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Malaysian mothers’ beliefs in developing emergent literacy through reading

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Abstract

This study investigated Malaysian mothers’ beliefs in reading to their preschool children and also their reading beliefs according to maternal education, ethnic background and family socioeconomic status (SES). Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed in this study. There was a significant correlation (p <.05) between mothers’ education, ethnic background and family SES, and the dimensions of mothers’ beliefs in reading. The findings revealed that most Malaysian mothers viewed reading to their children as a beneficial activity and provided considerable support to help their children become competent readers. The findings also suggest that mothers’ beliefs may impact emergent literacy development.

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Keywords: Emergent Literacy; mothers’ beliefs; reading; preschool

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In light of the large body of literature documenting mothers’ beliefs in reading to their children in most communities worldwide, the mother-child joint reading relationship has brought about a sizeable interest in its capability of impinging on the emergent literacy development of children. In particular, the parental belief systems could positively affect children’s emergent literacy (Wu & Honig, 2010; Haney & Hill, 2010).
For instance, parental beliefs in shared reading pursuits can be a predictor to their children’s emergent literacy capabilities (Wu & Honig, 2010). For this reason, it was ascertained that from a mother’s standpoint, mothers’ beliefs could cement the notion of developing their children’s pre-literacy tendencies at an early age (Current & Justice, 2008). Mothers having such beliefs are more often than not eager to read to their children in an enjoyable manner that affects their children’s interest in picking up the reading habit (DeBaryshe, 1995). In this case, mothers were also revealed to be acutely aware of their children’s early literacy expertises (Korat, 2009; Dickinson & DeTemple, 1998).

The regularity in which mothers read to their children lies in their beliefs concerning the merit and usefulness of joint-reading activities (Current & Justice, 2008; DeBaryshe & Binder, 1994) where such joint-reading sessions allow children to understand the contents being read to them by their parents as reasoned by Korat (2009). Regardless of different demographics, mothers ventured into believing that shared reading is a vital activity for their children, demonstrating that the support mothers provide their children during literacy exercises can encourage their children to be more learned (Current & Justice, 2008; Korat & Levin, 2001). Altogether, most mothers hinted at observing a regular practice in reading to their children in order to engender a literacy-rich surrounding that is immersive for their children (Deckner, Adamson & Bakeman, 2006). In view of the opinion that children’s emergent literacy development, with the collaborative input from parents – especially mothers, being explicitly sufficient to foster the reading habits within a family unit (DeBaryshe, 1995), this paper intends to throw light on this issue in Malaysia from a local perspective to encourage a more comprehensive dialogue.

1.2. Problem Statement

Although parents’ intervention may not be the presumed panacea in stemming the prevalence in illiteracy among children, it should not be subjugated to irrelevance. The beliefs of mothers in reading to their children are in short, necessary and essential to warrant their children’s emergent literacy capabilities. Then again, what is sorely lacking is the exploration done on this subject matter within a localised context. By associating the underlying threads concerning mothers’ beliefs in reading to their children, the connotations of the proposed premeditated constraints can be duly justified. Per se, the comprehension gained through a detailed study will inevitably provide the fundamentals of a maternal belief system from a local perspective, vis-à-vis erstwhile findings that are based on different communities and settings.

1.3. Objective

The main intent of this research was to delve into the belief system of Malaysian mothers in reading to their preschool children. Identifying the mothers’ core principles of inculcating the reading habit in their children could be construed as a facet, which may or may not have a noteworthy conjecture on their children’s emergent literacy. A secondary yet vital aim of this study was to ascertain whether the maternal reading beliefs vary by maternal education, ethnicity and family socioeconomic status (SES). All factors considered we could identify the analogous boundaries affecting the mothers’ beliefs in reading to their children. Above all else, this research will also prove the importance of mothers – acting as mediators within a family unit, in shaping their children’s inclination towards reading.
1.4. Significance of Study

It is anticipated that the renewed outlook in emergent literacy will broaden the understanding concerning Malaysian mothers’ beliefs in reading to their children that may spur the latter’s capabilities to read. What this entails is an active participation on the mothers’ behalves to be more involved in their children’s emergent literacy aptitudes. More so, this detailed study can comprehensively discern the extent of Malaysian mothers’ beliefs pertaining to reading to their children and the influence that beliefs have on improving literacy skills in children.

1.5. Research Questions

The research questions brought forward in this study, in essence should be objective and critical in answering the queries proposed. Among those questions were:

i. What are the beliefs of Malaysian mothers in reading to their children?

ii. To what extent is the correlation between Malaysian mothers’ beliefs and their education level, ethnicity and family SES?

