



READING WITH MOM: READING HABITS AMONG RURAL READERS IN SARAWAK



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ABSTRACT

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The role of the mother in the literacy development of a child has been well studied, but only a few have linked this development with reading habits practiced amongst nonnative English-speaking mothers. The current study investigates the choices of English language reading materials for at home reading activities for the mother and child in addition to the motivation that influences this reading habit. Results from the 31 participants from a rural area of Sarawak have shown a significant pattern in favor of fiction genre materials compared to nonfiction reading materials for at home reading activities. This suggests that the variety of information from the fiction-based materials draws more interest and motivation for these mothers to read with their children. Other factors which determine the choices of materials are the proficiency levels of these nonnative English-speaking mothers and the age of the child involved. The findings are significant because this population is often overlooked and thus this study supplements the perspectives of nonnative English-speaking mothers toward literacy activities in the home.

Contribution/ Originality: This study is one of very few studies that have investigated the role of the mother on a child's reading development within the context of rural Sarawak, Malaysia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Parental involvement in a child's literacy development is paramount for the academic success of the child. Studies have shown that parents' active involvement positively impacts their children's academic achievement (Topor *et al.*, 2010). In general, parental involvement, which is usually associated with the parents partaking in various activities both in school and at home, may significantly improve the child's literacy development (Domina, 2005; Dearing *et al.*, 2006; Michael, 2010) as in most cases parents are the first teachers of their children (Britto *et al.*, 2006) thus it is pertinent to acknowledge parental roles when discussing the literacy achievement of children.

Examining parental roles in literacy development is not a new topic. A study from Malaysia shows that mothers deemed frequently reading to their children as a beneficial activity in supporting their children's education (Fauzilah *et al.*, 2011) while a study from Japan illuminated that parents are regarded as partners in children's education (Moorehead, 2007; Jabar, 2010). In light of determining the parental role in literacy development,

research has also shown that the mother's active involvement in reading activity affects positively on the literacy development of the child (Fauzilah *et al.*, 2011).

A study by Michael (2010) has concluded that family involvement in joint reading activities positively affects the literacy development of a child. For instance, reading aloud with a child contributes significantly to literacy performance (Needlman *et al.*, 2005; Chiarenza *et al.*, 2013; Chen, 2018). Another study by Weisleder *et al.* (2018) has shown that a program on reading aloud had meaningful impacts on child language and cognitive development, especially for those of low and middle income backgrounds.

One of the effective ways of promoting literacy development is through reading together at home (Baker *et al.*, 1997). The reading habit at home can nurture children to become motivated and independent readers. There are various studies that depict the effect of choice of materials for reading activities on children's reading motivation as well (Lawson, 1972; Burgess, 1985; Reutzler and Gali, 1998). According to Mohr (2006) "when students read books of their own choosing, they are likely to be more motivated, independent readers" (p. 82). In this article, we present findings on the reading habits and preference of mothers when reading with their children. We also examine the issues that might be affecting the mother-child reading at home program in the district of Bau, Sarawak. The study also sought to explore the motivation behind the mother-child reading habit within this community.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Parental involvement can be defined as initiatives by the schools to assist families of children to create supportive home environments that can support and nurture children's learning (Epstein, 1992). These initiatives include "volunteer programs, workshops for families on how to parent, nurture, and support their children, reading nights, and school board councils" (Johnson, 2015). Though there are many other models on parental involvement, the Epstein Model (Epstein *et al.*, 2009) is the most widely adopted frameworks for parental involvement. In using this model, this study attempts to explore and investigate the mother's involvement in supporting their children's literacy development. According to the Epstein Model as shown in Figure-1, there are six types of involvement namely (1) parenting (schools and parents work on understanding family culture, backgrounds, goals, etc.), (2) communicating (schools and parents communicate on school programs and progress), (3) volunteering (families volunteer in school programs), (4) learning at home (families are involved with children's learning at home, which includes homework and other academic activities), (5) decision-making (families are involved in decision-making in schools), and (6) collaborating with the community (schools and families contribute service to the community) (Epstein *et al.*, 2009).

