The Relationship between Parents' Literacy Beliefs and Practices and Children's Responses to Literature

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Abstract

This qualitative case study investigated parental beliefs and practices regarding literacy, specifically, children's literature and ways by which children respond to literature read aloud to them. It was conceptualised within the framework of family literacy and reader-response theory. The study was conducted by interviewing four mothers and their sixth-grade children, home observations and by conducting read-aloud sessions with children. Results of the study indicated a supportive, print-rich environment in the homes and the diverse ways by which participants engaged with children's literature—by demonstrating intertextual, personal and expressive responses. The study highlights some pedagogical implications for teacher education programmes vis-à-vis family literacy practices.

Introduction

Research indicates that home literacy practices pave the way for the acquisition of language and literacy across socio-cultural contexts (Mol et. al., 2008; Niklas, et al., 2020). Regular exposure and engagement with children's literature promotes affinity for reading among children that contributes to their academic development (Kuo, 2016). Literacy activities such as reading, asking questions, and discussing stories impact children's overall literacy acquisition including vocabulary development, decoding, and comprehension skills (Curry et al., 2016; Kuo, 2016). Further, parents' beliefs and practices at home influence children's perception of reading and

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literary understanding (Sipe, 2008; Curry et al., 2016).

Parents' engagement is directly related to parents' beliefs about storybook reading (Bingham, 2007). The purpose of this study was to identify parental beliefs towards literacy and storybook reading and its possible influence on children's engagement with select texts in the Palakkad district of Kerala in South West India.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Reading a story encourages children to explore unseen characters and unearth novel experiences and events. It enables children to foster skills such as prediction and imagination to develop a literary understanding (Marchessault and Larwin, 2014). When children interact with the text, it contributes to the meaning-making process and enables the child to develop a unique sense of the text, even as their interpretations and predictions vary (Sinha, 2009). Readers' response to the text indicates that meaning is constructed between the reader and the text and throughout this transaction the learners employ their prior knowledge, their interpretation of the text, and experience to bridge the gaps in the text (Rosenblatt, 1985). Reading storybooks emboldens children to draw personal connections, and the textual transactions provide opportunities to formulate linkages with personal experiences and orate new concerns (Sinha, 2009). But this becomes possible only when children have access to texts.

Mol and Bus (2011) emphasised the relationship between print exposure or home literacy environment and reading achievement. A multifarious literacy experience provides children with the opportunity to interact with numerous print forms and objects like board games, calendars, grocery lists, and reading materials like newspapers, storybooks, magazines, charts, etc. (McGinty and Justice, 2009). Such an environment contributes to building a strong base for school (reading) achievement.

A plethora of research has established that strong readers emerge from families that provide suitable print exposure and promote literacy activities (Kalia, 2007; Teale, 1978). Parents' involvement thus, is central to their children's academic success and their literary understanding (Chang and Luo, 2020). Parents who believe that interactions and literacy activities at home would contribute to a positive attitude in children towards reading and facilitate their language development, are more likely to expose them to reading materials (Bojczyk et al., 2016).

In the Indian context, families focus more on oral forms of storytelling, dialogues, questioning that may serve as models for literacy engagement and may not always practice formal strategies to interact with children (Curry et al., 2016; Kalia and Reese, 2009). Although, reading aloud and

bedtime story reading have been identified as an important strategy that encourages students to read more and become better readers, one needs to remember that reading aloud traditionally has been considered a mainstream activity, especially for families who are from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Souto-Manning, 2009). In the context of India, the landscape of use of children's literature in out-of-school contexts presents a wide variation. While some researchers have documented the lack of print in homes (Singh, 2019), studies have indicated the practice and effectiveness of exposure to storybooks (Kalia, 2007; Kalia and Reese, 2009). Kalia (2007) examined 24 preschool bilingual children's exposure to storybook reading at home in Bangalore, India. A children's title checklist and the number of visits to the library calculated together determined the level of exposure. Kalia (2007) reported a relationship between exposure to storybooks at home and children's phonological awareness, syntactic complexity, and narrative complexities. Later, based on this study, Kalia and Vagh (2008) reported a wide variation found in literacy practices between the middle-income families in Bengaluru and low-income families in Mumbai. Their study pointed out that a quality home literacy experience contributed to positive literacy development. Children's active engagement with storybook reading at home created an opportunity for their active construction of knowledge. The exposure to books, their literary ability and prior experiences enabled them to respond to text in numerous styles during storybook read-aloud (Sipe, 2008).

