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# Parents' roles and perceptions of early literacy development in well-resourced environments

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**TITLE**

**Parents' roles and perceptions of early literacy  
development in well-resourced environments**

**by**

**Shelley Aronstam**

**ARNSHE004**

**A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the award  
of the  
Degree of Masters in Education**

**Department of Education**

**Faculty of Humanities**

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**Declaration**

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

**SIGNATURE:**

**DATE:**

\_\_\_\_\_ April 2005

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## **Abstract**

Literacy research in South Africa and other developing countries has for the most part focused on poorly resourced environments and literacy practices in lower socio-economic communities. The purpose of this study is to examine the role of parents in early literacy development in well-resourced homes in South Africa.

The study was aimed at investigating parents' roles and perceptions of early literacy development in well-resourced home environments. The study presents survey data from a large cohort of parents as well as observations and in-depth interviews with a smaller group of eight families. This study was conducted in a peri urban area in the Western Cape and engaged parents whose children were in reception year classrooms.

The research evidence shows that reading success does not necessarily occur through the use of a variety of resources but that it needs to be mediated and modelled by parents in the home to have significant outcomes.

The study finds that the parents' perceptions and approaches only partially reflect what is envisaged to be good reading habits. The time constraints and pressures on parents today impact on literacy practices and restrict them from spending sufficient quality time engaged in these practices with their children. Finally the study shows that although children are exposed to books, television and computers in the home environment it does not necessarily ensure proficient and interested readers.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

## 1.1 Introduction

Examining the development of early literacy practices has been the focus of literacy research and discussion for many years. The investigation of how young children engage in literacy events has been well documented by researchers like Shapiro and Doiron (1987); Yetta Goodman (1979); Teale and Sulzby (1987) and Hannon (1997). Within such discussions is a recognition that the home environment is a key 'space' for literacy development. As Shapiro and Doiron (1987:263) maintain, "the major preconditions for literacy are rooted in the home environment". The assertion is that the foundation of literacy development and acquisition are established very early in life, long before children come into the formal school environment. There is an acknowledgement, too, of the conditions that enable this literacy development to occur, namely;

- The role of the parents
- The availability of books and other printed resources
- The different literacy practices such as story-telling, story-reading and other activities that parents engage in with their youngsters.
- The manner in which the parents engage in literacy practices with their children

What is presupposed therefore, is that children come to school having had some literacy experiences. The nature and quality of these experiences may be different since they are largely dependent on factors, which include amongst others, the socio-economic backgrounds and literacy experiences of the primary care-givers (parents, etc), the availability of resources, the literacy events themselves, the value attached to literacy, the availability of resources and the like. The important role of social, economic, cultural and personal factors in early literacy development therefore cannot be ignored.

Notwithstanding, a key determinant in literacy development lies in the *opportunities* for literacy development which are made available to young children. It is said that these are embedded within the routine social interactions of adults and children and are often determined by the family unit and culture to which they belong. Researchers such as Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith (1984, as cited in Jackson, 1993:6) have inferred that “what was important was not so much being surrounded by print but being surrounded by adults who used print because of its effectiveness”. Teale (1987:193) maintains too, that the home background plays a major role in a young child’s orientation to literacy. Even though children’s experiences with books and reading may vary from home to home, it seems reasonable to accept that many entering school for the first time, bring with them a great deal of book knowledge. The source could emanate from a child having had a story read to them by a caregiver, or having observed adults and siblings reading a newspaper, television guide, supermarket flyer or other printed material.

## **1.2. Background**

Home backgrounds and environments differ in families. By implication, the experiences of young children and the levels of engagement in literacy practices with parents appears to vary as well. It would seem too, that since the 1980’s, technological changes has affected modes of reading and writing. Today, children’s lives seem saturated with print material and electronic texts. Even though parents are still reading books with their children, there appears to be a major shift in literacy events and literacy contexts in the home environment. The sharing of stories no longer seems to be the only literacy experience parents are encountering or providing for their children. Computer games and television are capturing a large share of family interaction. Synder (2000, as cited in Berthelsen, Halliwell, Peacock, Burke and Ryan) states, “we face a future dominated by technoliteracy”. He says that when educating young children, more attention needs to be given to understanding the multiple connections between literacy, technology and learning.

### **1.3. Context of the study**

As an educator who has had the opportunity to spend time in well-resourced (a place where books, visual print literacy and technology is available and visible) schools, I had noticed an emerging trend amongst children in privileged social groups (access to resources, large living spaces, parents' salary and qualification) who were not displaying literacy behaviour at appropriate levels and who seemed uninterested in reading. The majority of these children seemed to come from environments in which literacy was taken for granted. They seemed to have exposure to ample books, computers, television and other printed material. Yet even in the light of this, children appeared to lack an interest in reading and exhibited poorly developed reading skills.

### **1.4. Statement of the problem**

The majority of the children whom I observed were experiencing a lack of interest in reading activities in their formative years even though they may have had access to many resources and were exposed to print-rich environments. However, they were still not reading and did not demonstrate reading behaviours that were characteristic of this age group. This led me to the questions: "What happens in the home that may be influencing this perceived lack of engagement in reading behaviour and, 'what are the literacy practices in the home environment where children have a resource of print materials at their disposal?" These questions compelled me to want to investigate these issues further, in an attempt to understand the relationship of literacy practices in the homes of reception-year learners before entering formal schooling. My observations in well-resourced educational environments showed that there are many interrelated factors contributing to early literacy development. Furthermore, my interest lay in the roles, perceptions and opinions of parents towards literacy practices in the home setting.

## **1.5. Aim of the study**

Initially the study was aimed at examining what factors shape early literacy practices in homes perceived to be well- resourced, as well as to investigate the role technology plays in the early literacy development of young children in the new millennium. However, once I started my investigation the parents' perception of early literacy development influenced the direction of this study and the focus shifted more to the role of the parents.