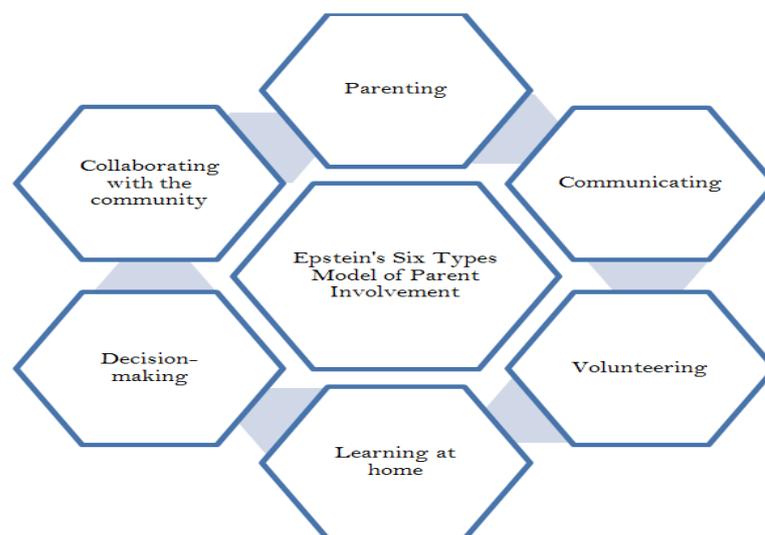


Figure-1. The Epstein model (Epstein *et al.* 2009).

Epstein redefined the meaning of parental involvement and asserted that the parenting roles should go beyond school and home, by forging a partnership between homes, schools and communities (Wright, 2009). The Epstein model is recurrently referenced as it recognizes the role of parents in the home to support their children's learning and to create an environment that nurture their learning (Epstein *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore, a few studies (Barnard, 2004; Ingram *et al.*, 2007; Lopez and Donovan, 2009) have found correlations between the use of this model and increased student achievement.

For instance, in a study by Barnard (2004) results indicated that even after controlling background characteristics and risk factors, parental involvement in school was significantly associated with lower rates of high school dropout, increased on-time high school completion, and highest grade completion. This study suggests that parental involvement in school is an important component in early childhood education to help promote long-term effects.

In another study, Ingram *et al.* (2007) investigated the critical elements of parental involvement that contributed to children's improved academic achievement involving 220 parents of children who attended three Chicago public elementary schools. The children who went to these three schools were mostly from minority groups from low-income populations. Based on Epstein's framework of parental involvement, participants indicated a stronger tendency to be involved in two types of parental involvement based on Epstein *et al.* (2009)'s model: Parenting and Learning at home. The study suggested that schools could assist parents in their parenting capacity and learning at home activities to further improve children's academic performance in schools. Through this program, schools and families have built effective partnerships, despite individual and language differences, in children's mathematics education.

Recognizing the importance of parental involvement in children's education, various efforts have been made to increase parental involvement in schools. In the United States, programs to encourage parents' involvement in children's education have been implemented since the beginning of the 20th century. This could be seen when nurseries that involved parents, especially stay-at-home mothers, to be teacher assistants or other assisting positions began to rise between 1920s to 1960s (Gestwicki, 2007). Then, another program called Head Start was introduced to especially cater the disadvantaged children in the 1960s and 1970s. Parental involvement was also mandated by the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, later reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Act in 1990 Amendments of 1997, and Individuals with Disabilities Educational Improvement Act of 2004. Parents of children with special needs were required by these programs to monitor whether the individualized education program (IEP) for their children was in line with state standards for achievement. Additionally, Goals 2000 was passed into law in the US which emphasized parental involvement. In this bill, every state was required to develop policies to increase parent-school partnerships. Lastly, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation was signed into law in 2002. One of the major goals of NCLB was to provide more choices for parents, including new options for making changes for children in low-performing schools (Domina, 2005). Another new regulation for parental involvement programs introduced by this legislation was to establish parental information and resource centers (PIRC) that assist parents of children identified for improvement under Title I. Thus, parents' involvement in their children's education has become more valued in the United States by themselves as well as by other stakeholders such as policy makers, teachers, school administrators, and children.

