

The Power of Home: How Family Literacy Shapes Early Reading Development in Young Children

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ABSTRACT

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Literacy is widely recognized as a foundational skill that enables children to engage meaningfully in society and learning. Among the factors shaping literacy development, family literacy plays a crucial role by providing children with early exposure to language, print, and supportive interactions at home. This study aims to investigate the impact of family literacy practices on early reading development in young children. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through interviews and observations in two families with children aged four and five. The findings reveal that both children demonstrated strong literacy skills for their age, including the ability to read alphabetically, recognize Arabic letters, and count numbers. The five-year-old child showed advanced competence supported by formal schooling and parental reinforcement. At the same time, the four-year-old, despite not yet attending school, displayed comparable abilities through consistent parental engagement, storytelling, and religious practices at home. These results indicate that family literacy significantly contributes to children's emergent reading skills, complementing or even compensating for formal education. The study concludes that family literacy not only supports children's technical abilities in reading and numeracy but also fosters motivation, confidence, and cultural identity as learners. Strengthening family literacy practices is therefore essential to ensure children's school readiness and long-term academic success.

Keywords: family literacy, early reading development, parental involvement, children's literacy, home environment

INTRODUCTION

Literacy is a fundamental competence encompassing the abilities to read, write, listen, and speak to understand, communicate, and participate fully in social life. Contemporary perspectives view literacy not as a single technical skill but as a

complex social practice that develops through interaction with family, community, and educational environments (Gee, 2015; Street, 2014). Ellis (2012, p. 4) defines literacy as "the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute, and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts," emphasizing that literacy enables individuals to achieve personal goals and to contribute meaningfully to society. This definition highlights that literacy involves a continuum of learning experiences rather than the mere mastery of decoding written symbols.

Among the four language skills, reading occupies a particularly crucial position in early literacy development because it provides access to knowledge and supports the growth of other linguistic abilities (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Plant et al. (2008) note that young children require structured and meaningful experiences such as being read to, engaging in shared and guided reading, matching picture cues to words, and sequencing stories. Such activities are most effective when they occur within the family environment, where children receive consistent emotional support and immediate feedback (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Empirical studies have demonstrated that children who are exposed to rich home literacy practices, such as daily story reading, parental modeling of reading habits, and access to varied print materials, tend to show better vocabulary growth and reading readiness before entering school (Bus, Van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995).

Preliminary observations in many communities reveal that some children aged four to five already demonstrate notable literacy abilities before attending kindergarten. They can recognize letters, read simple texts including Arabic scripts, and count numbers fluently. Family literacy practices strongly shape these early achievements. Menheere and Hooge (2013) warn that limited parental literacy may be transmitted intergenerationally, while conversely, supportive home environments can accelerate children's literacy trajectories. Hart and Risley (1995) further show that the quantity and quality of verbal interaction in the home significantly predict later academic success. Thus, the family functions as the first and most influential context for literacy learning.

Despite extensive research on early literacy, several important gaps remain. First, the majority of influential studies have been conducted in Western contexts with specific cultural assumptions about parenting styles, book availability, and school-home relationships (Neuman & Celano, 2001). Less attention has been paid to non-Western settings where families may rely on oral traditions, religious texts, or bilingual scripts as primary literacy resources. Second, previous research often uses broad indicators such as socioeconomic status or parental education level as predictors of literacy outcomes (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002), while fewer studies examine concrete home practices, such as reading aloud routines, storytelling traditions, introduction to multiple writing systems, or early numeracy activities that directly nurture children's reading skills. Third, many investigations focus on children after they enter kindergarten or primary school, leaving the literacy experiences of pre-kindergarten children aged four to five relatively underexplored (Justice & Pullen, 2003). Consequently, there is limited understanding of how family literacy alone, before formal schooling, can shape early reading competence.

To address these gaps, the present study investigates the power of family literacy in shaping early reading development among children aged four to five who have not yet received formal education. The study seeks to answer the following question: How does family literacy influence early reading development in young children? By focusing on specific home-based practices within a non-Western cultural context, this research aims to provide a more nuanced picture of early literacy formation beyond school settings.

