## Chapter Two

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 2.0 Introduction

Studies on the relationship between parent involvement and reading performance of children abound. However, studies of parent involvement in the development of emergent literacy skills of preschool children are scarce. In addition, studies on parent involvement have concentrated on teachers' practice of involving parents in schools or parent participation in school programmes.

Many studies have looked at how parents can assist kindergartens or schools to develop the knowledge skills through workshops at the school, home visits, family support programmes, parent-teacher conferences or involvement in decision-making. Since the focus of this study is on parent involvement before formal schooling, the literature review will focus principally on how parents and family members such as grandparents, siblings and extended family members, consciously or unconsciously create an atmosphere where literacy of young children can grow and flourish. The methods and techniques parents and family members use to enhance literacy development of their preschool children will also be reviewed. A brief overview of the theoretical framework and some research studies on emergent literacy skills are also included as they are pertinent to this study.

The following review focuses on seven studies which were carried out between 1976 to 1996. These studies review various aspects of parent involvement related to emergent literacy skills.

The literature review is organised under the following headings:

2.1 Theoretical framework as related to emergent literacy

2.2 Emergent literacy skills

2.3 Material resources in the home

2.4 Parents' literacy activities

2.5 Children's literacy activities

2.6 Parents' role model

## 2.1 Theoretical Framework as Related to Emergent Literacy

Many theories have been proposed to explain how children learn to read and write. Bronfenbrenner (1979) views human development as occurring within overlapping systems of social and cultural organisation. A child develops in a socio-cultural system characterised by material resources, activities and participation in these activities. A child's caregiver facilitates the child's development when she interacts with the child. In addition, the ecology of a child's development is also seen as a system of interdependent people embedded within several layers of social organisation. The home, school, neighbourhood, social settings and society all influence the development of the child.

Thus, a child's acquisition of emergent literacy skills is influenced by significant people in his life. In the case of a child, the primary caregiver plays a significant role as she lays the foundation for development of such skills.

Behaviourists believe that a child learns through imitation and conditioning (Miller & Dollard, 1941; Skinner, 1957). Upon first hearing the word 'dog', a child does not know what it means. But if the sound 'dog' is paired with a picture of a dog, the child begins to associate the sound and the object, thereby linking the sound 'dog' with the object. According to Behaviourists, the child grasps the meaning of 'dog' as the sum of all associations that the word evokes after having been paired to many different experiences (Taylor, 1973).

An essential part of the conditioning process is reinforcement (Skinner, 1957). A child produces a rich repertoire of sounds in the process of learning a language. These sounds are gradually shaped through reinforcement and refined through the child's practice. Through a parent's praise and attention, a child's sound of 'ma' might be shaped into 'mum'. Thus, the child successively uses closer approximations to the sounds of this word. It is this principle of conditioning that has theoretical significance for an adult who wishes to encourage a child to learn.

Besides the Behaviourist school of thought, Piaget (1970) has also provided another theory of how a child acquires language. According to

Piaget, a child learns to read and write by building upon new experiences and incorporating past experiences. He also learns to anticipate new situations based on earlier experiences. The child assimilates the consequences of his experience as it accumulates and in due course he internalises his actions and they become thoughts. He then organises his thoughts so that he can adapt them in order to learn from novel situations. Piaget explains that this process of adaptation operates more readily and with great versatility as the child matures and develops. He suggests that a child in the early years is not able to make intellectual deductions based on differences in the things he experiences. For instance, a child can distinguish a long word from a short one when he sees it in a known context. His ability to make this distinction is not based on intellectual deductions. It is only at a later stage of intellectual maturity that the child is be able to use his experience of seeing and hearing words to abstract certain characteristics.

Thus, Piaget's theory implies that the progress a child makes in language is in essence a function of maturation. His ideas emphasise the importance of the child's thinking which starts in action. A child therefore needs much experience in manipulating things. In learning literacy skills, a child should have plenty of opportunity of exploring through touch of letter forms, matching visual images and their word forms, listening and experimenting with different sounds, and understanding the sound component of words.

In putting Piaget's theory to practice, it means an adult should give the child a rich and varied experience as possible in all activities and materials which may help him to acquire literacy skills through exploration of his world. She may also try to precipitate his learning by helping him to use a discovery approach that allows him to learn by doing. With his natural curiosity, a child would learn at his own pace. The adult's role is to find out what the child already knows and teach him accordingly.

