

Children's Early Literacy Skills: The Incongruity of Perceptions and Practices among Malay Parents

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Abstract: The academic achievement of children in school is influenced by several factors. Ample studies have revealed that early parental participation in literacy skills has been linked to better academic performance for children. However, research shows that the level of participation among Malaysian parents in their children's literacy skills is still in moderate or low level. This study investigated the perceptions among Malay parents on their roles and practices in developing early literacy skills of their children at home. Additionally, it looked into the correlation between parental reading practices at home and parental education level. A set of questionnaires was given to the parents when they came to fetch their children at the end of the school session. They were given three days to complete the questionnaire before returning them to the classroom's teacher. The results obtained show positive results regarding the perception of the parents towards their children early literacy practices. Majority of the parents believe that they are the first teacher of the children. However, their practices do not reflect their belief, and they need to provide more support to help their children.

Keywords: Parental involvement, Early literacy practices, Parents' perception

Introduction

In Malaysia, the government made it mandatory for all national children to attend primary school beginning at the age of seven and continuing until the age of twelve. After completing Year 1 of elementary school, they are expected to grasp the basic 3M abilities; reading, writing, and arithmetic. To achieve such objective, a certain national curriculum was introduced to be implemented by preschools. This is done to ensure that students can follow the lessons in class smoothly and without falling behind. However, even today, the mastery of 3M is the most pressing issue that must be addressed even before the children begin elementary school. In a survey done among 30 preschool teachers in Klang Valley, it was reported 70% of the children had not mastered the basic skills needed (Hamid, 2021). Failure to address such concern may result in a worse disaster for those students in learning subjects at schools in the future.

The idea of early literacy or emergent literacy does not simply train young children to read and write. Early literacy and emergent literacy are terms that are interchangeable which describe "what youngsters know about reading and writing before they really learn to read and write" (Ghoting & Martin-Diaz, 2006). Early literacy exercises will help them to build the foundations of language which will cover the various ways a language is used to communicate. Once they start schooling, these abilities will assist them in making sense of printed words. There are some strategies to support the children in the process at home for example, shared storytelling and book reading sessions, sing songs, availability of books and stationaries at home, visits to local libraries and many more.

Plenty of studies were done in Malaysia have revealed some level of awareness on the benefits of early literacy practices at home. In a study completed by Jalal et al. (2014), although the parents were aware on the beneficial early literacy practices, the researchers found that they were moderately involved in the process due to the limited time and focus on their work. Norjumira et al. (2020) found a similar conclusion in a comparable study in Perak, revealing a modest degree of parental participation in their children's early reading. On the other hand, Boivin (2014) completed a study among urban parents of their level of understanding and practices at home. The results showed that the parents had different sets of understanding the practices as compared to the research defined social literacy practices. Thus, this study was conducted to better understand about a more recent situation regarding parents' beliefs and participations in their young children's literacy.

Literature Review

Teale (1987) described emergent literacy as the early signs of reading and writing demonstrated by young children even before they take formal instruction to reading and writing, and such early signs and ways are recognised by most adults. Further, Clay (2009) proposed the assumption that a child acquires some knowledge about language, reading and writing even before attending school. Clay asserted that literacy development begins in life and is ongoing. Numerous studies have showed that the essential period for a youngster developing his language and early literacy is between the ages of zero and eight (Foorman & Moats, 2004).

The family setting is a crucial component of a child's language literacy development. A child's social relationships influence and shape his early language literacy greatly (Barton, 2007). This is since home is the first and most significant institution in a child's life. Early literacy skills refer to the reading and writing experiences of babies and toddlers before they learn on how to write and read (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). They include the behaviour of reading and writing of surrounding adults with the young child that exposes them to print creation or use. Early literacy skills, according to Adams (1990), include exposure to alphabets and new vocabulary, phonological awareness, as well as reading techniques. Home literacy practices, on the other hand, refer to the use of native language at home, oral storytelling and reading of all available prints. In addition to that, they do not only include practices that result directly to later literacy outcomes but also the ones which are closely related such as looking at the book, holding a pencil and many more (Justice & Kaderavek, 2004).

Abundant of studies stressed that literacy basically starts at home (Segal & Martin-Chang, 2019). At the pre-kindergarten level, the involvement of parents in their children's education is more on the literacy practices at home. The involvement of adults at home in an early child's education is consistently found to be positively linked with a child's academic performance later in school (Topping & Wolfendale, 1985). Many studies show that children whose parents are more involved in developing their literacy skills at home are more likely to be more successful in academic performance, have higher self-esteem (Garbacz et al., 2017), as well as likely to have full attendance to school (Jezierski & Wall, 2019). Interestingly, Bus et al. (1995) discovered that parent-child reading has a similar effect, regardless of socioeconomic status (SES). It was found that even in households with low SES and low literacy level, the practice of shared reading along other literacy incentives, resulted in a positive children's language and literacy outcomes.

