

# The Role of Family on Pathways to Acquiring Early Reading Skills in Lusaka's Low-Income Communities

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- The learning process of reading starts long before the child starts school.
- Parent-child interactions affect the transfer of skills from parents to children as they socialise within their families.
- In the formal process of learning to read, decoding is a paramount skill.
- Most first graders in Zambia do not achieve the mastery of reading skills by the end of that year.
- In schools, challenges include poorly resourced infrastructures, inadequate reading materials, large class sizes and low teacher motivation.
- Within the family, the lack of children's books and parents' levels of education, employment statuses and reading attitudes can compromise reading attainment.

### The ecological theory of human development

- Developed by Bronfenbrenner.
- Children's early environments: the home (microsystem) and the school (mesosystem).
- The process, person, context and time are interacting elements in the environment that facilitate development.
- *Process* encompasses forms of interaction between the individual and the environment.
- The power of such processes to influence development varies substantially as a function of the characteristics of the developing *person*, of the immediate and remote environmental *contexts* and of the *time* periods in which the proximal processes take place.



### The study

This study examined the home environment as a predictor of reading development. Because reading is a mechanism through which children come to understand their environments, this study aimed at identifying family factors that affect children's orthographic awareness and decoding competence, which are skills pertinent to reading development.

### *Research question*

- *What family factors significantly explain variation in children's early reading skills?*

**The participants** were 72 learners who were randomly selected from 9 schools in Lusaka, Zambia and their primary caregivers.

### **Measures for reading skills**

#### *Orthographic awareness*

- Children were asked to choose items that would help them to read. They were shown letters, syllables and simple words from the ciNyanja writing system, as well as non-ciNyanja letters, syllables and words, which served as distractors.

#### *Decoding competence*

- Children were asked to match the sound that they heard to the corresponding letter, syllable or word on the paper.

### **Measures for family environment**

#### *Parental reading attitude*

- This was assessed through a modified version of the Home Literacy Questionnaire, consisting of ten items, such as "I spend my spare time reading" and "I find reading boring".

#### *Family literacy environment*

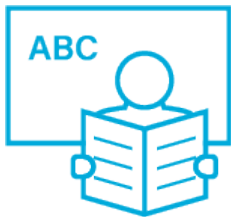
- This was assessed with the Home Literacy Questionnaire and included information on socioeconomic status and family possessions, such as televisions, electricity and reading materials.
- There were also questions on the presence and frequency of exposure to print, oral language and reading and writing activities was asked.



## Findings

- Parental reading attitudes and the family literacy environment significantly predicted children's orthographic awareness and decoding competence.
- Parental reading attitudes explained 40% of the variance in children's orthographic awareness in the pre-test and 17% of the gain scores in the post-test, while the family literacy environment explained an additional 12% and 6% of these, respectively.
- Regarding the variance in children's decoding competence, parental reading attitudes explained 32% of it in the pre-test and 9% of the gain scores in the post-test, while the family literacy environment explained an additional 11% and 8% of these, respectively.
- From the qualitative data, i.e. the interviews, it emerged that academic activities were encouraged, fostered and supported in the home.
- Parents perceive formal education as the channel through which their children can alter their future living conditions for the better.
- The key motivator for parents in encouraging their children to read appears to be economic in nature.

- Parents of high-achieving learners were seen to involve their children in extra literacy-enhancing activities.
- These parents possessed more reading-enhancing materials and explicitly knew how to engage in literacy-enhancing activities at home.



## **Implications**

- Family variables explain substantial variation in the reading outcomes in both pre-tests and post-tests but are less influential in terms of explaining the gain scores.
- The family variables studied explained a total of 53% of the variance in orthographic awareness in the pre-test, but that decreased to 24% for the gain scores. And similarly, these figures were 44% in the pre-test and 19% in the post-test for the variance in decoding competence.
- Some parents also asked their children to teach them what they had learned in school and, for example, to tell them what a television programme was about. These kinds of activities may also facilitate children's language skills.