

Teaching reading in the early years: exploring home and kindergarten relationships

Ibrahim A. Al-Momani^a, Fathi M. Ihmeideh^{b*} and Abdallah M. Abu Naba^h^c

^aFaculty of Educational Sciences, The University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan; ^bQueen Rania Faculty for Childhood, The Hashemite University, Zarqa, Jordan; ^cFaculty of Educational Sciences, The Hashemite University, Zarqa, Jordan

(Received 24 April 2008; final version received 20 June 2008)

This study investigated the relationship between home and kindergarten with regard to helping children with reading in Jordan. Interviews with parents of four- to five-year-old kindergarten students ($n = 40$) and their teachers ($n = 20$) were conducted. Results indicated that, although there was cooperation between parents and teachers, the role of teachers in encouraging parental involvement in their children's reading was quite limited. Results also indicated that teachers consider parental involvement as unhelpful since (1) they look at parents as unqualified persons to take a role in teaching reading, and (2) parents usually pressure teachers to employ inappropriate methods to teach children how to read. However, parents expressed their willingness to be involved when teachers give them the opportunity. Most parents think they need to know the appropriate methods to teach children how to read. This study identified the need for educating parents about kindergarten goals and appropriate activities.

Keywords: home–kindergarten relationship; learning to read; parent involvement

Introduction

Learning to read is seen as a vital, social and interactive process that begins at home as the child's first social organisation. This kind of interaction is considered to be a main socialising influence in young children's life (Morrow, 2004). Home is also a cultural environment in which children's behaviours, attitudes, language, emotions, thinking, meanings and even dreams are shaped. Young children are active learners who learn through their early years at home more quickly than at any other time in their life. Early childhood educators are aware of the important roles that parents and the home environment play in the development of early reading skills (Clark, 2007). This has been clearly supported by many correlational and longitudinal research studies of the past few decades; these studies advocated the importance of parental involvement and support in children's early years in developing their ability to read (Durkin, 1966; Teale, 1986). This study explored parents' and teachers' perceptions of parental involvement in and support of early reading development for young children. The relation between these perceptions was documented with interviews of kindergarten students' parents and teachers.

*Corresponding author. Email: fathi@hu.edu.jo

Background

Through the ages, parents have been more concerned about their children's progress in reading than in any other school subject. Parents' role in their children's reading development is not a recent phenomenon in the educational literature (Haussler & Goodman, 1984). Historically, reading was taught at home rather than at school. Durkin (1966) was one of the first researchers who investigated what parents were doing to promote early literacy development. Several studies on storybook reading had examined the efficacy of parent-preschooler reading in relation to reading skills, emergent literacy skills and language growth (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995).

The general themes arising from research studies indicated that learning to read for young children can be developed by communication and cooperation between home and school (Hannon, 1995, 1998; Morrow, 2004; Nutbrown, Hannon, & Morgan, 2005). Dailey (1991) suggested that promoting literacy is seen as the easiest and most beneficial way to make cooperation between parents and teachers a reality. The importance of home-school partnerships in supporting and increasing the effectiveness of teachers and parents to help children succeed in their literacy learning is reasonably well established (Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006).

Empirical research has shown that children develop perceptions about literacy consistent not only with their teachers but also with their parents (Wing, 1989). Anderson (1995) investigated the relationships between parents' perceptions about early literacy learning and their children's early literacy knowledge and their perceptions of learning to read, and found a positive relationship between parents' perceptions and their children's perceptions. Cuckle (1996) found that parents were aware of the fact that reading emerges before children start their formal schooling, through exposure to books and print materials and reading them stories in a meaningful environment in early childhood.

Today the interest has focused on how parents and other caregivers in the early childhood centres can develop appropriate involvement and support for future literacy instruction. It has been noted that there are different ways to involve parents in developing their children's learning; those ways could be either school-based or home-based (Brown, 1989). In both ways, parents have responsibility for enhancing their children's success in literacy. Therefore, early childhood educators should help parents and other caregivers undertake this responsibility and play their role in a successful way.

Many studies have investigated the role of parents in promoting literacy skills for children. Hannon (1995, 1998) pointed out that any attempt to involve parents in teaching literacy should have some theoretical basis, with the aim of helping them and to understand 'what is important about the parents' role, what experiences are likely to assist children's literacy development, and, broadly, what ways of working with parents should be considered' (1995, pp. 46–47).

Teachers need to give parents the opportunity to present their views on what they would like their child to be learning, to express how they feel about what happens in school and to offer suggestions for changes (Hughes & Oi-man, 2007; Morrow, 2004). This is important in building effective school-home partnerships and these procedures make parents aware of what is going on at school and what they are expected to do. Teachers, in order to work and interact with parents in a successful way, should be aware of the type of literacy experiences occurring at home and should also have some

knowledge of the sociocultural context of their students' families (Nutbrown et al., 2005). It has been argued that teachers who encourage parental involvement tend to report relatively high levels of teaching efficacy and support from and perceived effectiveness by parents (Angelides, Theophanous, & Leigh, 2006; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991).

Despite the importance of literacy and interest in home–kindergarten relationships and parental involvement, some parents (1) rarely become involved in their children's learning, (2) may have never read to or encouraged their children to read books, (3) do not possess books or any kind of printed materials in the home, and (4) do not share any literacy activities with their children. Therefore, teachers have responsibility for calling parents' attention to the importance of their role, bearing in mind that children come from diverse sociocultural backgrounds where literacy is practised in various ways and levels. Some children may come to school with rich experiences with books and stories (e.g. they have had books and stories read to them by parents every day and live in an environment filled with books and other printed materials), while others start school with very little or no exposure to such literacy experiences.

