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Maternal literacy teaching, causal attributions and children's literacy skills in Finnish-speaking and language minority families



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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effect of mothers' (language minority group mothers, LM, $n = 49$, and Finnish speaking mothers, MP, $n = 368$) literacy teaching at home, and mothers' causal attributions of their children's (mean age 11.48 years) literacy skills at fourth grade in Finland. For Finnish speaking mothers, results showed a negative correlation between the amount of literacy taught at home and children's performance on reading tests i.e., more teaching was associated with poorer performance and vice versa. Also, the more MP mothers measured their children's success by their ability, the better their children performed in reading comprehension tests. In the LM group, maternal literacy teaching did not predict children's reading skills.

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1. Introduction

Parental involvement in children's schooling has consistently been shown to impact children's achievement positively, regardless of its form (Hood, Conlon, & Andrews, 2008; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). According to Weiner (1985) and Weiner (1992) attributional theory of motivation, causal beliefs play a big role in influencing children's behavior and performance. All forms of involvement can motivate children's interest in learning and can facilitate the development of partnerships between parents and teachers that ultimately lead to gains in student literacy achievement (Cairney & Munsie, 1995). Although a number of studies have been conducted on family involvement and parental participation in their child's education (e.g., Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Epstein, 1995; Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000; Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004; Fantuzzo, Perry, & Childs, 2006), no studies, to the best of our knowledge, have examined the relation between a parent's attributions and a mother's teaching practices. Moreover, only little research (e.g., Adams & Christenson, 1998, 2000; Kikas et al., 2011) has been conducted on the relation between parental attributions in teachers and classrooms as well as family characteristics. Consequently, in the present study, mothers' involvement in children's homework and their causal attributions towards their children's reading achievement were assessed.

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1.1. Parental teaching of reading and the child's skill development

Parental teaching of reading has shown an important effect on parental involvement in children's school achievement (e.g., Manolitsis, Gergiou, & Parrila, 2011; Senechal & LeFevre, 2002, Torppa, Poikkeus, Laakso, Eklund, & Lyytinen, 2006). Thus far, findings have been contradictory: Some studies have clearly shown the positive contributions made by parental participation in children's success at reading skills (e.g., Sénéchal, & LeFevre, 2002; Sénéchal, 2006), but also the opposite impact of parents' teaching has been shown—that is, parental teaching has a negative effect on children's reading skills (e.g., Silinskas, Leppänen, Aunola, Parrila, & Nurmi, 2010). Researchers have noticed that parents react to their children's poor performance by increasing the frequency of teaching, and poor performing children more often ask for help from their parents (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007). Correspondingly, parents who have high- skills children, have been shown to teach their children less than parents whose children had poorer reading skills (Silinskas et al., 2013).

However, there are only a few studies in which parental help and support have been examined among language minority families. For example, Huentsigen and Jose (2009) studied well-educated first generation European-American and Chinese-American parents' involvement in their children's schooling. They found that Chinese-American parents were less involved with their children's schooling than were European-American parents, but they were more involved in explicitly teaching their children at home. Kiuru et al. (2012) studied 864 Finnish-speaking children and their parents and teachers. They researched which authoritative parenting and authoritative parenting teaching predicted the development of children's reading and writing from Grades 1 and 2. They noticed that authoritative parenting was positively associated with spelling development, especially among the children with reading risk, and authoritative parenting teaching was positively associated with spelling development among non-reader children and children with no reading difficulties. As well, Lee and Bowen (2006) studied specific types of parental involvement in the United States. They collected data from 415 third- to fifth- grade students and their parents. They found that European-American parental homework help was negatively associated with their children's achievement, but positively associated with African-American and Hispanic-American children's achievements. According to the researchers, the reason for this could be that European-American parents primarily help their children with homework when the children are not doing well academically.

1.2. Parents' causal attributions and children's academic skill development

Parents' causal attributions are the ways in which parents explain, predict, and evaluate their children's achievements (Miller, 1995). Attributions have been shown to influence parenting practices and their involvement in children's activities, which in turn influence children's development (Bugental & Happaney, 2002). Parental causal attribution theory is based on the work of Weiner (1986) and his Attributional Theory of Achievement Motivation. Studies in this field have shown that parents attributed their children's academic achievement to ability, effort, teaching, and the difficulty of the task (Natale, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2009; Weiner, 1986). According to Weiner's theory, causal attributions consist of three dimensions: *Locus* shows whether the success or failure is of an internal or external dimension, *stability* shows whether the factor is stable or unstable, and *controllability* shows whether the individual is in control or not. According to this theory, attribution to a child's ability is an internal, unstable and uncontrollable dimension, but attribution to child's effort is an internal, stable, and controllable dimension. On the contrary, attribution to the task difficulty is external, stable and uncontrollable, and attribution to adult's help is an external dimension (Natale et al., 2009; Weiner, 1979, 1986).

Studies have investigated the attitudes of parents and the effects of these attitudes on children's school achievement. Parental beliefs have been found to predict a child's school performance in the development of literacy skills (Aunola, Nurmi, Niemi, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2002; Bouffart & Hill, 2005). Different attributes affect children's school performances in different ways. Natale et al. (2009) noticed that parents' attributions of ability and effort predicted their children's failure or success in children's academic skills both in kindergarten and primary school. Some studies have shown that parents typically attribute their children's good success to internal causes such as effort and ability, and their failure to external issues such as task difficulty. In that way, parents employ a "self-protective bias" (Himmelstein, Graham, & Weiner, 1991; Miller, Manhal, & Mee, 1991). On the other hand, as Yee and Eccles (1988) suggested, parents attributed their children's success to internal causes but their failure in school performance to a lack of effort. Leung and Shek (2014) studied Chinese children aged 11–16 years and their parents' attribution of success and failure in school to their children. The study showed that maternal attribution of their children's success or failure to the child's effort affected maternal control and sacrifice to their child's education.

The parents' attributes, as well as the strength of these attributes, has been shown to have an effect on school achievement. Rytönen, Aunola, and Nurmi (2005) studied the effects of parent's causal attributions to their children's school achievement in preschool and primary school. They noticed that in preschool and primary school, the parents attributed their children's success to teaching and ability. The higher the achievement shown by the children, the more their parents attributed this success to their children's ability and the less they attributed the success to teachers' efforts.

1.3. Attributions and teaching of reading in language minority (LM) families

Although some studies of parental attributions exist, only a few exist within the context of studies among language minority children. Villiger, Wandeer, and Niggli (2014) found that immigrant students reported high motivation compared to

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