

Indian Journal of Modern Research and Reviews

This Journal is a member of the '*Committee on Publication Ethics*'

Online ISSN:2584-184X



Research Article

Poverty in Foundational Literacy: An Analysis of Teachers' Insights from Indian Schools

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19181474>

Abstract

Basic literacy is fundamental to the intellectual and learning abilities of children. Although there is an increased enrolment in schools in India, several students do not attain the basics of reading and writing in the early years of schooling. This paper explores foundational literacy poverty in an ecological perspective based on the teacher interviewees of the Indian primary schools. A mixed-methods research design was deployed, whereby a survey of 150 primary school teachers in government schools was used. The SPSS statistical methods, such as descriptive statistics, correlation, and multiple regression analysis, were used to analyse quantitative data. Findings showed that there were significant correlations between classroom and socioeconomic factors and literacy. The regression analysis revealed that parental support ($b = .40, p < .001$), teacher training ($b = .35, p < .001$), and school resources ($b = .28, p = .002$) were significant positive predictors of literacy development, and class size ($b = -.31, p = .001$) and language barriers ($b = -.22, p = .004$) had negative effects on literacy outcomes. The regression model accounted 52 per cent of the variance in foundational literacy outcomes ($R^2 = .52, F(5,144) = 31.02, p = .001$). Results indicate the ecological character of literacy development, which focuses on the relationship between school conditions, teacher readiness, family support, and language conditions. The research recommends enhancing teacher professional development, bettering classroom environments, and enhancing parental involvement in the education of Indian schools as a way of remedying foundational literacy poverty in Indian schools.

Manuscript Information

- ISSN No: 2584-184X
- Received: 26-01-2026
- Accepted: 28-02-2026
- Published: 23-03-2026
- MRR:4(3); 2026: 315-320
- ©2026, All Rights Reserved
- Plagiarism Checked: Yes
- Peer Review Process: Yes

How to Cite this Article

Kamila S, Mondal S. Poverty in Foundational Literacy: An Analysis of Teachers' Insights from Indian Schools. Indian J Mod Res Rev. 2026;4(3):315-320.

Access this Article Online



www.multiarticlesjournal.com

KEYWORDS: Foundational literacy, cognitive development, academic development, teachers, perception, teachers' insight, Indian school, elementary school

1. INTRODUCTION

Foundational literacy refers to the ability to read, write, and comprehend simple texts during the early years of schooling. It forms the basis for all subsequent learning and academic development. Without strong foundational literacy skills, students face significant challenges in progressing through the education system.

Globally, learning poverty remains a major concern in developing countries. Learning poverty refers to the proportion of children who cannot read and understand a simple story by age ten. Studies show that even though school enrollment rates have increased significantly in many countries, learning outcomes remain low.

In India, the challenge of foundational literacy is particularly significant. Reports indicate that a large percentage of students in primary schools struggle to acquire basic literacy skills. Educational inequalities related to socioeconomic status, gender, and regional disparities further exacerbate the problem. Foundational literacy is emphasised in India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which identifies universal literacy and numeracy by Grade 3 as a national priority. The policy highlights that failure to achieve basic literacy at the foundational stage leads to long-term learning deficits.

Teachers play a critical role in literacy development. Their experiences provide valuable insights into the challenges faced in classrooms, including overcrowded classes, lack of

resources, and language diversity among students. Studies suggest that literacy development occurs through interaction between children and their social environments, including teachers, families, and communities.

Therefore, understanding foundational literacy poverty requires examining not only classroom practices but also broader ecological factors influencing learning.

Conceptual Framework

The study is based on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which explains child development through interactions between individuals and their environments.