2. Literature Review

Parental responsibilities, either in terms of maternal or paternal capacity, include but not limited to that of nurturing their children’s emergent literacy skills. The opinion that the practice of reading audibly and distinctly by parents to their preschool children can be an important component of household learning pursuits holds true (Haney & Hill, 2004; DeBaryshe, 1995; DeBaryshe & Binder, 1994). For example, young children could improve on their literacy skills by means of repeated readings (Haney & Hill, 2004). Through other everyday educational activities at home that involve the combined participation of both parents and their young children, other ancillary literacy and semantics capabilities can also be effectively gained by their children (Korat, 2009; Haney & Hill, 2004). Aram and Levin (2001) corroborated this opinion, whereby they stated that children’s emergent literacy and their reading habits are interrelated and influenced by their parents’ own reading habits. Parental beliefs in reading can then be said to be inexorably correlated to their children’s emergent literacy abilities (Haney & Hill, 2004). For instance, parents will actively connect and converse with their children during reading when the parents themselves are adept readers (Curenton & Justice, 2008). Looking at this issue from a maternal standpoint, Deckner, Adamson, and Bakeman (2006) observed that mothers were more enthusiastic and participatory during joint reading with their children. This standpoint was further justified by both Curenton and Justice (2008) and DeBaryshe (1995) who indicated that mothers who have faith in the importance and virtue of reading would involuntarily pass down that very similar trait to their children. Atypical of the usual preconceived notions of the factors affecting a child’s emergent literacy level, mothers’ beliefs in reading to their children were actually found to be related to their children’s emergent literacy levels (Korat & Levin, 2001).

DeBaryshe (1995) also observed that mothers, whose beliefs that are more inclined towards emergent literacy practices, are more predisposed in reading aloud to their children more habitually. What is more, mothers were found to be more proactive in developing their children’s literacy skills with more frequent involvements (Manz et al, 2010). Curenton and Justice (2008), who stated that mothers’ beliefs in reading to their children correlate to the children’s emergent literacy development, further supported this observation. The figures speak for themselves as in the investigation carried out by Deckner, Adamson
and Bakeman in 2006, a majority of mothers surveyed conveyed that they have read to their children before their children was six months old. Similarly, Wu and Honig (2010) as well as Dickinson and DeTemple (1998) found that the preponderance of mothers surveyed often read to their children.

The parameters put forward in this research namely the mothers’ education level, ethnicity and family SES corroborate with the opinion of DeBaryshe (1995) who mentioned that factors such as the mothers’ education, income and personal reading habits were indicators of their beliefs in reading to their children. Palpably, mothers’ beliefs in reading aloud to their children originate from the mothers’ social class, literacy flair and own reading pursuit (DeBaryshe, 1995). A clear case in point is mothers who possess a higher education level have demonstrated to bear a greater influence on their children’s literacy success (Wu & Honig, 2010; Abu Bakar & Koh, 2009; Curenton & Justice, 2008) compared to mothers from the lower education faction (Korat, 2009). However, according to a research done by Wu and Honig (2010), maternal education level is independent of mothers’ beliefs in reading to their children. It should also be pointed out that mothers who are high achievers academically read more often to their children compared to mothers of lower education level (Wu & Honig, 2010; Curenton & Justice, 2008). Following that, it can be summed up that the education level of mothers has an affirmitive impact on children’s emergent literacy development (Wu & Honig, 2010; Korat, 2009; Curenton & Justice, 2008).

Families of preschool-going children have the most clout in terms of influencing their children’s emergent literacy development in spite of culture, SES or education level (Caspe, 2009). From a more focussed perspective, mothers’ beliefs in reading to their children also stem from the available resources for addressing their children’s emergent literacy development (Abu Bakar & Koh, 2009). It is clear that mothers’ beliefs in reading to their children can be closely related to many external issues that require further understanding (Curenton & Justice, 2008). All the same, the robustness of the maternal belief systems in question as posed by DeBaryshe (1995) are ostensibly tied to the emergent literacy skills of young children (Wu & Honig, 2010).

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

72 questionnaires were collected from mothers with children between the ages of 4 - 6 years. The level of education of the mothers were as follows: 31.9% had 11-13 years of school, 18.1% had a diploma, 34.7% of the mothers had a bachelor degree and 15.3% had a graduate degree (MS or PhD). 54.2% of their spouses had at least a diploma. The mean monthly family income was RM5000 to RM7000 per month. Most of the mothers were working mothers and only 8.4% were homemakers. The majority of mothers were Malays (65.3%). 33.3% were Chinese and 1.4% were Indians.