Significance of the Study

Several studies have indicated the benefit of storybook reading (Mol et. al., 2008; Niklas, 2020). While there is a fair amount of evidence on out of school practices using children's literature from the western context, research from the Indian context is scanty. The nature of the relationship between home literacy practices and academic achievement can only be understood with valid empirical studies in the Indian context. And therefore, to mitigate the ever-growing gap and issues between language and academic challenges, it is imperative to work in this area.

Research Questions

The specific research questions for this study were:

(a) What are the beliefs and practices of the families regarding literacy and the use of children's literature at home?

(b) How do children respond to children's literature read aloud?

Methods

The exploratory study employed a qualitative case study design (Creswell and Clark, 2011) guided by the research questions. It was conducted over a four-month period in Mannarkkad, a Taluka of Palakkad district in the Southern part of Kerala.

The Setting

Mannarkkad has a total population of 3,84,393 as per the Census of 2011. The total literacy rate of the taluka was around 88.79 per cent. The average literacy rate in the urban areas was 92.6 per cent, and 88.4 per cent in the rural areas. More than 90 per cent of the population resided in the rural areas of the taluka, while the rest resided in urban centres. All participants attended the same co-educational school located in the urban sector of Mannarkkad area. The number of children enrolled in the school was around 1300–1400, with 28 male teachers and 45 female teachers. It had an open library system with approximately 4,000 books in it.

Participants

The sample of participants for this case study consisted of four families from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The children spoke Malayalam as their first language and learned English as their second language. All children were in sixth grade. The specific age group was chosen because this is time when children are able to read independently and are able to choose books of their own liking. Two children had prior education from outside India. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants to ensure confidentiality.

Table 1
Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Previous Schooling	Parents' Education	Profession
Neelima	F	11	Dubai (not mentioned)	Mother: Graduate Father: Engineer	Mother: Nurse Father: IT or manager
Fariha	F	11.5	Kerala (Private)	Mother: Graduate Father: Graduate	Mother: Housewife Father: Supervisor
Nitin	M	11.5	Singapore (Public)	Mother: Post-graduate Father: Post-graduate	Mother: Corporate worker Father: Product Developer
Mohanan	M	11	Kerala (Government)	Mother: Post-graduate Father: Graduate	Mother: Teacher Father: Electricity officer

Data Collection

The data collection occurred in two phases using multiple data sources (See Table 2). Consent was sought from parents and children before data collection. During the first phase, interviews were conducted with the parents and children. In the second phase, read-alouds were conducted with children. The interviews with the parents focused on understanding of their beliefs and literacy practices at home, especially related to print environment and use of children's literature (Creswell and Clark, 2011).

The interactions also helped to develop a rapport with the families. Since the interviews were conducted at home, details of the location of the homes, the availability of print, books kept at home, and literacy practices at home were also documented. Interviews with children provided insights into their interests, likes, and dislikes about reading at home and in school. Adventure, humour and fantasy were some of the commonly liked themes across age groups. Given the variations in the recommendations, texts were selected based on the interests of children, availability, level of difficulty, and appropriateness of age.

Texts were read aloud to children in two ways—on a one-on-one basis and in small groups. This was done to enable all children to respond to the texts. A specific read-aloud structure was employed based on the suggestion made by Fountas and Pinnell (2018). An interactive read aloud lesson follows the process of—(i) Introduction to the text; (ii) read, ask questions in between the text; (iii) discuss the book and engage students to talk, reflect, and guide towards understanding the text; (iv) revisit the text; (v) respond to the text through various options-writing, drama, art, etc. In the group interaction, specific rules were discussed beforehand, including raising hands to speak or ask questions, listening to others without interruption, etc. In both sessions, before, during and after the read-aloud, children's responses were documented by asking open-ended questions. For example, "What do you think will happen next", "Why did the character do that?", "What would you do if you were in this position?" and so on. The responses reflected children's ideas and opinions about the stories and the characters.