The significance of this study lies in its dual contributions to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it enriches the literature on emergent literacy by documenting how everyday family interactions function as pedagogical resources (Purcell-Gates, 1996). It also contributes to cross-cultural literacy studies by illustrating strategies that may differ from those emphasized in Western models yet remain effective in fostering reading readiness. In practice, the findings may guide parents to engage in purposeful literacy activities at home, assist educators in designing programs that build on children's existing experiences, and inform policymakers in promoting family-based literacy initiatives, particularly in communities with limited access to formal educational resources. Ultimately, this study reaffirms that the home constitutes a powerful foundation for literacy learning and that family involvement is central to children's early reading success.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to obtain an in depth understanding of how family literacy practices influence children's early reading development. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables the researcher to explore participants' experiences, beliefs, and behaviors in their natural contexts rather than through numerical measurement. The case study design is particularly appropriate when the research seeks to examine a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life setting and when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018).

By focusing on a small number of families, this study aimed to capture detailed and holistic portraits of literacy interactions occurring at home. The design allowed the researcher to investigate how parents introduce reading activities, how children respond to them, and how daily routines shape early literacy learning. The case study approach also supports the use of multiple data sources, which strengthens the credibility of findings through triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, this design was considered most suitable for revealing the complexity of family literacy as a social and cultural practice.

The participants of this study were two families with children aged four to five years who had not yet entered formal primary education. The families were selected purposively based on several criteria: (1) the children demonstrated early interest in reading, (2) parents were actively involved in home literacy activities, and (3) the families were willing to be observed over several sessions. The research took place in the participants' homes in order to capture authentic literacy practices in everyday situations.

To obtain rich and comprehensive data, the study utilized two main instruments:

interviews and observations.

1. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the parents of each child. The interviews aimed to explore parental backgrounds, beliefs about literacy, and strategies used to teach reading at home. Guiding questions addressed:

- daily literacy routines (e.g., reading aloud, storytelling, religious text reading);
- parents' views on the importance of early reading;
- types of materials used (books, worksheets, digital media);
- the role of siblings or other family members; and
- challenges faced in supporting children's literacy.

The semi-structured format allowed flexibility for probing and follow-up questions so that parents could describe their experiences in their own words. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2. Observation of Children's Literacy Activities

Non participant observations were carried out to document real interactions between parents and children. Each family was observed in several sessions lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. The observed activities included shared book reading, letter and number recognition, writing practice, singing alphabet songs, drawing, and the use of digital applications. Field notes were taken to record verbal interactions, parental scaffolding strategies, children's engagement, and the physical literacy environment at home. When permitted, audio recordings and photographs of learning materials were also collected to enrich the data.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was chosen because it provides systematic yet flexible procedures for identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative data. The analysis involved the following steps:

1. Familiarization – The researcher repeatedly read interview transcripts and field notes to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data.
2. Initial Coding – Meaningful units related to literacy practices, parental roles, and children's responses were labeled using open codes.
3. Generating Themes – Similar codes were grouped into broader categories such as parental scaffolding, home literacy routines, digital literacy use, and children's motivation.
4. Reviewing Themes – Themes were compared across interviews and observations to ensure they accurately represented the data and to achieve triangulation.
5. Defining and Naming Themes – Each theme was refined and clearly defined to explain specific contributions of family literacy to early reading development.
6. Interpretation – The final themes were interpreted in relation to theories of emergent literacy and previous research findings.

RESULTS

This study employed qualitative methods, with data obtained through interviews and observations of two families, each with a child aged four to five years old. The primary

focus was to explore how family literacy practices shaped children's early reading development. Data were collected through recorded observations using a mobile phone and semi-structured interviews with parents. The children were asked to state their names, identify pictures, read the alphabet, Arabic letters, and numbers. Their performances were analyzed to assess their literacy abilities.

Table 1. Results of the study

Family	Age of Child	Literacy Characteristics	Literacy Characteristics
First family	5 years	Reads alphabet, numbers, and Arabic (lqro')	Fadillah Nasution
Second family	4 years	Reads alphabet, numbers, and Arabic (lqro')	Syadiva Aulia Riska

Case 1: Fadillah Nasution (5 years old)

Observations revealed that Fadillah demonstrated strong literacy abilities for her age. When asked her name, she confidently responded with her full name, "Fadillah Nasution," not only saying some words or sentences correctly in structure, such as *makan, memarahi, nakal, mama mau makan nasi goreng, umi tadi bilang kerjakan PR*. The other finding was literacy abilities that were found in saying the alphabet, numbers, and reading Arabic.

