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Exploring the influence of parents' home reading practices on emergent literacy

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore the correlation between Namibian preprimary and Grade 1 parents' demographic characteristics and print and digital reading practices in home environments. A quasi-experimental descriptive research design was selected to launch this investigation in the Khomas region. Survey data documented the relationship between parents' demographic variables and print and digital reading behaviours. The study tested the null-hypothesis (H_o: u1 = u2) and non-directional hypothesis (H_o: X1 ≠X2). The underlying assumption is that parents home reading practices positively impact children's early language and literacy development. The findings reveal that there is no significant relationship between age, gender, education, family size, and employment status, with print and digital reading behaviours that influence children's emergent language and literacy development in home environments. In a Chi-Square test, the null hypothesis was rejected for age, gender, education, family size, and employment status, but retained and positively correlated to marital status, child reading behaviour, and parents' book, magazine and newspaper reading behaviour. The implication is that when parents buy print materials for home reading purposes and engage their children in pleasurable reading experiences, their children are more likely to be supported at home to influence favourable language and literacy outcomes in school. The study contributes to family literacy literature and highlights the relationship between parents' reading behaviours and children's emergent language and literacy development.

Keywords: emergent literacy, home environment, parents, print and digital reading, reading behaviours, socioeconomic status

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Introduction

Research reveals that parents' reading practices and behaviours influence emergent language and literacy development during the first years of a child's life. In a study, Martini and Senechal (2012) state that parents' specific beliefs about reading such as interactive verbal participation are related to children's reading interest. Improved language learning is supported when parents frequently engage in responsive language and early literacy interactions in home environments. Reading environment refers to "the reading behaviours, resources, and opportunities that the child is exposed to within a home environment" (Curry 2012:6). Home literacy includes "parents' reading activities with their child, the reading environment they provide, and the reading beliefs the parents hold before and after the child enters school" (Curry 2012:16). Shared book-reading, constructive play, and exploration contribute toward higher language and cognitive skills during preschool and primary years (Bennett, Martin & Weigel 2006).

It is well documented that bilingual and multilingual speakers generally articulate a smaller vocabulary in each language they speak than monolinguals (Eilers & Oller 2002; Bialystok 2009). In a study, Rowe (2008) reveals that the more educated parents are, the more likely it is that they will talk to their children and utilize versatile vocabulary as well as longer utterances. The opposite is true for parents who are less educated. As a result, many children from families living in poverty enter preschool without the necessary foundational oral language skills, and with greater reading achievement gaps between boys and girls from high-poverty backgrounds by first grade (Chatterji 2006; Machet & Pretorius 2003). Therefore, these children acquire vocabulary at a slow pace. Within a Namibian context, English Second Language education in a multilingual context has become more than a pedagogical tool for language acquisition throughout school and in homes. The effect of English Second Language in a multilingual context has become a societal irritant involving complex issues of cultural, ethnic or tribal identity, social class or status. The rationale of this article is to emphasize salient issues that affect emergent literacy and brings the following dimensions to the fore: socio-economic status and other indicators of emergent reading development. The specific research question of this study asks: is there a statistical correlation between Namibian preprimary and Grade 1 parents' demographics and reading behaviours that influence children's emergent reading?

The null hypothesis of the study is that there is no correlation between parents' demographic variables and print and digital reading behaviours that influence children's early language and literacy development (H_o: u1 = u2).

The non-directional hypothesis is that there is a statistical correlation between parents' demographic variables and print and reading behaviours that influence children's early language and literacy development (H_o: X1 ≠X2).

Emergent literacy

When parents provide rich opportunities for children's participation in literacy activities, they have an increased chance of gaining advance oral and written language skills. The term 'emergent literacy' is used to describe pre-literate children's skills related to reading and writing before the achievement of conventional literacy (Whitehurst & Lonigan 2001). This concept includes 'knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are assumed to be developmental precursors to conventional reading and writing' (National Early Literacy Panel 2008). Parents' levels of educational attainment and socio-economic circumstances are likely to impact children's literacy development.