Table 2
Study Procedure

Phases	Study Procedure	Process	Text
Phase 1	Parents' interviews	Face-to-face	NA
	Children's interview	Face-to-face	NA
	Selection of text	Based on children's interest, difficulty level, and age appropriateness	• Lachmi's war (Dharmarajan, 2017), • One's own yet different (Kakkodar, 2017) • My name is Gulab (Kolwankar, 2021) • What is your name? (Nair, 2021).
Phase 2	Read-aloud	In small groups	All four books
		One-on-one	All four books

Data Analysis

The data analysis for the study was concomitant with the process of data collection. The ongoing process guided further data collection and enabled data reduction, analysis, and interpretation for identification of salient patterns and themes (Merriam, 2009). The interviews and observations during the home visits for interviews informed our understanding of the availability of print at homes and the home literacy practices of families. During read-alouds, children's responses were analysed from the perspective that when stories are read to children, they engage with them and forge connections with the characters through their personal responses (Sipe, 2008). Sipe (2008) has also pointed to five main kinds of literary responses by children. These include, analytical (responses within the text), intertextual (responses that connect across texts), personal (connecting self-experiences with the text), and performative (use of texts for expression of creativity).

In the first phase of data analysis, interviews, observations and children's responses were transcribed and open codes were assigned to each segment of data. In the second phase of data analysis, children's responses were juxtaposed in comparison with the categories presented above (Sipe, 2008). Lastly, data from the interviews and observations and children's responses were categorised further for a thematic analysis.

Results

The results of the study are presented in two parts. The first part provides an overview of the broad themes that were gleaned from the interviews with the four families and home observations,

and the second part discusses the responses of the children to the literature that was read-aloud.

Beliefs and Practices Regarding Storybook Reading

The four parents were interviewed to understand their beliefs and practices about storybook reading. All the parents were in the age group of 35–40 years and had college education. Their responses have been thematically characterised to reflect their beliefs and practices related to print and use of print in homes.

Print at Homes

Exposure to print at home benefits children in a myriad of ways. This idea was prevalent among all parents. However, the exposure to print varied from one home to another. All homes had calendars or charts (printed or drawn) or a map of India on their walls and over 15–20 storybooks. These ranged from moral stories to mythological books in both their native and second language. Two families also had a reading membership in the local public library.

Neelima and her four-year-old younger sister shared a room. Her room had a single bed and the walls were painted light blue. There was a small wooden study table on the opposite side of the bed. The wall above had a metal notice board that held her timetable, notices, and a word chart containing new words that she was learning. The word chart was titled 'new words' and some of the words included 'limpid', 'convolution', 'anomalies', etc. There were crayon scribbles on the other side of the wall done by her younger sibling. She had some fairy tales such as *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and other stories like *Earth's Beauty*, a collection of folktales, etc. Some soft toys such as a teddy bear, an action figure of a robot, and a kite were kept on one of the shelves.

Fariha shared her room with her seven-year-old younger sister in her house. Fariha's room had a single bed and a small plastic table to keep her school books and art supplies such as drawing sheets, colours and brushes. The room's walls were decorated with Fariha's artwork. There was a small bookshelf that had Malayalam novels such as *Chemmeen*, *Thottiyude Makan, Verukal*, etc. These books belonged to Fariha's sister. The shelf also held some stories such as a copy of *The Arabian Nights* (Malayalam), fairytales such as *Beauty and the Beast* (English), multiple copies of *Balarama* and *Kalikudukka*, a children's magazine published in Kerala. Another corner of the room held school textbooks of Fariha and her younger sister. According to her mother, "Her room is filled with art. Her aunt gets her books, even though she gets them from her friends. They share storybooks. I have some books but they are in Malayalam and mostly historical. She doesn't read them".

Nitin shared his room with his nine-year-old younger brother. His room was full of school books and comic book series of Spiderman,

Ironman and Batman. There were also English storybooks on *Sindbad the Sailor*, *Charlotte's Web*, *The Kid Who Came From Space*, *Pippi Longstocking*, etc. These books were shared by both brothers. The walls of the room had posters of Marvel heroes like Thor, Spiderman and footballers like Neymar Jr., Messi, etc.