Methodology

In this quantitative study, the questionnaire was loosely adapted on a questionnaire used by Boudreau (1997). The questionnaire was used to obtain information on the perception of parents as the first and primary teacher to their children. It also provided information of their practices at home to develop their children's literacy skills. The survey was divided into several parts as follows:

- i. Part 1: Demographic questions about the parent and child
- ii. Part 2: Perceptions of parents towards their roles on children's early literacy
- iii. Part 3: Parental practices in early literacy development regarding reading books, responses to prints, interest in letters and finally writing.

In evaluating the perceptions of the parents, 6-point Likert Scale was used to indicate their level of agreement to the items in the survey, which indicate scale 1 for strongly disagree and scale 6 for strongly agree. The parents were asked to rate their frequency by using 6-point Likert scale in doing the actions that can encourage the development of their children's early literacy as indicated in respective tables. The answers were later tabulated according to their frequencies, means and standard deviations presented in percentage. The analysis of the responses was done using SPSS Version 28.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1. Summary of the respondents' background

Respondents' background		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	2	4.4
	Female	43	95.6
Age	21-30	10	22.2
	31-40	27	60
	41-50	8	17.8
Education level	Secondary school	8	17.8
	College's certificate	2	4.4
	Diploma	22	48.9
	Bachelor's degree	13	28.9

The survey was conducted involving 45 parents of children of age four-, five- and six-year-old. Almost all respondents were the mothers and only 4% of fathers completed the questionnaire. The majority of the respondents (60%) are comprised of parents aged 31 to 40 years old, followed by 21- 30 years old (22.2%) and finally 41-50 years old (17.8%). Most of the parents completed their diploma with 22 parents (48.9%), followed by bachelor's degree with 13 parents (28.9%), secondary school certificate with 8 parents (19.8%) and lastly college's certificate with 2 parents (4.4%). Based on the data provided by the kindergarten, all families that send their children there are Malays.

Table 2. Perceptions of parents towards their roles on children's early literacy

Item	Frequency						MEAN	STD
	STD	SLD	D	A	SLA	STA		
Do you agree that a parent is the most important teacher to a child?	-	2 4.4%	9 20%	-	-	34 75.6%	5.07	1.67
Do you agree that a parent is the first teacher to a child?	-	-	-	-	-	45 100%	6.00	0.00
Do you agree that it is better for parents to not wait for teachers in teaching their children reading in school?	-	11 24.4%	7 15.6%	23 51.1%	4 8.9%	-	3.53	1.77

Do you agree that it is better for parents to not wait for teachers in teaching their children writing in school?	-	11 24.4%	7 15.6%	23 51.1%	4 8.9%	-	3.53	1.77
Do you agree that writing at home helps your children learn at school?	-	-	-	6 13.3%	18 40%	21 46.7%	5.33 46.7%	0.71

Table 2 reveals that majority of the parents agreed that parents are the first (100%) and the most important teacher to their children (75.6%). More than 50% of the parents believe they should not wait for teachers to teach their children writing and reading while almost 40% of the parents disagreed with the items. However, all of them (100%) deem writing at home will help their children learn at school.

Table 3. Parental practices in early literacy development relating to reading books

Item	Frequency						MEAN	STD
	Never/ Rarely	Once a month	Weekly	Several times per week	Daily	Several times per day		
How often do you read to your child?	8 17.8%	7 15.6%	6 13.3%	20 44.4%	4 8.9%	-	3.11	1.30
How often do you ask questions to your child requiring him or her to give a response when reading? (as in “What do you think will happen next?”)	5 11.1%	8 17.8%	8 17.8%	13 28.9%	9 20%	2 4.4%	3.42	1.41
How often do you make comments about actions or characters when reading?	4 8.9%	8 17.8%	8 17.8%	14 31.1%	9 20%	2 4.4%	3.49	1.36
	Only picture books	Few pages	Half of one book	One book	Two books	Three or more books	MEA N	STD
How many pages with print do you typically read at one sitting?	10 22.2%	20 44.4%	6 13.3%	9 20%	-	-	2.31	1.04
	I don't read to my child	Few mins	10-15 mins	30 mins	One hour	More than one hour	MEA N	STD
On average, how long do you spend during each reading session?	-	6 13.3%	23 51.1%	10 22.2%	6 13.3%	-	3.36	0.88

Relating to parental practices on reading, less than half of the parents (46.7%) only read once or less to their children in a week. In addition to that, they rarely put the efforts to elicit responses from the children. The findings also revealed that almost 80% of the parents did not manage to finish one book and spend less than 30 minutes whenever they read to the children.

