

## **EFFECTIVE FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN ruMANYO-SPEAKING CHILDREN'S HOME LITERACY LEARNING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper emphasizes that family should effectively involve in ruManyo-speaking children's home literacy learning. The paper emerged from a case study that was conducted in rural and urban settings in the Kavango Educational Region of Namibia. The aim of this paper is to share some views, experiences and opinions regarding the role of family involvement in their children's literacy learning. The study involved four families; one caregiver and their children from each family was selected; and two teachers one from each setting. Observations and semi-structured interviews were used as research instruments for data collection. Findings of the study show that families were not effectively involved in their children's literacy learning -for a number of reasons; lack of literacy knowledge, lack of a print environment and literacy resources in and outside the school, the absence of literacy programmes in the community, lack of reading habits, encouragement and motivation. However, many of these problems were fuelled by the severe lack of reading materials written in ruManyo. From the study findings, it is clear that there is a need for empowering families to understand and develop knowledge and skills regarding their children's literacy learning.*

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## INTRODUCTION

A study by Siririka (2007) investigated the involvement of parents in the development of their children's literacy in rural schools in the Omaheke region of Namibia. The findings were that parents were not effectively involved in their children's acquisition of literacy, for the following reasons: the parents were not appropriately empowered to influence the development of their children's literacy; an absence of environmental literacy programmes within the community; and a lack of literacy materials (Siririka, 2007). The researcher expanded upon these findings by examining, comparing and contrasting family involvement in the rural and urban areas of the Kavango region.

There have been wide-ranging debates about how best to ensure that children become literate, including everything from pedagogical concerns to the influence of the relationship between home and school environments. As Chatry-Komarek (2003) and Wray and Medwell (1991) stress, literacy is more than just reading and writing; children should learn to think, read critically and be able to understand and handle information from their everyday lives across the curriculum. In addition, Wragg et al (1998) state that if children do not acquire literacy skills in the foundation phase, they will struggle to catch up, and find it hard to learn effectively. That is why there is a need for the recognition of the importance of family involvement in children's literacy learning.

There are several conditions that enable this literacy learning to take place in and outside the home, such as availability of literacy resources, and different literacy activities that the families engage in with their children, such as story-reading, story-telling and play. The importance of social, economic, cultural and personal factors should not be taken for granted in children's literacy learning. The key factor in a child's literacy learning is not being surrounded by a lot of print; it is determined by the way family members demonstrate how print is used. As Wray et al argue, "a literate environment is a fairly meaningless concept without people who are using that environment; people who, through the variety

of the ways in which they use print, demonstrate when it is used, how it is used, where it is used and what it is" (1989:66). Thus, literacy development in children appears to be strongly influenced by the opportunities made available to them.

Purcell-Gates (1996) also noted the importance of family involvement in literacy activities. In her study, she describes how children who were successful in school were the ones who observed family members engaging in different literacy activities, and who also participated in these (1996: 406). This suggests that even though children's experiences with print may vary from family to family, families contribute to children's literacy learning in many different ways.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to Morrow (1997), the term 'family literacy' is a complex concept. Morrow refers to several studies that describe family literacy. One such description is that "family literacy encompasses the ways parents, children, and extended family use literacy at home and their community, occurs naturally during the routines of daily living, and helps adults and children to get things done" (Morrow, 1997: 54). Casper (in Rule and Lyster, 2005) describes family literacy as a very broad concept, which is difficult to define exactly because it depends on the context in which it is used. The concept of family literacy appears to be used and understood in two significant ways: "literacy practices within families", which refers to what families 'do' with literacy in their homes and communities, and "programmes which are designed to enhance the literacy skills of more than one family member", referring to programmes that work with the literacy development of children and adults in various contexts (Casper, in Rule & Lyster, 2005).

Both Purcell-Gates (2007) and Anderson et al (2010) stress that family literacy is important and contributes positively to children's literacy learning. Children who grow up in families that practice literacy-related

activities know from a very early age that literacy-related activities happen everywhere, in and outside the school environment. Those children come to school with a plethora of literacy-related activities, experiences and knowledge that the school could build on.