### **1.5.1 Main question:**

What are the views, roles and perceptions of parents on early literacy development in the home?

### **1.5.2 Sub questions:**

- How do parents perceive their role in the development of literacy in the home?
- What literacy experiences are children exposed to in their present home context?
- How are these experiences understood and used to create opportunity for literacy development?
- What is the nature of parent involvement in children's early literacy practices?
- What factors shape the nature and extent of parent involvement in literacy development
- What resources are available to children?
- What is the nature of their engagement with the available resources?

## **1.6. Significance of the study**

In general, the major concerns of academics and researchers in national and international settings have concentrated on the roles of early childhood literacy in poorly resourced socio-economic domains. In South Africa literacy studies conducted by Prinsloo, Stein and Bloch for example, have occurred in semi-

rural and urban township surroundings. However, my study is located in a peri-urban environment where the family's homes are perceived to be well-resourced. Teachers in reception year classrooms brought to my attention that children were not demonstrating an interest in reading books and other printed matter. It is therefore anticipated that this study will provide an opportunity to establish what factors in the home environment influence early literacy, as well as parents' perceptions of their roles in this activity. Furthermore the significance of technology will be explored as well as the parents relationship with their children in the use of multi media.

## **1.7 Definition of terms**

### **Well-resourced homes are homes where**

- books, visual print literacy and technoliteracy are readily available and visible.
- collective and varied selections of materials and references are available.
- parents are literate and have at least a matric or higher qualifications.
- the basic physical needs and requirements are capable of being met.
- the environment is accessible to achieve desirable literacy events and engagements

## **1.8. Thesis direction**

Chapter One has given an overview of the study, along with the background and context of the study. Included in this chapter are the overriding research questions and an outline of the significance of the study.

Chapter Two deals with the survey of literature that supports the need for further research in this field. This chapter reveals that factors which appear to influence literacy development in the home environment include a) socio-

economic b) print- rich environments c) enriching experiences and opportunities  
d) available resources and e) the modelling of literacy skills by the parents.

Chapter Three outlines the research design used for this study. It provides a methodological framework within which to understand the study, as well as an explanation of the different data -collection strategies that were employed.

As a way of responding to the question posed, the findings are presented in chapter Four. Themes and categories are used as an organising framework.

The data is analysed in relation to the literature review in chapter Five. This chapter is followed by Chapter Six, which includes the conclusion and recommendations.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of literature relating to early literacy perspectives and practices. The first part of this chapter is focused on two related issues, definitions and perspectives on early literacy practices. I begin with developing an understanding of the complexity surrounding definitions of early literacy. Thereafter, I provide a historical overview of the various perspectives and what it means to be literate. In this section, I describe how various disciplines understand and explain literacy and its meaning. Such perspectives are embedded in particular ways of understanding and are shaped by theoretical underpinnings. One such framework is described in detail because of its relevance to the study. I conclude this chapter by reviewing studies that have relevance in the field of education with particular reference to literacy practices in the home environment.

### **2.2 The problem of definitions of literacy**

Researchers such as Gee (1990); Hannon (1995); Barton (1994) and Scribner and Cole (1981) have shown that looking at definitions of literacy is a complex task because there may be as many perspectives of literacy as there are people. Gee (1990, as cited in Cairney, 1995:9) argues that “literacy is defined as a social practice which has many specific manifestations”. Hannon (1995:2) believes that “literacy is the ability to use written language to derive and convey meaning”. Street (1984) however, suggests that “literacy is not the name for a finite technology or set of skills”. Hannon (1995:13) suggests, as does Street (1984) that “there are many literacies and each literacy comprises an identifiable set of socially constructed practices based upon print”. Barton (1994), on the other hand, maintains that it is impossible to talk about literacy in one specific way, but rather in new broader terms like emergent literacy which have been used in education by several disciplines in the past two decades.

Scribner and Cole (1981, as cited in Barton, 1994:24) relate that “literacy can only be understood in the context of the social practices in which it is acquired and used”. To find a general consensus on a single definition, therefore, is almost impossible since debates reveal that words used in defining literacy may have different meanings to different people in different cultures.

David Barton (1994:19) reports that “literacy is a fairly recent English word and its meaning is being extended”. When tracing definitions historically, it would seem that the word appeared in dictionaries from the year 1924 onwards. From readings one gets the impression that this term originated from the word illiteracy that dates back to 1556. Thus the meaning of the word literacy cannot only be found by analysing dictionary entries, but also by referring to the many beliefs across a range of disciplines. What seems agreed upon is that one cannot isolate the view of literacy in this broad field without understanding the complexity of social contexts, practices, cultures and politics in this sphere.

Modern day society is full of print. Jackson (1993:2) says a simple, common-sense definition of literacy is that it refers to all activities that are to do with the written word”. However, she goes on to suggest “that the phenomenon ‘literacy’ or the state of being ‘literate’ has much broader connotations than just being able to read and write”.

In his book *Pathways to Literacy*, Cairney, (1995:9) argues that “...literacy is not a single unitary skill. Instead it is defined as a social practice which has many specific manifestations”. He goes on to say that there are many different definitions of literacy, each having a particular purpose and context in which they can be used. Literacy cannot really be disconnected from the people who use it. So in order to understand literacy fully Bruner (1985) and Gee (1990) as cited in Cairney, (1995:10) state “we need to understand the groups and institutions in which people are socialised into specific literacy practices”. In understanding definitions what seems central therefore, is that the definitions one holds of literacy are unavoidably reflective of a specific ideology and are apprenticed into the social practices of a particular group or community.



Many questions arise about the concept and definition of literacy. These include questions about literacy in the context of what language and at what level; or literacy for what expected use. As the discussion above illustrates, a general definition of literacy is impractical, as each literacy programme or project will usually have its own interpretation of what literacy is and the answer, more often than not, would be relevant to the articulated objectives and specific contexts.