In Malaysia, however, the partnership between school and parents is still relatively low. The only known parental involvement in public schools is the Parent-Teacher Association or commonly known as 'Persatuan Ibu Bapa dan Guru' (PIBG) (Jennifer *et al.*, 2001). Currently, teachers play the vital role in children's education with little or no involvement from the parents. The partial parental involvement is not only inadequate but it also fosters a society of individuals unprepared to engage in competent cooperative interactions. It is essential then, that teachers be adept not only in working alone but also in having parents as partners (Jennifer *et al.*, 2001).

In a news article by Astro Awani, the Malaysian Minister of Education announced that school Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), or PIBGs, must redefine their role and function to cater the needs of the schools. It was also said that parents should work together with schools for the benefit of the children and not merely to run businesses. Parental involvement should extend to support the schools in school activities and also home-based learning activities (Halimah, 2019).

The current system in Malaysia focuses largely on teachers as the key players in the children's education with little consideration being placed in having parents as partners in the children's learning process. Jennifer *et al.* (2001) investigated the views of 553 headmasters and teachers towards the concepts of parental involvement and its importance. They further examined the existing partnership models in primary schools. The results indicated that their views on parental involvement were partial with the majority of them perceiving that parental involvement was important, especially for children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. Nevertheless, the findings also revealed that only a small number of schools have actually carried out the practices of having the parental involvement with the school activities.

Furthermore, there have been various studies conducted on a mother's role on a child's academic achievement in various parts of the world. For instance, a study by Reay (2000) has examined the mother's emotional engagement with their children's education in their primary schooling. The study was enriched with a new perspective by analyzing how positive and negative emotions in mothers' activities with their children could give impact on a child's literacy development. In this study, it concluded that there was a positive correlation between a mother's emotional wellbeing and a child's educational success.

In the same vein, another study was conducted by Aram and Levin (2001) investigating the relationship between a mother's involvement in children's writing. The study analyzed the steps in the encoding process that the child was involved in when the mother intervened. It was later found in the study that a child's literacy was related to social economic status, maternal literacy, literacy tools at home, and maternal mediation.

Another study by Caspe (2009) on this subject examined the relationship between mothers' book sharing styles and low-income Latino children's language and literacy development for a period of six months. The study revealed that mothers' book sharing styles had an effect on children's literacy.

Similarly, a study was conducted among 72 Malaysian mothers with children aged between 4 to 6 years old to investigate the relationship between mothers' beliefs and children's literacy (Fauzilah *et al.*, 2011). The mothers' reading beliefs were according to their material education, ethnic background and family social economic status. The findings revealed that most of these Malaysian mothers agreed that reading to their children was a beneficial activity as it also provided considerable support to help their children become competent readers. The findings also suggest that mothers' beliefs may impact emergent literacy development (Fauzilah *et al.*, 2011).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Population Selection

The study was conducted in a rural primary school in District of Bau, Sarawak. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the District Education Office and supported by the school head. To begin the project, the research population targeted only mothers whose children attended the primary school. Aside from the mothers, female guardians, such as a grandmother or aunt, were eligible for this study for children without the mother's presence at home due to divorce or death; though none was reported in this study. The research team used the method of convenience sampling in gathering the mothers in the school for the Reading with Mom Workshop. Mothers or female guardians were encouraged to be involved in this project as it was also part of the school literacy program. It was explained to the participants that participation was on a voluntary basis as there was no token or reward given. Throughout this project, the school provided assistance by establishing contact with the participants for the workshop.

3.2. The Procedures

For the initial data collection, a reading logbook was distributed to all the Reading with Mom workshop participants. Throughout the ten-month period, the mothers and child put aside a minimum of 30 minutes per day to read together. The participants were requested to record their reading activity in the logbook provided. A representative from each of the nine villages was assigned to collect the logbook to be handed in to the researcher upon completion. The next method for data collection was the questionnaire survey, which was conducted before the end of the study. Table 1 indicates the timeline of procedures for the study.