Family practices such as parent-child joint book reading experiences set the stage for lifelong reading behaviours and increased academic achievement in later life. Book reading might, of course, increase children's interest in reading, provide them with information about the world, and make them aware of letter-sound relations. According to Justice and Kaderavek (2004), "emergent literacy skills - which are typically acquired in the preschool years - provide the foundation for children's subsequent transitions to early or beginning reading and, ultimately, the achievement of conventional, skilled reading" (p. 202). Distinct foundation skills in key aspects of emergent literacy such as phonological awareness, print concepts, alphabet knowledge, and literate language use, promote early reading and language development.

Parents are the first teachers of young children and support phonological awareness during informal interaction within home environments. Oral language is a major domain of emergent literacy. It concerns the ability to produce and comprehend spoken language. Oral language skills include word knowledge, receptive and expressive vocabulary, knowledge of grammatical rules, and conceptual knowledge (National Early Literacy Panel 2008; Storch & Whitehurst 2002). Phonological awareness refers to how spoken language can be broken down and manipulated. It consists of a continuum of literacy skills from easiest, determining rhyming words and alliteration to the most difficult-phonemic awareness- (Pittman & Dorel 2014). Both oral language and alphabet knowledge have effects on later reading achievement. Alphabet knowledge refers to a child's understanding of the names and features of individual alphabet letters and includes letter-shape knowledge, letter-name knowledge, letter-sound knowledge, and letter-writing abilities (Bradley & Jones 2007; Griffith, Beach, Ruan, & Dunn 2008).

Further, Lynch et. al. (2008) reveals that parents' educational level and the use of print relate to children's print awareness. Print awareness refers to a child's understanding of the nature and use of print. Research reveals that print awareness is an important first step in the development of emergent literacy (Christie, Enz, & Vukelich 2010). Therefore, literate language is strongly linked to children's reading success. Children acquire literate language through literacy experiences and literacy behaviours before and during school (Benson 2014). In the technology age, young children may gain literate behaviours when interacting with technology tools.

Emergent literacy and technology

From a Vygotskian perspective (Vygotsky 1978), young children's independent and shared interactions with the printed interface of sociocultural tools such as touch screen tablets and smartphones have the potential to foster emergent literacy (Neumann & Neumann 2014). Given the sociocultural conceptualisations of learning (Vygotsky 1978), language and literacy learning is regarded as social in origin and mediated through action and interaction while using cultural artefacts such as smartphones, tablets or computers.

Although integrated technological tools are becoming more prevalent in family practices, Namibia is still in the heydays of its application to support emergent literacy. Exposure to technology provides young children with many opportunities to observe technology, explore tools, play with them, and as a result, learn from them. Research shows how diverse digital devices are becoming integral to young children's early experiences of literacy in their homes and communities (Plowman, Stephen & McPake 2010; Wohlwend 2010). When using digital devices, meaning can be expressed through multiple modes of symbolic representation, and a combination of spoken and written language, images, icons, sounds, layout and animation. In a study, Plowman and Stephen (2003) argue that to capitalize on digital technology, there is a need to shift thinking from resistance to change to embracing digital technology in teaching and learning. Young children's understandings about print may emerge at home through their interactions and when playing with tablets or smartphones (McManis & Gunnewig 2012). Prereading skills are promoted when children use basic words such as click "ok, next etc." Increasing awareness of print and icons on smartphones, tablets and computers may be developmentally similar to developing understandings about traditional environmental print (Neumann & Neumann 2014). While some enthusiastically embrace the use of new technologies (Galloway 2009), others argue vociferously that new technologies have no place at all in early learning. Yet, when parents are trained to use new technology, they can positively contribute to their children's emergent literacy development. Chen, Pisani, White, and Soroui (2012) indicate that parents themselves need to have sufficient literacy capabilities to implement programs and strategies to support children's learning effectively.

Namibian context

Namibia is classified as an upper-middle-income country (National Planning Commission 2015). Evidence exists on the effects of poverty, the quality of the home literacy environments and parents' reading behaviour in high-income countries. However, no studies exist that measures these variables in middle-income countries such as Namibia.

