Parents' perceptions of home reading activities: comparing children with and without learning disability

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The early reading process can be viewed as triadic, encompassing the child, the parents and the environment. We examine the impact of each of these three components on children's participation in home reading activities as perceived by their parents. The results obtained from a questionnaire completed by parents of Grade 1 children, with and without learning disability, support findings of previous studies that home reading environments of both groups and their parents' role in story-book reading are not significantly different. The main finding was that children's responses during story-book reading and their engagement in independent reading differ. Children without learning disability are more involved in the reading process and independent reading than children with learning disability. This implies that teachers need to encourage parents of Grade 1 children to continue to actively engage in reading activities with their children despite their children becoming independent readers, and to also assist them in the selection of appropriate reading material.

Keywords: book reading; emerging literacy; home reading; independent reading; learning disabilities; parent perspectives; participation

Introduction

Reading to children is a requisite for building early reading skills and should be used as a scaffold to build instruction once children start school (Faires, Nicols & Rickelman, 2000; Dick, 2001). With the discussions that spontaneously take place during story-book reading, often including interactive language and reference to shared real-life experiences, parents help their children to understand the meaning of what is being read (Bloch, 1999). As children become more advanced in listening to story reading, parents' reading styles change as larger sections can be read without interruption (Sulzby, 1985). These opportunities to observe and participate in home reading activities thus acquaint children with the nature and functions of written language (Van Steensel, 2006).

The reading process can be viewed as triadic, and encompasses not only the child and the parents, but also the environment (Cook-Cottone 2004). Although these three elements have been outlined as a platform for discussing reading in the home context, they are not distinct, e.g. children from literate homes with a variety of printed materials (environment), and parents who frequently read to them (parental role) may result in greater enjoyment of reading and good reading skills (child's role). A discussion of these three elements follows.

The **environmental element** includes aspects such as library visits and the type of reading material children are exposed to at home (Sénéchal & Cornell, 1993; Stanthorp & Huges, 2000; Prinsloo & Stein, 2004; Van Steensel, 2006). It is well documented that the availability of reading materials in the home provides a positive reading environment (Greaney & Hegarty, 1987). Research has also shown that parents who expect their children to do well at school, are more likely to provide books and academic games for their children and take them to the library (Anderson, 2000). Once children start reading books independently, the types of book that parents read to them, change. While the children can read books with large print and lots of pictures independently, the books that parents read become the ones with more complex grammar, fewer pictures, smaller print and more involved plots, as these are the books that the children enjoy, but are as yet unable to read independently.

When comparing the environmental aspects pertaining to reading development in children with and without learning disability, conflicting views exist. Some researchers claim that the home environment of both groups are similar in terms of frequency and type of reading material (Hughes,

Schumm & Vaughn, 1999), while others emphasize their uniqueness (Rashid *et al*., 2005; Stainthorpe & Hughes, 2000). This uniqueness is firstly ascribed to an under-emphasis of home reading activities by parents due to their children's reading problems (Rashid, Morris & Sevcik, 2005), and secondly to less frequent parental participation in home reading activities because of the children's restricted reading ability (Stainthorpe & Hughes, 2000).

The second element in the triad refers to the **parental role** in reading, and includes the frequency of their own reading (thus the model that they provide), the frequency with which they read aloud to their children, and their perceptions of their roles during reading.

Parental reading patterns provide a positive reading environment and when parents read in different contexts, children learn about literacy in an incidental manner and acquire a positive attitude towards reading (Greaney & Hegarty, 1987; Stainthorpe & Hughes, 2000; Wood & Hood, 2004). Parents who are thus aware of the importance of encouraging their children to read at home, often structure home reading activities in ways which allows active participation (Hughes *et al*., 1999). Seeing parents reading magazines, books or newspapers provide a positive stimulus for children's reading (Anderson, 2000). These parents are usually also able to provide supportive reading experiences to their children (Kopenhaver, Evans & Yoder, 1991) and are able to convey that reading is pleasurable and worthwhile (Baker, 2003). Parents who view reading as a source of entertainment, are more likely to have children who also enjoy reading and are skilled readers (Anderson, 2000; Baker & Scher, 2002). In addition, researchers agree that the frequency of this exposure contributes to successful early reading development as children with above-average reading ability are exposed to more frequent storybook reading and word games than children who are below average (Wood, 2002).