Mace argues that family literacy support activities are passed on by parents to children, from one generation to another. However, a recent ethnographic study with families by Gregory (in Anderson et al, 2010) argues against this perspective. The studies by Gregory show the important roles siblings play in supporting literacy learning, and how both young children and older siblings benefit from language and literacy learning. Gregory questions the assumption (inherent in current educational thinking) that children's learning should necessarily be facilitated by adults; she argues, instead, for a more reciprocal view of such learning. For her, "the children's language and literacy practices reflected syncretism as children borrowed and melded elements from home, school, church and community literacies, although school literacy and at-home literacy are sometimes portrayed dichotomously in literature" (in Anderson et al, 2010: 35).

Gregory argues that children learn language and literacy from more than one person; they adopt and adapt to the situation as they find it. There are similar findings from a study by Molosiwa (2007), in Botswana, who also reports that many children were introduced to print literacy by their siblings who had attended school and that very few become literate through the influence of their parents. The evidence from these studies indicates that children's literacy development is supported not only by parents, but that older sibling's play a significance role as well.

Aitchison & Land (2005) argue that the concept of family requires substantial revision in the light of the serious social problems arising from violence, AIDS and migrancy. Many children are not taken care of by their biological parents; at a particular point, conditions have led to a breakdown and re-ordering of family structures. In such cases,

caregivers could be relatives, community members or older siblings. The concept of family literacy needs to include single parent families, extended families and orphaned families (Aitchison & Land, 2005), or anyone associated with the children in a family who can support their literacy learning-not only the biological parents.

Slonimsky & Stein (2005) conducted another study in South Africa (in the Cape, Gauteng and Limpopo Provinces) between 2000 and 2001, to examine how different family and extended family members contribute to children's literacy development. These researchers used ethnographic-style study to look at three families and their children, focusing on the children's literacy learning in homes, community and schools, in order to establish why some children and not others are successful acquirers of literacy. It is important to examine the entire environment in each case to see how each environment is contributing to children's literacy learning. In the first case, the whole family (father, mother and brother) took part in helping the younger child with reading texts in Sesotho and English. In the second case, the researchers noted the important role that the grandmother played in her grandchild's literacy learning, by telling and reading bedtime stories every evening.

In the third case, an aunt supported her niece's literacy development, playing a more directive, pedagogical role by helping her niece to understand and locate the generic features of a house-for-sale advertisement. She built the interaction playfully by arousing her niece's interest in looking for 'the price' in the text. This led to extensive conversation on 'the topic' and the meaning of the term 'estate agent'. The study also noted how the niece switched to other literacy activities such as writing, and how the aunt constantly communicated the message to her niece that her writing was meaningful and that she was 'saying' something. The evidence from this study shows that all three families practiced literacy and supported the children's literacy learning in different ways, and different family members were involved. Although the families in the study did not practice all literacy-related activities with

their children, the few activities they did practice were significant to the children's literacy learning.

### **Theory informing the study**

This study's theoretical framework is embedded in the ideas of the New Literacy Studies (NLS). NLS scholars argue that literacy learning occurs everywhere; in formal and informal settings, in or out of school, but also in everyday interaction, as a tool for building and maintaining social relations (Larson & Marsh, 2005; 18). This means that children see print everywhere, in and outside the home. NLS scholars understand literacy differently to traditionalists: for them, literacy is more than just reading and writing. It is seen as something that develops rapidly together with other global changes. The more technology develops; the more changes take place in literacy. Today, people do not depend only on print materials to learn how to read and write; there are many other resources. According to NLS researchers, the focus in their studies has shifted from the "local to the trans-local, from print-based literacies to electronic and multimedia literacies, and from the verbal to the multimodal"

Another key idea in literacy research is 'literacy practices', which advocates that reading and writing are located in social practices (Barton, 2010:1). According to Barton (2010), the use of the term 'practices' has its roots in the work of the British anthropologist Brian Street. The study by street (cited in Barton, 2010: 1) in Iran provides a broader theory of literacy based on practices that were taken up by applied linguistics researchers, thus developing the field of New Literacy Studies. Street sees a link between literacy practices and literacy events. "Practices refer to general cultural ways of using reading and writing, and literacy events are particular instances of people drawing upon their cultural knowledge" (Barton, 2010: 1).