However, Hannon and James (1990) found that some preschool teachers believed that parental involvement in preschool literacy could have a negative impact on children's literacy development as parents use wrong methods in teaching children and put pressure on children to read; so the parents were excluded from participating in their children's learning at school. They suggested that, although most parents expressed a willingness to know more about helping with literacy, only a few received advice from teachers. Some teachers may discourage parental involvement if they thought that parents teach their children inappropriately. Cuckle (1996) found that parents were competent helpers although they lacked confidence in their abilities; also, they wanted teachers to give them advice and guidance. The teachers expected parents to help only if parents wished to; however, they did not provide parents with instruction about how to share books at home or asked them to do anything in particular. Parents used their own initiation in employing strategies to help their children at home.

Huss-Keeler (1997) examined minority parent involvement and its influence on teachers' expectation of children's language and literacy learning in a British multi-ethnic primary school. The results showed that parents proficient in English as a second language were interested in their children's literacy learning, had high aspirations for their children and wanted them to be successful; but this interest was not acknowledged by the school, which viewed home and school as dichotomous worlds. Similarly, Brady (1999) found that parents indicated they involved themselves in literacy support activities (e.g. taking their children to the library), worked on projects with their children at school (e.g. helping in the classroom) and read in the child's presence. Teachers reported that parental involvement was limited and less than what parents reported.

However, Levine (2002) investigated teachers' perceptions of parental involvement and ways to actively involve parents of kindergarten through second grade students. All teachers in this study expressed positive perceptions towards parental involvement as a necessity in order for children to achieve success and improve their literacy development; they considered parents as the children's first teachers. Moreover, these teachers reported that not only are parents actively involved in their classrooms but they also participated in home-literacy activities. Finally, the teachers indicated that they

communicated and made contact with the parents through newsletters or telephone calls in addition to providing parents with strategies to be implemented at home to develop their children's literacy development.

There is an increasing recognition that parental involvement in early literacy learning helps children to develop their literacy skills (Christie, Enz, & Vukelich, 1997; Hannon, 1995, 1998; Morrow, 2004). Collectively, these and other studies reviewed indicate that parents have strong attitudes and motivation towards being involved in school activities as they are interested in their children's literacy learning and willing to provide help with literacy activities. However, they often do not receive encouragement and support from teachers. Teachers indicated that parental involvement is limited; while some teachers do not have positive attitudes towards parental involvement and made incorrect assumptions about parents' knowledge and actions, other teachers supported parental involvement and provided parents with procedures to support their children's development.

Parents in Jordan have an unclear notion of the aims of kindergarten. Owdeh, Frehat, and Hassan (1987) indicated that parents see the aim of kindergarten as the teaching of academic skills instead of social, emotional, physical and intellectual development. Indeed, it remains unclear what the parents' perceptions are on teaching reading in kindergarten, what skills they prefer their children to achieve in kindergarten and how they prefer their children to be taught reading. Furthermore, it is unclear how parents, as their children's first teacher, perceive their own involvement in developing their children's learning at home and kindergarten. Thus, it is important to look in depth at the nature of parental involvement in the Jordanian kindergarten context since research into the role of parents in their children's literacy development and parental involvement has not been a research priority.

Aims of the study

Investigating the home-kindergarten relationship in Jordan is a newly developing area. Consequently, there is a limited amount of background knowledge arising out of research and practical experience that is directly related to the Jordanian context. It is important that empirical evidence be collected about the way parents and teachers think about how children should learn to read and their own roles to better understand the issues. The main purpose of the present study was to ascertain the current state of the home-kindergarten relationship and parental involvement concerning teaching reading for Jordanian children. In particular, this present study aims to address the following questions:

- What are parents' perceptions of their kindergarten children's process of learning to read?
- What are parents' perceptions of their own involvement in helping their children to read at kindergarten?
- What kind of relationship exists between home and kindergarten concerning helping kindergarteners learn to read?

Methods

A qualitative study was conducted with kindergarten teachers and parents using a semi-structured interview protocol. The data collection attempted to document

perceptions of teachers and parents about early literacy, the roles of parents in this process and the support provided by their children's teacher.

Participants

The present study consisted of two groups: parents of kindergartners and their teachers. Ten kindergartens were randomly chosen from those in one educational directory in Jordan (Amman). Four parents from each kindergarten ($n = 40$) and two kindergarten teachers ($n = 20$) were selected to be interviewed. The population of parents consisted of those with children in kindergarten classes (aged four to five years). The principals of the selected kindergartens were asked to contact the parents and make appointments for them to be interviewed in the kindergarten. In other words, all parents' interviews were conducted in the kindergartens since it was thought to be more convenient to the parents and the researcher. Two parents declined to be interviewed because of employment; two other parents were selected to replace them. The majority of the parents who agreed to being interviewed were mothers (33 mothers and 7 fathers).

Except for two teachers who refused to have their interviews tape-recorded, all other teacher and parent interviews were tape-recorded for later transcription. This technique was employed in order to save time and to enable the researcher to transcribe accurately all comments. Notes of the two teachers' responses were made by the interviewer. The interview locations were different according to the nature of each kindergarten and its conditions. However, the researcher tried to select a convenient place to avoid any outside influence on the person's responses. Some interviews were conducted in the teachers' room while other interviews were conducted in empty classroom. The interviews varied in length between 20 and 30 minutes.