In this reading triad, the parental role is possibly the aspect that changes most significantly when children enter Grade 1. During the pre-school years the parents' role is to act as mediators between the child and written language, by providing structure, order and the necessary scaffolding to ensure the development of word-knowledge, the understanding of meaning and also to promote an awareness of the printed words or letters (Cook-Cottone, 2004; Sénéchal, LeFevre, Thomas & Daley, 1998). However, once children enter school and become readers themselves, the parental role changes significantly and parents become unsure of their new role in fostering their children's cognitive and academic growth (McMackin 1993). Their feelings of uncertainty regarding their role during reading and what is expected from them, is likely to influence their participation in this activity. Typically, parents tend to provide either more informal/implicit reading activities (when children are exposed to print during reading, without print being the focus) or more formal/explicit activities (when parents teach about reading words and letters). Both of these activities could happen within the same activity, e.g. when parents read and focus on both the story and on identifying print (Senechal *et al*., 1998). However, it seems that for pre-schoolers parents tend to focus on the informal activities, while the more formal activities tend to take preference once children start reading independently.

When comparing the specific strategies that parents of children with and without learning disability use, interesting differences are noted. Parents of fluent and competent readers use creative procedures such as scaffolding to assist children to comprehend stories and to make predictions, read the same book multiple times, talk less and assist the child to become more active in reading or telling the story (Saracho, 2002). In contrast, parents of struggling readers apply uncreative strategies such as decoding and concealing pictures to keep the child from guessing the words.

The third element of the reading triad relates to the **child**, and includes the child's enjoyment of listening to stories, their response to different reading activities, independent reading and reading ability.

Since reading is a developmental task, the more children read, the better they become at it. Beginner readers need a great deal of encouragement from those around them and their enjoyment of reading is enhanced when they experience a shared intimacy with their parents during this activity (Anderson, 2000; McMackin, 1993). As children are read to, they acquire new knowledge, improve their vocabulary (Leseman & De Jong, 1998), learn that words can form imaginary worlds away from the immediate here and now, and discover that written language has its own conventions and

rhythms (Bloch 1999). With their newly acquired interest in the act of reading, Grade 1 children will probably not be willing to listen to the story or look at pictures only and would choose to rather focus on the printed words and to read some of it independently (McMackin, 1993). Hence, once beginner readers start reading some words independently, the parental role changes from active reader to active reader-listener, or to active listener.

When comparing children with and without learning disability, certain trends prevail. Children without learning disability who enjoy reading, are more likely to devote time to it, resulting in increased reading proficiency which in turn develops more favourable reading attitudes resulting in a greater likelihood of reading for sheer enjoyment (Greaney & Hegarty, 1987; Fiala & Sheridan, 2003). Struggling readers on the other hand who do not enjoy reading, spend less time on it, which maintains the continuation of poorer reading skills — "*the poor get poorer*" in contrast to "*the rich get richer*" — also known as the Matthew effect (Stanovich, 1986). Furthermore, children, who experience reading difficulties, tend to label themselves as poor readers and as unable to learn to read, resulting in declined reading motivation (Baker, 2003). Children who acquire successful initial reading skills tend to remain good readers, while struggling readers tend to continue experiencing difficulties throughout their school years (Adams, 1990). Children's reading skills also contribute to their out-of-school reading. Competent readers read more books and magazines than less competent readers. Children, who already know the basics of reading at the beginning of Grade 1, begin to increase their reading of comics and magazines, which would in turn strengthen their reading skills. Children who are at the point of acquiring basic reading skills, are unable to become involved in the kind of leisure reading that would benefit their reading competence later. Children who experience difficulties in reading comprehension and word identification start developing problems in early reading. Therefore they read less and fall behind in reading skill development (Leppänen, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2005).

