

# Early Childhood Literacy Experiences at Home in Relation to Family Socio-Economic Status (SES)

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## ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to explore how children at early age experience literacy activities with their parents at home. It is also interesting to see how early childhood literacy experiences are related to family socio-economic status (SES) as many studies found that SES is one of the significance factors that affects family literacy activities. The data was gathered through interviews involving 26 participants using yes/no questions and open-ended questions categorized into four indicators as adapted from the theory of early literacy experiences of Teale and Sulzby (1986) and Sénéchal (2012). It is reported that all the families participated in this study variously provide home literacy opportunities for their children. In terms of read aloud, formal reading, and formal writing activities, families with mid-income provide more assistances to their children compared to families with low and high income. However, in terms of parents' literacy activities, all parents with high income come first.

**Keywords:** *Early childhood, early literacy, family literacy, socio-economic status (SES)*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Children's early exposure to language and literacy starts from home in the form of parent (or adult)-children interaction with literacy (Rogoff, 1990). Children may experience a parent-children interaction through shared reading and writing, do independent reading and writing, or observe their parent's literacy activities at home (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). However, the activities and the home literacy environment may vary from one family to another depending on the family background and or family belief (Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2006). Many scholars argue that family background has a correlation with socio-economic status (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008; Kirby & Hogan, 2008; Hartas, 2011) and it also influences the literacy practices at home and children literacy development (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008)

Since 2017, Indonesian government has started to support literacy through *Gerakan Literasi Nasional* (GLN) or National Literacy Movement. The government might have seen the urgency of promoting literacy at every level as a lesson learned to the recent PISA (Programme for International Student

Assessment) result as well as CCSU report. For the last three surveys in 2012, 2015, and 2018 of PISA, Indonesia was at the bottom rank over the other countries who participated in the survey. Not to mention, the Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) in 2016 reported Indonesia at the 60<sup>th</sup> rank of 61 countries who participated in the World's Most Literate Nations (WMLN) study.

The National Literacy Movement covers the literacy movement in the level of family, school, and society. At the school level, many scholars reported the success of the movement. There were various practices applied across different schools such as multi-literacy program (Nopilda & Kristiawan, 2018), providing more books, allocating daily reading time for students, designing reading corner, and involving every school member to support the program (Batubara & Ariani, 2018; Nopilda & Kristiawan, 2018). However, there was a scant number of scholars who explored the literacy practices at the family level. More importantly, some scholars were still arguing whether the socio-economic status can or cannot influence children literacy practices and development. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the children literacy practices at early age and

how the home literacy practices relate to family socio-economic status.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***2.1. Literacy in Early Childhood***

Research suggests that children's literacy development starts from infancy (McLachlan & Arrow, 2016) and before children receive any formal literacy instructions, they have already demonstrated capabilities necessary for their literacy development (Snow, 2006). This conforms to the concept of 'emergent literacy' which highlights that there is literate knowledge developed during early childhood needed for reading learning processes and conventional literacy acquisition (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Furthermore, the literate knowledge acquired during early years includes phonological and syntactic awareness (inside-out process) as well as language and narrative (outside-in process) (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). This early literate knowledge is often considered as the evidence that children in their early years have already participated in 'authentic literacy activities' (McLachlan & Arrow, 2016) by engaging in the literacy practices they see their parents do (Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

### ***2.2. Family Literacy***

The term family literacy was first used by Deny Taylor, a literacy researcher. Taylor observed six middle class families whose children was successful in learning to read and write. Taylor focuses on discovering what the parents in those six families did to foster their children's literacy. She discovered that the parents actively participated in their children's reading and writing experiences by playing word games, pointing out words in sign, reading aloud, and communicating through memos and notes. Taylor found out that each family makes read aloud activity an integral part of their family life (Taylor, 1983).

According to Teale and Sulzby (1986), family can provide the following literacy experiences: (a) experiences in which children interact with parents in reading and writing activities; (b) experiences in which children explore print on their own; and (c) experiences in which children observe their parents when engaging in literacy-related habits such as reading and writing. Furthermore, Sénéchal (2012) divides home literacy activities into informal and formal literacy. Informal literacy activities are those whose interactions focus on conveying the meaning of literacy sources, for example shared readings whereby children and parents focus on the story not the printed words. Meanwhile, formal literacy activities are activities that focus on drawing the child's attention directly to the printed word.

