

Perceptions of Teachers about the Role of Parents in Developing Reading Habits of Children to Improve their Academic Performance in Schools

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore teachers' perceptions about parental role in developing reading habits of children to improve their academic achievement. The study was conducted in one of the private schools of Gilgit city situated in the Northern part of Pakistan. Using a case study approach to research within the qualitative design, semi-structured interviews were used for data collection, which enabled the researchers in capturing qualitative experiences, opinions, beliefs and perceptions of purposefully selected research participants. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis approach and emerging themes were represented in the form of figures to provide a clear understanding. The study confirmed that reading habits, for example, out of school reading and reading for pleasure, have influenced academic performance and parental role is pivotal in developing children's interest in reading because healthy reading activities can help them to develop critical thinking and analytic skills. This could also develop their vocabulary to a great extent. Consequently, children exhibit improvement in their overall academic performance. The findings confirmed that if parents focused on reading improvement of their children in early ages, they could better develop reading as a routine activity. The study recommended that parents should play an active role in developing attitude towards reading by

Keywords: academic achievement, parental role, reading environment, reading habits, technological effects

Introduction

In both developed and developing countries context, reading is considered to be an instrument for learning that appears to be a priceless activity (Okeke, 2000). Reading is the ability to understand words written in a textual form which enables the readers to improve their knowledge for personal development (Dadzie, 2008) as well as academic performance. The child's exposure to different reading materials can open new ways to make meanings and to explore experiences about the world. However, it is not so simple to get clear meaning of a text if the reader is not clear about the purpose of reading. The parents and teachers can guide children in setting the purpose of reading, hence making them conscious about what and why they read. Loan (2009) claimed that a weak person becomes a communicator and a lame person can climb mountains of knowledge through reading. This appears to be one of the reasons that McPike (1995) believed that reading is the "gateway to all other knowledge" (p.3), which can open new avenues for the reader to understand the world that is hidden in the text and beyond.

Many authors including Guthrie, Benneth and McGough (2007) asserted the notion that reading is a multifaceted cognitive process of building meaning of the texts written in different sources. However, it depends on the ways readers are exposed to the textual attraction for their interest that would not only improve academic performance, but also enable them to become successful in this knowledge society. Research supports that those children who read at early age are likely to exhibit greater interest in reading at later ages (Arnold & Whitehurst, 1994). Additionally, Weinberger (1996) suggested that students who were attached to books at the age of three, could best perform in grade VII. This argument builds the basis that parents' role is very critical in the lives of their children.

Parents as first teachers of their children need to focus on developing reading habits such as reading for pleasure and out of school reading, so that it can further help them to read easily at school and beyond. Studies inform that reading as a routine activity helps the learners in obtaining meaningful and desirable

knowledge. Bashir and Mattoo (2012 as cited in Owusu-Acheaw, 2014) believe that it is the good reading habits that “acts as a strong weapon for the students to excel in life” (p. 2). Other studies extensively support the idea that parents who read in front of their children, can inspire them towards reading books and resultantly they are attracted automatically towards reading (Morrow, 1983). Furthermore, parents who read regularly can influence their children to engage with reading (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). Parents can provide many other opportunities to their children to start reading different texts for their academic improvement as well as for their general knowledge. Moreover, parents can provide materials related to reading at home that can enhance children’s reading achievement and cognition (Stuart, Dixon, Masterson & Quinlan, 1998). Similarly, Kaiser and Hancock (2003) acknowledged that for children, their parents serve as their first teachers, who can develop a love for reading that could enable them to excel in their academic as well as social life. Thus, the effective role of parents in improving reading engagement cannot be ignored (Baker, 2003), which ultimately helps their academic achievements (Pressley, 1998). Therefore, in order to understanding their critical role, parents should contribute in the success of their children by listening to them while they read their school books and other texts of their interest (Tizard, Schofield & Hewison, 1982).