It is against this background that we endeavour to describe children with and without learning disability exposure to book reading at home as perceived by their parents. This study is relevant not only as a basis to assist teachers in helping parents to provide optimal reading environments for beginner readers, but also to highlight the triadic association between environment, parent and child participation during this process. To address this, the environmental aspects related to two groups of children (children with and without learning disability) are described, followed by a description of parental roles during book-reading and specific aspects related to the child.

Method

Research design

A quantitative, non-experimental comparative research design, involving two groups (parents of Grade 1 children with and without learning disability) was used to address the aim of the study. A purposeful sample in a specific geographical area was taken, and data were collected by means of a self-administered questionnaire. Due to the focus of the research, and the specific participant selection criteria, purposeful sampling was used as this ensured that the population was representative and informative about the topic under investigation (McMillan, & Schumacher, 2001). In addition, a specific geographical area was selected, as it contained a school for children with learning disabilities as well as a mainstream primary school, which also increased the comparability of the two participant groups.

Participants

Parents of two groups of Grade 1 children were included as participants: 30 parents of children without learning disability, who attended a mainstream primary school in an urban middle class area and 10 parents of children who attended a neighbouring special school for learners with learning disability.

Children in the mainstream school had no previous diagnosis of learning disability. Class teachers also completed the Screening Checklist for Learning Disability (Johnson, 2008) to ensure that the children had no possible risk characteristics, e.g. problems with attention, concentration,

reading, comprehension, writing, spelling, visual and auditory discrimination, gross and fine motor skills, visual-motor integration, spatial orientation, obeying rules, understanding mathematics and planning skills (Dowdy, 1992). The children in the school for learning disability had previously been identified as having special educational needs and as children who could not keep up with the tempo of mainstream education, hence their attendance of the special school. These children's intellectual ability was within the normal range, but displayed learning disability such as attention deficit disorders, problems with visual and auditory discrimination, gross and fine motor skills, visual-motor integration, spatial orientation and planning skills. Children with dyslexia were excluded from the study.

The two groups were compared and a Mann-Whitney test confirmed that there were no significant differences between the two groups regarding their age. Furthermore, Fisher's Exact test showed no significant difference according to the following variables: marital status, qualifications and employment status of parents.

The majority of respondents were older married mothers (35 to 45 years), with tertiary qualifications. Either they or their spouses were in full time employment, indicating that the groups were part of the middle to higher socio-economic group. The languages spoken at home were either Afrikaans or both Afrikaans and English.

Measuring instrument

A self-administered questionnaire was developed, based on the questionnaires of Light and Kelford-Smith (1993) and Sénéchal *et al*., (1998). It consisted of four sections, Section A (Biographic information of parents), Section B (Biographic information of the child), Section C (Parent's and child's literacy activities) and Section D (Checklist of exposure to specific books). Table 1 provides detail in relation to the latter two sections as this was the focus of the study.

The draft questionnaire was pilot-tested and recommendations implemented. After final editing, the questionnaire was distributed to the participants. Story-book exposure was measured by using a checklist with foils to verify the authenticity of answers and to account for possible socially acceptable answers (Hawthorne effect)(Sénéchal *et al*., 1998). The Hawthorne effect is the tendency for people increase the desirable responses (i.e. by marking more book titles than the ones they actually read) because they know they are involved in research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001).

Data collection procedures

Prior to the commencement of the study, permission was obtained from the relevant authorities. The study complied with the strict code of ethics proposed by the University of Pretoria. A pilot study was conducted to explore the usability of the survey instrument within the context, after which adaptations were made for use in the main study. The researcher then visited both participating schools (mainstream school and special school) and identified all the children who met the selection criteria. Letters of informed consent were sent to parents or legal guardians to obtain permission for their participation. Thereafter, questionnaires were sent via the teacher and the children to the participants for completion within a week. Empty envelopes with the details of the researcher were included with the questionnaire for return purposes. The class teachers assisted the researcher to ensure that all the questionnaires were returned. Forty questionnaires were distributed to parents of children without learning disability, and the first 30 returned were used. All of the ten parents of children with learning disability returned their questionnaires.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics for each of the questions were calculated for the two groups, including frequencies and proportions of responses. Fisher's Exact Test was used to determine relationships between categorical variables and because of the low frequencies in some of the cells in the two-way tables (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). The Mann-Whitney Test was used to determine whether the means of the two group were equal. This is a non-parametric technique and was used because