The argument above illustrates that different definitions are relevant only in the context of literacy's pre-conceived purpose and practical use. Therefore in order to have a clearer understanding of the various concepts of literacy in this study I will be referring to literacy in the following terms:

*Traditional literacy:*

The ability to read, write and understand both. In this arena there does not seem to be a specific purpose and the subject matter is usually of minimal importance.

*Cultural Literacy:*

In 1960 UNESCO defined this as someone being able to read and write in his/her mother-tongue. It also refers to a group of people who take active pleasure and enjoyment in their own culture taking into consideration certain patterns and meanings pertaining to their specific community.

*Civic Literacy:*

It is usually a shared understanding of the way a group of people approach life. It involves good citizenship and the rights and duties of a community.

*Critical Literacy:*

Enables people to become more disparaging or appreciative of what they hear, see, get and ask for. It empowers people to oversee their destiny and become aware of their personal, social and economic connections around them

*Computer literacy:*

Is an umbrella term associated with particular kind of computer usage. It focuses not just on knowing how to use a computer but also knowing the appropriate jargon and when to use it.

*Functional Literacy:*

It is the ability to function effectively within a society. It includes economic skills combined with literacy that empowers people to perform in their specific cultural context. Functional literacy has a definite purpose and is linked to lifelong learning for all people that does not end when an individual finishes his/her formal schooling. "For an individual to become literate, literacy must be functional, relevant, and meaningful for individuals and the society in which they live. It must be able to meet the needs of individuals for their own social purpose and goals" (Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith, 1984 : 22)

One who is functionally literate can participate in all activities in which literacy is required for efficient performance and functioning within one's community. It also enables one to continue to use reading and writing for one's development as well as the development of one's specific community.

Defining literacy therefore is a complex exercise because there are so many perspectives from which to draw. Researchers have illustrated that culture and literacy practices are interwoven and that people are socialised into their community in order to be literate so that they can communicate with others. As literacy is purpose-driven and context-driven people react to each other through sequences of actions that shape their world.

From a historical perspective literacy development has been understood differently within the various disciplines. For many, literacy is no longer simply viewed as a cognitive skill but rather as a cultural practice that is socially constructed. Literacy brings opposing perspectives. Anthropologists tend to be interested in an entire culture and are concerned with what literacy can do, whereas psychologists' interest lies in the individual and what the person needs to know. The linguist on the other hand, is involved in the study of language

and concerned with the functions and forms of written language, whereas the socio-linguist is interested in the relationship between language and social reality. This will be discussed in more depth in the following section.

### **2.3 Perspectives on literacy development**

Historically, literacy has been examined from a number of perspectives and in a variety of ways by theorists of the various disciplines. Although it has been difficult for these scholars to agree on one simple definition they have acknowledged that literacy is something that exists between people and connects individuals to a range of experiences that begin long before children enter formal schooling. These literacy skills can be acquired in an assortment of ways and contexts and have a wide range of meanings.

In 1982, at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, fourteen researchers with comprehensive and overlapping backgrounds in psychology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics and education met to discuss preschool children and literacy. For four days this group came together to try and ‘bridge the gulf’ between disciplines and exchange views on how young children achieve literacy prior to formal schooling. Frank Smith (1984: vii) states that “what transpired were very different points of view which, even if not contradictory, rarely coincided”.

At this symposium, the *psychologists* present were inclined to support a ‘cognitive science’ orientation which focused on the structures of knowledge rather than patterns of behaviour; with attention to purpose rather than responses. These psychologists displayed a strong interest in the individual and were concerned in what makes people do what they do and be the way they are. They suggest that individuals need to be observed in their natural setting in order to get a clearer perspective of their behaviour. Studies have shown that observational learning is often called modelling and is one of the ways children acquire information. Smith (1984:vii) states that “it is not easy for many psychologists to accept that the particular interactions children have with

other people may have more to do with children becoming literate than their own intellectual strategies and abilities”.

Even though educational research and practice have customarily been governed by psychology, Smith (1984: vii) stated that “belief among educators in authority is that success would result from delivering to children the right amounts of the right instruction at the right time, with constant monitoring and quality control”. One might assume that such corresponding approaches would draw professionals together where the common interest is literacy, but in practice this is often not the case.

Therefore when discussing issues surrounding literacy, educators often turn to linguists as the linguistic principles relate to the understandings children may have about how written language is organised and displayed so that communication can take place. Through interacting with language and literacy events children learn to make sense of the written word. Linguists are primarily concerned with language usage in social contexts and in particular with the dialogue between speakers. They maintain that children develop an intuitive linguistic awareness about the knowledge of language. Hence, linguists determine what should be taught and psychologists want to ascertain how the instruction should be carried out. Smith (1984: viii) ascertains that “learning is essentially a series of inevitable psychological processes”.

Anthropologists, on the other hand, tend to look in the direction of an entire culture and are concerned with what literacy can do rather than what individuals need to know. Olson (1977, as cited in Goelman et al, 1984:185) argues that the anthropological approach to literacy development emphasizes that which is perpetuated, transmitted, passed on, or taught, rather than what is learned”. Anthropologists point out that literacy is not simply an individual achievement but rather a social one that is passed on from generation to generation through the process of socialisation that occurs through literacy activities that take place in the home environment. The focus is on the role of literacy acquired by children in the society in which they live and on what the society rather than the individual is doing with the literacy.

At this symposium, the anthropologists defended the need to appreciate the differences and variables of a culture. They expressed the belief that to formulate a set of theoretical constructs, one needs to gather descriptions as accurately as possible and then examine the data for any meaningful patterns that may arise. These researchers argued that nothing should be taken for granted and that each situation should be interpreted on its own terms in order to avoid imposing one set of cultural values on another situation.

Cairney (1995:12) juxtaposes the *psychologists* and *anthropologists* views by stating that “ we need to view literacy as a social and cultural process rather than just a cognitive skill”. He believes that literacy is crucial to social activity and is firmly set in culture that contributes to the shaping of it. Heath (1980) agrees and also suggests that culture and literacy practices are interconnected and that if learners are to succeed at school they need to be socialised into the literacy practices which will eventually empower them.