It has been specified in scholarly literature that everyday reading activities of children are affected in many ways, but the most important and prominent element appears to be the engagement with modern technological tools (Loan, 2009). Loan further asserts that reading habits of children are almost withering and the reason for reading time is playing with technological tools. Hastings and Henry (2006) presented a report in which they clearly mentioned that 85% of children prefer to watch TV over reading. According to Loan (2007), technology kills reading activity time of children. This means that unnecessary use of modern technology reduces time for reading books in the new generation; this is an issue that needs to be understood by parents, teachers and other stakeholders in education to develop effective reading habits in children in order to facilitate them to improve their academic achievements.

The main purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of teachers about the role of parents in developing reading habits to improve academic achievement of their children. To achieve this objective, the researchers came up

with the following research questions:

1. What do teachers mean by reading habits of children?
2. What are teachers' perceptions about the impact of reading habits on academic performance?
3. How can parents develop reading habits in their children?

Methodology

To address the above questions, the researchers employed a qualitative case study research approach. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with two teachers teaching at primary level, the researchers explored the phenomenon at a deeper level which enabled them to develop themes from the data gathered. Semi-structured interview is a data collection method which helped us in capturing qualitative experiences, opinions, information and perceptions. It helped the researchers to collect data about practices, experiences and school parent interactions (Merriam, 1998). During the whole engagement of the research activity, the researchers considered ethical aspects of the study by discussing the research process with the participants and seeking consent from them.

Participants' selection is a significant component of qualitative research design, which has been given less attention in methodological textbooks and journals as compared to centrality to the process warrant (Webster, 2010). The researchers selected a purposive sampling technique to collect the desired data from the research participants (Godambe, 1982) to enable them to extract accurate and reliable data. Purposeful selection is a technique used in qualitative research for the selection of information for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002).

Data analysis approach

In qualitative study, content analysis is considered as a spiral, iterative and explanatory process (Creswell, 2008). The data were analyzed by using thematic analysis approach. Thematic approach to data analysis focuses on how to find major themes arising from a systematic arrangement of similar and contrasting ideas arising from the collected data sets (Yin, 2003). This included arrangement of data

based on themes coming out of the whole process of deliberate meaning making. This technique enabled them to understand the phenomenon under exploration through explanation of these themes (Yin, 2003). Different themes were presented in a sequence according to the order of the purpose and research questions of the study. The focus of the analysis was to compare and contrast the responses of two teachers (research participants) guided by the interview guide.

Findings

The study came up with the following key findings after analyzing the data collected through three research questions.

Conceptual meaning of reading

While analyzing data regarding the perceptions of teachers, we came to know that the research participants seem to be aware of the concepts of reading. Fatima said:

“Reading is to go through a text and understand the message or the theme it contains.”

We found some similar views which were shared by Rahima in her own words:

“... If a child can read a sentence without breaks... and can understand its meaning is known as reading.”

This study found that the perceptions of the research participants support the relevant literature on the concept of reading. According to many writers such as Dadzie, (2008) and McGough (2007), reading is the ability to understand words which are available in a text and use that knowledge for personal development. Dadzie and McGough further stated that it is a multifaceted cognitive process of building meaning of the texts written in different sources. Moreover, McPike (1995) believed that reading is the “gateway to all other knowledge” (p.3) and a basic building block of knowledge acquisition (Irwin, 1967). Perhaps, Rahima’s further explanation of reading supported this view in the existing literature. She believed that:

“Reading is the main element that helps students to acquire knowledge”

We infer that reading is a process of making meaning from a written text. Both research participants had experienced their own ways of looking at the meaning of reading from the point of view of their students’ engagement with a text to make meaning of it. The figure below helps to summarize the emerging theme.