Table 1. Measurement instrument: family and child's literacy activities and exposure to books

Question area No. of questions	Type of question	Reason for inclusion
Family reading; time of day for story reading (3)	Q1 = 4 option checklist Q2 =5 option checklist Q3 = 9 option checklist	To describe exposure to home reading activities, e.g. frequency of parental example of participation in reading activities, and frequency in the time of day parent reads to child.
Child's interest in books (3)	Q4 = Likert-scale Q5 5 options Q6 Open-ended	To determine whether the child has a desire to read independently. To determine how many story-books the child possesses and which are favourites. Open-ended questions were used to ensure that relevant information would not be overlooked.
Child's participation (1)	Q7 Likert-scale	To determine frequency of participation in story-book reading, listening to story-book reading, paging through books or magazines, retelling a story, reading books on their own, requesting favourite books, lending or buying books.
Type of books (1)	Q8 11 option checklist	To determine the variety of story-books child listens to during home reading activities.
Reaction to story reading (1)	Q9 Checklist items with 3 point Likert-scale	To determine child's reactions when listening to stories.
Parents' role in story reading (1)	Q10 Likert-scale	To determine if parents understand the importance of their roles as mediators between the child and the written language.
Independent reading of printed material and reading ability(1)	Q11 Checklist items with 3 point Likert-scale	To determine the type of printed material the child reads independently and what his/her reading ability is.
Parents' views on story reading (2)	Q12 Checklist items Q13 Open-ended	To determine whether parents are aware that their perceptions influence story-book reading activities with their children.
Recognition of storybook titles (2)	Q1 Checklist items Q2 Open-ended	To verify that parents answered the questionnaire honestly. If parents frequently read to their children, they would be able to recognize titles on the list and not tick the foils. A list of 42 titles was provided containing six foils distributed evenly among the real titles. If more than two foils were ticked, the questionnaire was excluded from the study.

of the relatively small sample size and the fact that the variables were not normally distributed (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). For each of the open-ended questions, possible responses were reviewed by the researcher and the statistical adviser and sub-categories of possible responses were determined and operationally defined by means of a content analysis. For closed questions and multiple-choice questions, responses were coded according to pre-arranged codes. Comparisons were made between the responses of the group of children without learning disability and those of the children with learning disability. This coding procedure was also used for the follow-up questions, which formed part of the dichotomous-type questions.

Results and discussion

Results are described and discussed according to the three aims. Firstly the environmental aspects

are described, followed by a discussion of the parental roles. Finally, children's responses during book reading as well as their reading ability, are shown.

Environmental aspects

Environmental aspects are described in terms of two variables, namely the frequency of library visits and the types of books children are exposed to. According to their parents, 80% of children with learning disability have never visited a library. Fisher's Exact test ($p \leq 0.0001$) indicates a highly significant relationship between this group and the frequency of library visits.

On the other hand, similarities exists regarding the type of books children are exposed to. The majority of parents in both groups tend to read undemanding storybooks (with large print and many pictures) and picture books. Moreover, parents of children without learning disability often read non-fiction and rhyme books to their children whereas parents of children with learning disability tend to read more alphabet books. This might be due to the fact that alphabet books introduce children to the process of reading (Dixon, 2006), and hence parents might feel that they are "teaching" their children by doing so. Fisher's Exact Test could not be applied to the data as the parents could choose more than one option and, apart from some cells being too small in relation to the number of responses, the observations are not independent.

In summary, both of these environmental aspects support those of Rashid *et al*. (2005) who reported that more than half of the children with learning disability in their research had never visited a library, but that the home reading environment of children with and without learning disability are similar in terms of the type of books children are exposed to.

Parental roles

The second sub-aim relates to the parental roles, including variables such as the frequency of the parents' own reading, the frequency with which they read aloud to their children, and finally, how they perceive their roles during book reading.

