

Home Literacy Environment and Reading Achievement: The Case of Persian and Arab Children

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Abstract

Many people may think that school is the first place where children experience literacy. For many children, home is a place that provides the earliest learning environment for developing literacy (Hart & Risley, 1995) and providing exposure to print and letters (Loigan & Whitehurst, 1998). Reading achievement often serves as a predictor of future academic success. Thus, providing children with essential instruction and working to bridge the gap between achievement and potential is an essential factor. The present study aims at investigating the influence of home literacy environment on developing reading ability between Persian and Arab children to come up with the differences that exist between them. The population consisted of Persian and Arab parents and their kindergartens children in Ahvaz. They are selected based on convenience sampling. Two measures were used in the present study. A total of 56 parent participants completed home literacy environment questionnaire prepared by Martin (2006). Additionally, all children participants completed an assessment test that measures basic literacy skills in reading. Results showed that the home environment is a relatively good predictor of children's reading skill. And Persian and Arab children showed different mastery in reading achievement test.

Keywords: home literacy environment, reading achievement, Persian, Arabic, children

INTRODUCTION

A large number of studies have established the significance of language skills (e.g., reading, listening), meta-linguistic skills (e.g., phonological awareness), and emergent literacy skills (e.g., letter-name knowledge) to children's literacy acquisition (Adam, 1990; Hart & Risley, 1995; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998, Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). One way that contributes to develop these skills is language and literacy environment at

home. Home literacy environment (HLE) is considered as the type and amount of exposure a child has to literature, stories, and songs within the home environment.

Many people may think that school is the first place where children experience literacy. However, an implicit instruction of literacy skills commences years before children enter school. For many children, home is a place that provides the earliest learning environment for developing literacy (Hart & Risley, 1995) and providing exposure to print and letters (Loigan & Whitehurst, 1998).

Research on the acquisition of literacy was examined, with specific reference to the key components including word recognition, vocabulary development, fluency, comprehension and the development of writing and spelling as they relate to processing of print and digital texts. According to Antilla (2013) early literacy acquisition plays an important role and has long term effects of the academic development of a child. Receiving early literacy development activities in the home, prior to kindergarten, provides a child with the proper perpetration for learning in the formal educational environment.

The type and style of interaction seemed to determine emergent literacy skills (Britto, 2001). The types of interactions between mother and child that promote literacy development include book reading, teaching or discussion during book reading and puzzle solving activities. In the study of head start children, home literacy activities were limited to four items: telling story to a child, reading to a child, teaching letters, and singing songs or playing music with a child.

Among different language related skills, reading may be the most important acquired skill for any given person and directly impacts all other achievements (Wallace, as cited in Shepherd, 1980). Reading achievement often serves as a predictor of future academic success. Thus, providing students with essential instruction and working to bridge the gap between achievement and potential is key. With the understanding that reading success predicts future academic success, it is teacher's and parent's responsibility to develop strategies to ensure children success.

Burgess et al, (2002) determined home literacy environment is statistically significant to the development the area of oral language. Foy and Mann (2003) found that home literacy environment during preschool years has an important and multifaceted influence on the development of phonological awareness by contributing to the development of vocabulary, letter knowledge, and speech discrimination abilities.

Callaway (2012) conducted a research on home literacy practices of Arabic-English bilingual families (one Lybian American preschooler and one Syrian American) and reached to a conclusion that the preschoolers in both families use a multimodal process such as talking, drawing, singing, chanting, recitation, technologies, and socio-dramatic play in their daily literacy experiences. The parents are not concerned with teaching their children specific literacy skills; but they naturally use techniques for keeping them on task and questioning skills to enhance oral language and comprehension

development. These families' home literacy practices are Americanized by living in the mainstream social group, and English is frequently used among the family members. However, their bilingualism and religious literacy practices enrich and vary their children's literacy experiences and their family literacy practices. The significance of this study resides in the importance of getting to know individual families' backgrounds to better understand and respect the cultural practices of family literacy.