Relationship between reading habit and academic achievements

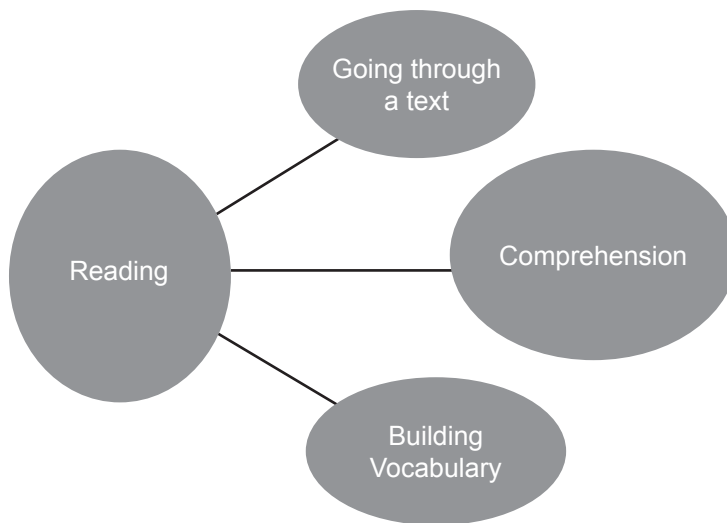


Figure 1. Reading and its meaning.

By analyzing the data on the relationship between reading habits and academic achievement of students, it emerged that reading is a basic component which leads to academic success. Reading texts and academic success are interrelated activities that have a profound effect on children’s lives (Owusu-Acheaw, 2014). Fatima stated:

“I believe that reading habits have a great influence on students’ academic achievements. The more they read, the more they learn and more knowledge they acquire which leads to success.”

Whereas teacher Rahima shared same views and shared:

“If students can read and understand the concept than their academic grades can be improved. Reading is directly related to academic achievement as reading includes vocabulary and pronunciation if a student knows all these elements of reading than his/ her grades can be improved.”

The reviewed literature also supported the idea that reading and academic achievement is interrelated. Exam results of those who lack good reading habits may not be satisfactory and may become a source of worry for parents, teachers and stakeholders of education (Issa, Aliyu, Akangbe & Adedeji, 2012). It is important to engage students in reading activities on daily basis that can help them to get better grades in examinations. According to Cotton and Wikelund (2003), students who perform best in their academics are supported by their parents by attaching them with reading from early ages. One of the participants said:

“Parents who help their children in reading, improve learning at school... those students who are good in reading they can better learn things as compared to other students....” Reading is all about learning. For my students who are fluent readers are mostly supported by their parents in their reading activities. Such children can better learn in classroom as well. I think through reading, students learn new words, which improve their language and writing skills. They also acquire new information by reading books which increase their knowledge.”

It was found that Rahima had similar views regarding the same question. She said:

“Reading is consisting of following elements like vocabulary, pronunciation, understanding and reading without breaks. If one is keeping in mind all its elements than the process of learning is increased.”

Reading, learning and academic achievements are related to each other. According to Rahima:

“If students spend their time in reading books, they can better learn things and their academic achievement can also improve.”

On further probing she shared her experiences in these words:

“For better academic achievement, students need to focus on reading. As a teacher I analyze that in my class those students who are left behind in examinations are those whose reading is not good and their parents appear to be less supportive... in our examination system teachers are not allowed to read question papers, due to which students with weak reading are unable to attempt the exam.”

After analyzing the collected data, it was found that there is a strong relationship between reading and academic achievement of the students. Students only read or memorize the answers of specific questions and ignore rest of the text in the book; this culture is mainly responsible for their weak reading skill. Worthy (2002) opines that students’ level of reading is highly influenced by their attitudes towards reading and it exerts a positive impact on their academic achievement. Figure 2 illustrates a better understanding of the emerged themes.



Figure 2. Relationship between reading habits and academic achievements.

Role of parents in developing reading habits of children

The responses of the research participants showed that parents play an important role in developing the reading habits of their children. Fatima suggested that parents should encourage their children to read at home by providing reading materials like story books and magazines which are available for kids. Similar views were shared by Rahima in these words:

“Reading habits should be developed in children from early ages. Almost 20 hours of a day children spent with their parents and much less time is spent with their teachers; therefore, parents need to focus on their children. Parents need to develop reading skills in their children by using a variety of books and setting up reading corner at home.”