Results showed that parents of children with and without learning disability often read at home (50% and 67%, respectively), and Fisher's Exact Test indicated no significance between the two groups. In the same way, Hughes *et al*. (1999) also reported similarities between both groups in terms of the frequency of exposure to home reading activities.

Moreover, Fisher's Exact Test indicated no significant difference between parents of both groups with regards to reading stories aloud to their children ($p = 0.0575$). In both groups parents frequently read to their children (i.e. more than 5 times per week), (50% and 63%, respectively).

Finally, parent's perceptions of their roles during reading were explored. Nine different roles were mentioned but Fisher's Exact Test showed no significant differences between these two groups for any of the roles: reading words in book; paging through a book with the child; showing words in a book and reading them; pointing to pictures and telling own story; asking the child to name pictures; asking the child to guess what would happen next; asking the child to explain why something happened in story; asking the child to look for certain words on a page and finally, asking the child to read certain words alone.

In brief, it was clear that children in both groups were exposed to the same input by their parents and parents in both groups perceived the roles similarly.

Children's responses to book reading

The third aim of the research was to investigate children's responses to book reading, and involves four variables, namely, enjoyment of listening to stories, responses to reading activities, independent reading and paging through books, and finally, reading ability.

Regarding children's enjoyment of listening to stories read by their parents Fisher's Exact Test indicates no significant difference between the two groups. In contrast, Table 2 shows that three of the eight aspects related to the children's responses to reading activities, showed significant differences between the two groups.

Table 2 shows that 80% of children without learning disability listened attentively to stories in contrast to only 50% of children with learning disability. Half of the parents of children with learning disability also indicated that their children found it difficult to concentrate and to sit still during story-book reading. Forty-six percent of children without learning disability tried to read words independently during story-book reading in relation to 30% of children with learning disability who did not.

Table 2. Children's responses during story-book reading activities

Responses	Never		Seldom		Often		*p*
	Children without LD	Children with LD	Children without LD	Children with LD	Children without LD	Children with LD	
Do not listen, look around	77%	40%	17%	50%	-**	-*	0.1903
Listen attentively	-	-	17%	40%	83%	60%	**0.0408**
Turn pages	27%	30%	53%	50%	13%**	10%*	1.0000
Look at, point to pictures	3%	-	40%	-	57%	90%*	**0.0460**
Ask questions about pictures	3%	-	47%	40%	43%**	50%*	1.0000
			43%	40%	53%	40%	0.2652
Ask about words	3%	20%	53%	60%	40%*	40%	1.0000
Ask the meaning of words	3%	-					
Read some words on their own	-	40%	47%	20%	47%**	30%*	**0.0038**

(* 1 parent did not answer this question)
(** 2 parents did not answer this question)
(Significant *p* values are highlighted in **bold**)

It is interesting, however, to note that the majority of children without learning disability often or seldom try to read some of the words in the story independently in relation to children with learning disability who never or seldom tried to read words independently. A highly significant relationship ($p = 0.0038$) between the children of both groups and reading of certain words independently, was noted. It is thus clear that children without learning disability tend to be more involved spontaneously in reading along with their parents in relation to those with learning disability. Their engagement in more reading activities results in children without learning disability getting "richer" according to the Matthew effect (Stanovich 1986).

The third aspect which related to the children's independent reading, was similar. Although 40% of children without learning disability often read books independently and none of the children with learning disability did, results only indicated a statistical significant relationship on the 10% level of confidence with Fisher's Exact Test ($p = 0.0648$), and thus it does not warrant further discussion of the two groups regarding their independent reading.

The fourth aspect related to the children's reading ability, but it is important to caution that these ratings are based on the perceptions of the parents and no norm-based reading test was administered to test the children's reading ability. However, Dickinson and DeTemple (1998) are of the opinion that parental reports in the area of literacy development are valuable, as parents play a central part in their children's literacy development and are therefore aware of their children's reading ability. They also reported that parents' perceptions of their children's reading ability were generally consistent and that highly educated mothers (similar to the majority of participants in the current study) provided accurate information because they were attuned to indications of literacy in their children (Dickinson & DeTemple, 1998).