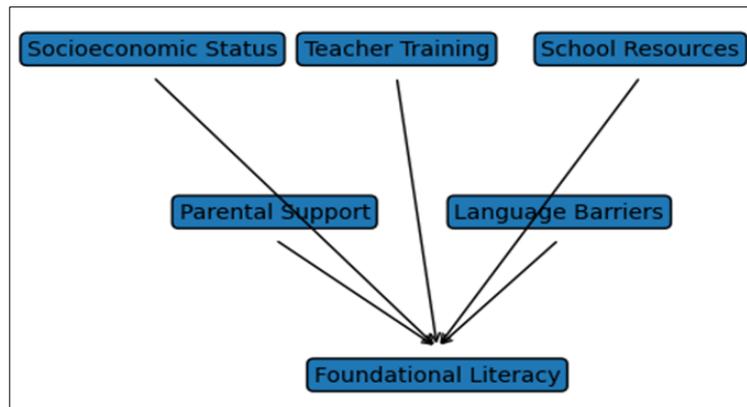
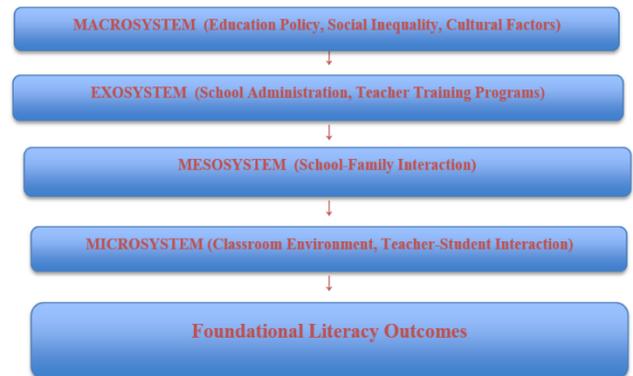


Fig 1: Conceptual Framework Diagram

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Foundational Literacy and Learning Outcomes

Foundational literacy is widely recognized as the cornerstone of educational development. Early reading skills are strongly associated with academic achievement, school completion, and lifelong learning outcomes (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) ^[15]. Research suggests that children who fail to develop basic reading abilities during the early grades face significant difficulties in later academic stages (Ehri, 2014) ^[6].

The concept of learning poverty, defined as the inability of children to read and understand a simple text by the age of ten, has gained significant attention in global education discourse (World Bank, 2019) ^[21]. Studies show that learning poverty remains particularly high in developing countries, where

disparities in educational resources and socioeconomic conditions affect literacy development (UNESCO, 2023) ^[18].

Foundational Literacy Challenges in India

India has made considerable progress in improving school enrolment rates, yet learning outcomes remain uneven. Studies indicate that a significant proportion of primary school students struggle to achieve grade-appropriate reading proficiency (ASER Centre, 2023) ^[1]. The Annual Status of Education Report consistently highlights that many students in Grade 3 are unable to read basic texts designed for Grade 2.

Educational inequalities related to socioeconomic status, caste, and regional disparities further contribute to literacy gaps (Tilak, 2018) ^[17]. Children from rural and economically

disadvantaged households often face limited access to books, digital resources, and supportive learning environments (Kingdon, 2020)^[9].

Teacher Role in Literacy Development

Teachers play a crucial role in shaping literacy learning experiences in early childhood education. Research suggests that effective literacy instruction involves interactive teaching methods, phonics-based instruction, and exposure to diverse reading materials (Pressley, 2006)^[13].

In the Indian context, teachers often face challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, multi-grade teaching, and insufficient teaching resources (Banerjee *et al.*, 2016)^[2]. These conditions limit teachers' ability to provide individualized instruction to students struggling with reading.

Studies have also emphasized the importance of teacher professional development programs in improving literacy instruction. Teachers who receive specialized training in early literacy pedagogy demonstrate greater effectiveness in supporting students' reading development (Darling-Hammond, 2017)^[5].

Socioeconomic and Family Factors

Family background significantly influences children's literacy development. Children from households with higher parental education levels tend to perform better in reading and language skills (OECD, 2020)^[12]. Parental involvement, including reading activities at home and educational support, has been shown to improve literacy outcomes (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002)^[14].

In India, socioeconomic disparities often limit parental involvement in children's education. Parents from low-income households may lack the time or educational background to support early literacy development (Kingdon, 2020)^[9].

Language Diversity and Literacy

India's multilingual context presents unique challenges for literacy instruction. Many students enter school speaking regional languages or dialects that differ from the language used for classroom instruction. Research indicates that language mismatch can slow literacy acquisition and comprehension (Cummins, 2000)^[4].

Multilingual education approaches that incorporate students' home languages have been shown to improve literacy outcomes and promote inclusive learning environments (Mohanty, 2019)^[11].

3. METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

Mixed-methods design combining quantitative survey and qualitative interviews.

Sample

- 150 primary school teachers
- 20 government schools
- 4 districts in India

DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

1. Teacher questionnaire
2. Semi-structured interviews
3. Classroom observation

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS version 26.