Wang, et al. (2002) conducted a qualitative study to compare the characteristics of the literacy-related activities initiated by Native American families in the United States and Chinese families in China. They investigated how adults support their young children's early literacy development in these two cultural contexts. The participants were two groups of 20 pairs of mothers and four-year-old children on a reservation in South Dakota and in Nanjing, China. The findings indicated that 43% of the Chinese mothers' whose interactions were literacy-related, compared to 10% of the Native American mothers' interactions were literacy-related. The Chinese mothers were more likely to initiate print-based literacy interactions, whereas the Native American mothers preferred interactions related to the oral narration of children's personal stories, family stories, and oral folk tales. The Chinese mothers were also more likely to explicitly direct their children's attention to the print-based literacy activities, focus on the specific aspects of literacy events, and expand on their children's answers in literacy-related aspects. In contrast, the Native American mothers were more likely to provide implicit support, spend more time providing the context relevant to the literacy event, and accept the children's version without expansion. In sum, this research illustrated how parent-child interactions and the emphasis of literacy skills vary from context to context related to the cultural values and traditions of literacy.

Leseman and de Jong (1998) investigated the relationships between home literacy practices (opportunities, social-emotional quality, mother-child cooperation, instructional quality of shared book reading) and early reading achievement. For this longitudinal study, they recruited 89 children at the ages four to seven from Dutch, immigrant Surinamese, and immigrant Turkish families. This study was done in Netherlands. In the Netherlands, children start kindergarten at age four and stay in kindergarten for two years before formal instruction in reading, writing, and mathematics begins in first grade. The researchers found that mothers in all groups used higher level utterances (explanations, evaluations, and narrative extensions) and picture labeling and describing utterances. In particular, Surinamese and Turkish mothers asked their children to repeat or complete sentences in a literal way, whereas Dutch mothers evaluated the narration and extended the narrative or topics. Turkish mothers used the pictures in the book less to support book reading and the comprehension process. They had difficulties in dealing with their children's spontaneous reactions to the book reading event. They considered children's looking at pictures and turning pages as inappropriate behaviors. For both Surinamese and Turkish parents, religious literacy is often the most important kind of literacy. Turkish mothers may see literacy as sacred and avoid pictures in picture books. Home literacy was strongly determined by socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic factors. In addition, the

parents' own literacy practices determined the opportunities for young children's involvement in literacy-related interactions.

In his study, Van Steensel (2006) explored the relations between children's home literacy environments and their literacy development in the first phase of primary education. The participants were 48 native Dutch families and 68 ethnic minority families from Turkey, Morocco, Somalia, the Netherlands Antilles, Iraq, Surinam, the Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, Egypt, Yemen, and Poland. He found that as the level of education increased, the number of families with a rich home literacy environment increased. Most families engaged children in school-related literacy activities frequently and learned new literacy practices, such as shared book-reading, singing children's songs, and going to the library as a result of acculturation (Berry, 2006; Berry 2007) in Dutch society. Van Steensel also reported that children whose parents or older siblings frequently engaged in individual literacy activities had significantly higher scores than children whose parents or older siblings did less reading or writing for personal purposes. These particular groups exhibited different cultural paths to literacy, which in turn influenced different literacy outcomes on school-based literacy tests. .

Taylor (1983) also reported in her study of white middle-class families that there is a noticeable shift when children start to learn to read and write in school. In other words, reading and writing then become the specific focus of attention in home literacy practices. Families that have their own cultural way of literacy adopt a new way of literacy to support their children's school literacy practices in the mainstream culture.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Much researches have shown that home literacy environment is positively correlated with the children's reading skill (e.g. Leseman and de Jong, 1998). In addition, the results of a meta-analytic review revealed an overall positive impact of parent joint reading on children's emergent literacy and reading achievement (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellergrini, 1995). But no published studies have been reported on the effect of home literacy on reading achievement between Persian and Arab children; consequently, this study is the first one to be conducted on both Persian and Arab children, and it is of particular significance as a developmental study.

The present study, therefore, aims to investigate the influence of home literacy environment on reading achievement between Persian and Arab children to come up with the differences that exist between these two groups.

Research Questions:

- 1) Does home literacy environment influence the reading achievement?
- 2) Are there any differences between Persian and Arab children in reading achievement?

METHOD

Participants

The populations of this study are 65 children who enrolled in social welfare kindergartens in Ahvaz and also their parents. Child participants' age at testing ranged from 4.5 years old to 6 years old and they had no history of any known neurological language impairments. To choose the sample, researchers used Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table. The participants consisted of 56 Persian and Arab parents and their kindergarten's children in Ahvaz that were chosen by stratified sampling. 55% percent of participants (parents and their children) were Arab (n=31) and 45% of the participants were Persian (n=25). Parents reported varied levels of education. Thirteen percent of fathers and mothers respectively, reported their highest level of education was elementary school. Approximately 45% of mothers and 42% of fathers have reached grade 12. Additionally, a greater percentage of mothers (20.5%) reported attending university compared to fathers (4.5%).