Interview protocols

A semi-structured interview technique was adopted because it is more flexible than other interview techniques. The semi-structured interview enabled the researcher to probe and expand the interviewee's answers by altering the sequences to overcome a common tendency for interviewees to anticipate questions (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1989). Moreover, it enabled the researcher to explore, in depth, interviewees' beliefs and perceptions about the current state of the development of literacy skills in kindergartens without prior limitations or constraints. The interview questions in this study included open-ended questions, which allowed the participants to share ideas and understanding with greater richness and spontaneity (Oppenheim, 2000). The teachers' questions dealt with teachers' perceptions about parental involvement and their own role in encouraging parental involvement, while the parents' questions dealt with parents' perceptions about teaching reading in kindergarten and the nature of their involvement in helping their children to read.

To verify the validity of the interview questions, the researcher provided them to a number of referees and asked for their comments and suggestions on each question and on the interview as a whole. As a result of their comments, minor changes were made to some questions. Generally, the external referees believed the interviews to be fair measures of the target constructs.

Data analysis

Since the majority of interviews were tape-recorded and field notes were taken during the interviews, the researcher listened carefully to the tapes and read the field notes several times before starting the analysis. The tapes were transcribed to produce written responses of each teacher and parent on separate sheets of paper. The teachers' and the parents' interviews were analysed separately since the questions were dissimilar. The researcher read the transcribed response precisely so as to identify the topic area related to the study aim. Then, response categories for each question were developed with relevant data placed under each category. The number of respondents who shared the same responses under each heading was calculated, responses were described in terms of the topics or categories and quotations were used to illustrate and support any assertions.

Results

The interpretation of the parent and teacher interviews lead to six assertions (knowledge claims) about parents' and teachers' perceptions regarding early literacy development, role of parents, home activities and teacher support of involvement and literacy tasks. The results are reported under specific subheading as assertions along with the supportive quotations, as evidences, and authors' elaborations. This section will address parent and teacher results separately.

Parents' perceptions about teaching of reading in kindergarten

Parents' perceptions about teaching of reading in kindergarten are divided into two categories; first, parents' perceptions about expected literacy skills in kindergarten and, second, parents' perceptions towards the practices employed by teachers in teaching reading.

Assertion 1: Parents expected their children to have specific literacy skills at the end of kindergarten related to the awareness of the alphabet, reading and spelling

A majority of parents (36 of 40) expected their children to have acquired an understanding and awareness of the alphabet and how to read and spell basic words and sentences by the end of kindergarten. One parent said:

I am unable to teach or educate my child at home; therefore, my purpose for sending her to kindergarten is to educate her so that she has the literacy tools and a basic grasp of language. In essence, I would like her to read and spell words and sentences at the end of kindergarten so that she may be an outstanding pupil in the future.

Another mother said:

Well, I want him to read and write and spell any word from books, newspaper, TV and in the street as well as read the Holy Book. Really, he can write letters now as he has become the first in his class and I am satisfied with that.

In contrast, three parents did not expect their children to learn anything related to literacy at the end of kindergarten. One father stated:

Frankly, I do not want my child to learn in the kindergarten stage as I feel it is too early for the child. Since both of us [himself and his wife] are employed, we would like to leave him in an environment where he can develop socially as a child with his peers and surroundings. I feel there is a time for learning and this is best suited when he has moved up into primary school. I do not expect him to learn how to read and write at the end of the kindergarten stage. Also I have informed the kindergarten about that.

Regarding the level that parents expect their children to achieve at the end of kindergarten, a majority of parents (34 of 40) indicated that they want their children to be fully competent with the alphabet and to be able to write and read words. However, 27 parents indicated that they also wanted their children to read and write sentences. One parent said:

I think it is difficult for my child to read fluently and master reading skills by the end of kindergarten, but I will not be happy if she has just been taught the alphabet at the end of this stage. I want her to spell simple words and sentences as well.

Furthermore, 12 parents did not know exactly what they expected, but they do not mind as long as their children learn as much as they can. This is well illustrated by the following comment:

I do not know exactly what she should learn, I just want her to learn and be educated. The more she can learn the better. It is two months now, and I am still awaiting the results. I was concerned, so I spoke to her teacher about this matter, and I told her 'You always take our child to kindergarten excursions and trips. What is next?'

Fifteen parents indicated they did not expect children to master reading and writing skills at the end of the kindergarten stage. They were concerned for their children to acquire listening skills, to be familiar with the school's instruction and discipline, to acquire the formal standard language (which is different from the language used at home) and to recognise letters.

Parents' perceptions about teachers' practices

Assertion 2: Most parents were not certain about specific instructional practices utilised by their child's teacher but were focused on literacy performance

Over half of the parents (28 of 40) indicated that they do not know which methods they prefer or want to be used in teaching their children how to read. They explained that they do not have any experience with or information about the teaching methods; however, they agree with any methods that help their children achieve better results. As one parent said:

Since I did not visit my child in her class, I do not know how they learn. Actually I do not have any idea about which methods I prefer. I am satisfied with any method used that makes my child learn better and be able to memorise her lesson.

However, 13 parents were in agreement with the idea of teaching children in small groups. They indicated that small groups in the classroom are considered to be a very good learning approach. They mentioned that their children can learn from their teachers and from their peer interaction. They also indicated that small group instruction encourages development of the child's personality and character. One parent stated:

I am unable to disrupt the classroom while the teacher is with the children. Generally, I feel it is better if the children are taught in smaller groups. In this way, each child may learn not only from the teacher but also from other children. This will enable him to have an understanding of social interaction when he goes to the first elementary class.

Another 21 parents believed drill-practice-repetition to be a good method in kindergarten classrooms. The reason mentioned by those parents was that this method provided quick, effective results since the child can memorise the lesson easily. In the words of one parent:

I think the repetition and practice are considered to be a good method in the kindergarten stage as it is easy for the child in this stage to memorise. The repetition makes my son memorise his lesson easily, and when he comes home I find him memorising his lesson. As a result, I do not need to repeat the lesson again at home, which gives me more free time to do other activities.

