

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

An extensive and growing literature documents parent involvement as an important element in effective schooling (Epstein and Becker, 1983; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler and Burow, 1995). Children's educational achievement is found to be correlated positively with parent knowledge, beliefs and interactive styles (Schaefer, 1991). Differences in parent involvement appear to account for a large variance in children's achievement including literacy. It has been suggested that parents' help with reading is a better predictor of success in reading than the child's intelligence (Hewison and Tizard, 1980). Thus, there appears to be a link between parent involvement and children's acquisition of literacy.

Studies conducted by Bradley and Caldwell on measurement of children's home environment found that the quality of stimulation provided in the early years of life is linked to cognitive development. They went on to conclude that mothers who encouraged and challenged their infants to develop new skills and provide them with stimulating play materials have children who show large mental test increases while children who did not show such progress have parents who did not provide a stimulating home environment (Bradley and Caldwell, 1976). Furthermore, their studies show that parent involvement with the children, such as encouraging, providing

emotional and verbal responsivity, appropriate play materials are predictors of intellectual development.

One of the main findings in an international investigation of reading comprehension conducted in fifteen countries by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) concurred that the effects of environment, especially the students' home and family background, are of critical importance in school achievement. Thorndike, Chairman of the Reading Committee, elaborates:

"A dominant determiner of the outcome from a school in terms of reading performance is the input in terms of the kinds of students that go to the school. When the population of a school comes from homes in which parents are themselves well-educated, economically advantaged and able to provide an environment in which reading materials and communication media are available, the school shows a generally superior level of reading achievement" (1973, p.177).

Results of many studies and the growing concern regarding the acquisition of basic academic skills justify the need to probe into a more pervasive learning environment that goes beyond the confines of the school and into the homes and the parents of school children (Hewison & Tizard, 1980; Guiang, 1980; Cairney, Ruge, Buchanan, Lowe & Munsie, 1995; Edwards, 1995).

This study attempts to investigate parent involvement in emergent literacy skills of preschool children. Parent involvement is defined "as the degree to which a parent is committed to his or her role as a parent and to

the fostering of optimal child development" (Maccoby & Martin, 1983 p.48). It concerns the amount of effort put into children's development. Specifically, it is reflected in parents' activities and practices in the home. It is also seen in the time spent with their children, discussing the day's events, participating in their play and being a role model. Parents also guide their children in acquiring emergent literacy skills through reading storybooks and providing suitable materials for them. It is hoped that the findings of this study will provide some basis for suggesting ways of making parent involvement more effective.

1.1 Background of the Study

An important aspect of the emergent literacy perspective is that literacy acquisition begins before formal schooling (Rogoff, 1990; Sulzby and Teale, 1991). Long before children go to school, they are immersed in literacy through exposure to environmental print and to books read aloud to them by family members. As children listen to stories or turn the pages of story books to tell or form their own stories, they are unconsciously engaging in literacy development (Teale, 1984).

Parents play a dominant role in this development by prompting, prodding and encouraging them towards meaning-making (Wells, 1986). The child usually focuses on the meaning of pictures and words and the parents respond to the sense he makes of them. In this purposeful

exchange, the child learns meanings, thus paving the way for language development (Lindfors, 1985)

Parents listen, prompt, provide information, ask questions and make children communicate. Wells (1983) mentions that the key to early language development is the volume of opportunities of meaning-making between parent and child, the degree of one-to-one interaction with adults and the type and nature of interaction with children.

In discussing how children learn language, Wells (1986) identifies a number of ways in which children's home experiences in the preschool years foster language and literacy skills. He emphasises that the talk that young children engage in is not an end in itself but is goal-directed to achieve other purposes such as communicating his needs and desires. It is believed that much of the preschool child's learning about literacy at home comes about as the child engages in literate activities.

This concept of guided participation provides an explanation for the processes through which literacy is fostered at home. According to Rogoff (1990) when a child and a more competent adult or sibling engage in a collaborative process, the more competent person provides a supportive structure and facilitates the child's appropriation of new skills.

Thus parent involvement in emergent literacy skills is important. A lot of research has been conducted on the home environment and parents' role in children's reading ability (Sheldon & Carrillo, 1952; Hansen, 1973;

Hewison & Tizard, 1980). However, very few studies have investigated parent involvement in developing emergent literacy skills of preschool children.

In one of these studies, Nespeca (1995) interviewed 9 mothers who encouraged their children registered in the Head Start programme to develop their emergent literacy skills in reading, writing and spelling. Her studies recorded differences in the amount of parent involvement in literacy activities and types of activities. Not many mothers engaged in discussions with their children and little effort was made to encourage these children to read, write and draw except for academic purposes.