Measures

Two measures were used in the present study. All parent participants completed a questionnaire using a paper and pencil method. The questionnaire assessed their home literacy activities and experiences. Some questions were added to learn more about demographic information and factors that may moderate literacy skills such as level of education. The questionnaire consists of questions that address the (a) language and verbal interactions, (b) the learning climate, (c) and the social and emotional climate. The Home Literacy Environment Questionnaire (Martin, 2006) was utilized to investigate numerous factors in the home that influence reading ability. Based on Woodcock Reading Mastery Tests, which is a standardized test of children's English reading skill, child participants completed this activity. The test was translated to Persian language. Because of cultural considerations, some items were removed. To validate the test, the researchers used expert opinion in this regard. Children were presented with 40 Persian words and were asked to pronounce and identify each word.

Procedure

The researchers briefly described the purpose of the study to both parents and kindergarten teachers and how to evaluate their children's early literacy scores from the kindergarten's reading activity. Their explanations also contained details on incentives for parents if they chose to participate in the study. On the test day, one parent filled out the study questionnaire for child's language development history. 56 questionnaires completed by a parent of a kindergarten student attending a kindergarten. 76% percent of questionnaire were completed by the child's mother (n=43), 24% were completed by the child's father (n=13). Meanwhile, children were assessed by reading and vocabulary tasks. The tasks approximately took two hours in total.

Data analysis

This was a correlational study. The independent variable is home literacy environment and the dependent variable is reading achievement. To investigate the relationship between independent and dependent variable, the researchers use Pearson correlation coefficient and SPSS software. Independent t-test is also used to compare the Persian and Arab children's reading achievement.

FINDINGS

This part provides a description of the results of statistical analyses used to address the two research questions in this study.

1) Does home literacy environment influence the reading achievement?

Table 1. Correlation between Parents' Perceptions about their Home Literacy and reading achievement

Variable	Pearson coefficient	Sig
Home literacy environment Reading achievement	0.471	0.05

As can be seen in table 1, the amount of Pearson coefficient ($r=0.471$) is significant at level 0.05. This means that there is a meaningful relationship between home literacy and reading achievement.

3) Are there any differences between Persian and Arab children in reading achievement?

Table 2. Reading achievement *t*-test between Arab and Persian children

Race	Mean	Std. deviation	Df	T value	Sig
Arab	23.7	1.64	54	2.021	0.031
Persian	31.6	1.27			

As can be seen in table 2, the amount of observed *t* (2.021) is significant at level 0.031. This means that there is difference in reading skill between Persian and Arab children. With reference to the means, it is obvious that the mean for Persian children is greater than that of their counterparts Arab children.

DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to examine the relationship between parents' perceptions about their home literacy environment, and their children's early literacy scores as measured by Reading Mastery Test. The home literacy environment (HLE) is considered as the home literacy materials and experiences, such as exposure to storybook reading, child opportunities for verbal interaction, parental literacy teaching activities and parent's literacy habits (Peeters, et al., 2009). For example, Miedel and Reynolds(1999) detected positive associations between parent involvement in preschool and kindergarten and reading achievement in kindergarten and in eighth grade. Izzo and

colleagues (1999) also found significant positive associations between average parent involvement in early elementary school and socio-emotional development and achievement in later elementary school. Therefore findings of this study are confirmed by the findings of Miedel and Reynolds (1999); Izzo et.al.(1999) regarding the relationship between home literacy experience and reading achievement. Also there is a meaningful difference between Persian and Arab children in reading achievement. Because this finding is a new one, there is no confirmation in this field.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to examine the relationship between variables home literacy environment, and a kindergarten child's early reading skill. The findings indicated that home literacy environment was the influential predictor of reading achievement. Due to the increasing emphasis government and school districts are placing on early literacy, these results are important for the future of education. Government programs that promote early literacy should target the home environment when designing research-based interventions. Further, the results indicate the need for more collaboration between kindergarten, preschools, and other agencies that have contact with parents and might inform parents of the importance of their role in developing and nurturing their children's school readiness skills.

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