Teachers' perceptions about parental involvement

Assertion 3: Most teachers believed that kindergarten-home cooperation was important, but parental interest could be excessive, parents could be uncooperative and home may not be an appropriate place for formal literacy development

A majority of teachers interviewed (15 out of 20) perceive that there is cooperation between kindergarten and home. They explained that parents are interested in issues that would help improve their children's learning development and are keen to respond to the kindergartens' requests. One teacher stated:

Parents are cooperative with the kindergarten. They show a great interest regarding their children's learning and behaviour. I also have a good relationship with all my children's mothers, and we are always keeping in touch by telephone.

At the same time, 16 teachers (out of 20) expressed concerns about parental interest in their children's learning and believed it could be excessive. They added that parents are not concerned about their teaching approach but are more interested in their children achieving concrete and quick results. One teacher stated:

Parents expect their children to be taught how to read quickly. Parents go to the kindergarten in the first week to ask about the progress of their children in reading and writing. They do not show a great interest in the development of their children's behaviour and give more attention to the literacy aspects like reading, writing and arithmetic. To be honest, parents want good characters to be learnt quickly irrespective of the way their children learn. If their children do not show these results quickly, parents start to complain that they pay the kindergarten to see results.

Such comments indicate that parents are looking for immediate evidence. This perception is supported by the six teachers who mentioned that parents always ask about worksheets, homework and paper-pencil tests used in the classroom and complain to the headteacher if these were not applied. As one teacher said:

Although parents are cooperative and showed a big interest, they pressure me to give their children homework and worksheets from the beginning of the year. They also complain if the homework or the worksheet was not long and, even if it was long, they are never satisfied.

Five teachers indicated that not all parents are cooperative with the kindergarten regarding their children's learning. In fact, three teachers mentioned that most parents did not attend the parent-teacher meetings, nor did they seek information on how their children should be taught at home. They indicated that the parents rely entirely on teachers for the development of their children's literacy skills. One teacher stated:

Frankly, 90% of parents rely fully on teachers in terms of children's learning. Just a few of them have attended parent-teacher meetings. None of them has ever asked me 'How I can deal with my child or how I can teach him/her?' They think that the teachers have the full responsibility, while their role is restricted to waiting for the results of children's progress. They are not aware of their child's development.

A majority of teachers (14 of 20) believed that the home-environment is an unsuitable place for the development of children's literacy skills. Instead, they considered the kindergarten to be a much more appropriate place to play a crucial role at this stage of literacy development since it has qualified staff who can improve the children's literacy learning. In the words of one teacher:

Home is not a suitable place for developing the literacy skills for children since it is not provided with a learning environment. At this stage I feel that the teacher is more qualified than parents to nurture the child's education and learning.

Some teachers also mentioned that, when the child enters kindergarten, the role of the parents should be only supervisory and not an educational one. One teacher explained:

I prefer the parents' role to be just supervisory. While children do their homework or write, parents should supervise their children's work. They should not involve themselves in the teaching process.

This reveals that teachers are not aware of early literacy development, nor are they aware of the important role parents have in this area. However, 12 teachers indicated that if parents were well educated and had good knowledge related to child development, then they could be involved in their children's learning. One teacher responded:

Parents can develop the child's ability to read at home but this would depend on the parents' education. If they have good knowledge about child development and provide their children with reading and writing materials, then it would be very helpful for their child because, as you know, the home is considered to be an educational institution as well.

A majority of teachers (15 of 20) did not expect children to have any knowledge regarding literacy before starting kindergarten. They mentioned that children should be exposed to literacy in the kindergarten classroom rather than home, as they prefer the children without any literacy knowledge. They also added that children with some literacy should start with those who have not. One teacher said:

To me, it is not a big deal if the child has any literacy background or not as I do not expect them to have these experiences or background. I treat them equally. It is not an important issue since I teach them all the same.

Nineteen teachers explained that children in their classes enter the kindergarten without any literacy experience and it would be better for them to have these

experiences from the home. They also said that children have some skills from their home environment – such as how to say their complete names (first name and surname), the names of colours, their fathers' career, the names of some animals and the sounds of some letters – but, in most cases, they start with the children from the beginning. One teacher said:

I think the child at this early stage does not need to know anything regarding print or literacy. If s/he knew that, it would be better. According to my experience as a kindergarten teacher, most of them come to kindergarten without having anything except for their names and some colours.

Yet, another teacher added that:

Most children are like a blank canvas; they do not know anything regarding the written language. They may know simple things if they have been educated by their parents like the names of animals and their sound, their names and father's career, but I teach them all from the beginning whether they know or not.

Teachers' perceptions about their role in parental involvement

Assertion 4: Some teachers believed that parents' role is to provide a background for and support of literacy development, but most teachers do not encourage parents to provide direct literacy instruction

Seven of the 20 teachers indicated that they encouraged parents to be involved in their children's learning at home. They said that they discussed with parents some issues regarding how to teach letters. Only two teachers indicated that they sometimes distributed reports to parents containing instructions on how to deal with their children's behaviour in general and how to protect them from common diseases in particular. One teacher stated:

In our kindergarten I give the children's reports including instructions related to how parents can protect their children from some widespread diseases. These reports were distributed among children's parents that would help overcome any problems that might occur in the future.

In contrast with the above views, 13 teachers (out of 20) indicated that they do not encourage parents to be involved in teaching their children at kindergarten. These teachers believed that parents are not well prepared to teach their children and are not aware of the child's development. They were also concerned that, if parents involve themselves in teaching their child how to read, it may be done in a way that does not follow the guidelines of the kindergarten. One teacher said:

I do not prefer parents to be involved in their children's learning, especially at this stage. It is better for us and for their children as well since parents are unqualified to teach their children. They cannot help their children develop their ability as they would teach them in a wrong way.