Table 4. Parental practices in early literacy development relating to response to print

Item	Frequency						MEAN	STD
	Never/ Rarely	Once a month	Weekl y	Severa l times per week	Daily	Severa l times per day		
How often do you point out signs and words such as restaurant names or street signs to your child (i.e. McDonald's arches, Coke logo, etc.?)	4 8.9%	8 17.8%	7 15.6%	14 31.1%	12 26.7%	-	3.49	1.31
How often do you ask your child to bring you an item where he/she would have to recognize the label in order to grab the correct item? (such as a particular box of cereal)	4 8.9%	11 24.4%	6 13.3%	18 40%	6 13.3%	-	3.24	1.22

Regarding the extent of parental involvement in enriching their children early literacy by using prints, as portrayed in Table 4, most of them said that they are not quite used to this approach as only 26.7% of them make it as daily routine and 31.1% do several times in a week. Only 13.3% of the parents ask their children to bring items that require them to recognize the label first on daily basis.

Table 5. Parental practices in early literacy development relating to interest in letters

Item	Frequency						MEAN	STD
	Never/ Rarely	Once a month	Weekly	Several times per week	Daily	Several times per day		
How often do you attempt to teach the names of the letters of the alphabet?	5 11.1%	8 17.8%	7 15.6%	18 40%	7 15.6%	-	3.16	1.22
How often do you ask your child to identify some letters of the alphabet? (such as pointing to the letter "A" or "Show me where the B is.")	5 11.1%	8 17.8%	7 15.6%	18 40%	7 15.6%	-	3.31	1.26

Moving to the next subsection, only 15.6% of parents claim that they teach the names of letters to their children on daily basis. 40% of the parents do so several times in a week.

Table 6. Parental practices in early literacy development relating to writing

Item	Frequency						MEAN	STD
	Never/ Rarely	Once a month	Weekly	Several times per week	Daily	Several times per day		
How often does your child draw or colour with crayons, markers, or pencils?	5 11.1%	10 22.2%	10 22.2%	15 33.3%	5 11.1%	-	3.18	1.28
How often do you see your child write letters of the alphabet in the correct manner?	8 17.8%	10 22.2%	15 33.3%	7 15.6%	5 11.1%	-	2.80	1.24

The pattern continues with their writing practices in which only 11.1% of the parents encourage their children to draw or use colours and write letters of alphabets every day.

The perceptions of rural Malay parents on their roles in developing their children's early literacy

The finding shows that Malay parents in rural areas have positive perception on the roles in developing their children's early literacy. All of them agree that they are their children's first teacher and most of them believe they are the most important teacher for their children. This is a good indication that they have the awareness in playing a pivotal role in developing the children's early literacy skills. These findings may be due to the most parents being reasonably well educated as 77.8% of them at least have a diploma or bachelor's degree.

The extend of parental involvement at home

Although most of the parents think that their roles are prominent in developing their children's literacy, the data obtained on their actions and practices do not actually reflect their belief. Only 8.9% (4 parents) of the parents read to their children on daily basis. The most popular choice is to read to their children several times a week. Furthermore, most of them spend only 10 to 15 minutes for each session. Only half of the parents inquire and provide comments to their children during the reading sessions. Obviously, this is not enough to inculcate the interest of reading among the children. Parents need to be more serious about reading to their children because according to Greenspan (1992), "it is the most important activity in building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading..." (p.18).

Using billboards and restaurant arches is the most familiar method among the parents to foster the children's literacy skills outside the house and classroom. More than 70% of the parents will direct their children's attentions to them while leaving the house. It is a good way to ensure the learning process occurs at all time and place. As for asking children to fetch items that need them to recognize the labels, more than 50% do it at least a couple times in a week.

Activities that involve letters of alphabets and writing are not being practiced enough by the parents. Only 15.6% of the parents attempt to teach the names of alphabets and ask their children to identify letters on daily basis. Less than 15% of the parents practice writing letters of the alphabet with their children daily. Parents should pay more attention to this as the activities will provide a strong foundation to phonological skills of the children which will offer better chances to students to excel at school (Poe et al., 2004).

The correlation between parents' education level and their involvement in their children's early literacy skills

Table 7. Pearson Correlation between parents' education level and their early literacy practices

Mean of all dimensions of early literacy practices		
Parents' education level	Pearson correlation	0.061
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.692

The results in Table 7 reveal that the correlation between parents' education level and their early literacy practices is at 0.061 which means the two do not correlate in this study. According to Jackson (2015), coefficient is significant at the .05 level and positive correlation is measured on a 0.1 to 1.0 scale. Any results lie in the range of 0.1 to 0.3 would indicate weak positive correlation, moderate positive correlation from 0.3 to 0.5, and strong positive correlation from 0.5 to 1.0.

Conclusion

The results of this present study could not be applied to all Malay parents throughout Malaysia as the number of samples was not large enough. However, the results cannot be taken for granted. Even though there are positive perceptions of the parents towards their roles in enriching children early literacy experiences, it seems that they are lacking in making efforts to foster it. Only assumptions can be made that it is due to the hectic daily life that they have or lack of knowledge about the proper practices. If so, they need to be helped by a third party, for example by providing guidance or relevant reading materials.

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