New Literacy Studies understands literacy as a social practice (Street, 2004). Prinsloo maintains that "such studies produce evidence that

reading and writing, in whatever modality, appear as not exactly the same thing, in their uses, functions, modes of acquisition and status, across groups of people and across specific social domains within societies” (2005:3). He further adds that the studies focus on the uses and meanings of literacy in different cultural and social contexts, leading to the recognition of ‘multiple literacy’. For Street (2004) and Prinsloo (2005), the use of, meaning of, and the way people acquire literacy differ from individual to individual, depending on social, cultural, economic and personal factors.

NLS researches also take a conceptual turn from the traditional, seeing literacy as something that is not ‘neutral’, and which should not be generalized; it varies from one person to another and from context to context. As Street explains, literacy should be studied “not as an issue of measurement or of skill but as social practices that vary from one context to another” (2009: 21). His studies suggest that literacy should not be treated as ‘one size fits all’, while its use and meaning varies among people, depending on various factors. In the same vein, the study by Heath (1983) found that written texts play a significant role in literacy learning, but their use differs in the practices of everyday life. She further stresses that people use language, reading and writing for different reasons, and that these vary among groups of people. From her findings it is evident that all people practice literacy; but in different ways and for different purposes, depending on their beliefs and customs and the availability of resources.

## **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of the study was to investigate the nature of family involvement in ruManyo-speaking children's home literacy learning, in the two selected communities to find out how different families in the selected communities involve themselves in their children's literacy activities and their uses of print, in their homes, and the surrounding environment. The study was also conducted for a half thesis that was submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree Master of Arts (African Languages and Applied Linguistics).

Today, literacy plays a big role in daily life. It is evident that there is a need to reinforce family literacy learning. But home background and environment differ between families, and the experiences of young children and their levels of engagement in literacy differ as well. These differences can have a profound effect on children's literacy learning, and contribute directly to their performance in school. The reasons for them are heavily dependent on factors such as socio-economic background, literacy experiences of family members, resources available in the home and surrounding areas, literacy events available, and the value that family members attach to literacy. The family's role in children's literacy learning is extremely important, since they are the people with whom children spend most of their time.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The researcher attempted to find out the kinds of literacy activities and interactions do parents of first language ruManyo speaking children engage in with their children at home in rural and urban setting.

This study focuses mainly on four families and their children in their selected settings as they were considered worthy of study. Case study research considers the setting to be powerful determinant in examining both causes and effects (IIEP, 2003); thus, the researcher opted to use

the case study as an appropriate method for qualitative research. As it also provides unique examples of real people in real situation, it enabled the researcher to understand ideas more clearly than if the researcher was to attempt to fit them to abstract theories or principals (Cohen et al, 2000:181).

For Punch (2000), the case study in qualitative research aims to understand the case in depth, and in its natural setting, recognizing its complexity and its context. Punch (2009) notes that the case study is more a strategy than a method, because it acts holistically, aiming to preserve and understand the wholeness and unity of the case.

Case study research simulates “what is it like” to be in particular situation, to catch the close-up reality and “thick description” of participants’ lived experiences of a situation, and their thoughts about and feelings for a situation (Cohen 2000: 182). To this end the researcher allowed the parents, their children to speak for themselves rather than to direct their responses.

The factors above influenced the use of the case study method. Throughout the study process the Researcher tried to understand what it was like to be a caregiver, according to their own experiences and what they feel about the nature of family involvement in their children’s literacy learning. The purposeful sampling of the study was used to identify the kinds of literacy activities that families engage in with children at home.

