

The Home Literacy Environment in an African Context

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Introduction

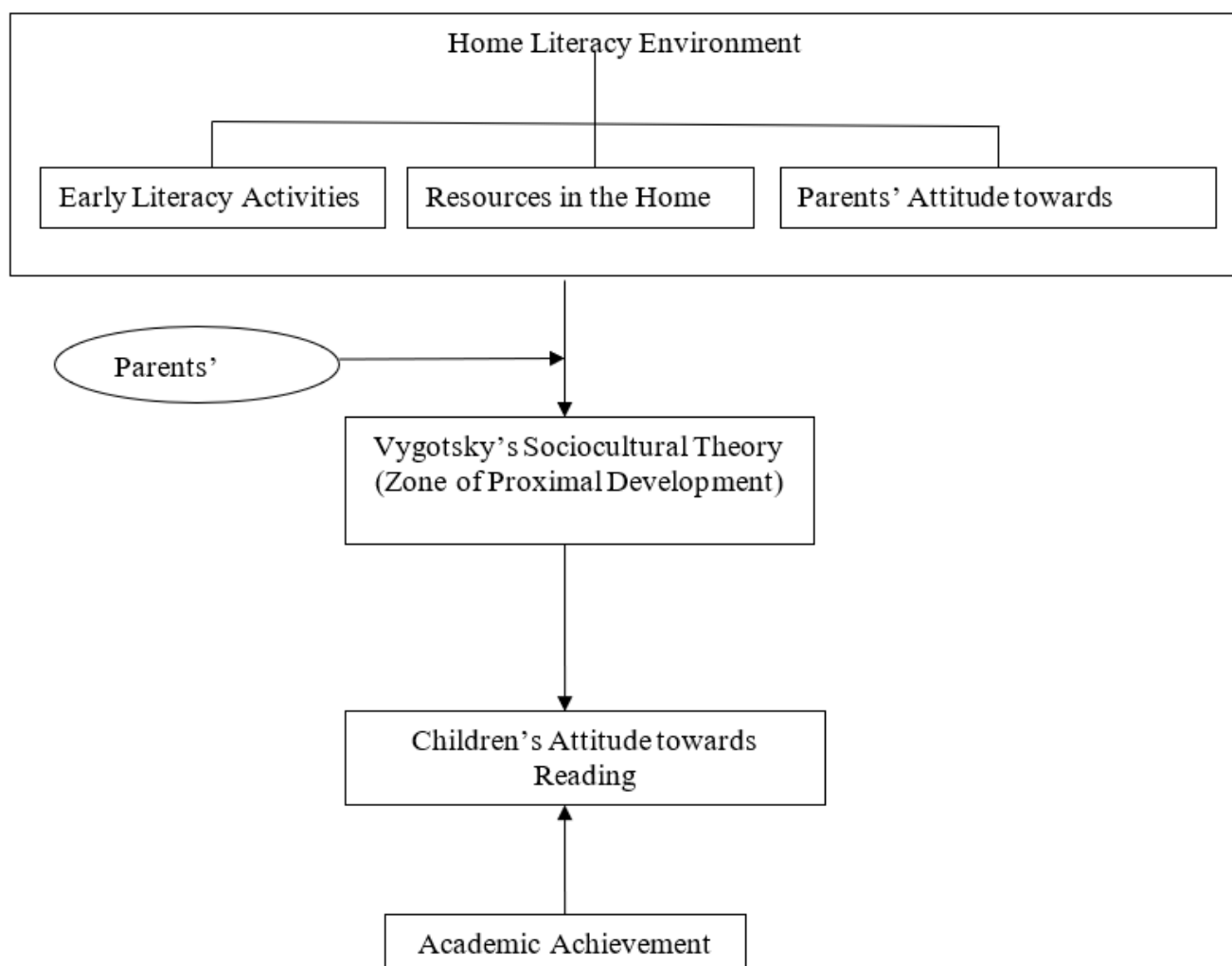
Research has shown a consensual pattern of impact and the importance of the home literacy environment in the acquisition of literacy. The home literacy environment is a niche that introduces children to their earliest literacy experiences. This early foundation may facilitate or inhibit literacy acquisition once children are enrolled in school. As such, early manifestations of how they practise reading are embedded within the home literacy environments facilitated by their family structure within their social contexts¹Gee, J. P., Neuman, S. B., & Dickinson, D. K. (2002). A sociocultural perspective on early literacy development. Handbook of early literacy research, 30-42.. As a result of the differential literacy practises and rituals and routines in which children and their parents engage in, children enter school with different levels of preparedness for literacy acquisition. Families play a critical role from which children can benefit in the acquisition of reading skills, language skills, social-emotional functioning, and overall academic achievement²Farver, J.A.M., Xu, Y., Eppe, S., & Lonigan, C.J. (2006). Home environments and young Latino children's school readiness. Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 21, 2, 196-212³Shonkoff, J.P. & Phillips, D. 6 Keilt, B. (2000). Early childhood intervention. The National Academic Press.⁴Stipek, D. J., &