Other studies report how literacy activities and events practised by parents had an effect on their children's acquisition of literacy skills. Heath's (1983) study points to the importance of parent involvement in literacy. Her well-known ethnography study of three communities in Piedmont Carolina found considerable cultural variation in the acquisition of oral language and the manner literacy was introduced to these children. Using story reading as a base, she recorded great differences in styles of literacy socialisation of these three communities. Her study shows the place emergent literacy enjoyed in each of these communities and how their parents helped to prepare their children to succeed or fail in the school system.

Purcell-Gates, L'Allier and Smith (1995) report how children from four families learned in the home-family context during the years preceding

formal school. Their study reveals that the two high-literacy families engaged in more literacy events than the two low-literacy families. They also pointed out that in the high-literacy families, print use was continually used, while for the low-literacy families, the use of print was relevant only to some aspects of their lives. Furthermore, the low-literacy families in their study did not engage in school or story book reading. In fact, the numerous literacy events for the low-literacy families were entertainment and daily living routines. In contrast, the high-literacy families fell within the literacy-learning, story book reading and entertainment categories.

Nespeca (1995), Purcell-gates, L'Allier and Smith (1995) and Heath (1983) emphasise the importance of parent involvement in developing the literacy skills of preschool children.

Morrow, Paratore, Harrison and Tracey (1993) stress that:

"..... if we do not attend to the home when we discuss literacy development, whatever strategies we carry out in school will never be completely successful Family literacy should be viewed by schools and other community agencies as the most important element in literacy development (p.194).

Furthermore, Huey (1908) suggests that children's learning in school begins with the parents reading to them at home. Other research also supports a strong link between parent involvement and children's acquisition of literacy (Clark, 1984; Teale, 1984; Cochran-Smith, 1986; Morrow et al., 1993). They maintain that practices in the home as shared reading, reading

aloud, making a variety of print materials available and promoting positive attitudes towards literacy have a significant impact on children's literacy learning.

With all these considerations in mind, this study not only aims to understand the child's emergent skills as he observes and interacts with more knowledgeable others at home, it also intends to examine the influence of parents on emergent literacy skills of preschool children. The main thrust of this study is to examine the practices of parents which can contribute to emergent literacy skills. The researcher is particularly interested in determining whether parent involvement with children in literacy-related activities affects the child's literacy development.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Parent activities such as reading to children, creating a stimulating environment, discussing the day's events with them, being a role model help their children develop emergent literacy skills. However, what Malaysian parents are doing to enhance the emergent literacy skills of their preschool children has not been answered by research. In view of the growing interest in emergent literacy, a closer look into parent involvement in the Malaysian context is timely.

1.3 Research Questions

This study attempts to seek answers to the following research questions:

1. What levels of emergent literacy skills have these preschool children acquired?
2. What are the material resources that parents provide for their children in enhancing their emergent literacy skills?
3. What are the activities that these parents expose their children to in the process of enhancing their emergent literacy skills?
4. What are the behaviours these parents engage in as role models?

1.4 Definition of Terms

In this report, the term 'parent involvement' refers to the dedication of resources by the parents to the child's acquisition of emergent literacy skills. Parents overtly manifest their involvement in 3 ways. Firstly, parents provide material resources to help their child acquire emergent literacy skills. Secondly, parent involvement is seen in their practices of exposing their child to intellectually stimulating activities in or outside the home. Finally, parent involvement is also seen in the role model parents provide for their children.

Emergent literacy skills refer to the early indications of young children's interest in and of their abilities related to reading and writing before a child's school entry (Bader, 1992).

1.5 Significance of the Study

By examining parent involvement in children's emergent literacy skills, this study hopes to highlight the importance and central role parents play in facilitating their child's development. It hopes to create an awareness that parents are important people in children's development and education. By providing a few basic necessities and doing some activities at home, children's literacy skills can be enhanced.

This study seeks to provide a picture of parent involvement in terms of parent provision, practices and behaviour. Some insights into the educational environment of the home of children with high emergent literacy skills can provide other parents and educators more information on how parents are important people in helping children acquire early literacy skills. It also hopes to create an awareness that parents are important people in the child's development and education. With a better understanding of parents' interactions with their children, the researcher hopes to suggest alternative ways of positive parent involvement.

If this study can stir a ripple of awareness among parents who are concerned about their children's education, then it would have served its purpose.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study is that the number of subjects is relatively small. The sample comprises only 20 5-year old children. As such the findings cannot be generalised to the same age group or to other age groups. The sample is also limited to children from an urban kindergarten. Hence, the findings may not be applicable to children in rural kindergartens. A bigger sample would allow a more representative investigation of parent involvement.

Another limitation of the study is that the researcher did not explore certain dimensions of parent involvement such as socio-cultural similarities and differences and parents' beliefs and expectations.

Socio-economic factors which are important indices of parent involvement are also not given prominence in this study of parent involvement.

Several other dimensions of emergent literacy have not been studied in this research. For instance, it would have been ideal if phonological awareness which is an important component of emergent literacy skills is also included in the assessment of emergent literacy of the children in this study.