The total population of Namibia is about two million six hundred thousand (http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/namibia-population/), of whom approximately two hundred and eighty thousand are under the age of four. In the Khomas region, the total

population is approximately 340 900 people (United Nations Development Program 2012). The Namibia National Planning Commission (2015) indicates that the poverty incidence in the Khomas region is five percent (15 738 people) of the total population in this area. Khomas region is also identified as the least poor region of Namibia. According to the Ministry of Basic Education, Arts and Culture (2017), 41 607 children were enrolled in 2017 for pre-primary education in public schools, and 85 072 for Grade 1. From these learners, 19.8 percent failed Grade 1. The reason for failure in Grade 1 is cited as a lack of literacy and numeracy skills. Home literacy experiences, such as book exposure, are known to be directly related to early literacy skills and language learning that have an impact on later reading outcomes (Senechal 2009). Research further reveals that early exposure to books contributes to reading achievement, oral language capabilities, and emergent literacy skills (Laakso, Poikkeus, Eklund & Lyytinen 2004). Moreover, children's interest in reading and attitudes toward language learning is nurtured through dialogic storybook reading. According to Bayldan (2018), "adults using a dialogic reading style take on the role of an active listener during shared storybook reading and support the child to tell the story. The adult makes comments, asks questions, adds information, explains vocabulary and encourages the child to respond and engage in the story" (p.24).

Another form of shared reading intervention is known as print referencing, which features adult use of explicit print terminology during reading interactions. Children who are exposed to home literacy activities that focus on the reading process itself (high priority activities, such as shared reading) which require the active participation of the child are more likely to have higher language and literacy skills than children who are involved in "passive" activities that are less related to reading, such as storytelling without books (Burgess et al. 2002; Van Steensel 2006). Despite the low poverty rating of five percent in the Khomas region, parents may not have access to books or electronic devices to support their children's emergent reading in this region. Parents from low socio-economic circumstances may also not be trained to use electronic devices to nurture an environment for language learning and the culture of reading during children's early years.

Impact of poverty

Socio-economic status (SES) refers to "an individual's social rank based on parental education and occupation" (Curry 2012:7). Research indicates that children from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds have substantially smaller vocabularies than their more advantaged peers. Poverty is shown to be a risk factor in several domains of child development, including school achievement (Whitehurst & Fischel 2000). Socio-economic status (SES) is typically determined through family income, parent education level, and/or parent occupation, and has frequently been used in studies of children's early literacy achievement (Heath, Bishop, Bloor, Boyle, Flether, Hogben, Wigley & Yeong 2014). Children from socioeconomically-disadvantaged families are likely to start school with inadequate readiness for academic and behavioural demands (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox 2000). As a result, children from lower socio-economic families have

lower levels of reading preparation before they start their first grade (Chatterji 2006). Socioeconomically-disadvantaged families may not provide cognitively stimulating home environments and the same level of care as families of higher socioeconomic status (Chatterji 2006). Basic home literacy behaviours such as library visits and interactive use of digital devices might impact academic skills despite financial or educational deficits (Bracken & Fischel 2008). The literature shows that poverty and socioeconomic status impact children's prospects of developing early language skills, social competence, and school achievement.

Methodology

This study adopted a quasi-experimental, descriptive research design (Chen 2015) to find a relationship between parents' demographic variables and reading behaviours. The study determines whether there is a causal relationship between the demographic variables and the reading behaviours of preprimary or Grade 1 parents of the Khomas region. Quasi-experimental designs do not use random assignment. Generally, quasi-experimental designs use an intervention that looks at pre-post test results but within a situated context in the real world. Where true experimental design with random assignment of persons to treatment groups is not possible, due to ethical considerations, lack of power, or feasibility, the application of quasi-experimental analysis has much to offer. The independent variable is the variable of influence and the dependent variable is the variable that is being influenced (Loewen & Plonsky 2016). In this study, the statistical interaction of results correlates preprimary or Grade 1 parents with similar demographic characteristics and reading behaviours to test the hypotheses. Quasi-experiments are a subtype of non-experiments, which attempt to mimic randomized, true experiments in rigour and experimental structure but lack random assignment (Cook & Wong 2008; Kirk 2009). Quasi-experimental studies do not require a true control group either but may include a comparison group.

Preprimary and/or Grade 1 children's parents provided their family's demographic information such as age, gender, education, home language, if single/married, employment status, reading interest, and perspectives of emergent literacy practices and behaviours in home environments. The independent or descriptive variables were age, gender, education, home language, single/married, and employment status. The dependent variables were practices of emergent literacy strategies and behaviours in home environments (household reading behaviours, children's reading behaviours, library visits, digital reading behaviours and use of digital devices).

