

Chapter Five

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses the main findings of the study. It also presents some pedagogical implications and suggestions and recommendations for future research.

5.1 Discussion of Main Findings

This study found that generally the 5 year-old children in this study had acquired some knowledge of the alphabet. All of them could recite the alphabet in the form of a song although 25% of the children did so hesitantly. This is probably due to the heavy emphasis given to the acquisition of oral skills among preschool children. These children are encouraged to sing as a form of learning.

The mean scores of the subjects' performance in letter knowledge showed their letter knowledge to be in descending order, beginning with letter recognition, letter identification and letter writing. This order of letter knowledge acquisition is considered normal as most children learn to recognise letters first before they can identify or write letters of the alphabet. Similar findings on oral letter production and letter knowledge tasks have also been recorded by Hildebrand and Bader (1991) in their study of preschool children.

In name writing, 75% of them could also write their names correctly or nearly correctly . This is likely as parents, besides teaching their children to write the letters of the alphabet, also taught them to write their names. Nespeca (1995) explained that the 'most common (activity) of the parents was teaching the children to write his or her name' (Nespeca, 1995 p. 170). About 90% of the 5 year-old children in Hildebrand and Bader's (1991) study could write their first names 'nearly correct'. but none of their 5-year-old subjects could write their names correctly.

In addition, 55% of the subjects could segment auditorily 5 to 8 words given to them. They were able to use at least 5 letter names as a clue to word recognition. This ability is important as a basic skill of phonemic discrimination and segmentation which is useful in beginning reading. One likely explanation for the children's ability in this task is that in many homes and kindergartens, parents and teachers teach their children phonemic discrimination and segmentation by asking them to name the first letter of common words.

Furthermore, 16 out of 20 children read 'Milo' in logo and 2 could read in standard print. This could be due to 'Milo' being a common household beverage among young children in Malaysia. This finding supports Sonnenschien et al. (1996)'s study in which 39 children 'did best' on environmental print tasks when the products or logos were available in the home (p. 26).

This study also found that 13 children read 'KFC' in logo and out of this number, nearly half of them read the standard print. This implies that the children were able to read this environmental sign. This finding concurred with Bader and Hildebrand's study (1992) in which 86% and 40% of the children respectively were able to transfer their logo reading of 'Stop' and K-mart' to standard print compared to other environmental signs. An explanation given by the researchers was the graphics found in these two environmental signs did not differ much from their standard print. Another likely explanation is that 'KFC' and 'Milo' are well advertised on mass media, shopping complexes and billboards and the children in this study had high exposure to them.

Among the 20 subjects, no child was able to read 'Mariaville' which is the name of the kindergarten. It is possible that the children did not take note of this word as the word was not conspicuously displayed in the kindergarten. It was also possible that parents did not draw the attention of their children to this word. The other environmental sign which the children did not fare well was 'Gardenia'. This could be due to the fact that parents did not buy this brand of bread for their consumption.

The following discussion of main findings focuses on material resources of the 10 children provided by the parents. An analysis of the material resources found in the homes of these 10 children showed that the 5 children with high scores in emergent literacy had reading and writing materials, audio-video materials and books. Like the subjects in Hall,

Moretz and Statom's (1976) study, these children owned a good collection of books. Four children had alphabet blocks and shapes and they also owned at least 2 packs of flash cards. All of them had alphabet books, colour pencils, crayons, colouring books and writing books. They also owned storybooks, children's books on nursery rhymes and picture dictionaries. Thus, it is obvious that these parents placed importance on material resources as a tool for literacy development.

Among the children with low scores in emergent literacy, the findings on material resources were mixed: 2 out of 5 children had a good collection of material resources while the others did not. A possible explanation for 3 of the children who did not have the material resources could be that Yun and Mei's parents did not think that it was important to provide such resources to them. A likely explanation why Devi did not have audio-visual and books was poverty as the researcher visited the home and saw the home environment of the child.

This finding that children with high emergent literacy scores tended to have parents who provided them with material resources corresponded with Bader & Hildebrand's (1992) study.

Parents of children with high emergent literacy scores also carried out a number of literacy activities that promoted their children's acquisition of emergent literacy skills. Reading and telling stories were common daily activities in the homes of these children. When mothers did not carry out these tasks, fathers played an active role in reading and telling stories.

These parents also engaged in active verbal interaction with their children. They answered their children's questions patiently.

Unlike children with high emergent literacy scores, 4 parents of the children with low emergent literacy scores did not read nor tell stories to them. These parents were either too busy with their careers or did not consider such activities important. This similar finding was obtained by Bader & Hildebrand's (1992) study of 74 pre-school children.