Plenty of opportunity to use language, to see, and to compare word shapes, letter shapes, and to match visual and auditory patterns will enable the child to perceive the mental connections between what the child hears and the printed patterns in the books and materials he handles. A learning environment through the availability of materials, activities as well as the provision of guidance help the child acquire language skills.

A third theory of how children learn to read and write can be understood from Vygotsky's (1978) theory of language development. His theoretical perspective has been widely used in contemporary literature on cognitive development and education. He emphasises the importance of social interaction as an important mediator of cognitive development. Children learn by internalising activities conducted in the world around them. They emulate behaviours of people and incorporate them into their existing structure of knowledge when they are exposed to new situations in which they can actively interact with others. Vygotsky (1978) stresses that a

child's development always occurs in a context organised and watched over by adults.

Vygotsky (1978) believes that a child's initial words are communicative acts, mediating his interaction with those around him. A child learns when he interacts with people who can support and nurture his efforts. These shared efforts are gradually taken over by the child and transformed into individual abilities. This central role of social communication in helping a child learn takes place within the zone of proximal development. Tasks within the child's zone of proximal development are ones that are too difficult to be done alone but they can be accomplished with the verbal guidance of adults or other more skilled children. Then, the child takes the language of these verbal instructions, makes it part of his private speech and uses this speech to organise his own independence to learn. (Berk, 1989).

Thus, according to Vygotksy there is a difference between what a learner can accomplish independently and what he can accomplish with the guidance and encouragment of a more competent partner. Thus, there is a zone in which sensitive instruction should be aimed at and in which new learning can be expected.

The theoretical framework of this study is that a child learns the complexities of language with the help of an adult. His learning occurs in a context of interactions with people who are important to him (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). He learns by imitating the language behaviours of others (Skinner, 1957) or by acquiring the basic schemas through his

interaction with objects and people (Piaget, 1970). Another way of learning complex language is through social communication with adults who help the child to develop language as one of the many spheres in which children need to become competent members of society (Vygotsky, 1934). These learning theories have contributed to a deeper understanding of how a child acquires language.

## 2.2 Emergent Literacy Skills

Different researchers have different emphasis on what constitutes emergent literacy skills. Hall, Moretz and Statom (1976) in their investigation into 'early writers' studied the writing skills of 18 three- to five-year old children. However, they did not go into an in-depth study of literacy skills beyond reading and writing of words.

More recent studies on emergent literacy skills investigated the various components of emergent literacy in greater detail. In 1991, Hildebrand and Bader (1991) looked into 74 preschool children's emergent literacy to see if a developmental basis to literacy could be identified. The Bader Reading and Language Inventory was used to measure the children's emergent literacy scores. These children were tested on a few tasks concerning concepts about books and print, alphabetic knowledge, print orientation, syntactic or semantic processing and reading behaviours. Their findings indicated that 3- to 5-year, especially the older 4's and 5's, had acquired basic concepts about books and print. They could recite the

alphabet and write their names. These children knew the alphabet with a left-to-right orientation. Their semantic processing in sentences showed that these children had also acquired oral-language ability. These children were better at oral spelling than written spelling. Many of the children recognised environmental signs and labels in logo but not in standard print. There was also a wide variation in the children's literacy skills.

Bader & Hildebrand (1991) concluded with the idea that the variability among the children in pre-reading development was a result of differences in opportunities to learn and differences in cognitive levels of development. Thus, they felt that there was something that parents and educators can do to enhance children's literacy skills.

Baker, Sonnenschien, Serpell, Fernanez-Fein and Scher (1994) in their study of urban pre-kindergarten children used the term 'emergent literacy' taken from Sulzby and Teale (1991) to refer to the reading and writing behaviours that precede and develop into conventional writing. In this study, they listed orientation towards print, knowledge of the world, narrative competence and phonological awareness as domains of emergent literacy.

In a more recent study, Sonnenschien, Baker, Serpell, Scher, Fernandz-Fein & Munsterman, (1996) conducted a study on 39 5-year-old children and tested them on emergent literacy skills such as phonological awareness, narrative competence and orientation towards print. Since this

was a longitudinal study, the researchers were interested in the development of emergent literacy skills of children over a 5-year period.

Their interim results showed that all the children had some knowledge of many literacy related skills. About 87.8% of the children scored highest on rhyme detection (SD = 16.8) and only 12.8% of children scored lowest on alliteration production ( SD = 20.5). For narrative competence, most of the 39 children knew how to hold a book, turn the pages and even tell the story. Eleven children were beginning to attempt to decode the printed words. Only 4 children were not clear when tested on a narrative. For orientation to print, the children were tested on concepts of print and environmental tasks.