Parents' reading behaviours in home environments were captured on a 1-5 choice Likert scale. Four questions were rated on the following levels: 1 - never, 2 - once a week, 3 - twice a week, 4 - more than twice a week, and 5 - daily, while two questions were rated as 1 - never, 2 - seldom, 3 - occasionally, 4 - often and 5 – daily and entered into SPSS.

A modified questionnaire with 19 questions was used to capture parents' responses. This questionnaire was designed and tested as a home literacy construct made up of multiple underlying dimensions such as reading activities, reading environment, and reading beliefs (Curry 2012). Only 3 of the 19 questions were open-ended (unstructured) and focused on the descriptive/qualitative responses of the parents as they identified recent book titles of children, barriers to obtaining books, magazines or newspapers, and made any comments or recommendations. The remaining 16 questions of the modified questionnaire were closed-ended/forced-choice responses that provided the quantitative data of the research study. The questionnaire was found to have good test and re-test reliability, with Cronbach's alpha of 0.74 and internal consistency of Cronbach's alpha of 0.96. Thus, the questionnaire was considered a reliable way of obtaining information about parents' home reading behaviours.

Levels of significance at $p < 0.05$ probability between the demographic variables and reading behaviours were analysed using multivariate analysis (M)ANOVA for specific significant differences between levels of each demographic variable. The Chi-Square tested the hypothesis.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was granted by the University of Pretoria, EC 16/08/01. The ethical route to obtain permission from the school principals was followed. Surveys were distributed and collected by teachers from preprimary and Grade 1 parents. Surveys provided for anonymity of participating parents.

Data collection

One hundred surveys were distributed to preprimary or Grade 1 parents from four public schools in economically disadvantaged areas of Windhoek, located in the Khomas region. These participants were not randomly selected but were a convenience sample. The full sample of preprimary and Grade 1 parent respondents who returned the surveys comprised 77 of the families. Using a survey as a data collection instrument has limited the rate of responses when the initial sample of 100 was reduced to 77 participants. The participating parents did not receive any training intervention or any reward for filling out the survey.

Presentation and discussion of results

Demographics

The age, education, family size, and employment of the participants are displayed in the table below to give a descriptive overview of the participants' demographics.

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Profiles

Demographic Variables	Categories	No.	Percentage
Age	20-25	6	7.8
	26-30	14	18.2
	31-35	27	35.1
	Older	30	39.0
Education	At least Grade 10	12	15.6
	Not Grade 12	15	19.5
	Grade 12	19	24.7
	Degree/Diploma	12	15.6
	Post-Graduate	1	1.3
Family Size	1-2	37	48.1
	3-4	26	33.8
	5-6	13	16.9
	More	1	1.3
Employment status	Adequately Employed	30	40
	Self-employed	5	6.5
	Underemployed	23	29.8
	Unemployed	19	24.7

Table 1 shows the non-parametric distribution of participants' age, education, family size and employment status. The age distribution indicates that 35.1% of the participants lies between the ages of 31 and 35 years, whereas 39.0% of the respondents were older than 35 years old. The participants' level of education was well distributed across the sample. 24.7% of the participants had a Grade 12 or school leaving certificate. The results show that 48.1% of the respondents had a relatively small family size that comprised 1 or 2 children. In general, the family size was unevenly distributed. In terms of employment, 40% (30) of the respondents were adequately employed, (6.5%) (5) of the respondents were self-employed, and 24.7% (19) were unemployed. The most prominent careers included teaching, administration, and domestic work.

Gender: The results show that respondents' gender was disappropriately distributed among the participants. Females constituted 76.6%, while males constituted only 23.4%. This was not a surprise since women often take responsibility for issues around the children in a home.

Marital status: The participants' marital status was well distributed among the total of 77 participants: (50.6%) were married and (49.4%) single.

Figure 1: Home language

Figure 1 presents the home language of the participants. Participants were expected to select the dominant language spoken within their home environment.