A majority of the teachers (16 of 20) who do not prefer to involve themselves with parents in the children's learning gave the following reason for this belief: when parents start teaching their children how to read, they teach children according to the alphabet method (learning the letter according to the letter name instead of its sound)

whereas it is taught the opposite way in the kindergarten. Thus, this contradiction becomes confusing to the children at this stage. One teacher explained:

Parental involvement in teaching letters is very problematic for me. They start teaching the letter names instead of the letter sounds. They sometimes pronounce to their children some letters incorrectly. Such practices might prevent my role in the kindergarten as a teacher.

Parents' perceptions about their involvement in the teaching of reading

Parents' perceptions about their involvement in teaching children how to read at kindergarten are also divided into two parts; namely, parents' perceptions about their involvement in literacy activities in kindergarten, and parents' perceptions about some initiatives carried out by the kindergarten in order to encourage them to be involved in the kindergarten.

Assertion 5: Parents believe that they have a responsibility and role in their children's literacy development

A majority of parents (34 of 40) indicated that a kindergarten teacher is not the only one responsible for a child's primary learning. They believed that they have a shared responsibility with teachers in the development of their child's education and behaviour and ensured that they followed up what their children had been taught. One parent stated:

A kindergarten teacher should not have the unique responsibility. I also teach my children at home after school. I let my child write in order to improve his writing to be on lines so that it looks neat. I also have double the work the teacher has; if the teacher has the third role, I have to have the double (two-third).

In contrast to the above, 10 parents (out of 40) indicated that the teacher is the only responsible figure for teaching at this stage. They explained that they rely completely on the teacher since the child trusts his/her teacher more than his/her parents. Another reason mentioned is that they considered teachers fully qualified to teach children. One parent explained:

In this stage, the teacher should take full responsibility to teach children at kindergarten stage; teachers are more qualified since it is difficult to teach children at this critical stage. In my opinion, teachers have more of a trust with the children than the parents at this stage.

Four parents indicated that they do not care about what children have learnt, as what they have learnt in the kindergarten will be repeated to them in grade one. One parent said:

I think the kindergarten has complete responsibility towards my child and their education. Truly, I am not worried too much about my child's learning in this stage, as I am sure it will be repeated in the next year at the next stage when they enter school in the first primary grade.

Parents were asked whether there is cooperation and support between kindergarten and themselves regarding their children's literacy development and the teacher's

efforts to involve parents in kindergarten activities. The majority of parents (33 out of 40) in the sample indicated that there is support between the kindergarten and the parents regarding their children's learning since they indicated that they have a good relationship with the principals of the kindergartens. Eight parents described the relationship between the kindergarten and parents on a very personal level. One parent explained:

There is support and cooperation as I feel now my child is benefiting from kindergarten education. At the beginning I was very worried about my child's learning as I used to ask myself how my child would write the letters. But now I am confident my child is progressing. When he comes home, he remembers everything he has learnt at kindergarten.

From the above, it seems that parents supported the kindergarten as the children are getting a sound education and are progressing as individuals. However, they do not see the kindergarten as cooperative when their children do not make progress in reading. For instance, four parents were not convinced by the kindergarten's evaluation of their children's progress as they felt their children were not progressing as well as they should. In the words of one parent:

The kindergarten does not encourage any relationship between the kindergarten and parents. They [the kindergarten teacher] seem to have no consideration for the parental role in child development. They do not send any homework or books and emphasise less on learning and more on leisure activities and kindergarten excursions.

Parents' perceptions about initiatives to encourage parental involvement

Assertion 6: Most parents did not perceive opportunities for involvement or support for at-home literacy activities

The majority of parents interviewed (32 out of 40) indicated that they did not have any opportunity to be involved in kindergarten activities or were not given information related to how children learn to read and write at home. They mentioned that they have a great desire to be involved in such activities in the kindergarten or at home. One parent stated:

The kindergarten does not support or guide us on how to deal with our children regarding their education at home. It has suggested no methods or techniques that would help our children develop their literacy skills. If the kindergarten were to involve us with the teaching of our children or could suggest certain methods that could encourage such behaviour, then I would be very appreciative.

With respect to the parent–teacher meetings held at the kindergarten and the effect of these meetings on children's literacy development, a majority of parents (34 of 40) indicated that most of these meetings were ineffective as they were not held on a regular basis. They believed that the content of the meetings was unrelated to the development of the child's learning in general and literacy development in particular. One parent said:

The meetings that I attended at kindergarten were not as I expected. I found that they really never discussed how we can improve our child's literacy. The main emphasis of these meetings was on other issues like the importance of paying tuition fees on time,

how to organise visits to ask for our children and how to take care about our children's clothes, textbooks and bags, etc.

Nine parents criticised these meetings as they did not pay attention to the role of parents in developing their children's learning. One parent explained:

These meetings are absolutely useless because the kindergartens do not want to involve us in the learning and teaching process. As a parent, I cannot interfere with the kindergartens' system and force it to involve us by saying to the teachers to do this or do not do that.

A wide majority of the parents (27 of 40) indicated that they never attended parent-teacher meetings owing to different reasons. Four parents considered them ineffective and a complete waste of time, while 1% considered the timing inappropriate as they were usually at work; another parent argued that there was no need for such meetings since she saw her child's teacher every day and was aware of her child's progress level. They said:

I do not think that parent-teacher meetings would help me to develop my child's literacy skills; therefore, I do not attend these meetings. All the parents I know who have attended these meetings have advised me not to go.