3.2. Measures

The Parent Reading Belief Inventory (PRBI) was adapted from a research done by DeBaryshe & Binder in 1994 with middle-to-low income families in the USA. Forty-five items were used to find out the beliefs of Malaysian mothers in reading to their children. The items were divided into seven sections: Affect, Knowledge, Participation, Resources, Efficacy, Environment and Reading Instruction. For this study, the PRBI was translated into Malay Language for clarity. A pilot study was conducted to investigate the appropriateness of the items. Based on the responses, the items were revised. Mothers
indicated their response to each item on a four-point scale in a Likert format (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree).

3.3. Data Analysis

The data gathered through the questionnaires was analysed using the computerised SPSS (Statistical Software Package for Social Science) software version 16. Descriptive statistics was used to explain the overall profiles of the respondents. A crosstab and correlation analysis was performed to investigate the relationship between the sections. In addition, the relationships between the individual items and mothers’ level of education, ethnic background and monthly income of family were analysed. The Spearman correlation was used to measure the relationship between the ordinal variables. Cronbach’s alpha was used to measure the internal consistency reliability. The alpha coefficient for the items is .92, suggesting that the items have relatively high internal consistency.

3.4. Methodology for Qualitative Section

For qualitative data, the research utilised purposive nested sampling (a subset of those in quantitative data collection method of the study were chosen to be in the qualitative data collection method of the study) (Teddlie & Tashakkori 2009). 7 mothers representing about 10% of the sample population were chosen for qualitative data collection through open ended interview. Mothers were asked 3 open ended questions about their beliefs in reading to their children: “Who read[s] to the children?”, “What are the benefits of reading to children?” and “How do children learn to read?” Mothers’ answers were audiotaped. Answers were later transcribed, separated into unique comments, and sorted by content.

4. Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent Reading Belief Inventory (PRBI)</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affect</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficacy</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading instruction</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall mean</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As seen in the table, the means for the sections except environment are above 3.00. The section with the highest mean is reading instruction (M = 3.37) followed by knowledge (M = 3.36) and participation (M = 3.23). The overall mean (3.16) shows that the mothers had positive beliefs regarding reading to their preschool child.
4.1. Affect

This section looks at the mothers’ feelings about reading to their preschool child. Only a small percentage (8.3%) of the mothers found reading to their child difficult or boring. Half of the mothers disagreed that their child did not like to be read to and that they had to discipline their child during the shared reading sessions. A high percentage of mothers agreed that reading was an enjoyable time they shared with their child (M = 3.43). Although 8.3% strongly disagreed and 22.2% disagreed that they had good memories of being read to, more than half of the mothers read to their child whenever he or she wanted (M = 3.10).

4.2. Knowledge

In this section the mothers rated their beliefs regarding the knowledge their child gained when being read to. This section has the second highest mean (M = 3.36) showing that mothers viewed reading activity as a beneficial activity. A high percentage of the mothers agreed that ‘Children learn new words, colours and names from books when we read to them’ (M = 3.53). The mothers felt that reading helped children be better speakers and better listeners and be more creative. 61.1% of the mothers reported that their child learnt about things they had never seen before from books (M = 3.39).

4.3. Participation

Mothers were asked to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with items like ‘I ask my child lots of questions when we read’ and ‘When I read, I try to sound excited so my child is interested’. Most of the mothers (95.9%) asked their child a lot of questions and they liked their child to ask questions about the book they were reading (M = 3.26). More than 90% of the mothers liked their child to participate in the activity by helping them tell the story. The mothers talked about the story and the pictures (M = 3.29) and also asked their child to point out different letters or numbers that were printed in the book (M = 3.19).

4.4. Resources

This section deals with the resources available such as time, place and reading materials. Only 15.3% said that they were too busy and too tired to read to their child and 2.8% stated ‘there is no suitable place in the house’ as a reason for not reading to their child. Most mothers bought a lot of reading materials for their child (M = 3.31). However, 30.6% did not create a mini library for their child.

4.5. Efficacy

The items in this section deal with the mothers’ beliefs regarding parents’ role in their children’s education. A high percentage of mothers felt that they played an important role in their child’s development (M = 3.62) and they believed that parents needed to be involved in their children’s education (M = 3.68). Most mothers agreed that they were their child’s most important teacher (M = 3.38) and children learnt many important things from their parents (M = 3.44). Moreover, the mothers believed that parents were responsible for their children’s reading success (M = 3.46) and that children did better in kindergarten or school when their parents also taught them things at home (M = 3.62). However,
20.8% felt that they could not do much to help their child get ready to do well in school. Some mothers agreed that they would like to help their child learn, but did not know how (M = 2.47).