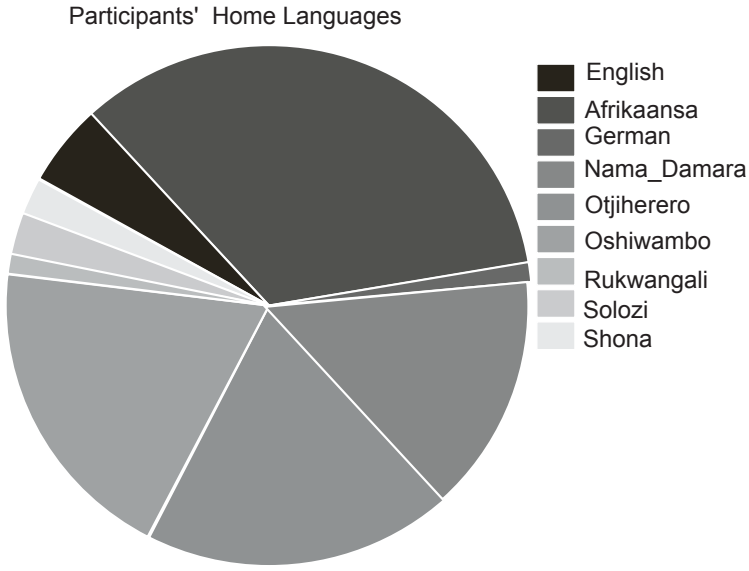

Figure 1: Home Language

The results show that home language was unevenly distributed across languages spoken. Afrikaans was the most commonly spoken language with 33.8% of the respondents starting Afrikaans as their home language. The least spoken Namibian languages were German (1.3%) and Rukwangali (1.3%).

Table 2: Demographic variables and household reading behaviours

Table 2 displays the (M)ANOVA correlation between the individual demographic variables and household parent reading behaviours.

Table 2: Demographic variables and parents' home reading behaviours

Item No.1	Sum of square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Home Language	3.697	4	.924 .216	4.280	.004
	15.549	72			
	19.247	76			

Variation is significant at the 0.05 level (p<0.05)

The statistical analysis of one demographic variable, the home language was noteworthy and shows significance (F=4.280, p = 0.004) (p <0.05). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected for home language. The results show that there is a likelihood that a relationship between home language and home reading behaviours exists. Parents' consistent home language use and interaction with children may benefit emergent literacy and language development, thus children's school readiness.

Table 3: Demographic variables and library visits

Item No.2	Sum of square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Age	7.091	3	2.364		
	60.701	73	.832	2.843	.044
	67.792	76			
Gender	1.444	3	.481		
	12.348	73	.169	2.846	.043
	13.792	76			

Variation is significant at the 0.05 level (p<0.05)

From the output of the results, the analysis indicates the effect of significance for age (F=2.843, p=0. 044), and gender (F=2.846, p=0.043). The analysis indicates that the effect of two demographic variables on parents' library visits was significant, with p < (0.05). Therefore, the data suggest that there is a difference in library visits based on age and gender.

Table 4: Demographic variables and the use of digital devices

Item No.3	Sum of square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Education	24.134	4	6.034		
	113.398	72	1.575	3.831	.007
	137.532	76			
Marital status	3.055	4	.764		
	16.191	72	.225	3.397	.013
	19.247	76			

Variation is significant at the 0.05 level (p<0.05)

The analysis shows that the effect of parents' level of education (F=3.831, p=0.007), and marital status (F=.225, p=0.013), are significant (p<0.05) for print and digital reading behaviours. For education and marital status with 4 and 72 degrees of freedom, there is not enough evidence to conclude that there is a significant correlation between the two variables. However, for employment status (F=4.527, p=0.003), with p<0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected. There is a correlation between parents' use of a computer or other electronic devices to access reading materials to support children's or household reading behaviours. One can, therefore, infer that parents have to access electronic devices at home.