- **Alphabet:** She was able to recite the alphabet from A to Z, both as taught in school and reinforced at home. Although her pronunciation was accurate, some letters were influenced by her Bataknese dialect, showing high stress on certain sounds such as

A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, U, V, W, X, Y, Z

→ → → → → →
A E O be ce te

It means that she always says with high stress when pronouncing the letter.

- **Numbers:** Fadillah successfully counted from 1 to 100. While she occasionally forgot a number, her mother provided support, allowing her to continue without major difficulties. This ability reflected both her school-based learning and consistent reinforcement at home.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92,

93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100

- **Arabic (Iqro')**: Fadillah was able to recognize and pronounce Arabic letters accurately. She had received instruction both at her Islamic school and from her mother at home, particularly during daily prayers.

ا ب ت ث ج ح خ د ذ ر ز س ش ص ض ط ظ ع غ ف ق ك ل م ن ه و ا ل ي

These findings suggest that Fadillah's literacy development was shaped by a combination of formal schooling and consistent family support, which enhanced her confidence and mastery across multiple literacy domains.

DISCUSSION

Syadiva, though younger and not yet enrolled in school, also showed promising literacy abilities. When asked her name, she firmly corrected the researcher by stating her full name, "Syadiva Aulia Riska," indicating self-confidence and linguistic awareness. Based on the finding the second participant, Syadiva Aulia Riska, has literacy abilities as the first participant, even though she is still 4 years old and hasn't come to school yet. She can say words and sentences such as: makan, minum, mandi, susu, pegi, mama mau num, mama mau mamam, mau susu, mama gak boleh nakal. The other data that was found about alphabet, numbers, and reading Arabic.

- **Alphabet**: Syadiva could recite the alphabet with minimal assistance, though occasionally she confused *n* and *m*. Her mother provided guidance by pointing to letters and asking her to pronounce them, which she successfully did with most letters.
- **Numbers**: She was able to count from 1 to 20 independently. Unlike Fadillah, who reached 100, Syadiva sometimes paused to think, especially around numbers 17–19, before continuing.
- **Arabic (Iqro')**: Syadiva recognized several Arabic letters, though she struggled to distinguish between *ba* and *ta*. Her mother corrected repeated questioning, and Syadiva eventually self-corrected, showing resilience and motivation.

ا ب ت ث ج ح خ د ذ ر ز س ش ص ض ط ظ ع غ ف ق ك ل م ن ه و ا ل ي

Despite her young age and lack of formal schooling, Syadiva displayed advanced literacy skills, largely attributed to consistent parental involvement, storytelling, religious practices, and exposure to multimedia learning resources.

Background of the Families

- **Fadillah's Family**: Both parents are civil servants and actively support her education by providing resources and guidance at home. Being the eldest child, Fadillah benefits from focused parental attention and structured learning routines.
- **Syadiva's Family**: Her mother is a mathematics teacher and her father works in a company. During weekdays, Syadiva spends most of her time with a nanny while her parents work, but they devote quality time during evenings and weekends. Despite limited daily interaction, her parents maintain strong involvement in her literacy

development through storytelling, counting in both Indonesian and English, religious teaching, and exposure to educational media.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that family literacy plays a pivotal role in shaping children's early reading development. Both children showed advanced abilities for their age, but with different levels of mastery:

- Fadillah benefited from a combination of school instruction and parental reinforcement, enabling her to achieve higher literacy outcomes such as counting up to 100.
- Syadiva, though younger and unschooled, demonstrated strong foundational skills due to her parents' direct teaching, use of multimedia, and integration of religious literacy practices.

These results suggest that family literacy practices such as parental scaffolding, storytelling, religious activities, and multimedia use significantly contribute to children's early reading and broader literacy development, even in the absence of formal schooling.

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that children's early literacy development is inseparable from the literacy practices embedded within their family environments; indeed, both cases presented in this research underscore the essential role of parents in scaffolding, supporting, and extending literacy skills that are first acquired informally at home before being formally taught in school. In the case of Fadillah, who already attends an Islamic school, her ability to read the alphabet, count numbers up to one hundred, and recognize Arabic letters can be directly traced to the combination of structured school instruction and consistent reinforcement from her mother at home; this confirms what Plant et al. (2008) argued regarding the progressive integration of speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills as interdependent components of literacy, which must be cultivated both in formal and informal learning spaces.