Table-1. Timeline of procedures for the study.

Activity	Nov 2018	Dec 2018	Jan 2019	Feb 2019	March 2019	Apr 2019	May 2019	June 2019	Jul 2019	Aug 2019
Reading with Mom workshop										
Reading logbook activity										
Questionnaire survey										
Reading logbook activity										

3.3. Reading with Mom Workshop

A Reading with Mom Workshop was held on the 14th of November 2018 at the school. The workshop was held from 8.00 a.m. to 2.00 p.m. and there were 31 participants in total. During the workshop, there were three sessions involved, namely the introduction to the project, the reading activities, and the presentation by the mothers. Besides that, the workshop also served as a platform for the researchers to establish a network with the mothers as the project was to extend throughout a year. The workshop focused on the reading activities and brainstorming session with the mothers. Table 2 depicts the activities from this Reading workshop. At the end of the workshop, the reading logbook was distributed to all the participants. Participants were briefed on how to fill in the information in the logbook and asked to return it to the researchers once it was completed. The logbook included information such as the time spent reading, as well as the choices of reading materials during the reading session with the child at home.

Table-2. description of reading with mom workshop.

Session	Activities
Session 1 (120 mins) Introduction to Reading with Mom Project	Activity 1: Welcoming speech and briefing on the project Activity 2: Ice Breaking activity Activity 3: Q and A session
Session 2 (120 mins) Reading workshop	Activity 1: Knowing types of reading materials Activity 2: Reading games (in groups) Activity 3: Group Presentation
Session 3 (60 mins) Debriefing	Activity 1: Sharing and brainstorming session Activity 2: How to fill the reading logbook

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

For this data presentation, this section focuses on findings based on the reading logbook from the 31 participants.

4.1. The Demographic Data

This study adopted a survey research approach to collect the data of reading materials used by the participants throughout the 10 months' period. All 31 participants attended the Reading with Moms Workshop. Of the participants, 10 were aged between 20 to 30 years old (32.3%), while a majority of the participants were between 31 to 40 years old (41.9%) and lastly, 25.8% were between 41 to 50 years of age. In terms of the parents' level of qualification, most of the participants possessed their higher secondary education, namely *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia*

(SPM), at 54.8%. This was followed by 29.1% of the participants who held their highest level of education at lower secondary level, or *Penilaian Rendah Malaysia* (PMR), and 12.9% who only completed their primary education, or *Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah* (UPSR). Only one participant possessed a diploma (3.2%). All of the participants were residents of the nine villages from the Krokong area in the Bau district, as shown in Table 3. The last demographic investigated in this study was the participants' occupations. The majority of the participants were full-time housewives (83.9%), followed by 12.9% who were working in a private sector, and only one participant who worked with the government (3.2%).

Table-3. Participants' demographic profile.

Items	Percentages (f)
Education level	
• Diploma	3.2 (1)
• SPM	54.8(17)
• PMR	29.1(9)
• UPSR	12.9(4)
Age group	
• 21 – 30	32.3 (10)
• 31 – 40	41.9 (13)
• 41 – 50	25.8 (8)
Village	
• Batu Sepit	16.2 (5)
• Blimbin	22.6 (7)
• Bijongon	22.6 (7)
• Fairy	3.2 (1)
• Kanan	9.7 (3)
• Krokong	3.2 (1)
• Peros	6.4 (2)
• Pisa	9.7 (3)
• Sinaan	6.4 (2)
Occupation	
• Full-time housewife	83.9(26)
• Government staff	3.2 (1)
• Private sector	12.9(4)

In this study, there were 21 pupils involved in the data analysis. These 21 pupils completed the logbooks at home with their guardian. The school the students attended had a high concentration of pupils from the Bidayuh ethnic group as it was a rural school in the predominantly Bidayuh district. Of these pupils, there were four standards involved in this study, and a mean pupil age of 8.9 years. The majority of the child participants (eight) were from the Year 3 class, followed by six from Year 2 and six from Year 4 classes, while only one was from the Year 1 class. Table 4 below depicts the detailed demographic information of the pupils.