Table 5: Demographic variables and free newspaper, book and magazine reading

Item No. 6 & 7	Sum of square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Education	6.926	1	6.926		
	130.606	75	1.741	3.977	.050
	137.532	76			
Marital status	1.482	1	1.482		
	17.765	75	.237	6.255	.015
	19.247	76			
Family size	2.502	1	2.502	4.151	.045
	45.212	75	.603		
	47.714	76			

Variation is significant at the 0.05 level (p<0.05)

Table 5 shows the overall results and the significance of parents' newspaper, books and magazine reading behaviour. For education, (F= 3.977, p=0.05) and marital status, (F= 6.255, p=0.015) with 1 and 75 degrees of freedom p>0 .05, there is enough evidence to conclude that there is a significant difference between parents' education, marital status and newspaper reading behaviour. Decreased scores on the significance of these demographics indicate a more favourable attitude toward newspaper reading. In terms of books and magazines, the results indicate family size (F=4.151, p=0.045). In response to the open-ended question, the respondents were requested to name their child's last book reading title. The majority of the respondents were unable to respond to this question while (2.6%) of the participants indicated that they read the Bible.

Discussion of results and findings

This study relied on a quasi-experimental design to explore the relationship between demographic variables and the nature of parents' reading behaviours and activities in home environments. The study tested the hypotheses: (H_o: u1 = u2) and (H_o: X1 ≠X2). To localize the effects of the significant interaction between demographic variables and print and digital reading behaviours, a one-sample Chi-Square test was performed. This test determines the change within each category to test both hypotheses. The overall results rejected the null hypothesis for demographic variables age, gender, education, and family size, but supported the non-directional hypothesis, with an asymptotic significance displayed for marital status, child reading behaviour, and print and digital reading buying behaviour.

Measures for understanding the influence of demographic variables on pre-primary and Grade 1 parents' reading behaviours have not been studied within a Namibian context to highlight socioeconomic status and its effects on emergent reading development. Even though the Namibia National Planning Commission (2015) reveals that only 5 percent of the residents in the Khomas region is regarded as poor, families with relative wealth in the Khomas region are not print-oriented. Therefore, there is a need to develop intervention measures to improve children's emergent language and literacy development within preschool and Grade 1 classrooms to avoid high drop-out and failure rates in Grade 1.

Davis-Kean (2005) reports on low-income families and their expectations and performance beliefs that do not correlate well with their children's actual school performance. Parents and family characteristics were revealed by demographic variables. Reading behaviours were revealed by parents' choices to read and to engage their families and especially children, in reading activities such as library visits and book, newspaper or online reading resources. Children from low-income homes or linguistically diverse backgrounds may have fewer books in the homes and limited experiences with books before school entry (Kreider, Morin, Miller, & Bush 2011). The results show that the majority of parents responded in the affirmative to a close-ended question on whether they like or dislike reading, there was a strong negative correlation between reading behaviours and activities. This implies that parents indicate liking reading but report little evidence that they do read to children. Engaging young children in early literacy experiences such as library visits and book exposure will prepare them for later school success that can help to mitigate some of the disparities faced by low-income families within linguistically diverse contexts.

The results also revealed that parents could not divulge the latest book title of their children or make any comments after rating their online and book, newspaper and magazine reading behaviours. Parents indicated that they only read the Bible. Parents who spend time reading to children before the age of three lays the foundation for educational success across the academic lifespan (Gottfried et al. (2015). In a study, Chen, Pisani, White & Soroui (2012); Wen, Bulotsky-Shar, Hahs-Vaughn & Korfmacher (2012) reveal that it is important to investigate the relationship between parents' reading and children's emergent literacy directly to design an adult or family literacy program to support parents that may be at the lowest literacy levels but are expected by the school to work with their children's literacy-related tasks in home environments.

The results show a correlation between parents' employment status and their digital reading behaviour. The conclusion is that when parents have financial resources and human capital, such as educational qualifications and well-paid jobs to cater for education activities, they will interact with children, enable involvement and emphasise activities for language and literacy development. Shala and Grajcevci (2016) believe that parents will also model attitudes, beliefs and values that children will adopt towards learning.

Recommendations for further research

The study recommends further research to explore the relationship between children's early literacy practices in pre-school and Grade 1 classrooms, parents' literacy and the educational outcomes in the early grades. The study also recommends new channels for resource-sharing between public libraries and community centres to train parents on how to use digital media in ways that empower families and stimulate learning that supports and fosters children's emergent literacy. Improving parents reading and digital literacy levels may lead to improvement of environmental, social, and cultural factors that support children's emergent literacy.

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