Full length article

Home literacy as cultural transmission: Parent preferences for shared reading in the United Arab Emirates☆

Lydia Barza [a],*, Antje von Suchodoletz [b]

[a] Zayed University, College of Education, PO Box 144534, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates
[b] New York University Abu Dhabi, Department of Psychology, PO Box 129188, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

A B S T R A C T

This paper examines parents' literacy preferences for their young children as a reflection of the greater culture within a Muslim, Arab context. We describe literacy as a social practice and form of cultural transmission. Parent preferences among nationals in the United Arab Emirates ($n = 118$) are described across the following dimensions: children's book genre and content, and purpose of shared reading. Semi-structured interviews were analyzed based on the constant comparison data reduction method. Parents valued books that were a reflection of their culture and values. Nonfiction texts were favored due to their realistic content, which allowed parents to more easily assess a book's suitability for their child. They preferred life, earth and space science texts that teach facts and morality. Favorite folk stories included The Arabian Nights and Tales of Juha because of their entertainment value and lessons taught. The purpose of shared reading is mainly to teach isolated reading skills and develop factual knowledge, deemphasizing meaning making. Parents allowed boys to self-select reading materials more than girls. Study implications call for literacies that unite and empower rather than spark opposition from the local culture.

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1. Introduction

Both fathers' and mothers' home literacy involvement in the early childhood years positively contribute to children's cognitive and socioemotional development. Parent stimulation of reading in childhood, including shared book reading, is associated with children's reading levels and enhanced reading and math outcomes (Baker, 2013; Kraaykamp, 2003; Mol & Bus, 2011). As such, parents should be encouraged to increase both the quantity and quality of home literacy experiences for their children. How to do this, however, is dependent on important cultural factors.

In this paper we use sociocultural theory based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological framework for human development as a basis to argue that home literacy practices are a form of cultural transmission. As such, we seek to describe the specific ways in which families with a common culture and religious affiliation seek to pass on their cultural identity to their children through shared reading practices. The local Emirati population of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) presents a unique opportunity for research because (1) they constitute a Muslim, Arab population within which few literacy-related studies are reported, and (2)

they represent a culture in transition having established themselves as a nation <50 years ago. At that time, they were considered one of the least developed countries in the world and now the UAE boasts the second largest economy in the Arab world. Considered in the context of the UAE, we examine parent preferences for storybook genre and content. In the process, we reveal how and to what extent this Arab population with a rich history of conservative Muslim traditions is influenced by Western culture in terms of their home literacy preferences and practices.

1.1. Home literacy practices as cultural transmission

Ecological theory holds that child development is influenced by the interaction between the characteristics of the individual child and his or her environment. These layers of contextual influence include family, school, and community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Fraser, 2004). The ecological model is also compatible with the notion of cultural reproduction, in that, characteristics of the greater culture are reflected in smaller microsystems, including school and home (Bourdieu, 1977; Jæger, 2011; Sullivan, 2001; Yaish & Katz-Gerro, 2010). Facets of the greater culture, including political, economic, and religious spheres, influence home literacy practices (Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2005). Parents serve as sociocultural intermediaries for the child, largely controlling access and exposure to cultural artifacts, including children's books (Arizpe, Farrell, & McAdam, 2013; Chick & Heilman-Houser, 2000; John-Steiner & Mahn, 2003; Street, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). Moreover, literacy is a social learning tool that requires the integration of culture and experience resulting in what Curtin and Hall (2013) refer to as 'literacy as a shared consciousness'. As such, parental socialization efforts are a form of cultural transmission that influences children's literacy preferences (Notten, Kraaykamp, & Konig, 2012).

Although there is a history of sociocultural studies of literacy in the West, the literature regarding Eastern cultures has long been dominated by psycholinguistic and cognitive processing models, most of which neglect the importance of context for literacy development. Therefore, a focus on literacy-related cultural activities make "the valued practices of a community on the nature of learning and participation … visible" (Razfar & Gutiérrez, 2013, p. 55). Drawing upon ecological and sociocultural theories, this study responds to such calls by examining home literacy socialization practices of children growing up in the UAE. More specifically, we aim to contribute to the understanding of how literacy practices are reflective of cultural ideologies through an examination of Emirati parents' preferences for their child's books. The importance of making home literacy learning relevant to Emiratis is no more dramatic given the high school dropout rates, in particular in middle school (Marri & Helal, 2011; Ridge, Farah, & Shami, 2013). The first strategies objective for reducing attrition recommended by school authorities in the UAE is increasing engagement and involvement in home learning activities with shared reading being an important component (Marri & Helal, 2011; Sénéchal, 2012). Investigating parent preferences for storybook genre and content may provide important information on the current literacy practices in the Emirati culture and parents' understanding of the nature of children's learning.

1.2. Parents' storybook preferences

Investigations on parent book selection for their children are limited in regards to both population and methodology. Most studies have been conducted in Western cultures. A common pattern of results emerged indicating that parents tend to (a) read narrative text or fiction to children most often, as compared to information books or non-fiction (Dickinson, De Temple, Hirschler, & Smith, 1992; Owens, 1992; Saracho & Spodek, 2010), and (b) choose books for their children based on content, their perceptions of their child's interests, and the book's complexity (Anderson, Anderson, Shapiro, & Lynch, 2001; Owens, 1992; Robinson, 1983; Saracho & Spodek, 2010).

For example, in the Anderson et al. (2001) study 24 parents of four year olds were asked to choose five books out of fourteen presented to them representing various genres. When asked for the reasons behind their book choices, parents cited content first. This included the overall concept of the book, how engaging they thought the topic would be for their child, and how much fun they thought they would have reading the book with the child. Parents also reported selecting books based on their child's interests, aesthetics (mostly illustrations), and familiarity (with the book or its author). As compared to earlier investigations, some evidence exits that parents' book preferences for their young children are shifting from predominantly fiction texts to a more balanced preference for both fiction and non-fiction texts. The authors attribute this to the increase in quality informational books published as well as parents' increased familiarity with this genre. An additional factor that requires further research involves recent emphases on motivating students towards STEM fields (Rosenzweig & Wigfield, 2016) and how parents contribute to this push through their book choices.

Further, most studies that include shared reading interventions with families provide limited (van Kleeck, Gillam, Hamilton, & McGrath, 1997) or no opportunities for parents to choose the reading materials (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000; Hindman, Skibbe, & Foster, 2014; Landry et al., 2012; Malin, Cabrera, & Rowe, 2014; Whitehurst et al., 1994) with few exceptions (Saracho & Spodek, 2010). Rather, they tend to focus on parent use of materials provided by the researcher and effects of shared reading on language and reading achievement. Therefore, most studies on home literacy interventions do not acknowledge shared reading as cultural transmission, even with diverse populations.

There also exists a gap in the literature regarding storybook preferences and race or ethnicity (Mohr, 2003; Stoodt-Hill & Amspaugh-Corson, 2001). Although we acknowledge that race, culture, and nationality are not the same, we do use national identity in the present study to make assumptions about the population's shared culture.