4.6. Environment

15.3% of the mothers strongly disagreed and 52.8% disagreed that some children are natural speakers and parents do not have much influence over their children’s speaking ability. Most mothers believed that children model after their parents’ reading habits (M = 3.06). More than half of the mothers felt that besides learning to read from their parents, children learnt to read from the television (M = 2.74), the Internet (M = 2.49) and educational software (M = 2.86).

4.7. Reading Instruction

Mothers were asked to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with items like ‘I read to my child so that he or she will learn the alphabet’ and ‘My child is too young to learn to read’. The mothers felt that reading would help the child learn the alphabet (M = 3.42). Most mothers agreed that their child would learn how to read simple sentences (M = 3.39) from the shared reading activity. 43.1% strongly disagreed and 44.4% disagreed that their child was too young to learn to read.

The correlations between the sections show that affect correlates positively with knowledge (p < 0.01, rs = .557), participation (p < 0.05, rs = .301), resources (p < 0.01, rs = .490), efficacy (p < 0.01, rs = .503) and reading instruction (p < 0.01, rs = .468). Knowledge is significantly related to participation (p < 0.01, rs = .623), resources (p < 0.01, rs = .631), efficacy (p < 0.01, rs = .588), environment (p < 0.05, rs = .300) and reading instruction (p < 0.01, rs = .632). Participation has a significant relationship with resources (p < 0.01, rs = .510), efficacy (p < 0.01, rs = .393) and reading instruction (p < 0.01, rs = .552). A significant relationship exists between environment and efficacy (p < 0.05, rs = .283). Reading instruction is significantly related to resources (p < 0.01, rs = .458) and efficacy (p < 0.01, rs = .556) while resources has a significant correlation with efficacy (p < 0.01, rs = .475).

4.8. Level of Education, Ethnic Background, Income and Mothers’ Beliefs

The non-parametric correlations between mothers’ level of education, ethnicity and family monthly income, and the different sections show that mothers’ level of education has a significant relationship with environment (p < 0.05, rs = .281) and efficacy (p < 0.05, rs = .243). Income correlates positively with environment (p < 0.05, rs = .247) while a negative relationship exists between ethnic background and reading instruction (p < 0.05, rs = -.299).

A significant relationship also exists between mothers’ level of education and individual items like ‘When we read together, we talk about the pictures as much as we read the story’ (p < 0.05, rs = .233) and ‘Children learn to read by using the Internet’ (p < 0.05, rs = .347). The item ‘I would like to help my child learn, but I don’t know how’ correlates negatively with mothers’ level of education (p < 0.05, rs = -.240).

There is a negative correlation between ethnicity and reading instruction (p < 0.05, rs = -.299). The items that correlate with ethnicity are ‘I create a mini library for my child’ (p < 0.05, rs = .248) and ‘I have good memories of being read to when I was a child’ (p < 0.05, rs = -.251). There is a negative correlation
between ethnicity and the item ‘I read to my child so that he or she will learn the alphabet’ (p < 0.05, rs = - .243).

The items that correlate significantly with income are ‘My child learns many important things from me’ (p < 0.05, rs = .270), ‘Children learn to read by using the Internet’ (p < 0.05, rs = .269) and ‘I would like to help my child learn, but I don’t know how’ (p < 0.05, rs = -.283).

4.9. Qualitative Findings

Who reads to the children? Mothers were found to be most frequent readers to their children. All seven mothers interviewed read frequently with their children. Fathers did read to the children but mothers spent more time at home reading to their children compared to the fathers. When probed further on the reasons for this phenomenon, the 7 mothers responded that fathers had less time to spend reading to the children. Furthermore, it was the responsibility of the mothers that the children learn to read.

What are the benefits of reading to children? 7 mothers were asked about the benefits of reading that encouraged them to read to their children. The mothers indicated that reading is a beneficial activity. They realised that eventually their children would pick up the habit of reading independently. The children were able to learn letters, sounds and expand their vocabulary. They had more ideas to share when they retold a story that they had read based on illustration, memory or language of the story.

How do children learn to read? The 7 mothers discussed the importance of reading aloud, drilling on letter identification and telling the children what a printed word means, and providing books for the children.

These open-ended questions corroborate with the results of the survey suggesting the importance of the mother’s beliefs in emergent literacy development through reading.