Ryan, R. H. (1997). Economically disadvantaged preschoolers: ready to learn but further to go. *Developmental psychology*, 33(4), 711..

The complexity of the process requires a multifaceted approach that involves the specialised expertise of teachers. In the home, facilitating reading skills has been linked to formal and informal, interactive literacy processes⁵Aram, D., & Levin, I. (2002). Mother–Child Joint Writing and Storybook Reading: Relations With Literacy Among Low SES Kindergartners. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* (1982-), 202-224.⁶Kirby, J. R., & Hogan, B. (2008). Family literacy environment and early literacy development. *Exceptionality Education International*, 18(3).⁷Manolitsis, G., Georgiou, G. K., & Parrila, R. (2011). Revisiting the home literacy model of reading development in an orthographically consistent language. *Learning and Instruction*, 21(4), 496-505⁸Sénéchal, M. (2006). Testing the home literacy model: Parent involvement in kindergarten is differentially related to grade 4 reading comprehension, fluency, spelling, and reading for pleasure. *Scientific studies of reading*, 10(1), 59-87.⁹Storch, S. A., & Whitehurst, G. J. (2001). The role of family and home in the literacy development of children from low-income backgrounds. *New directions for child and adolescent development*, 2001(92), 53-72.¹⁰Reese, L., & Gallimore, R. (2000). Immigrant Latinos' cultural model of literacy development: An evolving perspective on home-school discontinuities. *American journal of Education*, 108(2), 103-134.¹¹Van Steensel, R. (2006). Relations between socio-cultural factors, the home literacy environment and children's literacy development in the first years of primary education. *Journal of Research in Reading*. 29,4, 367-382.. These interactive processes differ from place to place, culture to culture, and family to family. Important to realise is that different groups of people are literate in different ways following their cultural practises, which

invoke different patterns of cognitive demands and opportunities for learning¹²Heath, S. B., & Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge University Press.¹³Serpell, R. (2020). Literacy and child development in a contemporary African society. *Child Development Perspectives*, 14(2), 90-96.¹⁴Vygotsky, L. S., & Cole, M. (1978). *Mind in society: Development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University press.. For example, a generational pattern of how reading is practised may directly relate to how much exposure children have to literacy materials. The Home Literacy Theoretical Framework is shown in figure 1.

Figure 1. Home Literacy Environment Model



Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model

The antecedents for reading development are present in the home environment. The differences in literacy achievement in early school years may be closely tied to the quality and quantity of literacy-related experiences and language development in early childhood¹⁵ Snow, C., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (1999). Language and literacy environments in preschools.¹⁶ Cunningham, A. E., & Stanovich, K. E. (1997). Early reading acquisition and its relation to reading experience and ability 10 years later. *Developmental psychology*, 33(6), 934.. Research has identified several potential stress factors that negatively impact the quality and quantity of literacy interactions and subsequently impede the learning process. Examples of these factors include the following:

Family income. Most processes connecting home environment and school success have examined family socioeconomic status (SES). Studies have generally reported that families with low income, low maternal education, and low proficiency in English experience greater hardships and have limited access to resources, all of which compromise children's success in school¹⁷ Farver, J.A.M., Xu, Y., Eppe, S., & Lonigan, C.J. (2006). Home environments and young Latino children's school readiness. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 21, 2, 196-212. This is a reality of many African countries, with mothers having low levels of education; yet they are the most available parents/caregivers to the children. With low formal education, most of them do not know how to read. Even in cases where the mothers/caregivers have attained some level of education adequate to promote literacy in the home, they often find themselves juggling income-generating activities to sustain their livelihood, thereby leaving limited time to actively engage in meaningful home literacy activities with their children. This challenges may compromise the literacy package that a child receives from home. As such, the child depends entirely on the contribution of the school. This means

