be in the home language even though the home language may not have a written form. In fact, given our culture, all symbolic, cultural and religious occupations and engagements with symbols can be the starting point for further exploring the world of literacy.

I remember at the start of the nine days of Navratri, going up the long staircase to my home, starting at the first step by drawing the feet of the Goddess Laxmi, and moving up towards the door. I believe that is when my engagement with written symbols began. I began to wonder why the feet of Goddess Laxmi were drawn, why a certain conch-shaped symbol was etched at the door, and why the 'om'? However, my interaction with written words began with this journey up the stairs in more ways than one. In order to reach all the way up to the fifth floor where my home was, I had to pass the name plates of my friends. I remember reading the names and chanting Shetty - Sunil, Reddy - Rita, Raga-Darshana, and so on.

My best friend Avdhoot's family had a small business of *Vada-Pav* on a cart. There were frequent invitations to taste the mouth-watering *vadas* all wrapped up in oily newspaper. That's where Avdhoot and I began our negotiation with literacy—every single day!

The world of every child has literacy encounters and literacy materials which she/he has engaged with at some point. As teachers we need to

explore this world through the experiences of the child, and build connections between the literacy world within and outside the school. However, a child cannot begin the journey of literacy in the true sense unless there is an emotional connect with literacy. This second path of negotiating the journey of literacy usually happens through the support of an elder. The teacher is in fact in a unique position to support this emotional connect which can be established through drama, role play, or a learner-created text. Poetry, rhymes, songs, music, paintings are all symbolic tools which represent emotions and can hence be used to further the connect with literacy. Using literacy to explore art or music through culture would leave an indelible imprint on the child's mind, and forever make literacy a part of the child's life. Children have the unique ability to read drawings, and paintings such as the Worli art have a great potential for scaffolding language development. Drawing stick figures and creating stories around them is great fun. Songs can also be used to develop phonemic awareness which is the core of prediction in reading. The songs can be in the child's home language. Indian movies nowadays are also exploring the medium of folk songs in multilingual mode. This can be a wonderful starting point for literacy instruction!

Cognitive Value

Human beings are born with a special capacity to keep learning. In fact we never stop learning. We are like children until the time we die. Also, we never stop playing. Children love to play with words. That is why they love jingles and alliteration. We can use a cognitive play of words by helping children explore riddles, puns, ambiguity and a simple play on the letters of words. This helps in literacy acquisition by making children aware of the possibilities of word play, multiplicity of meaning, the way symbols become double metaphors and words

change their meanings. This, however, is done at a later stage in the learning process once the children have already learnt how to read and write. But why should we work incrementally with children and let all this happen later? Why can't these little nuances of language be explored to create possibilities for development of thought in the early stages of the learning process?

Making theme-based word webs in the languages of the classroom—comparing them, looking at them, and drawing pictures around them to support meaning-making—gives a lot of opportunity to children to compare the phonetic and semantic systems of the languages they hear around them and construct hypothesis about the nature of language. This process should not be articulated but needs to emerge as an outcome of learning the language. The teacher in the classroom must not be the keeper but a learner; she / he must be an explorer of knowledge along with the children. At first, teachers may be uncomfortable with this position. However, once they delve into it, they will begin to see the infinite possibilities of a cognitive approach to reading through literacy inputs.

Therefore, for a teacher, a literacy rich environment implies that she / he must become a learner, and go on a journey to find out what literacy actually means to the children she / he is entrusted with and to their families. What is the relationship between language and literacy in their culture? What is the function of literacy in their culture? The teacher must bring that knowledge into the classroom and value and nurture it even if it is a challenge. The child needs to begin at that point and start making connections between what she knows and what is new. The target language may not be the language of the child, or may not even be the language of the culture. There may be huge diversity in the classroom. Teachers need to celebrate that diversity and nurture its creativity.

A literacy rich environment for the learners implies that they be able to find their voice, to play with written symbols, to write new stories (generally the teacher does the writing) and to enjoy creative play. The learners must also be able to experience a seamless extension of reading and writing from the home, to the street, and to the school. They should feel a sense of self-worth and not feel alienated. This can happen when a part of their culture is mirrored on every wall of the school; the school then becomes their home.

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