Sociologists started taking a more vocal interest in literacy education in the 1960's and 1970's. They claimed that their discipline had a significant part to play in educational theory and policy-making as well as an endeavour to achieve change in particular directions.

More recent trends in education in understanding literacy development draw from more than one perspective. A group known as socio-linguists consider literacy development as a social-cultural phenomenon and expressed the belief that children who did not speak the language of the dominant social group often failed to benefit from the advantages of education. Socio-linguists were interested in investigating the social actional aspects of all language use and are concerned with the relationship between talk and its ethnographic context. They are now considered the current trend- setters because they are concerned with the social embeddedness of literacy.

However, Frank Smith (1984) is of the opinion that educational theory and practice have conventionally been dominated by psychology. He says that

“psychologists rather than sociologists have been called on to interpret the new data, which they assimilate into conventional procedures instead of using the data to re-evaluate the procedures themselves”. Sociologists agree with the other disciplines that in the process of being socialized into family life, children need the opportunity to observe and be involved in the language used to achieve authentic purposes of daily living

The last decade of the twentieth century has witnessed an increased interest in the social importance of literacy, distinctly in how it has been socially constructed. For many theorists literacy development can no longer just be regarded as a cognitive skill but has to also be viewed as a cultural practice. Haas Dyson (1993, as cited in Cairney, 1995:1) points out that “literacy is used as a cultural tool to construct symbolic meanings and to engage with others. It is acquired as people relate to one another”. Therefore today, it is better understood as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Scribner and Cole (1981) define the term literacy as “a set of cultural practices developed in and for different social contexts”. Literacy concepts are no longer limited to the basic mechanics of learning to read and write, but also focus on the role of cultural factors that are associated with language learning in different societies. Literacy has ceased to be a feature that is merely inherent to the individual as psychologists understood and has become a process that is increasingly being redefined and renegotiated as the individual interacts with their surroundings. Within such interpretations, no debate or perspective of literacy learning can take place without reference to explicit historical and cultural contexts. Therefore when asking what it means to be literate and what literacy is, the answers will depend on specific contexts and vary from culture to culture.

A number of key constructs have been derived from the socio-linguistic theories. Writers such as Halliday (1975), Hymes (1974), Bakhtin (1981) and Gumperz (1986, as cited in Cairney, 1995:1) state that “people learn to be literate primarily in groups as they relate to others to accomplish social and communicative functions”. This is also a move from viewing literacy as an individual process, which the psychologists propagate, to viewing literacy development as a social process. They believe that literacy involves three

aspects: a) it is purpose-driven b) it is culturally and context embedded and c) it is a social nature of the process. Thus, the suggestion is that literacy is driven by a function and bound to the context within which it is used. People are inclined to react to the actions and patterns of group interactions, and these deeds basically involve language and literacy as part of the system.

Even though there is an overlapping of disparate views, ideas and theories from various academic disciplines, there are also many areas of common ground. The commonalities that have emerged among the different groups is a) that one needs to observe evidence and base conclusions on the data at hand b) that the traditional approaches to language and literacy are not consistent with contemporary understandings about becoming literate and c) that each situation should be interpreted in its own terms. The fact emerges that each discipline seems to be based in its own personal disciplinary background. The significant shift seems to be in the way these disciplines define literacy.

What is apparent is that people learn about literacy within a social context and this develops as their relationship with other people unfolds. The explanation and interpretation that a person constructs as they engage with literacy events reflects who they are, how they interact with language and the purpose for creating them. "Individuals are enculturated into these practices and these meanings" (Cairney, 1995: 2). To understand literacy fully a person needs to understand the groups in which individuals are socialized into the particular literacy habits.

The symposium ended without an agreed-on definition of literacy, but the outcome that "literacy is complex and multifaceted and that children, literacy and culture are too complex to be dealt with in terms of concepts, slogans, objectives, techniques or materials" (Goelman et al, 1984:221). The participants did agree however, "that literacy permits individuals or groups to exert political, economic, or social control over others" (Goelman et al, 1984:221).

Another agreement that emanated from the symposium was that some features of the cultural context within which a child becomes literate have a certain association to the quality and degree of literacy acquired. Contextual attributes such as values, beliefs, physical environment, language and interpersonal interaction from which children learn to become literate, do not always alter in relation to the social class, cultural group or ethnic background.

## **2.4 Literacy as a socio-constructed phenomenon: A theoretical perspective**

### **2.4.1 Introduction**

Vygotsky provides a useful theoretical framework that helps us better understand the social construction of literacy. The home background and environments of well-resourced families and the studies on early literacy development have directed my focus towards theories that are socio-cultural in nature. This perspective was selected because it acknowledges that social interaction profoundly influences cognitive development and that biological and cultural development do not occur in isolation. Vygotsky's Social Development Theory has been identified as having relevance to this study as he "focused on connections between people and the cultural context in which they act and interact in shared experiences" (Crawford, 1996:43).

### **2.4.2 A socio-cultural perspective**

A socio-cultural perspective of literacy advocates that reading and writing involves much more than the straightforward coding and decoding of texts. A socio-cultural approach to literacy does not however deny the significance of this particular skill but maintains that literacy needs to be viewed in the context of everyday experiences of people interacting with each other. Rutgers (2004:14) states that "literacy is a complex social practice which is learnt through dialogue and apprenticeship in specific communities". She says that besides the process of coding and decoding, the broad overview of how people



make meaning of their daily literacy experiences in their different cultural contexts needs also to be highlighted.

Literacy education in the home environment may be viewed as a process of apprenticeship, where the parent or caregiver interacts with the child in a socially meaningful activity and guides and transmits knowledge that exists in their culture. Gee (1990) has stated that literacy is not always acquired by direct instruction, but that children learn through guided and unguided participation with people who have already mastered the process. This social cognition learning model asserts that culture is the prime determinant of individual developments. Thus a child's learning development is influenced by the culture of the family environment in which he or she is enmeshed.