Observations in this study focused on the ways the children interacted in their homes, with parents or other members of the family. The researcher took note of all the activities that included print media or evidence of reading and writing by any members of the family. The researcher took notes of the kinds of activities children perform in homes and how parents and family members engaged with them. The observations for two families in each setting lasted for two weeks each. The observations in homes always happened during the day, after

school. During the observations the researcher noted the existence of print and its uses in homes. The aim was to get a clear picture of how families engage in literacy activities, in and outside the home.

The duration of each interview was approximately one hour, and participants were interviewed individually. The interviews helped me to probe deeply; I was able to understand the adults' involvement in the children's literacy activities, and their influence on the children's school achievements and motivation to read and write. The interviews were conducted in ruManyo, since my participants included caregivers and young children and I could not take it for granted that they would understand questions in English.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The discussion will focus on the literacy activities and interactions that parents of first language-ruManyo speaking children do with their children at home. These will include reading aloud to children, story-telling, and playing. Then I will also discuss other two main issues, which are literacy activities in rural and urban homes and literacy activities and interactions in both settings.

### **Reading aloud to children**

Reading aloud is the key to everything children do in school. It came up as an important literacy activity during the interviews with caregivers in this study. Caregivers emphasized the importance of reading in general. Previous researchers had similar views: Krashen (1993) claimed that reading is the only way children can become good spellers and good readers, and develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary and advanced grammar. Similarly, Morrow (1997) argues that children who are read to regularly from an early age have an increase interest in books and in learning to read and write, and that

reading provides a model for children to emulate and aids development of literacy skills.

The most significant finding from the observation and interviews regarding this topic is that reading aloud for pleasure at home is being done; whether by caregivers, other family members, neighbours or friends. This evident in the houses I visited: Children always engaged in a lot of reading activities when they played with friend at home.

### **Storytelling**

Another issue that has emerged from the study is that of storytelling and story reading. Research by Dyson supports the view that storytelling and reading contribute significantly to children's literacy learning (1993). As noted in Chapter 2 of the main study, the study by Bloch claims that storytelling and reading expose children to a special form of language, which is whole, rich and complex (2006). During the interview, all three caregivers claimed to tell their children stories; however, only one did it at home. One caregiver tells stories at school, since she is her son's class teacher; she stated that she does not have time to tell stories at home. One caregiver's son did not support her claim that she told stories at home.

Looking at the findings, it seems that caregivers claimed to do more than they actually do. As with 'reading aloud', this suggests that the caregiver and other family members may know they should be supporting their children's literacy learning, but are not actually doing so.

### **Playing**

Play is another issue of importance in the study. It was clear from my observations and interviews that plays are a natural activity. All four children confirmed that they enjoyed playing, at home, and all engaged fully in different play activities, such as playing 'school', playing 'house', cutting and pasting papers, talking, reading, writing, and drawing

pictures. These findings are in line with Dyson's 1993 study, as stated in chapter 2 of the main study; she reports that the children in her study shared experiences, culture and literacy activities through play. In the same vein, Bloch (2006) supports the idea that through play, children discover language and learn reading, writing, listening and talking with others.

In this study I learned that children do not just play; they demonstrate or imitate what they see from people around them, for example their teachers, parents and other people in the community.

### **Literacy activities in rural and urban homes**

This study revealed that there are many contributing factors that could be related to the support of children's literacy learning. Some of those identified include the environment in and outside the home which can encourage or discourage children's literacy learning, as well as direct encouragement from teachers and family members. This study found that some of the children's home environments are very poor, and lack print and other resources that can encourage children to read and write. The children in such an environment may have difficulties in learning to read and write quickly and easily. Previous studies by Van Wyk and Lemmer (2009), Kasokonya and Kutondokwa (2005), and Arbor and Michigan (1981) support the view that poverty can be an obstacle for establishing children's literacy learning, both in and outside the home environment.