that the potential interactions between the school and the home in providing a healthy literacy package for the child may be far-fetched for many children in Africa. McLoyd¹⁸ McLoyd, V. C. (1998). Socioeconomic disadvantage and child development. *American psychologist*, 53(2), 185. reported in a literature review that poverty status and SES were significant predictors of children's early language skills, academic achievement, and social competence. However, evidence shows that low income and ethnic minority families do provide opportunities and experiences that support children's early skill development¹⁹ Aram, D., & Levin, I. (2002). Mother-Child Joint Writing and Storybook Reading: Relations With Literacy Among Low SES Kindergartners. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* (1982-), 202-224.²⁰ Teale, W. H. (1986). Home background and young children's literacy development. *Emergent literacy: Writing and reading*, 173-206.. Most African countries are faced with economic hardships that see many schools with few resources. In Western societies, written language has a central place. In Africa, with its different history and traditions, no child, even those from low income or ethnic minority families, is entirely deprived of literacy exposure in the home²¹ Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1987). Mexican adult literacy: New directions for immigrants. *Becoming literate in English as a second language*, 9-32.²² Purcell-Gates, V. (1996). Stories, coupons, and the TV Guide: Relationships between home literacy experiences and emergent literacy knowledge. *Reading research quarterly*, 31(4), 406-428.²³ Teale, W. H. (1986). Home background and young children's literacy development. *Emergent literacy: Writing and reading*, 173-206.²⁴ Van Steensel, R. (2006). Relations between socio-cultural factors, the home literacy environment and children's literacy development in the first years of primary education. *Journal of Research in Reading*. 29,4, 367-382.. Although literacy resources are accessible to children, these researchers acknowledge that differences exist

in the range of literacy activities children engage in.

Family size. Studies indicate that crowded homes are associated with disparities in children's vocabulary growth rates, cognitive abilities, and social emotional functioning²⁵Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (1995). Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children. Paul H Brookes Publishing.. Others found an inverse relationship between the number of siblings and academic achievement, even when variables like race, SES, and age were controlled for²⁶Blake, J. (1989). Number of siblings and educational attainment. *Science*, 245(4913), 32-36..

Parents' own literacy habits influence children's interest and motivation for reading²⁷Serpell, R., Baker, L., & Sonnenschein, S. (2005). *Becoming literate in the city: The Baltimore early childhood project*. Cambridge University Press.. We know that beliefs, values, and attitudes can motivate one child to become an enthusiastic reader and another a nonreader. These values are inculcated in children when they are young. For instance, parental beliefs, values, and attitudes towards reading can, to a large extent, determine whether their children will like or dislike reading. Baker and Scher²⁸Baker, L., & Scher, D. (2002). Beginning readers' motivation for reading in relation to parental beliefs and home reading experiences. *Reading psychology*, 23(4), 239-269. found that parents' parental positive attitude towards reading was predictive of children's engagement in reading. Although we do not seem to have universal agreement on the reading culture in many African societies, it can be inferred that in many instances, most parents may choose not to engage in reading when other options exist. Therefore, promoting positive reading habits among parents is an imperative policy consideration for both educators and society at large as it has a bearing on the educational achievement of children.

A home literacy environment can therefore be promoted through *parental involvement*. Parents, being their children's first teachers, exert a lot of influence on their literacy development. The extent to which parents actively embrace school activities at home has been found to influence academic achievement²⁹Bennett, K. K., Weigel, D. J., & Martin, S. S. (2002). Children's acquisition of early literacy skills: Examining family contributions. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 17(3), 295-317.³⁰Christian, K., Morrison, F. J., & Bryant, F. B. (1998). Predicting kindergarten academic skills: Interactions among child care, maternal education, and family literacy environments. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 13(3), 501-521.³¹Fantuzzo, J., Tighe, E., & Childs, S. (2000). Family Involvement Questionnaire: A multivariate assessment of family participation in early childhood education. *Journal of educational psychology*, 92(2), 367.³²Leseman & deJong, 1998. What constitutes parental involvement needs to be explored.

Shared Book Reading. Early research on the home environment and literacy development in many societies has examined the practise of joint book reading between parent and child and its influence on literacy outcomes. Researchers have argued that "shared book reading speaks of love, the importance of the family unit, and parental commitment to a child's future"³³Whitehurst, G. J., & Lonigan, C. J. (1998). Child development and emergent literacy. *Child development*, 69(3), 848-872.. Some of the reasons that make this activity important for literacy development relate to the exposure to books, which prepares children for literacy, familiarises them with print, and enhances their interest in books. Furthermore, shared book reading may advance the text by leading to conversations, questions, and comments between parent and child³⁴Dickinson, D. K., & Tabors, P. O. (2001). Beginning literacy with language: Young children learning at home and

school. Paul H Brookes Publishing.. Although a predominantly Western concept, shared reading activities have yielded results that could help ascertain different ways in which African children may be exposed to literacy artefacts within the home.