Socio-cultural theorists believe that we are all social beings from the time we are born and that our language and thoughts develop through mediated social interactions in the contexts within which we exist. According to Gee (1992) people in social groups speak, read and write for different purposes. Literacy can be seen as a social skill that is integrated with everyday practices in the home environment and a large part of knowledge that is acquired dwells not only in the mind of the learners, but also in the social practices of the group to which they belong.

### **2.4.3 Social Developmental Theory**

Vygotsky's (1978) theory stresses the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition as well as the central role that community plays in the process of meaning making. Riddle (1999:1) stated that Vygotsky believed that "humans use tools that develop from a culture, such as speech and writing, to mediate their social environment". Initially, children develop these tools to be used for social purposes and ways to communicate their needs. However, once they internalise these tools, they then develop cognition and higher thinking skills.

There are two other central concepts in Vygotsky's developmental theory that highlight the importance of social interaction in literacy learning. They are: (a) ZPD and (b) Scaffolding.

a) The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

This is a level of development attained when children engage in social behaviour. Vygotsky (1978) said "It is the range of skill that can be developed with adult guidance or peer collaboration and exceeds what can be attained alone". Learning and teaching in the ZPD is clearly dependent on social interaction, which includes face-to-face conduct that is moderated by speech. This Zone of Proximal Development bridges the gap between what is known and what can be known. The formation of individual abilities takes place through relations with others and the child gains mastery of these activities through mediation with an adult or more competent peer. In a Vygotskian framework children are capable of far more when they have proper assistance from adults.

b) Scaffolding

Bruner (1983) agreed with Vygotsky's theory of ZPD whereby an adult (the social intervener) assists and provides support for the child to problem solve and perform a task that could not be achieved alone. However, Bruner called this process 'scaffolding' where the adult continually adjusts the level of his or her assistance in response to the child's level of performance. Scaffolding not only produces immediate results, but also introduces the skills that are necessary for independent problem solving. This support will enable the child successfully to complete the tasks on their own and apply the acquired skills to similar tasks in the future. The parent, however, must try to engage the child's interest and motivate the child to pursue the instructional goal by extending their current skills and knowledge.

New learning usually builds on what the child already knows and for learning to occur there is always an influencing factor. This could be the parent, a book, a sibling or an activity that provides the necessary guidance for the child. If a child is presented with knowledge that they can't understand, and no

assistance or mediation is provided, the chances are high that the child will struggle. Through the process of “scaffolding” Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1983) maintain the child will be able to reach a level of understanding that is acquired for effective learning to take place. As the home environment is the setting for informal learning that takes place before children enter formal schooling, Vygotsky (1978) believed that parents play the main role in the learning process for children and that, given the challenge and guidance, young children can achieve that little bit more.

## **2.5 Summary**

As has been discussed there is no formal definition of literacy. The roots of literacy development are embedded in the social practices of a culture and bound by the literacy practices in the home environment. Early literacy development in a literate society begins long before children start formal schooling. Conditions that enhance literacy are print- rich environments where children are exposed to stimulating literacy practices. Among the conditions, Vygotsky states that the mediating role of the parents or a significant other who has already mastered the competencies is key to the process of meaning making in the social interaction of literacy learning.

## **2.6 Perspectives on Early Literacy**

The literature so far has focused on the general conceptions of literacy. With the introduction of reading readiness tests and workbooks in the 1920’s and 1930’s as well as the Head Start programs in the 1960’s, researchers began shifting their views on the concept of early literacy development. Marie Clay, (1967, as cited in Teale & Sulzby, 1987:xvi) a pioneer in examining young children’s reading and writing habits rejected the reading readiness philosophy as she felt that her views on early literacy development differed from the conventional concept of reading readiness. She believed that there was “a great deal to learn by examining what children do with books and reading and writing, even though the child cannot yet read or write in the conventional sense”. Clay’s work inspired many researchers to expand their perspectives on

early literacy development by conducting studies in both home and school settings.

When authoring their book, Teale and Sulzby felt they needed to secure this new paradigm for understanding early childhood reading and writing. They therefore decided to utilize the term 'emergent literacy' to describe the literacy process. This term had been developed by Marie Clay in her doctoral dissertation research of 1966. Teale and Sulzby (1987:xix) stated "that emergent connotes development rather than stasis; it signifies something in the process of becoming" and that the word '*literacy*' constitutes "writing as well as reading and these two processes develop in co-ordination with each other". Thus the word 'literacy' is of great importance as it explains the perspective from which various researchers represent their information and the location from which they operate.

Clay (1967), Teale (1981), Durkin (1966) and Goodman (1967) have argued that the first years of a child's life denote a time when authentic reading and writing development are taking place. They believe that it is not practical to point to a specific time in a child's life when literacy begins, but rather to view children in the 'process of becoming' literate which the term 'emergent' suggests. Progress in reading and writing comes from within the child and as a result of environmental stimulations. Teale and Sulzby (1987:xx) state "There is something new emerging in the child that has not 'been' there before". Young children's learning is constituted through processes of assimilating and adapting the information and data that is used around them. Therefore, growth results from the use of print in the everyday contexts of the home and the community.

As a reaction to the above researcher's views, studies involving environmental print awareness began to take place. Pre-school children were presented with signs, labels and logos in varying contexts in order to examine their perception of environmental print. Results from these studies revealed that the roots of the reading process were established very early in a child's life and reinforced the notion that function precedes form in learning to read.

This term 'emergent literacy' has been affiliated with everything from language learning to reading actions as indicated by Marie Clay (1967), whereby she researched five-year-olds entering school in New Zealand. The main purpose of Clay's study was to provide a clearer account of the early reading behaviours of children especially those who were experiencing reading difficulties in order to identify them as early as possible. She concluded that there was no evidence to suggest that any five-year old child could not come into contact with printed language forms on account of them being thought to be immature.

