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Research paper

Home literacy practices and preschool children's emergent writing skills: An initial investigation

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ABSTRACT

Home literacy practices are known to facilitate children's oral language and reading skills. In this study, we extend previous work by examining the amount and types of writing-related home practices that parents engage in with their young preschool children. Next, we examined the relation between these home practices and the development of writing skills in 4- and 5-year old preschool children. Correlations between parental teaching activities and child independent activities and letter writing, spelling, and spontaneous writing were statistically significant.

Results from the multi-level modeling indicated that parental teaching predicted a child's letter writing, spelling, and spontaneous writing skills whereas child independent practices predicted letter writing and spontaneous writing but not spelling. Results of the current study clearly indicate that practices in the home include writing related activities and that these activities have an impact on children's writing development. Implications of this research and directions for future research are discussed.

1. Introduction

Collective work by a number of researchers over the past three decades indicates that children learn to read and write prior to beginning school and receiving formal instruction (e.g., Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Sulzby, 1982; Sulzby & Teale, 1991; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, 2001). Some of these emergent reading skills that preschool children display include knowledge of letter names and letter sounds, phonological awareness skills, and understanding of print concepts. Similarly, before entering kindergarten, preschool children appear capable of writing, including having skills to write their first names, write alphabet letters, and use invented spelling (e.g., Bloodgood, 1999; Fox & Saracho, 1990; Puranik & Lonigan, 2010; Tolchinsky-Landsmann, 2003). Home literacy practices have been shown to be important correlates of children's developing literacy skills (Frijters, Barron, & Brunello, 2000; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Much of the research conducted to date concerning home literacy practices has focused on shared reading frequency and characteristics (e.g., amount of interactivity; Mol, Bus, De Jong, & Smeets, 2008) and its association with children's oral language or reading skills. The aims of the present study were to expand on this knowledge by examining home practices specifically related to writing and to examine if these home practices are related to children's development of letter-writing, spelling, and spontaneous writing skills.

1.1. Effects of home literacy practices on oral language and reading skills

Work conducted by numerous researchers indicates that the home plays an important role in facilitating both oral and written language skills. Initially, these investigations focused on children's storybook exposure and children's early acquisition of language and literacy skills (e.g., Bus, van IJzendoom, & Pellegrini, 1995; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994; Sénéchal, LeFevre, Hudson, & Lawson, 1996). Later work expanded the focus on home practices to include parent-child activities other than book reading, including those related to letters and print exposure (Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002; Frijters et al., 2000; Leseman & de Jong, 1998; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2006). Cumulatively, research has revealed that distinct kinds of home practices often appear to have effects on different oral and written language skills (Hindman & Morrison, 2012; Phillips & Lonigan, 2005).

Sénéchal and LeFevre (2002), Senechal, LeFevre, Thomas, and Daley (1998) suggested a model for distinguishing home literacy practices into those that can be categorized as either informal (where the primary goal is the message contained in the print) or formal

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(parent and child focus on the print itself) activities. An example of an informal interaction may be when the parent is reading to the child and the parent focuses on the meaning of the story. Parent-child reading interactions focused on story meaning are consistently associated with improvements in oral language (Deckner, Adamson, & Bakeman, 2006; Evans, Shaw, & Bell, 2000; Mol et al., 2008). In contrast to these informal interactions, direct parent teaching or formal interactions have a greater facilitative effect on children's code-related emergent literacy skills (Evans et al., 2000; Senechal et al., 1998). For example, when reading an alphabet book to the child, the parent might point to specific letters and provide the child with the name and the sound of the letters. Likewise, explicit alphabet- and word-focused teaching outside of book sharing contexts would be considered formal interactions, and there is evidence that these teaching activities promote development of code-related emergent literacy and conventional literacy skills (Hindman & Morrison, 2012; Levy, Gong, Hessels, Evans, & Jared, 2006; Weigel et al., 2006).

1.2. Home literacy practices and children's developing writing skills

Whereas prior home literacy investigations have explored shared book reading, and teaching of letter name and sound recognition, little is known about home literacy practices specifically related to children's writing. That is, the focus of most home literacy surveys has been on asking parents about the frequency of story book reading, the frequency of reading requests by the child, number of children's books in the house, frequency of library visits, and, in some cases, the frequency with which parents teach children letter-names and letter-sounds and engage in phonological awareness activities. Since writing has not been the focus of previous studies, surveys used by researchers examining home literacy practices typically have included just one or two questions pertaining to writing. For example, Senechal et al. (1998) surveyed parents extensively about their home literacy practices but their survey included only one question asking parents whether they help their children to print words. Haney and Hill (2004) incorporated one yes/no question asking whether someone in the home directly taught the child to write words. Similarly, Hood, Conlon, and Andrews (2008) followed 143 Australian children from preschool to second grade to examine the effect of home practices on spelling development. Their survey included one question pertaining to writing where they asked parents if they taught their children how to write their names. Examining whether parents engage in writing activities with their young children is important because little is known about the types of writing-related practices parents engage in with their young children. Therefore, the first objective of the current study was to survey parents more extensively about their home practices specifically related to writing.