When I go with my child to the kindergarten, I see my daughter's teacher every day. If I need to know of my child's level of education, then I can contact him/her directly without having to attend any meetings.

Twenty-five out of 40 parents suggested some procedures that would enhance their involvement in their children's learning in kindergarten. They think that the kindergarten should acquaint parents with the planning and procedure that can help parents to develop their children's literacy skills. They prefer to be informed of the kindergarten teaching methods in the teaching of literacy. One parent stated:

Kindergarten should inform us of all planning procedures and aims and what they use in developing literacy skills in order.

Almost half of the parents (21 of 40) indicated that they were interested in any procedures made by the kindergarten that involved them in its activities and that would consequently encourage the development of their children's literacy skills. In the words of one parent:

I will do anything to improve my child's literacy learning. I do not know what the procedures are, but I will definitely accept any suggestions that I find are to the advantage of my child's education and learning.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicated that parents of kindergarten children expect their children to read and to write letters, words and some short sentences at a mastery level by year-end. A number of children, but not all, could exhibit these skills at the end of kindergarten; parents emphasise these skills and expect their children to master them quickly from the beginning of kindergarten. Also, parents were not aware of the

reading and writing skills that encourage emergent literacy abilities like print and phonemic awareness. These results are supported by research studies that found parents place heavy emphasis on academic skills and basic knowledge, instructionally oriented activities and educationally based skills and materials thereby reflecting a traditional view concerning literacy development (see Anderson, 1995; Piotrkowski, Botsko, & Matthews, 2000).

Although parents acknowledge that their children should be taught by playing and taking part in activities within small groups, the results indicated that parents placed more value on traditional direct-instruction methods like drill and practice, giving children homework, worksheets and group tests. Moreover, parents value the outcomes rather than the process as they look for concrete results and immediate evidence of progress (Piotrkowski et al., 2000). This result gives support to the findings obtained from teachers' perceptions that parents exert pressure on them to teach literacy according to their desired approach since parents believed teachers were using inappropriate practices. Moyer, Egertson, and Isenberg (1987) pointed out that parents must be encouraged to search for developmentally appropriate programmes for their children and that this could be done by informing the school administration of their eagerness to support such programmes.

The reasons why parents have these perceptions could be due to their lack of knowledge about early literacy development and the ways in which children should be taught to read and write (Christie et al., 1997). Parents trust the teachers' teaching methods since parents see the teacher as a qualified person who should select the appropriate methods. This explanation has been supported by Cuckle (1996), who found that parents indicated that the main teaching should be the responsibility of the school and its expert teachers.

The findings indicated that teachers believe that the parents pressure them to employ inappropriate methods to teach children how to read from the first days in kindergarten. This result supports the findings of Hitz and Wright (1988), Stipek and Byler (1997) and Miller and Smith (2004) who found that teachers' perceptions about literacy instruction has links to parental pressure, while Kelly and Berthelsen (1995) found that issues of parents are considered to be a major source of stress for preschool teachers. Many principals or private kindergartens take parents' desires into account, and they allow parents to interfere in the teachers' affairs, which exerts pressure on teachers to teach according to parents' demands regardless of whether or not parents' demands are appropriate. This result has been highlighted in Hitz and Wright's (1988) study which indicated that kindergarten administrations do pressure teachers. This is due to the fact that the vast majority of the kindergartens in Jordan belong to the private sector, established as a for-profit business, and require that parents' demands receive attention from the administrations.

The results also showed a clear indication that teachers did not see parents as partners who should be involved in their children's learning; instead, they discourage parental involvement. This kind of relationship between parents and teachers has not created an atmosphere for cooperation and could negatively affect the development of children's literacy learning. Morrow (2004) pointed out that teachers need to view parents as partners in the development of children's literacy and to devote efforts to inform parents about appropriate literacy expectations and instruction.

It has also been noted that teachers place little value on the role of the home environment in children's literacy development since they expect the children to have no

literacy experience from home. Hannon (1998) suggested that teachers who show no interest in children's home literacy activities are more likely to discourage parental involvement. It is worth mentioning that teachers in Jordan have paid little or no attention to the literacy experiences that children bring from home since they indicated that they start teaching all children regardless of their literacy background and level, as if they know nothing. The erroneous belief that only teachers teach and children only learn at school regardless of the role of the home is still prevalent among teachers in Jordan.

Although the results indicated that teachers have good personal relationships with parents and they consider them as cooperative persons who show interest in their children's literacy progress, parental involvement has been discouraged. Teachers do not want parents to be involved in kindergartens unless they are knowledgeable about the child's development. Wolfendale (as cited in Cuckle, 1996) pointed out that 'there is a "folklore" that teachers do not like parents to teach reading in preschools or augment school-based work' (p. 27). The results of the present study showed that there were no serious attempts to involve parents in kindergarten activities or help them be involved in their children's learning at home. Hannon and James (1990) found that preschool teachers do not encourage parental involvement in young children's literacy development since teachers expressed fears about putting pressure on their children to read and write using inappropriate methods at home. Although most parents expressed their willingness to know more about helping with literacy, only a few of them said that they have been given advice from teachers. Kindergarten teachers in Jordan allow parents to be involved in kindergartens only if they take the initiative themselves in asking teachers about their role in children's learning. This finding is supported by other studies (e.g. Brady, 1999; Huss-Keeler, 1997) in which teachers did not support parental involvement although parents were interested in their children's literacy development.

From the analysis of the findings of this study, it becomes clear that teachers play a limited role in encouraging or capitalising on parental involvement. In addition, the results showed that teachers involve parents in discussion only when parents take the initiative themselves in asking teachers about how they can teach their child to read and write. Most of these discussions are focused more on the child's behaviour and health rather than on how the child should be taught to read. Involving parents in reading and giving them information about supporting their child's literacy or encouraging them to read with their child were quite absent.