Shapiro and Doiron (1987:263) argue that "major preconditions for literacy are rooted in the home environment", and that the many facets of literacy behaviour in the home are linked to later literacy acquisition. They also claim that oral language skills develop in a natural, caring and interactive environment where modelling is taking place and adults nurture and encourage children to understand that language is functional.

Shapiro & Doiron (1987:265) identify that children learn from a young age that language contains messages that they can act upon, as well as interpret to understand the world around them. In this regard, they believe that the home can provide enriching experiences that allow children opportunities to explore language and gather information to guide their learning. As they suggest "Parents are often perceived as the models that youngsters imitate, therefore it should be considered important for children to see adults involved in the use of literacy skills" (Shapiro & Doiron, 1987:265).

They maintain that in an ideal home environment children are provided with enriching experiences that allow for language to develop whereby children are encouraged to take risks and ask questions as they explore their environment. Bissex (1984, as cited in Shapiro & Doiron, 1987:264) states that "Research into the ways children approach literacy events in the home implies that children are actually in control of highly sophisticated processes that guide their learning". Thus, given that children are active players in their own learning, it is important for them to see adults involved in the use of literacy skills.

Shapiro & Doiron's work suggests that conversations, picture book-reading, rhymes and stories are all useful activities that parents should engage in when developing a stimulating home environment for children to flourish in. Wells (1985, as cited in Shapiro & Doiron, 1987:266) suggested that "homes in which reading and writing were naturally occurring daily events, gave children a particular advantage when they started school".

In Yetta Goodman's study of the '*Development of Initial Literacy*' as discussed in (Goelman, Oberg & Smith, 1984:101 ) she proposed that "children's discoveries about literacy in a literate society began much earlier than at school age". In describing the outcome of her research from her doctoral dissertation of examining the reading processes of beginning readers in the United States, she stated that children start to acquire literacy skills from a very young age. Results from her studies also indicated that "the roots of the reading process are established very early in life" (Teale & Sulzby, 1987:xvii). From her data she hypothesized that children cultivate notions of literacy in the same way that they develop other important learning: namely that they construct literacy as they actively engage in their society. She goes on to say that environmental factors such as the reading of books in the home, writing of lists, filling in of forms and taking of phone messages play a significant role in the development of literacy.

Goodman (1980) stressed the fact that the roots of children's literacy development stem from their experience as well as the attitudes, beliefs and views they encounter as they interact within their family environment and community. She maintains that children begin from an early age to cultivate a conscious knowledge about the forms and functions of written language. This comes about when parents read stories to their children pointing out letters and words, as well as when they engage in family games such as recognising written symbols on television and products in the home. Children therefore start to understand the relationship between oral and written language and the meaning and purpose it represents. It has been shown by researchers (Doake, 1981; Haussler, 1982) that children realise that written stories represented in books usually follow a distinct format. They will often repeat a story verbatim

that has been read to them indicating that they are aware of the story format and form.

As early as 1967, Yetta Goodman examined the reading process of early readers. She found that even first-graders who could be characterized as 'at risk' for progressing into competent readers still had some cognition about the many aspects of reading. They appeared to know how to handle books as well as have some understanding of print from a young age supporting the argument that the roots of the reading process were entrenched very early in life.

Furthermore, the results supported the notions that function precedes form in learning to read and that there is a movement from learning to read printed symbols in familiar situational contexts towards more reliance on language contexts". Goodman & Goodman (1979, as cited in Teale & Sulzby, 1987:xvii). In their studies on early environmental print awareness, the Goodmans discovered that children were able to read signs, labels and logos in their environment using different contextual clues. These explorations were based on research that Yetta Goodman had been doing since 1973 with children aged between 2-6 years of age.

Yetta and Ken Goodman (1989) employed a variety of techniques to gather information when studying literacy development in early childhood in both home and school settings. They concluded that learning to read is common and logical in a literate society. The influences of Durkin (1966) and Clay's (1967) studies on early readers prompted Yetta Goodman to look at the literacy strategies of even younger children. Goodman discovered that even children who had been characterized as 'at risk' for becoming competent readers had some knowledge about how to handle a book, the functions of print in a book as well as having an understanding about the directionality of written language. Thus the results from Goodman's (1979) study in the United States concur with Clay's findings that literacy development begins long before children begin formal instruction.

Carole Bloch (1997:5) states: “the term ‘emergent literacy’ describes becoming literate as a process, which emerges as reading and writing are experienced and learned in personally meaningful ways”. She wrote a book exploring how young children become literate by weaving reading and writing into the social and cultural practices of their homes. Bloch believes that literacy practices of children are built on the social background and daily language they experience in their home environment. As reading and writing play different roles in different families children are exposed to different experiences with print. Thus Crawford (1995:71) believes, “Emergent literacy has come to mean different things to different people. It depends on researcher’s backgrounds and interests”.

Teale & Sulzby state that the majority of studies administered in the 1980’s were conducted in both home and school settings and have attracted wide interest among scholars. Furthermore, they propose that in order to gain added, valuable information researchers should identify the factors that contribute to these differences and examine the roles which social and cultural factors play in early literacy development. However, today academics maintain that when studies are being done on emergent literacy perspectives, researchers must aspire to keep their investigation naturalistic and holistic in an attempt to link research and practice as this may be able to reveal a great deal more about children’s literacy development in the early years of their lives.

Culture makes two sorts of contribution to a child’s literacy development. Firstly, through culture children acquire much of their knowledge and content of thinking and secondly, the surrounding culture provides children with the processes or means of their thinking. Vygotsky called this the tool of intellectual adaptation and stated that culture teaches children both what to think and how to think.



## **2.7 Related Studies**

In the past thirty or so years, researchers from a variety of disciplines and with different goals in mind have investigated the different facets of literacy. Many different contexts and perspectives have been studied and analysed. As I have chosen to examine the factors that are associated with early literacy practices in the home environment, I will be focusing on the studies of researchers in the areas of literacy before schooling.