Mohanan was a single child and his room had two small shelves that were filled with storybooks. The family housed books that specifically catered to the interests of the child. These included book series of *Famous Five*, *Nancy Drew*, story books like *The Boy at The Back of The Class* (English), *The Rabbit and Friends* (Malayalam), *Jungle Book* (Malayalam), *Aracycle* (Malayalam), etc. His room also had a geographical map of India and posters depicting historical events. According to Mohanan's mother, "I think it's essential to have books or other prints because it accommodates a child's interest and reading efficiency. I cannot expect my child will suddenly start reading if I don't introduce it to him".

While four is a small sample of families—it does provide some interesting insights into the prevalence of print in the homes, and ways by which families have been supportive of their children's interest in reading storybooks (Bingham, 2007). The involvement of the families was evident not only in the prevalence of books but also in the physical setup and the active support they provided in ensuring rich reading experiences for their children (Kuo, 2016). The network of sharing of books indicated building of a local literacy community.

All the mothers pointed out that reading is a crucial aspect of developing a better foundation for the future and they actively participated in inculcating this practice among their children. However, across all four homes, fathers rarely were part of these events. The stated reason behind the absence of their fathers was work. Due to their long shifts, fathers rarely had the opportunity to interact with their children, especially using print. One of the common beliefs among these four families was that children were capable of learning early in their life. They believed that early exposure is necessary especially if you have resources. According to Neelima's mother, "We learn the most when we are children. I still remember some of the stories my mom used to recite for us. You gain the most as you grow up. That's where all the fun is".

The reading practices at home varied. These four families did not necessarily follow the concept of reading a bedtime story. According to Fariha's mother, "Her grandmother reads to her. All the children of the house get the chance to listen to their grandmother read them a story in the evening". Two families started reading to their children as young as 2–4 years while the other two narrated stories or read scriptures to their children. The parents reported reading a religious scripture was the closest practice that

occurred daily. Moreover, two families talked about how once in a while they would read with children or talk about the characters of the stories.

One of the families pointed out that their children would ask questions about the characters whenever they read a story. However, these parents reported that they rarely found time to read with or to children. Nitin's mother said, "I read with my child if I have time. It's not easy to find time. But he reads on his own. It's a practice he gained when we were abroad. I too learned to read to him from there". There was usually an older sibling or grandparents who would narrate or read the story with children. These parents reported that their children would often ask them questions and they would engage in discussions about what they read.

Across the four families, story-telling and storytelling practices were encouraged. The significance of texts was evident—the mothers encouraged the practice of literacy among their children because they believed in its significance and that they themselves benefitted from it (Kalia, 2007). One can also observe the sharing of texts—in borrowing or lending of books and sharing of stories. These practices also enable children to understand reading as a socio-cultural practice (Niklas, et al., 2020).

Children's Responses to the Texts

Children connected with the stories in diverse ways. The emergent categories from children's discussion represent different facets of children's perception regarding stories and their responses in individual readings and group readings. These also overlapped with Sipe's (2008) categories of literary understanding and response.

Intertextual Connections

Children through their responses reflected their ability to make connections with other cultural texts that they read or the characters they had read about. They connected instances from the story with that of other stories. They were able to see the text in relation to others forming a matrix of interrelated cultural contexts (Sipe, 2008). For example, in the story *Lachmi's war* (Dharmarajan, 2017), Neelima connects the character of Lachmi with that of Radha (a character from the story Mayavi).

Researcher: "Friends let's form a *bal sena* and we must act now."

Neelma: "Lachmi is just like Radha (a character in the native story who fights evil). She is fighting evil in the similar manner with her gang."

Neelima: "Radha has Mayavi (another character) and Lachmi has her girls and boys."

The children are able to see similarities across characters and also the actions of the character in the plot of the story. They are also able to connect with the theme of the plot across the two stories.

Similarly, the intertextual links were established by Nitin when he was able to associate the story *What is Your Name?* (Nair, 2021) to that of

the original story *Rumpelstiltskin* as soon as the first few pages were read.

Researcher: "How am I going to turn this stack into Gold?"

Neelima: "Oh! I know this story, I mean I think … hmm … this is going to end like ruplste … isn't it?"