Furthermore, parents of children with high emergent literacy scores were actively involved in teaching their children how to read and write. These parents also made sure a certain amount of time was put aside daily for this purpose. In addition, 2 parents sent their children for formal instruction by tutors.

This study has also shown that 'doing things together' with the child helps him to develop literacy skills. Children measuring high in emergent literacy scores read the newspapers with their parents who patiently explained the events to them. Two parents did jigsaw puzzles with their children, one sang songs with his child, another watched television programmes with his son. Finally, 1 child helped her mother in taking phone calls and arranging bills in the car accessory shop business. These parents spent time with their children 'doing things together'.

Generally, parents of children with high and low emergent literacy scores did not write letters to relatives and friends except on festive occasions.

Writing shopping or marketing lists was also not a common practice. Thus, their children did not involve themselves in such writing tasks.

Only two parents of children with high emergent literacy scores brought their children to the library and borrowed books for their children to read. The other 3 parents of children with high emergent literacy scores did not bring their children to the library. It thus appears that visits to the library are not common activities among the subjects of this study.

This finding is similar to what was found by Baker et al (1994) in their study. These researchers also recorded extremely low library visits by their subjects. However, the explanation given by the researchers was since books could be borrowed and brought home, there was no necessity to bring the children to the library. Bader and Hilderbrand (1992) found a slightly higher figure of 55% of library visits by their 5-year old children.

Similarly, too, the 5 parents of children with low emergent literacy scores did not bring their children to the library. It is suggested that if parents knew the important connection between library visits and emergent literacy skills, they would make more effort getting their child to the library.

Two parents explained environmental signs and labels of products to their children. Eight parents, irrespective of emergent literacy scores, did not think that environmental print was an important tool for literacy. Silvern (1986) in his review 'Young children's environment print reading', noted that preschool children were interested in words in the environment and read them if parents helped them by pointing to the word and reading aloud to

them (Silvern, 1986). However, 8 parents in this study did not take note of environmental print. These parents were not aware of the importance of environmental print to their child's acquisition of literacy.

All the children in the sample preferred going to the toy section in shopping complexes. Children with high emergent literacy scores showed interest in literacy products. They spent time looking at stationery items and books. The children with low emergent literacy showed more interest in things that are not literacy related.

The findings in this study also indicate that children high in emergent literacy skills are interested in reading books, looking at pictures while the children low in emergent literacy scores preferred to play with objects.

Parents of children with high emergent literacy scores were actively guiding their children to scribble, draw and colour. These parents not only encouraged them to draw but demonstrated and taught them how to do so. Children of low emergent literacy skills had the same inclination to scribble, draw and colour but were not given the guidance by their parents. This concurs with Nespeca's (1995) study of 9 Head-Start children whose mothers noticed their children drawing but none of them 'emphasised it to any degree' (1995, p.171).

The present study found that children with high scores in emergent literacy watched considerably fewer hours of television and video programmes. Their parents controlled the choice of their programmes. They engaged in more verbal interactions with their parents about the

programmes they watched. On the other hand, children with low emergent literacy scores watched more television and video programmes and had less verbal interaction with their parents. A likely explanation is that these parents used the television and video as a 'baby sitter' while they went about their work. This finding concurred with the findings of Bader and Hildebrand (1992) which showed that the children with low emergent literacy scores watched more television than did children who had high scores in emergent literacy. These children were also less likely 'to discuss' the programmes they viewed with their parents (Bader and Hildebrand, 1992, p. 166).

Parents of children with high emergent literacy scores read the newspapers. These children observed their parents' reading behaviours and 'imitated' their parents' behaviour. This finding is not found in parents of children with low emergent literacy scores. In Nespeca's study (1995), 5 parents felt that their children learned to read and write by example or by 'mimicking them' (p. 167). Similarly, Hall, Moretz and Statom's subjects reported that their children observed their reading and writing behaviours and followed what the adults did.

In summary, the findings obtained are:

1. The children have acquired some basic knowledge of the alphabet, phonemic discrimination and segmentation and environmental signs and labels reading in logo.

2. Generally, children with high emergent literacy scores had parents who provided them with material resources. Only 2 children of low emergent

literacy scores had a good collection of material resources. Comparatively, the other 3 children had parents who did not provide them with sufficient material resources.

3. Children of high emergent literacy scores had parents who actively read, told stories and taught them. They also spent more time “doing things together.” Parents of children with low emergent literacy scores neither read, told stories nor teach their children. They did not spend time “doing things together.”

4. Only 2 parents of children with high emergent literacy scores actively taught their children about environmental signs and labels. The other 3 children were not taught by their parents. All 5 parents of children from the low emergent literacy scores did not point out and teach their children environmental signs and labels.