I also found that there was a serious lack of support in and outside the children's homes. Children are not fully supported in reading and writing. There are very few literacy-related activities in and outside homes to encourage literacy learning. This was evident during observations and interviews: the four families studied engaged in very few literacy-related activities and showed very little literacy support, in or outside their homes, to encourage their children's literacy learning.

The four caregivers also indicated that their family members have poor reading habits.

### **Literacy activities and interactions in both settings**

In this study I refer to 'informal literacy moments'-simple, casual, un-prescribed interactions in which families engage with their children in literacy activities. These may include sitting around the television and talking about a certain programme being viewed, or talking about any print in the home.

These incidents came to my attention during the interviews and observations I conducted with caregivers. Family understanding of "literacy activities" was limited to formal reading sessions, where printed materials such as books were being used. I feel this lack of understanding is one of the important issues to have come from this study. The main concern of the caregivers I interviewed was that they did not spend much time helping their children to read and write; but they seemed unaware of the opportunities available during the informal time families spend together, using resources other than books. Outside the children's homes they see lots of writing-in town, on shops, hospitals, post office, banks, street names and road signs.

Because all this print is easily available in and outside homes, families do not recognize all resources for literacy learning. Families are unaware that informal literacies and the use of any print in the surrounding environment of the child may increase children's interest in books and encourage literacy learning.

Another issue that emerged from the study was that of television. During the observations and interviews I found that television plays a large role in some of these children's lives. Three caregivers out of the four interviewed said that their children enjoy television very much. Studies by Marsh (2004) and Krashen (1993) suggest that television does not do any harm to children's literacy learning. According to these

researches, television helps children to acquire a second language more easily.

### **Tentative suggestions for action and future research on the basis of this study**

This was a small-scale study, and I was not able to generalize the findings. Therefore, I have identified possible actions and suggestions for further investigation. The reason for this would be to 'spread the word'; to make people who are in the situation described understanding what might help them in supporting their children's literacy learning. Various factors in this regard were brought to light by this study; they are discussed in the following two sections.

#### **Possible actions**

Families in both communities are involved in their children's literacy learning-although they do it in different ways, depending on various factors. It has been observed that if families get more involved in assisting children with literacy, the children benefit, learning literacy more easily. Therefore, the introduction of the family literacy programme to these communities would be an opportunity for families to learn how they can help their children with literacy learning. As stated earlier, families need to realize the needs of children, and learn how best to support them. Introducing children to technological gadgetry may help families understand that children do not need to depend only on reading books for their literacy learning; they can also make use of the newer technologies available in their homes and communities.

The caregiver's concern in regard to their children's literacy learning in the home environment is how to engage their children fully in reading and writing activities. The findings of this study are that children get bored with the literacy activities organized in the home that are based mostly on printed materials such as books. It is therefore important to

introduce children to another literacy resources (such as shopping lists, menus, telephone and water bills, recipes, text on food packets and containers, to mention but a few) to make literacy more interesting and enjoyable for them.

The use of these literacy resources will be to the advantage of the caregivers, as they will learn more about the alternative literacy resources they can use to help their children with reading and writing more easily and effectively.

### **Possible areas for further investigation**

In order to provide a full picture of the nature of family involvement in ruManyo-speaking children's home literacy learning, further (and large-scale) research is needed, in more than just two communities of the Kavango region. This could include ascertaining the viewpoints of different family members, of publishers in ruManyo, and/or of translators and writers of children's stories. This kind of research has the potential to provide a much broader view of why family involvement is needed in the children's literacy learning, and how it can be encouraged.

### **CONCLUSION**

This research has discussed the nature of family involvement in ruManyo-speaking children's home literacy learning. The participants shared their views and experiences regarding this research area, the results of this study have provided invaluable insights into children's literacy learning. Literacy learning in children does not only have serious implications for those children's education; it has social, cultural and economic implications as well. More than anything, however, I hope that the findings from this study will inform families and other community members; and persuade them to take children's literacy learning seriously, and start to put what they take for granted into practice.

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