Considerable works have been dedicated to investigate the correlation between family or home literacy practices and early childhood literacy development, i.e., children's exposure to story books at home and children's early literacy skills (Sénéchal, LeFevre, Hudson, & Lawson, 1996), impacts of home literacy environment on emerging literacy and language skills (Weigel et al., 2006), and informal reading interaction at home and children's oral language development (Mol, Bus, DeJong, & Smeets, 2008).

### ***2.3. Family Literacy Practices and Socio-Economic Status (SES)***

Research suggests that family's socioeconomic status (SES) such as parent's educational background, income, and occupation affects children's early literacy development (Korat, 2009; Neumann, 2016; Umek, Podlesek, & Fekonja, 2005) and substantial evidence shows that children with lower SES have considerably lower level of literacy than their peers with better SES (Neuman, 2016; Buckingham, Beaman, & Wheldall, 2014; Pan, Rowe, Singer, & Snow, 2005).

SES is believed to have impacts on several factors essential to early literacy development: parents' roles in children's literacy activities, parents' perspective towards literacy, and parents' literacy experiences. Children whose parents have good literacy experiences tend to inherit their parents' reading habits (Sukhram & Hsu, 2012).

Parents play a key role in providing their children with home literacy experiences. Home literacy covers children's exposure to story books as well as home access to other printed reading materials (Lynch, 2008; Korat, 2005). The availability of reading materials at home is closely related to family's SES because high quality books cost a lot. The low level of Indonesian students' literacy skills, as shown by the 2018 PISA survey and the 2016 CCSU report, might be due to the relatively low SES and inadequate family literacy practices. Therefore, it seems necessary to examine the possible correlation between early home literacy experiences and socioeconomic status that, in turn, will possibly affect children's literacy development, be it the formal literacy or the informal one.

## **3. METHODS**

### ***3.1. Participants***

There were 26 family representatives joined this study. Although the primary intent was not to restrict the study to mothers, there were only two fathers participated. Thus, there were 24 mothers and two fathers participated. They reported their child's age from 1 to 8 years old (mean = 3 years 7 months) and also the educational level of their partners as shown in

Table 1. The family monthly income was 50% had low income (2-5 million rupiah), 42.3% had middle (Mid) income (5-10 million rupiah), and only 7.7 % had high income above 10 million rupiah. The distribution of the family monthly income was also shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Distribution of participants’ socio-economic status

Income	Mother’s Education Level	N	Father’s Education Level	N
Low-income	High School	2	High School	3
	Diploma	0	Diploma	1
	S-1	9	S-1	9
	S-2	2	S-2	0
Mid-income	High School	0	High School	1
	Diploma	0	Diploma	0
	S-1	6	S-1	9
	S-2	5	S-2	1
High-income	High School	0	High School	0
	Diploma	0	Diploma	0
	S-1	1	S-1	1
	S-2	1	S-2	1
Total		26		26

**3.2. Procedure**

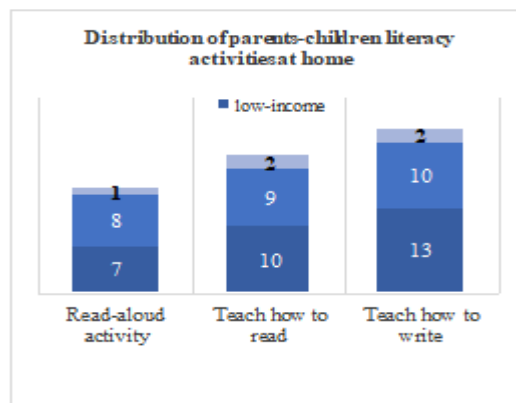
The interview was conducted offline and online and consent data was also gathered from the participants. Interview of the 26 participants was conducted one by one of each participant and recorded. The types of questions delivered to the participants were yes/no questions and open-ended. The categories of early childhood literacy experiences at home from Teale and Sulzby (1986) and Sénéchal (2012) were used and broken down into the four interview core questions as follows; (1) read-aloud; (2) formal reading; (3) formal writing; (4) parents’ literacy. There was also a question added to see the challenges of doing literacy practices at home. After gathering the data, the answers from the yes/no questions were analyzed and presented in table to see the distribution and the ratio of the answers for each family income level. Meanwhile, the data from open-ended question was analyzed accordingly to support the findings from the yes/no questions.