It was also noted that teachers did not pay attention to the role of parents as they did not provide children with books or stories to be read at home, nor did they make home visits where the teacher-parent relationship could become stronger. Home-based activities may enhance parental involvement (Brown, 1989). Brady (1999), Hannon and James (1990), Huss-Keeler (1997) and Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, and Reed (2002) also found that teachers do not encourage parents to be involved in their children's learning. The practices employed by teachers in Jordan discouraged parental involvement (Hannon, 1998). One reason for this practice could be due to the teachers not having an adequate awareness of effective methods to encourage parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002; Hughes & Oi-man, 2007). Also, teachers do not like parents to be involved as they use inappropriate methods at home, pressure children to read (Hannon & James, Cuckle) and lack the teachers' knowledge base in early literacy development.

The findings revealed that parents acknowledge the role of the home environment in developing literacy skills for their child. They have strong, positive attitudes towards the importance of being involved in the kindergarten but had few opportunities to get involved in the kindergarten's activities. This finding is consistent with Huss-Keeler (1997) and Levine (2002) who found that parents have positive attitudes towards being involved in the school and the kindergarten. However, Brady (1999), Cuckle (1996), Hannon and James (1990), Huss-Keeler (1997) and Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2002) found that parental involvement was discouraged and parents have no chance of being involved in the school.

The parents in this study expressed willingness to be involved and wished to take this opportunity as soon as the teachers give it to them. They also showed a great interest in identifying the appropriate methods to teach their child how to read and write. However, there is limited discussion and communication between teachers and parents in this matter (Christie et al., 1997). This result confirms the fact that parents in Jordan give great attention to their children's learning in the early childhood stage and they do value the role of the early childhood institutions.

The results obtained from the present study showed that parents saw teachers as only teachers instead of partners in developing their child's literacy skills. The lack of regular parent-teacher meetings and the lack of workshop sessions and conferences that could be held to inform parents on the appropriate methods to enhance their child develop literary skills, together with the lack of books provided to parents to read to their child, may reflect the fact that parental involvement in kindergarten literacy activities are non-existent. This also confirmed the results obtained from the teachers' perceptions regarding their own role in encouraging parental involvement as their role was limited.

The discouragement of parental involvement in developing literacy skills for children at kindergartens, although parents have great desire to be involved, may be caused by the fact that teachers are not knowledgeable about encouraging parental involvement at both home and kindergarten (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). Also, parents' attempts in promoting their child's literacy development are not acknowledged and encouraged since teachers are not convinced of parents' involvement in their child's literacy learning. Besides these reasons, we cannot deny the fact that parental involvement is a new field in the education system in Jordan and that both parents and teachers do not know their roles regarding parental involvement.

Conclusions

It is clear that there is lack of parents' knowledge about early literacy development, and the way in which children should be taught to read and write. Some parents have misconceptions about the kindergarten's aim due to lack of liaison between home and kindergarten in which parental involvement is to be encouraged to equip parents with the kindergarten's aim. It could be concluded that parents' perspective of what and how literacy skills should be taught affect the children's literacy development which the teachers follow in line with the parents' desire, which are not developmentally appropriate. Because the vast majority of kindergartens are privately run, the parents' demands received a great deal of attention. This may lead parents to reflect on their expectations and to judge the teachers' implementation. Discussion between parents and teachers – about the aims of kindergarten, the literacy skills to be taught to

kindergarten children and appropriate instruction methods – should be encouraged to develop unified expectations and shared understandings. Inviting parents to kindergarten to inform them through workshops, meetings, etc. about the skills that children should achieve by the end of kindergarten and the way they should be taught may help parents hold an appropriate perception regarding their children's literacy thereby increasing cooperation between home and kindergarten.

There is a clear indication that teachers are not happy with parents' methods in teaching their children, as the teachers have inappropriate views regarding their teaching attempts. This kind of relationship between parents and teachers would not create an atmosphere for cooperation, and this could affect negatively the development of children's literacy learning. It is obvious that teachers are not aware of the early literacy development and the importance of the early childhood years in the literacy development since children spend most of their time at home where parents may play a crucial role in this regard. This reason may explain why the majority of teachers do not acknowledge the role of the home environment as the place where the children's literacy acquisitions grow rapidly before they arrive at kindergartens. This could be due to the absence of the in-service teacher training which makes teachers aware of the importance of parental involvement.

In light of the aforementioned text, it could be concluded that education courses should be held for both the teachers and the parents to convince them of the importance of school-home cooperation and parental involvement in kindergarten, for teachers to equip them with early literacy development and for parents to know the aims of kindergarten. Jordanian universities should offer courses for students who will become kindergarten teachers related to the home-school relationship, parental involvement and effective methods of building cooperation with parents. Each kindergarten should inform parents through workshops, meetings or conferences about what to expect from the kindergarten and the practices employed in the kindergarten, and provide them with justifications and explanations regarding each practice and their expected role at home. Moreover, teachers should acknowledge the responsibility for inviting parents to participate in their children's literacy activities and make every effort to engage parents in an educational partnership by providing various opportunities for parental involvement.

From the analysis of the findings of this study, it becomes quite clear that the teachers play a limited role to encourage parental involvement. Involving parents in reading in kindergarten and giving them information about supporting their children's literacy were quite absent. The reasons for that could be due to the fact that teachers do not have an adequate grasp of awareness about the effective methods to encourage parental involvement, and the lack of teachers' knowledge base in early literacy development. Therefore, there is an urgent need to educate both teachers and parents in order to become involved and integrated as a team in order to help the children develop their literacy, based on kindergartens' aims.