Furthermore, research indicates that parents differ in their beliefs regarding the kinds of activities that facilitate literacy skills, which in turn affects their home literacy practices (DeBaryshe, 1995; Fitzgerald, Spiegel, & Cunningham, 1991; Phillips & Lonigan 2009; Stipek, Milburn, Clements, & Daniels, 1992). Past research indicates that whereas all parents agreed that informal activities such as storybook reading was important, parents varied in their opinion regarding the importance of more structured activities such as using flash cards or specifically teaching children to read and write. Thus, it cannot be assumed that because parents engage in reading-related practices, they also engage in writing-related practices. Fitzgerald et al. (1991) reported that parents "tended to characterize early literacy development mainly with regard to reading, sometimes to the exclusion of writing" (p. 208). In a study examining the role of parental mediation on reading and writing, Aram and Levin (2001) reported that although parents might engage in joint reading/formal activities with their children, they might be hesitant to engage in joint writing with their young preschool children because joint writing is often considered by parents to be a school-like activity and thus perhaps unsuitable for parent–child interactions. In contrast, parents might engage in joint reading because it is viewed by many children and parents as being engaging. These findings suggest that parents' may not view reading and writing as being interrelated and that writing may not be encouraged.

In the few studies that have included questions about writing in measures of home practices, most have not directly examined the effect of these home literacy practices on the development of writing-related skills. Senechal et al. (1998) examined the differential effect of home literacy practices on oral and written language. They included four tasks in their written language factor, including invented spelling, but their study did not examine whether home literacy practices had any effect on each of these written language tasks separately. Therefore, it is not known how or whether home literacy (writing) practices had any specific effect on each of those written language measures. Although Haney and Hill (2004) included one writing-related question in their survey, they did not examine the relation between these practices and children's writing skills. Hood et al. (2008) who longitudinally examined the relation between different types of home literacy practices and written language, included spelling rate as one of their outcome measures. Given the age of the children in their study (children were administered this task in first and second grade), however, a timed task may not have been very appropriate. Notably, the parent survey used by Levy et al. (2006) had a large number of questions related to writing. Although they included several questions regarding writing-related home practices, they did not examine the effect of these home practices to writing skills, perhaps because examining the relation between home literacy practices and writing was not the focus of their study. The most recent relevant studies were those of Gerde, Skibbe, Bowles, and Marticcio (2012) and Hindman and Morrison (2012), both of which used parent-report measures with a greater emphasis on code-focused teaching activities than many prior studies. Hindman and Morrison asked parents about home teaching behaviors such as learning letters and writing activities. Whereas this study demonstrated a significant relation between writing-related home practices and children's letter knowledge and decoding, they did not investigate the relations with child writing outcomes specifically. Gerde et al. (2012) recently investigated a similar question, but they focused exclusively on name writing. They reported that children's letter-name knowledge and fine-motor skills were the most prominent predictors of name writing, however, home literacy environment accounted for about 2% unique variance in name-writing skills.

Whereas past research has not included surveying parents about their home practices related to writing, it must be noted that links between emergent writing and parent practices have been examined by observing parent-child interactions during writing tasks in preschool and kindergarten children. In these studies, the mother is given a writing task- spell words, write an invitation or a grocery list and instructed to help their children with the writing tasks. Interactions between the mother and the child are videotaped and coded for the supportive behaviors that mothers provide- mother holds/guides the pencil, mother writes the letter for the child to copy, mother dictates the letter name etc. In several studies across different cultures and languages, and socio-economic status, maternal mediation has been shown to be related to name writing (Neumann, Hood, & Ford, 2012 for Australian preschoolers) and word-writing (Aram, Abiri, & Elad, 2014 and Aram & Levin, 2001 for Israeli preschoolers; Levin, Aram, Tolchinsky, & McBride, 2013 for Israeli Hebrew-speaking and Spanish-speaking kindergartners; Lin et al., 2012 for Chinese kindergartners). Whereas observations of these mother-child interactions are important to our understanding of the role of parent practices, data obtained from these interactions may be less accurate or different from data obtained from surveys. During these observations, it is entirely possible that mother's might try harder because they are being observed. This may inadvertently make the mothers provide more socially desirable support thereby providing information on what a mother hopes to report rather than what actually occurs in the home. Therefore, data from these observation studies must be supplemented by survey data to