In general, these children were better off at the identification than at naming environmental tasks ($p < .001$). They were also relatively better with both the product and logo identification than with standard print reading. Thus, this shows the children's competency in recognising print in their environment. However, they could not utilise their knowledge of print to match a logo with its standard print.

In summarising research on emergent literacy skills, various researchers have used different tasks to assess these skills of preschool children.

## 2.3 Material Resources in the Home.

Availability of material resources seems to be an important factor in the development of emergent literacy skills. Hall, Moretz and Statom (1976)

studied the home background of children who were early writers. Using a measure to test early writing abilities in preschool children, these researchers also interviewed their parents using a questionnaire. Their study showed that the parents of the 18 subjects aged from 3 years to 6 years provided them with writing materials and these materials were easily accessible to the child without parental permission. In the 18 cases, the children had access to alphabet books, nursery rhymes and storybooks. Only one parent reported not having newspapers and magazines.

In another study of preschool literacy among poor inner-city families, Purcell-Gates, L'Allier & Smith (1995) used an ethnographic description to record the literacy artifacts found in two low-literacy and two-high literacy families. The researchers found that in one low-literacy family, children's storybooks were kept in the boy's bedroom and in the living room but the researcher never saw these books being used. Pens, pencils and paper were available but like the books, they were hardly used.

In another low-literacy family, the researcher counted 10 children's storybooks and a children's dictionary but they were not used. There were some adult reading materials such as TV Guide and women's magazines but there was no evidence of writing materials.

However, in the high-literacy families, the homes were full of literacy artifacts. Many children's storybooks, reading materials such as Bibles, pamphlets and study materials could be found. The researcher saw these

materials being used on many occasions. There were daily newspapers and children's finished works such as poems and drawings displayed on walls, refrigerator and on bulletin boards in the kitchen. Pens, pencils and paper were in abundant supply.

One high-literacy family had over 100 children's and adult's books including storybooks, adult novels, Bibles for different ages, inspirational books, cookbooks and school books. There was also a wealth of reading materials like newspapers, magazines and comic books.

The findings of another study of 74 preschool children also support the popular notion that provision of material resources by parents is important to the development emergent literacy skills. Hildebrand and Bader (1991) tested 74 three-, four- and five-year-old children for their emergent literacy skills and divided them into children with high scores and low scores in emergent literacy. Questionnaires were sent out to the parents. Findings indicated that children with higher emergent literacy scores had parents who provided more alphabet books, blocks, shapes and cards. All the 5-year-old children had 2 or more alphabet books. About 90% of the 4- and 3-year-old children had similar material resources. Some of these children even had 3–dimensional plastic or wooden blocks.

These findings of parent involvement in providing material resources were also supported by Nespeca's (1995) study of Head Start children. Seven out of 9 parents provided books for their children. Some received

books as gifts. As these families were poor, they usually bought books at discount stores, grocery stores, even at garage sales or from mail orders from children's book clubs.

Thus, it appears from these studies that parents who are concerned for their children's literacy development provide material resources for them. These parents organise a physical setting that includes many forms of print materials. A comfortable chair with good lighting in the room, a desk and a drawer set aside for them is a suitable place where literacy activities take place.

## 2.4 Parents' Literacy Activities

Perhaps a more pervasive aspect of parent involvement in enhancing emergent literacy skills in preschool children can be seen from parents' literacy activities in and out of the home. One of the literacy activities that enhances emergent literacy skills is reading to children and hearing them read. A plethora of research from diverse sources and disciplines advocates the practice of reading aloud to children as a fundamental experience that provides a gateway to literacy (Teale, 1981; Dazma & Gilstrap, 1985).

According to Nespeca (1995), 8 out of 9 mothers read to their Head Start children and enjoyed reading to them. The other mother read 'a little' but spent more time teaching him to count. Out of 8 mothers who read, 3 reported reading to their children since they were infants. One started

reading to her child since birth and one 'bought books for her child before he was born and began reading to him when she was pregnant ' (p.167). Two mothers started reading when their children were about a year old and 2 other mothers only after their child's second birthday.

Bader and Hildebrand (1992) reported 20% of the parents in their study spent about half an hour a week reading to their 5-year old children and 45% of the parents spent about an hour a week and 25% of the parents spent 2 hours or more a week just reading to the children. About 40% of the children listened to stories occasionally and 15% to 50% listened 'very often' to a story.