Reflecting on the findings of the study and looking at the literature, it can be concluded that both research participants' views are in accordance with the findings of many researchers. For example, Begum (2007), Lynch et al., (2006), Purcell-Gates (1995), Roberts, Jurgens and Burchinal (2005) and Rowe (1991) have strongly supported the notion that parents who provide better reading enrichment activities at home, contribute tremendously to develop their children's reading skills.

After analyzing the views of research participants and literature, we also conclude that parents are role models for children. According to Kaiser and Hancock (2003) parents are the first and most continuing teachers for their children. If parents read books in front of their children, their children's reading habits will automatically be developed. If parents engage in other activities like watching television and using mobile phone and ask children to read, the children will also avoid reading. Rahima shared her views as follows:

“Those parents who do not create a conducive environment (providing material like books especially pictorial books) or reading time at home, their children are also weak in reading as compared to those students whose parents provide such activities at home. I personally observe many parents even highly educated parents engage themselves with electronics and ask

their children to read books, which actually kills the motivation of their children towards reading.”

According to Vygotsky (as cited in Senechal & Cornell, 1993), children learn skills like reading and can understand their world when they interact with adults. This means that children learn different skills from adults by interacting with them at home. Generally, early ages of students are the most important period for development of any skill; reading is also a skill for development for reading habits in children. Parents need to expose children to reading from early ages, even before they enter formal schooling. According to Fatima:

“Those students who are aware of phonics before entering school do not hesitate in reading when they came to school at the age of 6. I am a teacher of grade 2. This year I have six students who cannot read even a simple word. I was very upset and always thinking of those students. My sister-in-law has a diploma in early childhood development and I shared the problem of those students with her. She said that those students were not familiar with the phonics which they need to learn in their early ages. If they are not familiar with the phonics of English and Urdu, they will not be able to read. After discussing with her, I went to school and asked students to read phonics. Surprisingly, the students did not even know the sound of ‘A’. After that I gave some time to those students to teach phonics. At the end of the session, I was surprised to see the transformation in those students who could not read a single word were now able to read much better.”

Literature also supports the view of research participants. According to Arnold and Whitehurst (1994) and Weinberger (1996), students who are attached to books in early years can also exhibit greater interest in reading at later ages. The benefits of positive role of parents, like providing proper support and guidance by developing reading habits of children can lead them to read any kind of text fluently (Saracho, 2002). Figure three elaborates the theme discussed above.

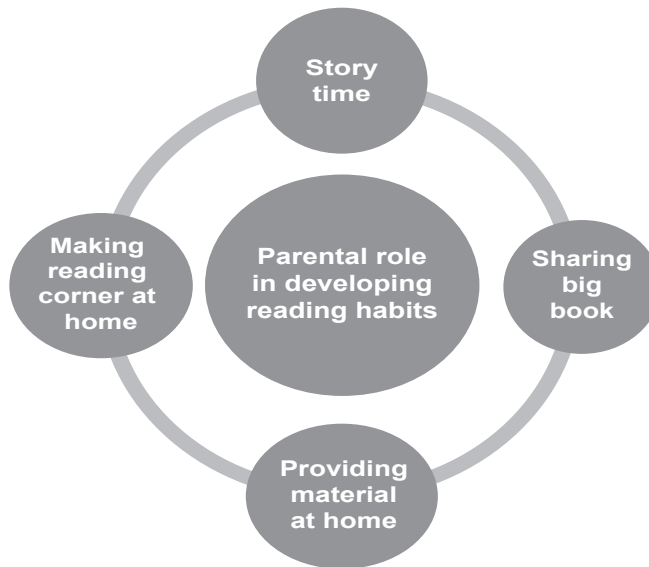


Figure 3. Parental role in reading of children.