Family Mealtime. Family conversations around mealtime are another opportunity that can expose children to literacy development. Dickinson and Tabors³⁵ Dickinson, D. K., & Tabors, P. O. (2001). *Beginning literacy with language: Young children learning at home and school.* Paul H Brookes Publishing. suggest that children can learn a lot from listening, watching, and participating in conversations with their families. As in many societies, family mealtimes can provide comfortable, natural, and unplanned conversations that create important teaching moments, with children having the opportunity to participate in stories and explanations about everyday life. Children who hear discussion around a variety of topics show higher scores on vocabulary, and listening comprehension measures³⁶ Dickinson, D. K., & Tabors, P. O. (2001). *Beginning literacy with language: Young children learning at home and school.* Paul H Brookes Publishing..

Storytelling is one untapped resource in Africa that is vital in promoting literacy skills. Most African countries are orally oriented, and knowledge transfer is centrally focused on folktales. It used to be a traditional practise in most rural African communities for children to sit around the fire in the evening and listen to stories from their grandparents. Although folklore was largely seen as the major conduit of intergenerational knowledge, the potential it has in promoting foundational literacy skills has not been given prominence in early literacy discourse in the region. During storytelling, children are likely to engage in meaningful conversations with adults, ask questions, get feedback, and make connections with the story. In this regard, not only does storytelling increase the children's oral language skills, but it acts as a buffer

to emergent literacy by promoting listening skills and enhancing the child's ability to organise thoughts. Moreover, the coming of modern technologies has contributed to the natural extinction of such a rich cultural heritage, which has since been replaced by computer games, cartoons, and social media among upper and middle class families. Even in rural communities, where such a reservoir of oral tradition may still be available, many children tend to shun it as they do not seem to identify themselves with the imaginary characters in the stories. However, given the fact that there is a generational pattern of home literacy embedded in storytelling, our proposition is that teachers should explicitly recognise this and help parents and families embrace the cultural practise using technology.

What can teachers do?

1. Teachers and parents can work together to reposition literacy in the home environment. Knowing that most parents only have a low education, teachers can take the lead in helping parents realise the potential that lies in their efforts. Teachers and parents may have different views on what provides a literate home. As such, the work given to the child from school may not be treated with the importance it deserves because parents may not believe in that strategy. There is need to bridge the gap in the understanding of what literacy means by building an account of literate behaviours that need to be encouraged in the home.
2. Teachers can introduce parents to strategies that enhance literacy home environments. Teachers must emphasise resources that are contextually available to parents.
3. Teachers can recognise the autonomous and synergic contribution of both the school and the home literacy environment in literacy acquisition. Regardless of the level of education, parents should be treated with the

important position they occupy as their children's earliest teachers.

4. Teachers can localise and contextualise literacy artefacts. Due to generational patterns of reading, bombarding parents with new strategies may be overwhelming; teachers may wish to facilitate this process by starting with what is locally available, accessible, and easy to learn.
5. Teachers can implore parents to actively get involved in literacy activities. As many parents are illiterate, this would be an opportunity for them to also learn basic literacy skills; as such, parents in turn are benefitting from the literacy activities. Baker³⁷Baker, L., Afflerbach, P., & Reinking, D. (1996). Developing engaged readers in school and home communities: An overview. *Developing engaged readers in school and home communities*, 13-27. notes that home-school partnerships can have a positive effect on literacy if families and teachers together develop ways of communicating and building meaningful curricula that extend the insular classroom community. The key elements of reciprocity and respect must be locally interpreted and jointly construed by parents and teachers.
6. Teachers should have a background knowledge on the literacy environment a child comes from. This will help teachers identify those children who come from less literate homes. These children and parents may need more teacher input than those from a richer home literacy environment.
7. Teachers can develop a home literacy checklist with basic behaviours that will help the teacher in the identification process of the different home literacy environments. Examples of what teachers could strive to realise may include but are not limited to making sure that:

- a. appropriate books for children are easily accessible;
- b. there are large amounts of print material for adults in the house, including books, magazines, and newspapers;
- c. children are read to on a regular basis;
- d. children are exposed to adults reading regularly;
- e. children are provided with space for reading; and
- f. parents provide guidance and encouragement for reading.

References

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