Nitin is able to see similarities across the two texts very quickly. In all three anecdotes, we see that children are able to make sense of and connect across texts. This is an indication of deep comprehension of the texts that they have read previously and are reading currently (Curry, 2016). The connections that children are making are not superficial ones—but one that require an analysis of the texts and metacognitive abilities as well.

Expressive Engagements

Sipe (2008) indicated several types of responses within the category of expressive engagements. One such type of response is critiquing. Under this, children signaled towards alternative plots or suggestions to the changes a character should have as they engaged with the story. For example, both Nitin and Fariha showed offence at the mention of verbal bullying of the main character in the story *My Name is Gulab* (Kolwankar, 2021),

Researcher: Started teasing her by calling her stinky Gulab.

Neelima: "I can't believe they are so bad! I would've made sure that they stank instead. I would've definitely played a prank on them."

Fariha: "If I was Gulab, I think I would make sure that they get caught for this. My teacher always reminds us that bullying is not to be tolerated."

Another form of response in expressive engagements may occur in the form of talking back. Children showed engagement to the character of Aje in the story *One's Own Yet Different* (Kakkodar, 2017) and expressed their opinions of how they felt and disagreed. For example,

Researcher: "When a daughter gets married, she becomes an outsider."

Fariha: "I don't like you Aaje, how can you call the daughter an outsider… It's just wrong. (Throws her hand up in air.)"

Another example indicated their disbelief.

Researcher: "Aaje, did you go to school? No, says Aatibai. In those days girls were not sent to school."

Neelima: "Why wouldn't girls go to school? (frowns)"

Neelima: "Really? Which time is she talking about? I didn't think anybody would be exempted from school. I wish I wouldn't go to school. It's boring and everything is about studying."

Children were able to express their opinions about the plot in the story. The vignettes indicate that children had internalised the incidents and expressed their engagement with the characters and the experiences that they had been through.

Personal Connection

Children used their personal connections to relate to the text. They would either talk about their

own experiences or what they have seen around them. For instance, Fatima shared her discontent with bullying when she explained a similar experience while reading the story *My Name is Gulab* (Kolwankar, 2021).

Researcher: "In school, they tease me. They call me stinky-stinky Gulab."

Fatima: "But it's bad to bully someone. Gulab should fight back. My friend too was bullied because she stammers … it's not good."

Another example was shared which ignited a discussion around how there was a cultural difference within the state and that of the story when Fariha shared how her *thatha* didn't move out of the house after marriage after reading the story *One's Own Yet Different* (Kakkodar, 2017).

Researcher: "How can I give this to your mother? Now that she's married, she is an outsider."

Fariha: "Why outsider?"

Neelima: "Because she moves out after marriage, like my aunt."

Fariha: "No! my *thatha* didn't … instead, her husband lives with us."

K: "But my mom says that she too left her house … there is a difference here because Fariha's family follows something else?"

The above vignettes indicate the ways by which children connect the plot of the text they are reading with the cultural practices in their own communities. While these are personal connects that children are indicating—these are also indicative of their views of social practices. The texts have afforded children to express and engage with aspects of their family and community life which may not necessarily be discussed in day-to-day conversations.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the beliefs and practices of parents regarding print and storybook reading and ways by which children in sixth grade responded to literature read-aloud to them. The results of the study indicated that the four mothers played a significant role in creating a supportive print rich environment, in providing access to children's literature and enabling them to create a community of readers. The involvement of the families in the early literacy development paved the way for future academic development (Kuo, 2016). The children themselves were quite participative in responding to the books read out to them. In their responses they were able to make intertextual connections, demonstrate expressive engagement and also make personal connections (Sipe, 2008). While the sample size for the study was small, children's responses indicated only a glimpse of the ways by which children respond to literature (Rosenblatt, 1985). It is also important to note that while children choose and read diverse variety of literature, they connected to their contexts, culturally and personally.

The research has implications for teacher education in enabling pre-service teachers to understand about family literacy practices and

connect the same with classroom instruction. It also demonstrates the significance of encouraging children to respond to literature in the classrooms to make meaningful connections and enhance literacy skills. The study highlights the significance of the use of a variety of children's literature in the schools and homes and the need to do more research to document and understand ways by which children respond to literature.

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