Effects of technology on students reading habits

Due to the current technological era, children spend most of their time playing games, watching television and surfing internet; therefore, giving little time for reading. According to (Loan, 2009), reading habits of children are almost diminishing and the reason for this decline is technological advancement that provides children a replacement of reading time with technological tools. Fatima expressed her concern that:

“Technology badly affects the reading habits of students. Smart phones, tablets and internet have taken over the kids and they prefer to watch videos and playing games instead of reading. Although technology has negative effects, it may be used for developing reading skills in students. It is up to the parents to monitor how their children use technology.”

However, Shabi and Udofia (2009) believe that reading books are much better in one’s life for success rather than watching TV passively or using other technological tools. Rahima expressed similar views regarding the use of technology

by children and its impact on their reading habits. She said that:

“There are different applications in mobiles, tablets and computers like auto spell programs, shortcuts of words etc which can decrease the chance of children to think and read and write by themselves. Children using technology decrease their imagination skills as well.”

Strategies to develop reading habits of children

The following seven sub themes emerged under the major theme-strategies to develop reading habits of children. These themes include books, time for practice, read aloud, shared reading, setting study corner at home, developing home school link and taking children to libraries.

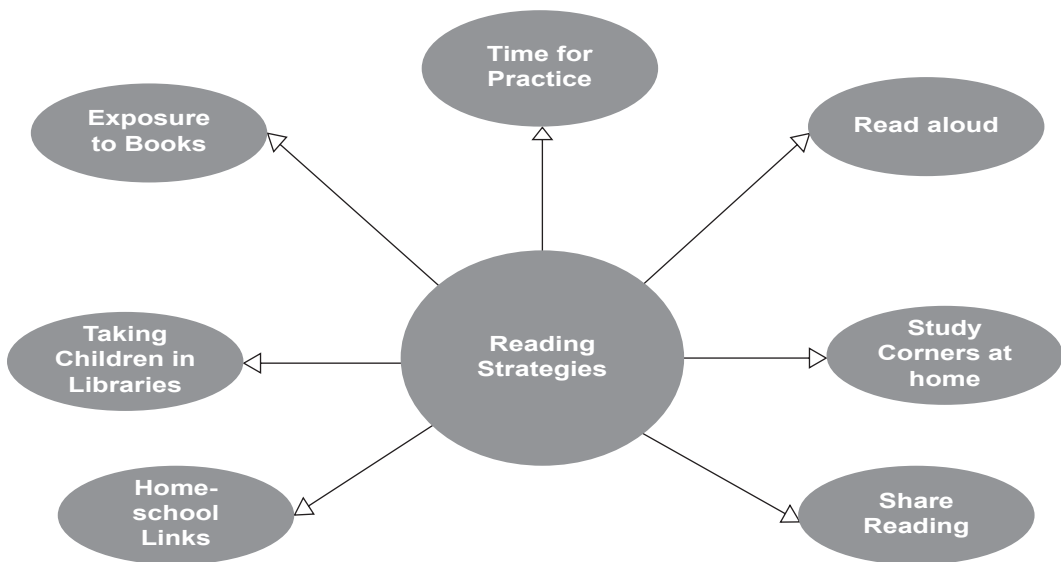


Figure 4. Reading Strategies which parents can use.

Loud reading

The participants believed that parents may use a variety of strategies for monitoring their children to read and reading aloud is one of the best ways to do so. Trelease (2005) accentuated that the more you read aloud to your children, the better they understand and are encouraged towards reading and become smarter.

Allen (2000) claimed that read aloud to children is one of the effective ways for children to read fluently.

Exposure to books

Another strategy shared by research participants was for parents to expose children to books from early age. According to Nalusiba (2010), “Once pupils were exposed to different practices of reading and reading materials, they were likely to broaden their imagination and engage in the practice of regular reading” (p.27). Senechal and LeFevre (2002) and Thomas and Daley (1998) reported that there is a big gap between the results of the students who are exposed to books at preschool and those who are not. Gibson (2004) stated that students should be allowed to choose books of their own interest.