Similarly, the case of Syadiva illustrates that even in the absence of formal schooling, strong parental engagement and family literacy practices can significantly accelerate a child's literacy development; although she is only four years old, her ability to recite the alphabet, count to twenty, and identify several Arabic letters reflects the impact of constant parental involvement, story-telling routines, religious practices, and the use of multimedia resources, thereby reinforcing the claim by Hill (2011) that early home-based literacy experiences exert long-term effects on children's academic trajectories. In addition, these findings resonate with more recent scholarship, such as Neumann (2023), which emphasizes that digital media and multimodal literacy resources within the family context can enrich children's emergent literacy skills, particularly when mediated by attentive and responsive caregivers who actively guide the learning process.

The role of parental involvement, as demonstrated in both families, also supports the theoretical perspectives offered by Menheere and Hooze (2010), who asserted that parental participation influences not only learning outcomes but also children's motivation, persistence, and classroom behavior; in the present study, the mothers of both children were seen actively questioning, prompting, and correcting their children, which highlights the mechanism through which family literacy becomes an interactive and dialogic process rather than a passive transmission of knowledge. Furthermore, the variations between the two families—one with greater access to formal education and both parents present daily, and the other where the child spends significant time with a nanny due to parental work commitments—illustrate the argument by Desforges and Abouchaar (cited in Menheere & Hooze, 2013), who noted that differences in socioeconomic background, parental availability, and family environment significantly

shape the quality and intensity of parental engagement, thereby producing different literacy outcomes.

Taken together, the findings not only affirm the classical definitions of literacy as the capacity to read, write, and function effectively within society (Zygouris-Coe, 2001), but also extend them by showing how literacy is deeply contextualized within cultural, religious, and familial practices, with Arabic literacy for example becoming an integral part of children's overall literacy repertoire in these families; this aligns with the more contemporary reconceptualization of literacy as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, social, cultural, and digital competencies (UNESCO, 2023; Xu & Warschauer, 2020). In this regard, the research highlights that family literacy is not only about transmitting technical reading and writing skills but also about shaping children's identities, values, and worldviews through the everyday interactions, stories, and practices they encounter within the home. The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that children's early literacy development is inseparable from the literacy practices embedded within their family environments; indeed, both cases presented in this research underscore the essential role of parents in scaffolding, supporting, and extending literacy skills that are first acquired informally at home before being formally taught in school. In the case of Fadillah, who already attends an Islamic school, her ability to read the alphabet, count numbers up to one hundred, and recognize Arabic letters can be directly traced to the combination of structured school instruction and consistent reinforcement from her mother at home; this confirms what Plant et al. (2008) argued regarding the progressive integration of speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills as interdependent components of literacy, which must be cultivated both in formal and informal learning spaces.

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Therefore, the study's implications are twofold: on the one hand, they demonstrate that early literacy development benefits from the dynamic synergy between school instruction and family reinforcement, which together create a rich environment for skill acquisition; on the other hand, they point to the urgent need for broader educational policies and community programs that support and empower parents to engage in meaningful literacy practices with their children, especially in contexts where formal schooling begins later or where socioeconomic constraints might otherwise limit children's exposure to print, language, and numeracy resources.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how family literacy practices shape early reading development in young children. Based on the qualitative findings from two families with children aged four and five, it is evident that the home environment plays a decisive role in fostering children's emergent literacy. Both children demonstrated significant abilities in reading alphabets, counting numbers, and recognizing Arabic letters, even at an early age. These outcomes highlight that literacy development is not confined to formal schooling but is actively constructed within family interactions, routines, and cultural practices.

The findings confirm earlier research (Plant et al., 2008; Hill, 2011; Menheere & Hooze, 2010) and are further supported by recent studies (Neumann, 2023; UNESCO, 2023), which emphasize that children's literacy skills are strengthened through consistent parental involvement, multimodal resources, and early exposure to language-rich environments. While differences in background, parental availability, and resources were observed between the two families, both cases illustrate that intentional parental engagement through storytelling, religious practices, repetition, and scaffolding directly enhances children's literacy outcomes.

In conclusion, family literacy acts as the foundation for children's early reading development by shaping not only their technical skills in reading and numeracy but also their motivation, confidence, and cultural identity as learners. The study implies that empowering parents with awareness and strategies to engage in literacy practices at home is essential to ensure children's readiness for formal education and long-term academic success.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

Riski Amrina Sari: Conceptualization (lead), methodology (lead), data collection (lead), formal analysis (lead), writing - original draft (lead), review and editing (supporting).

Dita Septiana: Conceptualization (supporting), methodology (supporting), formal analysis (supporting), writing - review and editing (lead), supervision (lead).

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