5. Letter and note writing was not a usual practice among the four parents of children with high emergent literacy scores. Only one parent wrote letters and notes and involved her son in the writing process. All 5 parents of children of low emergent literacy scores did not write letters or notes.

6. Writing of shopping and marketing lists was not a practice of parents of this study, irrespective of high or low emergent literacy scores.

7. Only 2 parents of children with high emergent literacy scores brought their children to the library and made use of the facilities. The other 3

parents did not do so. All 5 parents of children with low emergent literacy scores did not bring their children to the library.

8. All the children, irrespective of emergent literacy scores, preferred the toy section in the shopping complex. However, the children of high emergent literacy scores chose the stationery section as their second choice. The children of low emergent literacy scores chose the food and clothes sections as their second choice.

9. The favourite activities of children of high emergent literacy scores were related to book reading, looking at pictures and literacy related activities. The children of low emergent literacy scores preferred to play with objects.

10. Children of high emergent literacy scores watched an average of about 1½ hours of television and video a day. Their parents enforced certain rules such as choice of programmes and amount of viewing time. Children of low emergent literacy scores watched an average of about 1½ to 3 hours of television and video programmes a day with little control from parents.

11. All parents of children with high emergent literacy scores reported reading newspapers, magazines, books and novels. Three fathers of children with low emergent literacy scores read newspapers but not other types of reading material. No mothers of children with low emergent literacy scores read the newspapers as a leisure activity.

Most parents, irrespective of emergent literacy scores, watched the television as a leisure activity. Parents of children with low emergent literacy scores watched more video dramas than the parents of children with high emergent literacy scores.

5.2 Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions

The results of this study are important to parents and educators who wish to enhance children's literacy skills.

Firstly, parents have to be actively involved in their children's learning. The emphasis is on parents' interaction with the child in his environment in regard to reading and writing activities. It is important that parents facilitate the child's attempts to learn by responding to his needs and questions. Parents have to "seize the teachable moments when the child shows interest in reading or writing" (Bader & Hildebrand, 1992. p.169).

Secondly, parents have to set time aside for their children's literacy development. Provision of material resources is important but on its own is no guarantee of literacy development. These children may have access to material resources but not to the activity itself. Thus, parents have to put time aside for activities such as reading, writing, telling stories, drawing, and colouring. Parents also have to provide opportunities for children to respond to books in various ways. If children participate in many types of real experiences, they develop ideas, feelings and concepts to talk about. Children dictate stories, retell familiar stories and engage in role play which

is helpful for literacy acquisition. Parents' role thus should facilitate their children's natural curiosity, interest and desire to engage in activities meaningful to them.

Thirdly, parents have to consider the importance of themselves as reading models to their children. Those who are concerned about their children's literacy development should also make time for their personal reading (whether a newspaper, a magazine or a book) while their children are awake, rather than wait until they have gone to sleep. Parents have to set an effective role model and demonstrate that reading is an important and interesting activity. Making greater use of libraries and their resources is a good practice and should be recommended to all parents with preschool children.

Finally, parents have to realise that they can play an important role in enhancing their children's emergent literacy development by creating a stimulating environment for them to read and write. Parents can provide a home environment that is print rich. This also creates opportunities for verbal interaction between children and their parents. Schickendanz (1986) notes that "literacy learning proceeds naturally if the environment supports young children" (p. 7).

Since the results of this study show that parents can enhance their children's emergent literacy skills, this study suggests that parents read and tell stories to their children. It also means that parents set aside a certain amount of time daily for verbal interaction with their children before bedtime.

Conversation can evolve around kindergarten activities, television shows or stories that are read. While travelling, parents should also be sensitive to environmental print and encourage children to read road signs, or menu or any other written material whenever possible.

Parents can nurture literacy by encouraging children to draw. Drawing helps the child express his feelings about the things around him. He can be encouraged to draw the stories that are read to or told to him.

Regular library visits help the child develop a love of books and a desire to search for knowledge. Subscribing to children's magazines and daily newspapers can also help the child develop a love of reading. Parents can also encourage a child to make a scrapbook of interesting items.

5.3 Recommendations for Further Research

As it has been mentioned earlier, the sample size is small and thus the results may not be generalised to parents as a whole. Hence, more studies of the same nature can be conducted to include children of various age groups and from different parts of the country, urban as well as rural.

Preferably, the scope of parent involvement can also be widened by taking into consideration parent beliefs and values which are not addressed in this study. A range of two to six year old children could be included so as to study the developmental base of emergent literacy. All these would thus help future research gain a deeper understanding of parent involvement in the acquisition of emergent literacy skills of preschool children.