Table-4. Demographic information of child participants (N=21).

Year	Percentage (f)
Standard 1 (age 7)	4.8 (1)
Standard 2 (age 8)	28.6 (6)
Standard 3 (age 9)	38.1(8)
Standard 4 (age 10)	28.5 (6)

Throughout the study period, participants submitted the completed logbook to the researcher and the last batch of logbooks was collected on the 30th of August 2019. From the 31 participants, only 18 logbooks were deemed usable for the analysis. Therefore, the response rate for this study is 58.06%. From the data collected, these

mothers recorded an overwhelming 75.5% as preference for fiction literature like storybooks (72.1%), novels (1.6%) and comics (1.8%) when reading with their children. As for the nonfiction genre, the mothers recorded reading textbooks (14.3%), newspapers (5%), magazines (1.8%), dictionaries (1.2%), catalogues (0.8%) and Bibles or religious materials (1.5%), with a total record of 24.5% from the bulk of the reading materials. Both types of reading genres were in English and Malay languages; which only includes printed reading materials and excludes online reading materials. The detailed information of the differences in types of literature by frequency is depicted in [Table 5](#).

Table-5. Comparison for the selected reading materials by genre based on frequency.

Types of reading genre	Percentage (f)
Non Fiction	
• Textbook	24.5(163)
• Newspaper	14.3(95)
• Magazine	5.0(33)
• Dictionary	1.8(12)
• Catalogue	1.2(8)
• Bible and religious materials	0.7(5)
	1.5(10)
Fiction	75.5 (503)
• Storybook	72.1(480)
• Novel	1.6 (11)
• Comic	1.8(12)

Reading material choice among the participants appeared to have been influenced by both recreational and functional reading habits. The most preferred reading materials included both fiction (story books) and nonfiction (textbooks and newspapers). Similarly, a study by [Chaudhry and Low \(2009\)](#) found that the choice of reading materials was influenced by both pragmatic and functional reading habits. In this study, fiction was favored over non-fiction with the majority mentioning story books in their logbooks. Story books usually contain interesting narratives with accompanying images, which can enhance reading motivation among young readers ([Wigfield, 2000](#)). These interesting reading materials may further influence children's intrinsic motivation to read.

5. DISCUSSION

This study examines the activities involving reading with mom in a rural primary school in Bau, Sarawak. The evidence presented in this study helped researchers to understand the types of materials, limitations and motivation amongst the mothers when it comes to helping their children to read. Mothers play an important role when it comes to the literacy development of their children, and many favored reading storybooks to engage the children in reading. Another notion is that the mothers seemed to decide on the type of materials suitable for the children to read. Although the data collected for this study focused on the frequency of the materials used, it is a simple indication that reading choice has a significant role in literacy development. Given the fact that the children participating were 8 to 9 years old, such literature genre is an obvious choice to build up their characters through moral values and meanings behind those stories. It is a pragmatic approach as mentioned by [Chaudhry and Low \(2009\)](#) as nonfiction materials require readers to have functional reading habits.

Secondly, the answer of the question ("What is the motivation for the reading activity with children?") can be seen through the second-most recorded material: the textbook. Based on the data, it shows that these mothers still consider academic texts as important reading materials. The motivation in choosing this reading material is obvious given the fact that these children need to learn and do homework for their literacy development. This leads to a simple conclusion that academic materials are also significant for home reading activities. The evidence of having textbooks as one of the reading choices indicates that academic achievement motivates these mothers when choosing reading materials at home. It is hoped that the reading with mom activity will empower the children to be

competent readers while bringing them pleasure in reading interesting materials with their mothers. Such experiences would foster better understanding of how mothers can contribute actively in their children's literacy development, especially at home. Throughout the study, the participants have shown that reading habits can be meaningful for both the mothers and the children.

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