Time for practice

The participants highlighted that the students needed practice to become fluent readers (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). According to Cunningham and Stanovich (1997) and Wang and Guthrie (2004), the more one reads, the more his reading comprehension and general knowledge increases. If a fluent reader decreases the time of reading, then sooner or later, he/she becomes a slow reader.

Setting study corner at home

According to the research participants, developing a reading corner at home was another effective strategy for encouraging children to read. Chen (2008) asserted that children whose parents provide a literacy rich environment at home, spend more time on reading in comparison to those children who lack these resources.

From the perspectives of both research participants, it was evident that creating a reading atmosphere at home and encouraging children in reading activities can be one of the best strategies to improve reading habits that can lead towards better academic achievements. Thus, it is the responsibility of parents to ensure that their children have an educational environment at home that can support their school activities.

Taking children to libraries

Both participants had similar views about the importance of taking children to libraries for improving reading skills. The participants further elaborated that they had developed a book corner in each class to attract children towards book reading of their own choice. Daniel (2004) stated that library is a powerhouse of any educational institution; he further stated that school is like a car without engine and a human body without soul. However, according to the research participants in the context of Gilgit, parents are unaware about the importance of taking children to libraries. Perhaps, this could be one of the reasons that in Gilgit there are no public/private libraries. Bus, Ijzendoorn and Pellegrini (1995) claimed that if parents “take their young children to the library, the children get accustomed to read books of their own interest” (p. 4).

Home school link

Fatima and Rahima shared their experiences about developing a home-school link. They elaborated that those students performed better whose parents attended parent teacher meetings and shared information about their children’s activities at home. Many authors like Auerbach (1995), Baker (2003) and Braun (1991) claim that creating a strong link between home and school can play a significant role in improving children’s academic achievement. They asserted that by inviting parents in school and getting information about the available resources at home and what roles parents play at their home can enable both parents and teachers to better coordinate with each other in order to improve students reading.

By analyzing the collected data, it is concluded that if teachers intend to develop students academically, then parents need to cooperate with teachers and schools. Until and unless parents are not aware of their children’s activities at school, it will become difficult for them to guide children at home. When parents take notice of school activities of children and also communicate with teachers on issues of students on monthly basis, the teachers are also more conscious about students ‘performance and give them extra attention. In this way, teachers are also aware of the kind of resources available for students at home, according to which teachers will assign work and also assist students if needed, with respect other reading materials. DeTemple (1998) noted that “acknowledgment of parental expertise could go towards establishing a teacher-parent relationship based on trust and mutual respect” (p. 256).

Shared reading

Shared reading was another strategy highlighted by the research participants. They asserted that children will enjoy reading and also learn how to read fluently and with expression if parents share reading with their children.” Scollon and Scollon (1981) endorsed that in early childhood, sharing of story books with parents lay the foundation for the development of literacy skills.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper discussed the perceptions of teachers about parental role in developing reading habits and its effects on academic achievements of their children. The study revealed that reading is the foundation of literacy skills and gateway to academic success in life of children; therefore, reading appears to be one of the powerful activities that enables a child to make meaning of a text, develops vocabulary and helps to communicate easily in his/her life.

The research highly encourages all key stakeholders including teachers, parents and school principals to use multiple strategies and take notice of resources required to improve reading habits, which can empower children to become successful learners. There exist many factors which affect children’s reading habits such as excessive exposure to technology, especially at home that can waste productive time of children (Yienger, 2016). The study recommends stakeholders to become well aware of their critical role in order to facilitate children in reading books by creating an environment both at home and school. Moreover, parents and teachers need to establish a strong relationship between both contexts through parent-teacher’ meetings, close monitoring and facilitation that could discourage children to use technological devices excessively. In doing so, they can provide alternative opportunities for children to develop an interest in reading. This in turn may further contribute towards high academic achievement.

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