5. Discussion

Research question 1: What are the beliefs of Malaysian mothers in reading to their children?

The findings show that Malaysian mothers had positive feelings about reading to their child although some faced challenges in engaging their child in reading. Most mothers found the reading activity enjoyable and encouraged their child’s participation by asking questions. This correlates with the observation by Deckner, Adamson and Bakeman (2006) that mothers participate and are enthusiastic during shared reading with their children.

Malaysian mothers felt that reading to their child is an activity that helped widen their child’s knowledge. During the open ended interview, the mothers reported that their child learnt letters, sounds, and new words, and got more ideas from the reading. The findings revealed that most mothers did not face difficulty in allocating the time, finding a suitable place and providing the materials for the reading activity. Thus, they had a positive view of the activity. As noted by Abu Bakar & Koh (2009), mothers’ beliefs in reading to develop their children’s emergent literacy stem from the availability of resources.

Malaysian mothers believed that they played an important role in educating their child and they were their child’s most important teacher. When interviewed, the mothers responded that it was their
responsibility to help their children become competent readers. The results obtained suggest that families of preschool children have a lot of influence on their children’s emergent literacy development (Caspe, 2009). Majority of the mothers felt that their reading habits could influence their child’s and they provided a model for their child. The findings show that the mothers were aware that parents’ reading habits can influence their children’s emergent literacy and reading habits (Aram and Levin, 2001). These findings may be due to the mothers being fairly well educated as about 70% of the mothers and more than half of their spouses had at least a diploma. The mothers were also aware of the advances in technology that may facilitate the development of their child as readers. Most of them were working mothers and with an average monthly income of RM5000 to RM7000, they were able to provide reading materials and also make use of technology to develop their child’s literacy abilities.

Research question 2: To what extent is the correlation between Malaysian mothers’ beliefs and their education level, ethnicity and family SES?

Mothers with relatively more education felt that their children would do better in school if the parents played an active role in developing the child’s emergent literacy. These mothers encouraged their child’s involvement during shared reading. This is in line with the findings from Curenton & Justice (2008) that parents with a high level of education will be actively involved with their children as they are adept readers. Mothers with a higher level of education were more likely to draw their child’s attention to the pictures while reading compared to those with a lower level of education.

Although mothers with less education realised the importance of developing their child’s emergent literacy, they lacked the confidence in helping their child learn to read. They may find difficulty in teaching their children reading skills which are more complex. Thus, mothers with lower education level have less influence on their children’s literacy success (Wu & Honig, 2010; Abu Bakar & Koh, 2009; Korat, 2009 and Curenton & Justice, 2008). The findings suggest that mothers’ education level has a positive impact on children’s emergent literacy development (Wu & Honig, 2010; Korat, 2009 and Curenton & Justice, 2008).

The negative correlation between ethnicity and reading instruction indicates that Chinese mothers were less likely to use the direct approach to emergent literacy than Malay mothers. The positive relationship between ethnicity and the item ‘I create a mini library for my child’ suggests that Chinese mothers provided a more conducive environment for reading activities compared to Malay mothers. The reason for this could be that they were higher income families. More Chinese mothers recalled being read to when they were a child and therefore regarded reading to their child as an important activity to be passed down (Curenton and Justice, 2008 and DeBaryshe, 1995). The reason Malay mothers read less to their child could be that it is not an important part of their culture and they felt that their preschool child was still too young to be taught to read.

The positive correlation between income and environment indicates that those with higher income felt that children could learn from other sources besides storybooks. It was also found that those with higher income believed that their own reading habits had an influence on their child’s and felt that their child learnt important things from them. Mothers from a higher SES were more confident about developing their child’s emergent literacy whereas those from the lower income group found helping their child to learn a challenge. DeBaryshe (1995) found that income and personal reading habits are indicators of mothers’ beliefs in reading to their children.
6. Conclusion

The findings of the quantitative study and the responses of the mothers during the interview suggest that Malaysian mothers provided considerable support to help their preschool children become competent readers. The mothers considered reading and writing skills as skills that their children should possess before formal school. These findings suggest that mothers’ beliefs may impact children’s emergent literacy abilities and therefore, mothers should continue to provide frequent modelling opportunities to ensure their children’s reading success.

However, the obtained results may not be generalised to the general population due to limitations in sample and environment. Future research should obtain a larger sample covering mothers in different parts of the country such as those in urban and rural areas. Other factors that may affect mothers’ beliefs such as age of mothers and types of occupation could also be investigated. Such studies will help in designing effective parent-child literacy interventions to promote emergent literacy skills in Malaysia.

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References