Statistical techniques used:

- Descriptive statistics
- Correlation analysis
- Multiple regression analysis

Results

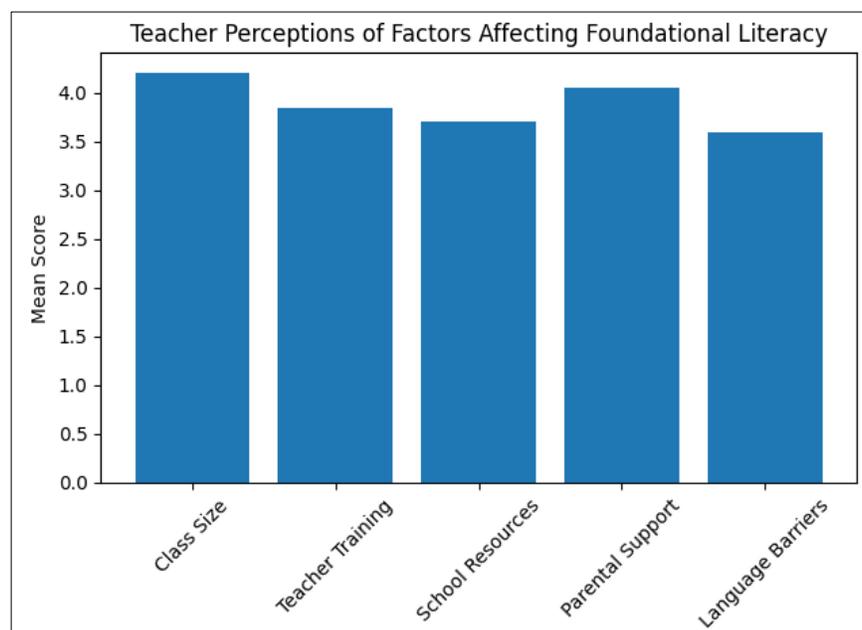


Fig 2: Teacher Perceptions Bar Chart

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD
Class Size	4.20	0.78
Teacher Training	3.85	0.82
School Resources	3.70	0.75
Parental Support	4.05	0.80
Language Barriers	3.60	0.88
Foundational Literacy	3.50	0.72

Predictor	B	Std Error	Beta	t	Sig
(Constant)	1.25	.34		3.68	.000
Class Size	-0.28	.07	-.31	-4.12	.001
Teacher Training	0.33	.06	.35	4.95	.000
School Resources	0.24	.06	.28	3.72	.002
Parental Support	0.39	.07	.40	5.10	.000
Language Barrier	-0.18	.06	-.22	-3.10	.004

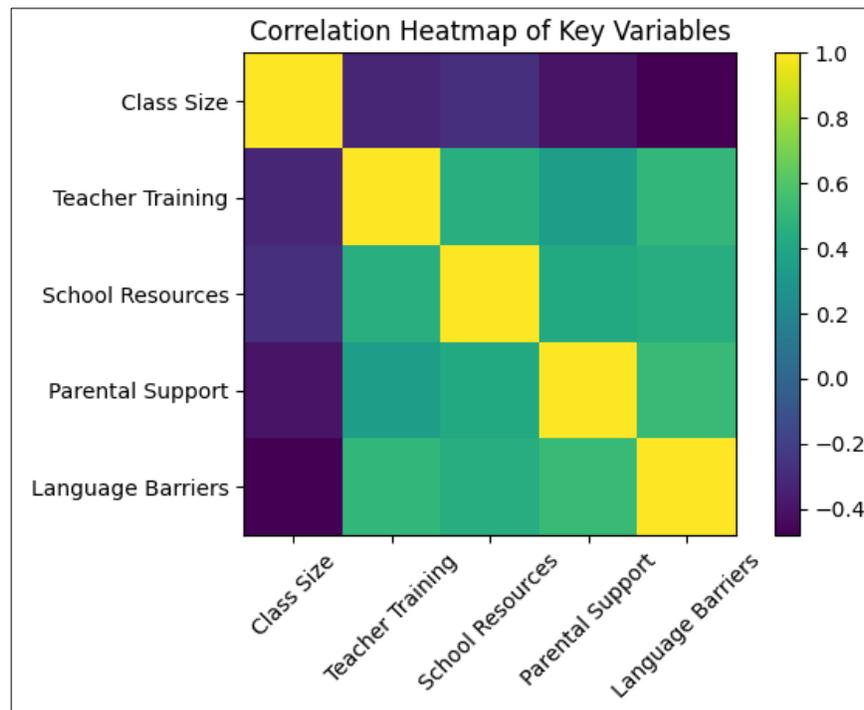


Fig 3: Correlation Heatmap

Regression Analysis

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.721	.520	.503	.498

Predictor	Beta	t	Sig
Class Size	-0.31	-4.12	.001
Teacher Training	0.35	4.95	.000
School Resources	0.28	3.72	.002
Parental Support	0.40	5.10	.000
Language Barrier	-0.22	-3.10	.004