Baker et al. (1994) described an ongoing longitudinal study of 41 parents and their preschool children from various socio-cultural backgrounds and found that joint storybook reading was a daily activity. Children in all socio-cultural groups had frequent storybook reading (overall mean ratings 2.39). In many of these homes, 90% of the middle income parents reported daily storybook reading activity compared to 52% of low income parents. Thus, these findings concurred with Nespeca's findings that low income children do have opportunities to learn about print through story book reading.

Similarly, according to Purcell-Gates, L' Allier & Smith (1995) the high-literacy mother read stories to her preschool children and storybook reading occurred during the day. The low-literacy family, on the other hand,

neither read nor told stories to their children in the course of 3 months' observation period.

From these studies, it can be seen that research findings were quite conclusive in that parents who were concerned with their child's literacy development read and tell stories to them. However, some read and told stories 'a little' and some none at all. The difference does not lie in the socio-economic status as some families reviewed here were from inner-city families or from the low income group.

Another literacy activity that parents were involved in was verbal interaction. Parents who engaged in oral discussion with their children about daily events, storybook reading helped their child to acquire language. However, only one mother in Nespeca's study (1995), saw the importance of oral discourse. The rest of the parents rarely did. Books were read and forgotten as the day progressed.

As Bader and Hildebrand (1992) put it, children with lower literacy scores were less likely to discuss television programmes they viewed with their parents compared to children with higher literacy scores.

In writing and drawing, mothers of Head Start children in Nespeca's study (1995) were actively involved in teaching the children to write their names, numbers and letters of the alphabet. Four mothers helped their children in doing homework brought back from the kindergarten.

Similarly, in Purcell-Gates, L'Allier and Smith's study, the mother in one of the high-literacy families spent much time on reading, writing and spelling of individual words which, on many occasions, were initiated by her children. They spent a considerable amount of time doing their reading, writing and spelling homework given by their kindergarten teachers. In another high-literacy family, homework was also a major activity done during the evening and also before leaving for kindergarten the next morning. The mother insisted that the children read and write words, names and captions on drawings.

The example above is in contrast to the two low-literacy families in the same study in which parents did not help their children in reading and writing. Thus, research regarding parent involvement in reading and writing seems conclusive as high-literacy parents emphasise the importance of reading and writing but others do not.

Parent involvement in children's literacy skills is also seen in outings to places like the libraries, museums and supermarkets. Baker, Serpell and Sonnenschien in their study of urban preschoolers, (1995) commented that 'shopping was also a time for more awareness of the practical application of arithmetic and language arts' (p. 241). However, in another study Baker et al. (1994) found low ratings in supermarket visits by some parents (mean = 1.71, SD 0.75) as many of them did not bring their children out for shopping purposes. Visits to the library were also extremely low (mean = 0.68, SD

0.69). The reason stated for low library visits was that it was not necessary to go to the library 'to reap the benefits of the visit' since books could be borrowed and brought home (p. 24). These researchers also found that 90% of the middle-income families and 43% of the low income families used the library as part of their literacy activities.

Similarly, Nespeca (1995) showed that only one mother in her study frequented the library with her children while the other 8 mothers did so 'sporadically' (p. 172). The reasons these mothers gave were transport problems, time constraints and a fear that their children might mishandle library books and misbehave in the library.

## 2.5 Children's Literacy Activities

It is interesting to note that the subjects in Bader & Hildebrand's study (1992) liked to scribble and pretend to write. These children also copied letters and environmental signs. In Nespeca's (1995) study, 8 out of 9 mothers reported that their preschool children pretended to read to their mothers, siblings or other relatives. One mother reported that her child pretended to read the newspapers each time she noticed her mother do so. Three mothers commented that their children scribbled and wrote all kinds of letter, 2 mothers said their children drew circles, squares and triangles.

## 2.6 Parents' Role Model

Research findings on parent involvement as role models are sparse. Hall, Moretz and Statom (1976) indicated that the 18 parents in his study always engaged in writing and reading activities themselves, especially in letter writing to relatives or friends and this behaviour was frequently observed by the children.

As Nespeca (1995) pointed out only 2 parents were avid readers and one mother often read the newspapers. The others read the newspapers casually. 5 out of 9 mothers when interviewed felt that their child learned how to read or write by imitating them.

In view of the importance of parent involvement in the emergent literacy skills, it is necessary for parents to reflect on their involvement and contemplate on ways of providing more appropriate ways that will help children enhance the acquisition of such skills. The studies reviewed on parent involvement have provided some insights into how parents can enhance such skills.