Table 3 presents parents' perceptions of their children's reading ability according to how the

children read different types of printed material. Fisher's Exact Test was implemented to determine the significance of the relationship between the two groups.

Table 3. Parental perception of their children's reading ability

Printed material children are exposed to and read on their own	**Fluent and competent**		**Average**		**Poor**		***p***
	Children without LD	Children with LD	Children without LD	Children with LD	Children without LD	Children with LD	
Labels	50%	-	50%	60%	-	40%	**0.0002**
Names of shops	70%	40%	30%	40%	-	20%	**0.0479**
Flash cards	90%	10%	10%	80%	-	10%	**<.0001**
Picture books with no print	70%	50%	17%	40%	7%**	-*	0.2239
Picture books with 1 or 2 words per page	90%	20%	10%	80%	-	-	**<.0001**
Picture books, large print, single words	90%	20%	10%	50%	-	20%*	**0.0001**
Picture books with large print, short sentences	80%	20%	20%	50%	-	30%	**0.0004**
Story-books with large print, hardly any pictures	57%	-	40%	40%	3%	50%*	**0.0002**
Story-books with small print, many pictures	50%	10%	43%	20%	7%	70%	**0.0002**
Story-books with small print, hardly any pictures	17%	-	60%	10%	23%	80%*	**0.0023**
Books with very small print, hardly any pictures	10%	-	50%	10%	40%	80%*	**0.0383**
Non-fiction books	20%	-	43%	10%	30%**	70%**	**0.0292**
Magazines	10%	-	47%	20%	40%*	60%**	0.3107

(* 1 parent did not answer this question)
(** 2 parents did not answer this question)
(Significant *p* values are highlighted in **bold**)

Fisher's Exact Test indicates significant differences in the reading ability of children with and without learning disability for 11 of the 13 variables included. No significance is noted between the reading ability of the two groups regarding easy reading material, namely, picture books without the printed word nor the reading of magazines.

The above results clearly show that children without learning disability are more fluent and efficient readers of printed materials in relation to those with learning disability. To determine the relationship between the children's learning ability/disability and their reading ability, Fisher's Exact Test was implemented, with results displayed in Table 4.

Table 4. Reading ability of children with and without learning disability

Frequency Row %	**Fluent or competent reader**	**Average reader**	**Struggling or poor reader**
Children without LD (n = 30)	67%	33%	0%
Children with LD (n = 10)	10%	60%	30%
Total	53%	40%	70%

($p < 0.0001$)

Children with learning disability fall into the group of average to struggling readers while children without learning disability fall into the group of fluent and competent to average readers. Fisher's Exact Test indicates a significant relation between the two groups.

Conclusions

Although children in both groups may be exposed to similar home reading environments and their parents may perceive their roles similarly, it is clear that children without learning disability are more engaged in independent reading activities than children with learning disability. These findings are similar to those of Rashid *et al*. (2005), who reported that children with learning disability engage in fewer home reading activities because of their reading problems. In contrast, children without learning disability develop into better readers, as they are more exposed to reading activities, enabling them to develop their reading skills. Results also indicated that children without learning disability are better readers of almost all printed matter presented in the questionnaire, including labels, school reading-cards, books with large or small print and non-fiction books.

This research also supports findings of previous studies that home reading environments of children without learning disability and children with learning disability and their parents' role in story-book reading are similar. The main finding of the current research is that children's responses during story-book reading, as well as their engagement in independent reading differ. Children without learning disability are more involved in the reading process and independent reading than children with learning disability.

Teachers need to encourage parents of Grade 1 children to not only actively engage in reading activities with their children, but also to be aware of the type of responses elicited from the child. As children with learning disabilities may be less interested in printed matter, parents need to be alert in selecting books of high interest, representing different types of print material to encourage the children to participate in all types of reading material. To engage in these activities, parents may need more support in selecting appropriate books to encourage better participation from their children on different reading levels.

Due to the relatively small sample size, this study should be regarded as a pilot study with encouraging results. Interesting trends were noted. Future research therefore needs to replicate this study using larger and more diverse samples and should employ a wider variety of data-collection instruments.

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