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## Cognitive Development



# Early literacy among Arabic-speaking kindergartners: The role of socioeconomic status, home literacy environment and maternal mediation of writing



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### ABSTRACT

We explored the sociocultural context of early literacy development among Arabic-speaking kindergartners in Israel, focusing on the nature of mother–child joint writing. Eighty-nine kindergartners and their mothers participated. Mothers were videotaped in their homes while helping their children write words. Early literacy was evaluated by alphabetic knowledge, concepts about print, phonological awareness, and vocabulary. Kindergartners' early literacy was related to socioeconomic status (SES), home literacy environment (HLE) and maternal mediation level. Hierarchical regressions indicate that HLE predicted alphabetic knowledge, phonological awareness, and vocabulary beyond SES. Maternal mediation of writing predicted all children's early literacy measures except vocabulary, after controlling for SES and HLE. We discuss maternally mediated joint writing interactions as a possible context for early literacy enhancement among young Arabic-speaking children in Israel.

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## 1. Introduction

Cross-linguistic differences in language structure and orthographic architecture have led to extensive research on variations in literacy acquisition in different languages (Joshi & Aaron, 2006). Early home literacy activities in a variety of languages such as Chinese (Lau & McBride-Chang, 2005), Dutch (Leseman & de Jong, 1998), Greek (Manolitsis, Georgiou, & Parrila, 2009), and Hebrew (Korat, Klein, & Segal-Drori, 2007) have been studied. Examining a spectrum of languages broadens understanding of literacy acquisition and provides insights into universal and language-specific aspects of literacy development (Reilly & Radach, 2012). The present study examines Arabic-speaking children's early literacy from a sociocultural perspective focusing on mother–child writing interactions. Early literacy in Arabic has received little attention to date, despite it being particularly interesting due to its diglossic nature (children speak one language and learn to read and write another) and complex orthography (visual letter similarity).

### 1.1. Literacy development within a sociocultural context

Bronfenbrenner's (1986) bio-ecological systems theory emphasizes the interplay of various levels of context surrounding children's development. The ecological environment is conceived topologically as a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next, all relating to the child's development. The closer the level is to the child, the more directly it affects the child's development. Our study examined a three-level model within the Arabic-speaking family related to kindergartners' early literacy, presented from distal to proximal: socioeconomic status (SES), home literacy environment (HLE) including the child's literacy tools and activities at home, and the nature of maternal writing mediation.

SES appears related to children's literacy, as it does to other aspects of cognitive development (Clearfield & Niman, 2012). Children of lower SES display lower levels of phonological awareness, letter naming, word writing, word recognition, vocabulary, and grammar (Bowey, 1995; Korat et al., 2007; Levin, Share, & Shatil, 1996; Lundberg, Larsman, & Strid, 2012). HLE reflects children's access to literacy-evoking materials and to experiences that influence their language and literacy development (Griffin & Morrison, 1997; Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinal, 2005). For example, Rodriguez et al. (2009) studied the unique contributions of literacy activities, maternal quality of engagement, and availability of learning materials to infants' language development, emergent literacy, and school readiness. They found each aspect associated with child outcomes. Although HLE is related to SES and differences exist in the literacy environment of children from different SES levels (Korat et al., 2007), HLE also varies among families of the same SES (Aram & Levin, 2001). We aimed to study the relationship between families' SES and HLE and children's early literacy, focusing on the level closest to the child – maternal mediation of writing.

### 1.2. Writing interactions with young children in different orthographies

Children's interest in writing and their attempts to write start before they understand the alphabetic principle (Mata, 2011). Many parents respect their children's interest and support their writing of words, names, birthday greetings, etc. (Hall, 2000; Neumann & Neumann, 2010; Saracho, 2000).

Observing parents and children during writing tasks, researchers have found that parents apply a consistent level of writing mediation across different tasks, such as writing dictated words, writing names, and writing composed phrases (Aram, 2002). Relations between parents' behaviors during joint writing and children's alphabetic and linguistic skills have been studied in several languages, revealing some universal cross-linguistic patterns and some language-specific ones. Parental mediation of writing is consistently related to a range of children's alphabetic skills in languages that differ in their writing systems, such as Hebrew, Spanish, Chinese and English (Levin, Aram, Tolchinsky, & McBride-Chang, submitted for publication; Lin, McBride-Chang, Aram, & Levin, 2011; Worzalla, Skibbe, Hindman, Aram, & Morrison, submitted for publication). For example, Aram and Levin (2001) videotaped Hebrew-speaking mothers guiding their kindergartners (aged 5–6) in writing unfamiliar words. The degrees to which mothers communicated steps in the word encoding process and encouraged

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