I will proceed to describe and analyse these studies under various sub-headings with reference to a) geographical location, b) background of the participants involved in the study and c) the researchers' description of their key findings.

The related studies of Sylvia Scribner & Michael Cole, Brian Street, Shirley Brice-Heath and Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Bambi Schieffelin have been highly influential in providing threads to understanding early literacy practices in young children. All of these research studies looked at specific societies in detail and examined how separate groups within a society acquired and used literacy for their specific purpose.

### **2.7.1 Social Influences on the Development and Practice of Literacy**

Scribner & Cole's (1981) study covered a five- year period, whereby they observed the literate skills of the Vai people of West Africa. The Vai people boast of a writing system of their own invention which is taught at home rather than at school. Although their language is widely used within the culture the inhabitants of this group make up a relatively small number within their country.

The goal of Scribner & Cole's research was to create a better understanding of the psychology of literacy and how different social situations affect, shape or change human thought. They were also interested in examining the social and

economic conditions that promote literacy activity. Hence they discovered that in the Vai culture three different educational systems appear to exist. One being English schooling similar to American schooling another being Qur'anic schooling which is conducted in Arabic, and the third being traditional socialization or bush school where the boys are taught by men and the women teach the girls. So even though the majority of the Vai population pass through some sort of schooling, the literacy practices that occur frequently appear to be limited according to Scribner & Cole. They noticed that letter writing is a familiar form of communication that has taken on a distinct pattern.

They therefore conjectured (1981:1) that "the more a particular application is practiced, the greater the knowledge of that particular skill".

These two researchers conducted their investigation through a combination of surveys, interviews and experiments and found that the structure of literate skills practised by the Vai people matched the functions encountered in their daily lives. They went on to state that the many routine and mundane uses of print show evidence of important elements of literacy practice even though they have been structured differently from formal teaching situations. They thus noted that these practices are what adults pass onto their children. Scribner & Cole (1981, as cited in Teale, 1987:174) state that "literacy and literacy learning are fundamentally social processes" and occur in the everyday contexts of the home and community. After examining all the data they collected over the years Scribner & Cole concluded that there are clearly defined cognitive skills associated with literacy but these don't necessarily only take place in classroom learning. They believe that these cognitive skills are primarily laid down by each culture and situation.

Brian Street had a different starting point. His study began from a more descriptive social and anthropological approach. He did anthropological field research amongst Islamic villagers in Iran in the 1970's. His initial impression was that there was a great deal of literacy activity taking place amidst these 'illiterate' villagers. In his encounters with the people it appeared that there were a lot of quite different practices associated with literacy taking place. These literacy events were happening in traditional Qur'anic schools, new State

schools and amongst traders who were using literacy in their buying and selling of fruit to urban markets.

Street (1985) made a clear distinction between autonomous and ideological notions of literacy. In his analysis he refers to autonomous literacy as a set of cognitive skills and abilities in contrast to ideological literacy, which he states refers to the social conceptions and uses of literacy. Street (1985:2) maintains “literacy is what society does with literacy, and society is, to some extent, what literacy brings to it”.

In his research Street described how literacy practices are socially embedded and that he found there are multiple literacies in a community. Street (1985, as cited in Howarth, 1997:4) also claims that from the data collected there was evidence to suggest that “all societies have the ability to use rational and scientific knowledge based on experience, whether they are literate or not”. Thus reading and writing can be taught in any context, it all depends on the aspects of social structure in different cultural environments.

A third study is Shirley Brice-Heath’s work of three Appalachian communities in the south-eastern part of the United States of America. Over a seven-year period she examined the people’s reading and writing practices done in the home as well as in their community. Heath (1980, as cited in Barton, 1994:26) comments that “the concept of literacy covers a multiplicity of meanings that carry implicit but unrecognised views of its functions and uses”. Heath used the term ‘literacy events’ to refer to actual instances of people using reading and writing in their daily lives. This term has been influential in education and has been used by several researchers who have investigated and explored literacy activities in the home and community. Heath aimed to investigate how children of two culturally different communities (Roadville and Trackton) learnt to use language, and the effects of the preschool home and community environment on the learning of language structure. She explored the patterns of literacy learning within the communities with reference to specialised behaviour.

Heath (1980, as cited in Goelman et al, 1984:25) found that “even among working-class people there are many ways, in addition to reading books, that adults arrange for their children to come into contact with print”. Her study report indicates that despite the fact that all the adults in Trackton could read and write, they did not consciously model reading for their children. Even though these parents did not demonstrate patterns of talking, reading and writing with their young children, they all started school being able to recognise environmental print and names of products. She believes this occurs as a result of children learning a set of master patterns of language as parents immerse their children in an environment of repetitive literacy habits. Heath found in Trackton, literate parents in black families did not initiate any interaction in the domain of literacy but usually rather waited for the preschool child to initiate events first.

For comparison Heath studied Roadville, a white working-class community where adults had little more than a high school education. Heath claims that Roadville aspiration was that their children would work hard and continue to further their education and get ahead in life. She established that from a young age children were exposed to literacy-based stimuli such as nursery rhymes, picture books and a variety of toys. Whether children were playing alone or with siblings, parents continually encouraged language interaction and asked questions relating to items in the home environment. Heath (1980:144) stated that “Roadville parents see themselves as responsible for training their preschool children, and providing them with appropriate experiences before they go to school”.

In contrast to Trackton, children in Roadville were motivated and encouraged by adults to construct and tell picture stories drawing on real life events and television characters, as well as model stories told by parents. Thus, in their play, Roadville children continue their parents’ specifications for using language to report and label events and items.

Both Trackton and Roadville are literate communities and each have their own conventions for using and structuring language. In terms of the standard

distinctions between oral and literate traditions neither community is one or the other, as they both are able to read printed and written materials in their daily lives. In both these communities, members have access to multiple uses of oral and written language, however, they access them differently and decide on their own course or actions.