The findings revealed that parents have strong positive attitudes towards the importance of being involved in the kindergartens, but simultaneously they were found to have few opportunities to get involved in the kindergarten's activities. This may negatively affect the development of children's learning. The closeness and mutual trust between the parents and teachers are important for guiding the teachers to succeed in the development of parental involvement. Indeed, teachers have a responsibility for enhancing parental involvement as well as educating them on appropriate ways that extend the quality of their involvement.

Notes on contributors

Ibrahim A. Al-Momani is an Associate Professor of Early Childhood and Elementary Education at the University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan.

Fathi M. Ihmeideh is an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education at Queen Rania Faculty for Childhood, The Hashemite University, Zarqa, Jordan.

Abdallah M. Abu Naba'h is an Assistant Professor of TEFL at the Faculty of Educational Sciences, The Hashemite University, Zarqa, Jordan.

References

- Anderson, J. (1995). Parents' perspectives of literacy acquisition: A cross-cultural perspective. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED383475.
- Angelides, P., Theophanous, L., & Leigh, J. (2006). Understanding teacher–parent relationships for improving pre-primary school in Cyprus. *Educational Review*, 58(3), 303–316.
- Brady, M. (1999). Parents' reported involvement in their children's literacy development and teachers' reported perceptions of that involvement. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED437210.
- Brown, P. (1989). Involving parents in the education of their children. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED308988.
- Bus, A., van Ijzendoorn, M., & Pellegrini, A. (1995). Joint book reading makes for success in learning to read: A meta-analysis on intergenerational transmission of literacy. *Review of Education Research*, 65(1), 1–21.
- Christie, J., Enz, B., & Vukelich, C. (1997). *Teaching language and literacy: Preschool through the elementary grades*. New York: Longman.
- Clark, C. (2007). *Why it is important to involve parents in their children's literacy development: A brief research summary*. London: National Literacy Trust.
- Crawford, P., & Zygouris-Coe, V. (2006). All in the family: Home and school with family literacy. *Early Childhood Educational Journal*, 33(4), 261–267.
- Cuckle, P. (1996). Children learning to read: Exploring home and school relationships. *British Educational Research Journal*, 2(1), 17–32.
- Dailey, K. (1991). Writing in kindergarten: Helping parents understand the process. *Childhood Education*, 67(3), 170–175.
- Durkin, D. (1966). *Children who read early*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Greenwood, G., & Hickman, C. (1991). Research and practice in parent involvement: Implications for teacher education. *Elementary School Journal*, 91(3), 279–288.
- Hannon, P. (1995). *Literacy, home and school: Research and practice in teaching literacy with parents*. London: Falmer Press.
- Hannon, P. (1998). How can we foster children's early literacy development through parent involvement. In S. Neuman & K. Roskos (Eds.), *Children achieving best practices in early literacy* (pp. 134–159). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Hannon, P., & James, S. (1990). Parents' and teachers' perspectives on pre-school literacy development. *British Educational Research Journal*, 16(3), 259–272.
- Haussler, M., & Goodman, Y. (1984). Resources for involving parents in literacy development. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED250673.
- Hitchcock, G., & Hughes, D. (1989). *Research and the teachers*. London: Routledge.
- Hitz, R., & Wright, D. (1988). Kindergarten issues: A practitioners' survey. *Principles*, 67(5), 28–30.
- Hoover-Dempsey, K., Walker, J., Jones, K., & Reed, R. (2002). Teachers involving parents (TIP): Results of an in-service teacher education program for enhancing parental involvement. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 18(7), 843–867.
- Hughes, J., & Oi-man, K. (2007). Influence of student–teacher and parent–teacher relationships on lower achieving readers' engagement and achievement in the primary grades. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 99(1), 39–51.
- Huss-Keeler, R. (1997). Teacher perception of ethnic and linguistic minority parental involvement and its relationship to children's language and literacy learning: A case study. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 13(2), 171–182.

- Kelly, A., & Berthelsen, D. (1995). Preschool teachers' experiences of stress. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 11(4), 345–357.
- Levine, L. (2002). Teachers' perceptions of parental involvement: How it effects our children's development in literacy. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED465438.
- Miller, L., & Smith, A. (2004). Practitioners' beliefs and children's experiences of literacy in four early years settings. *Early Years*, 24(2), 121–133.
- Morrow, L. (2004). *Literacy development in the early years: Helping children read and write*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Moyer, J., Egertson, H., & Isenberg, J. (1987). The child-centred kindergarten. *Childhood Education*, 63, 235–242.
- Nutbrown, C., Hannon, P., & Morgan, A. (2005). *Early literacy work with families: Policy, practice and research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Oppenheim, A. (2000). *Questionnaire design, interviewing and attitude measurement*. London/New York: Continuum.
- Owdeh, A., Frehat, M., & Hassan, M. (1987). The reality of kindergarten education in Jordan. *Annual Scientific Studies*, 2, 43–56.
- Piotrkowski, C., Botsko, M., & Matthews, E. (2000). Parent's and teachers' beliefs about children's school readiness in a high-need community. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 15(4), 537–558.
- Stipek, D., & Byler, P. (1997). Early child education teacher: Do they practice what they preach? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 12, 305–325.
- Teale, W. (1986). Home background and young children's literacy development. In W. Teale & E. Sulzby (Eds.), *Emergent literacy: Writing and reading* (pp. 173–206). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Wing, L. (1989). The influence of preschool teachers' beliefs on young children's conceptions of reading and writing. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 41(1), 61–74.

Copyright of Early Child Development & Care is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.