**4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

**4.1. Read-Aloud Activity**

The distribution of reported children read-aloud activity at home is presented in Figure 1. The table shows the summary of the yes-no question of read-aloud activity; Did you read to your child? From the table, there was 53.8% of the low-income families did read-aloud with their children while 42.4% didn’t read to their child. The mid-income families reported that 72.7% of parents read to their child while 27.3% didn’t. The 50:50 ratio was reported from high income families.

Read-aloud is one of the shared reading activities at home that promotes parent-child interaction (Teale & Sulzby, 1986) and belongs to home informal literacy activity (Sénéchal, 2012). The results reported in this study quite echo results from the previous study of shared reading activity. Read-aloud as a part of shared reading was promoted by more than 50% of the parents participated in this study. This shows that parents took read-aloud as a valuable shared reading activity in their home (Deckner, Adamson, & Bakeman, 2006).



**Figure 1** Distribution of parents-children literacy activities at home.

However, the slight ratio of Yes and No answers from low-income families leaves a notable finding. It may indicate that read-aloud has not been a common shared reading activity in our society in Indonesia.

In promoting shared reading in early age, Wood (2002) state that it is significant to help children read independently later, and Hood, Conlon, & Andrews, (2008) also state that it will develop their emergent literacy skills. Pinnell and Scherer (2003) also stated that children who improved the achievement of literacy as a product of reading and writing attained higher scores on a knowledge-of-literacy test. That happens because the goal of adults read to children is to talk with children and to improve their ability in linguistic function features. As such, parents may aid themselves with various techniques to accommodate shared reading and consider learning the components of doing read-aloud in a more interactive way (Sandy & Muliawanti, 2020).

**4.2. Formal Reading and Writing**

Figure 1 also presents the distribution of parents’ activity in teaching their child to read. The table summarizes the answer of the question; Have you taught your child how to read? 76.9% of parents from the low-income families reported that they already have taught their child how to read since early age and only 23.1% haven’t yet. The mid-income families reported that

81.8% of parents have taught their child to read while 18.2% haven't yet. From the high-income families, 100% of the parents have taught their child to read.

The distribution of parents' activity in teaching their child to write is presented in chart 4.1. It shows the answer of the question; Have you taught your child how to write? Parents from low-income and high-income 100% reported that they have taught their child how to write since early age. However, there was 9.1%, one participant, from mid-income family who haven't taught how to write. Unlike other previous studies that reported lesser formal reading activity in early age (Haney & Hill, 2004; Wood, 2002), this study reports noticeable finding on parents' contribution in teaching their children how to read and write. There was more than 75% of parents in this study reported formal reading activity and almost 100% of them teaching how to write from early age regardless their income level. From the interview, 4 of the 5 parents who haven't taught their children how to read due to children's young age meanwhile one of them believed that teaching reading and writing was school's responsibility.

The activities in formal reading and writing were varied. In teaching reading, parents commonly used activities such as spelling and letter-name knowledge. Other activities promoted by some parents were repeating word(s) and/or sentence(s). Moreover, most of parents started to teach writing by introducing their children to hold pen or pencil and let them draw lines or sketch.

Literacy exposure in the early age is believed can help children to be more successful at school. According to Weigel et al. (2006) facilitative parents hold strong literacy beliefs not only in providing shared reading activity but also in assisting their children to the print knowledge. Moreover, other studies also noted that literacy teaching activity at home is significance to develop children in letter knowledge (Evans, Moretti, Shaws, & Fox, 2000; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Stephenson, Parrila, Georgiou, & Kirby, 2008) and also phonological sensitivity and word reading (Stephenson et al., 2008).