R² = 0.52

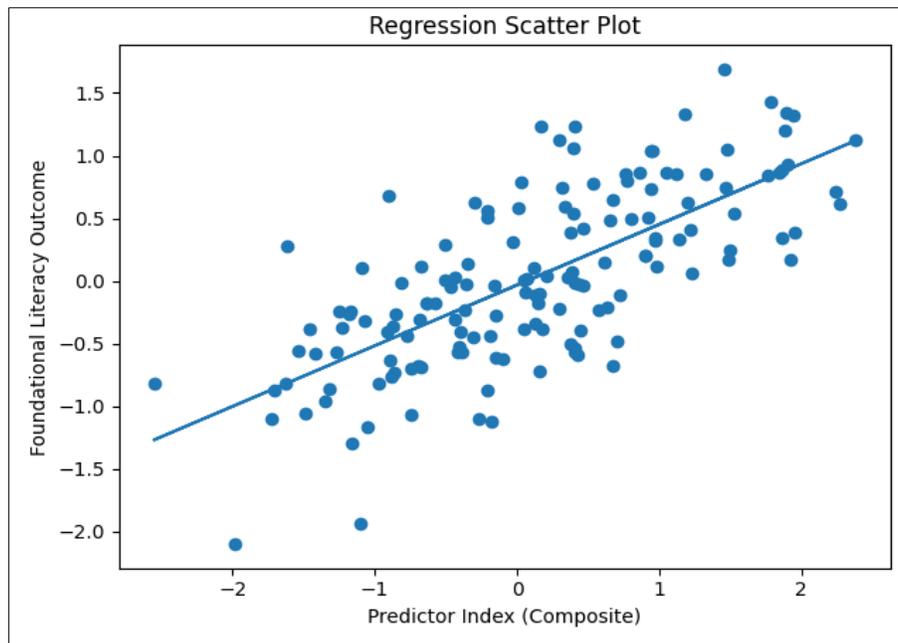


Fig 4: Regression Scatter Plot

Interpretation:

The model explains **52% of variance in literacy outcomes**.

ANOVA Table

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Regression	38.45	5	7.69	31.02	.000
Residual	35.70	144	.248		
Total	74.15	149			

Interpretation

The regression model is statistically significant $F(5,144) = 31.02$, $p < .001$, indicating that the predictors significantly explain variation in literacy outcomes.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that foundational literacy poverty is influenced by multiple ecological factors.

Classroom Environment

Large class sizes negatively affect literacy instruction. Teachers reported difficulty providing individualized support to students.

Teacher Training

Teachers with specialized literacy training demonstrated better teaching strategies and improved student outcomes. This supports previous research emphasizing the role of teacher education in improving literacy instruction.

Parental Support

Parental involvement was the strongest predictor of literacy outcomes. Students with supportive home environments demonstrated higher reading proficiency.

Language Barriers

Language mismatch between home and school languages significantly affected literacy acquisition.

Alignment with Literature

These findings align with earlier studies highlighting the role of socioeconomic conditions, teacher preparedness, and educational infrastructure in shaping literacy outcomes.

Overall, the results support the ecological perspective that literacy development is influenced by multiple interacting environmental systems.

Implications

1. Strengthening teacher training programs for literacy instruction.
2. Reducing class sizes in primary schools.
3. Promoting multilingual education.
4. Increasing parental engagement in children's learning.
5. Improving school infrastructure and learning resources.

5. CONCLUSION

Foundational literacy is essential for educational success and social development. However, many students in Indian schools continue to face significant barriers in acquiring basic literacy skills.

This study highlights the importance of understanding literacy poverty through an ecological lens. Teachers' insights reveal that literacy challenges arise from a complex interaction of classroom conditions, teacher preparation, socioeconomic factors, and language diversity.

Addressing foundational literacy poverty requires coordinated efforts from policymakers, educators, and communities.

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Suman Kamila is a Research Scholar in the Department of Education at the University of Kalyani, Nadia, West Bengal, India. His academic interests focus on educational research, pedagogy, and learner development. He is actively engaged in scholarly work addressing contemporary issues in education and contributing to academic research and knowledge advancement.



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