### **4.3. Parents' Literacy**

The frequency of parents' literacy activities at home is varied across different family income. Parents from low-income families reported that 46.2% of them often doing literacy activities at home, 15.2% sometimes, 23.1% rarely, and 15.2% didn't answer the question. From the mid-income families, 81.8% of parents reported that they often doing literacy activities at home, 9.1% was rarely, 9.1% didn't answer. The frequency of parents' literacy activities from high-income families was 100% often doing literacy at home.

The percentage of parents' literacy activities at home differed from low to high-income families. Although 46.2% low-income families reported often frequency, the number was smaller than the percentage of parents from mid and high-income. However, the overall percentage of every income level shows a plausible finding that there were more parents in this study who involved more frequently in literacy activities at home than those who were infrequently. Looking at the participants' educational background, it can be seen that 84.62% of the participants were having at least a diploma degree. This may be a good sign for their family literacy environment in which the children from parents with good literacy background may inherit good habit from their parents (Sukhram & Hsu, 2012).

Parents who were doing more literacy activities at home indicated their positive attitude to create a rich literacy environment at home (Spiegel, 1992). Some parents who reported often frequency were involved in home literacy activities such as reading novels and work-related literacy activities and 23.1% of them involved in digital literacy activities. Their active participation in literacy at home can be a model to their children to be more engaged with various literacy activities and materials.

### **4.4. Challenges of Home Literacy Practices**

Challenges of home literacy practices is summarized in Table 2. There was 57.7% of parents reported that it was hard to keep their child focusing on literacy activities. Other challenges reported were as follows; parents' limited time of 15.4%, book varieties access of 7.7%, children distracted by smart phone 3.8%, and children's age factor of 3.8%. There was also 7.7% of parents from mid and high-income families who reported no challenge in assisting or doing literacy activities at home.

Parents in this study reported children's focus as their most challenge in assisting literacy activities at home. The challenge also found in Weigel et al. (2006) in which conventional mothers faced barriers in doing shared reading due to children's less interest, engagement, household distractions, and lack of enthusiasm. They also reported that children's less interest was also affected by parents' fewer skills in shared reading.

Although all of the participants in this study were graduated from high school and 84.62 % had at least diploma degree, it may not be enough to aid them with skills to promote diverse literacy activities at home. Iddings (2009) reported a program, the Welcome Center, that was useful to bridge the school and home literacy practices and develop language and literacy for the newcomers (immigrant families who came to the US). As such, there may be further actions to enhance

parents' literacy skills to accompany and motivate their children in a more various literacy activities at home.

**Table 2.** Challenges of home literacy practices

Challenges	Low-income	Mid-income	High-income	Overall (%)
Children hard to focus	7	7	1	57.7%
Book varieties access	1	1	0	7.7%
Children distracted by smart phone	0	1	0	3.8%
Parents have limited time	4	0	0	15.4%
Children's Age	1	0	0	3.8%
No challenge(s)	0	1	1	7.7%

**5. CONCLUSION**

Surprisingly, the findings show that early childhood literacy experiences at home cannot be predicted solely by family's socio-economic status (SES). All the families participated in this study variously provide home literacy opportunities for their children. In terms of read aloud, formal reading and writing activities, families with mid-income provide more assistances to their children compared to families with low and high income. However, in terms of parents' literacy activities, all parents with high income come first. Furthermore, Indonesian parents, regardless their SES level, tend to perceive early literacy practices by teaching their children letters, numbers and how to read and write. Moreover, it is more important to think about creating rich literacy environments at home regardless the SES level because learning to read is a socio-cultural process (Resnick, 1987) which more related to the beliefs, attitudes, and actions (Spiegel, 1992).

A number of limitations to this study need to be addressed. First, this study took a very small number of participants from across different regions in Indonesia which made this study could not represent any number of populations and cannot be easily generalizable to the national population. Second, the number of participants from high income families were to small which didn't compare evenly to the other group of participants from low- and medium-income families. Third, the scopes of questions in this study only address the literacy practices as follows; (1) read-aloud; (2) formal reading; (3) formal writing; (4) parents' literacy. However, there were still other type of literacy practices belong to family literacy that might apply such as; digital literacy, games, multiliteracy activities, etc. Thus, further study using larger participants and broader literacy practices should be conducted to see the home literacy practices in Indonesia.

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