Whereas children in Roadville grow up surrounded by an abundance of print, toys and books, Trackton residents have no accumulation of reading materials. Roadville parents consider reading material as a very important aspect for their children's intellectual and spiritual development, and all preschoolers participate eagerly in bedtime story reading. On the other hand Trackton children find their reading tasks evolve for them in the form of environmental print found in the home, neighbourhood stores or the plaza. Reading for Trackton youngsters is to learn what they need to know before they start formal schooling in order to be successful in their community.

Both Trackton and Roadville residents have a variety of literate traditions, and in each community these are interconnected in different ways with oral uses of language, ways of negotiating meaning and obtaining status. Where Roadville parents believe it is their task to praise and practise reading with their children, Trackton adults believe that young children "have to learn to be and do, and if reading is necessary for their learning, that will come" (Heath, 1980:234).

Heath (1967, 1973, as cited in Goelman et al, 1984:52) concluded that these studies "provide support for the notion that the transmission of cultural capital by the middle-class involves much more than the provision of books and leisure time for book-reading; it implies also a host of sustained and routine mechanisms that work harmoniously to integrate children from such homes into learning with literacy". Neither community's approaches are right or wrong as they don't really prepare their young children for the school's ways, yet it is interesting to observe that both communities engage in literate practices that are influenced by their group's social history, cultural habits and current environmental conditions. The ways children learn to use language are

dependent on the ways each community structure their families and guide their children's socialization to fit the roles that shape their society.

### **2.7.2 The Cultural Influence on Literacy Before Schooling**

Marilyn Cochran-Smith (1983) and Bambi B. Schieffelin (1984) used ethnographic research to investigate the early literacy practices of three social groups. The first study undertaken by Cochran-Smith was with a group of educated parents with preschool-aged children from a city called Philadelphia in America. The second study was done by Schieffelin with a family in traditionally non-literate society in Papua New Guinea, and the third study was also done by Schieffelin with a number of Chinese families who had left Vietnam and recently settled in Philadelphia. The goal of their studies was to examine the values and beliefs of members of these social groups with reference to literacy interaction and acquisition.

Over an eighteen-month period Cochran-Smith (1983) studied the literacy practices in the home context of seventeen Philadelphia families with diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. She found that although there were many differences amongst the families they also had a lot in common. Most of the children were from two-parent families and had one or two siblings. The fathers had undergraduate or advanced college degrees and held professional positions and the mothers were college-educated and held current or previous professional positions. Through her investigations, Cochran-Smith (1983, as cited in Goelman et al, 1984:5) noted that parents in this community took literacy for granted in their own lives and that they somehow assumed that "their children's early print interest emerged 'naturally' as part of their normal, routine development".

Cochran-Smith (1983) reported that in this community an integral part of the early learning experiences included entertainment, mental stimulation and social interactions as well as print-reliant activities. This particular group of adults used and organized literacy for their own social purposes. Without

exception, all families read stories to their children regularly. Bedtime reading was promoted and considered appropriate as it allowed for close physical contact between parents and their children. The youngsters were also encouraged to look at books independently, and reading was seen as a valuable way to spend time together or alone in the community. The children were continually surrounded by books and print-related items. Parents stated (Goelman et al 1984:6) that they did not push their children to learn the alphabet or engage with print but rather “assumed that their children would become literate and that their interests in literacy were part of normal child development”.

In her research, Cochran-Smith (1983) stressed the fact that the print interests of the children in this Philadelphian community or any community for that matter do not emerge ‘naturally’. She believed that literacy emerges out of a particular cultural orientation and that children are socialised to be literate and engage with print to meet their objectives.

In this district of Philadelphia, there was no single context or purpose in which literacy occurred. The most important characteristic of the literacy orientation in this group of people was “the authority accorded printed materials and books to verify and extend primary experiences and to legitimate oral information” (Goelman et al, 1984 : 7). Children in this community were exposed to a wide variety of literacy events as well as familiarised with their own literate heritage. This is commonly referred to as ‘functional literacy’ as the children were learning to use print, share information and acquire knowledge about their world as they participated in everyday social interactions with their families and peers.

In the second study, Bambi Schieffelin (1984) observed one family of the Kaluli people living in the rain forest in Papua, New Guinea. The members of this group are monolingual speakers of the Kaluli language and it is traditionally a non-literate society. Face-to-face interactions predominate and the people have never expressed much interest in learning about reading and writing. In 1971, the Kaluli people began to experience social and cultural changes when

the Christian missionaries who had settled in the area introduced adult literacy classes. A small proportion of the community attended these classes and after five years of instruction, there was little evidence that literacy had had any impact on everyday village life. Some older children aged 10 - to 16 years old also attended school but only for a few years. Most village people did not think that literacy was relevant to their lives as their main interests were food-collecting activities and gardening. The nature of literacy skills in this community was viewed as a connection towards mission life and an involvement outside of village life. Schieffelin (1984, as cited in Goelman et al, 1984:12) states "Interest in literacy tended to separate individuals from one another in fairly significant ways and changed the usual patterns of organizing social activities".

Schieffelin examined the 'book-reading' activities that were taking place in one family in which both parents were acquiring literacy. Most reading was done in the daytime as there was limited means of lighting. Most adults did not allow their children to handle any literacy booklet as it could be damaged easily. However, in this family, the mother, Osolowa was the only adult who looked at books with her child. Her daughter was two years old and always initiated the joint book-activity with her mother. At times, the mother would point at pictures and engage in discussion with her daughter. Osolowa would label and name objects for her child and in turn the child would pronounce the word breaking it into appropriate syllables as she had heard her mother articulate them when she read aloud. Schieffelin concludes that even though these book-reading activities had little connection to the aspects of Kaluli social life, they did have an important effect on the language usage of the young child in this family. Unlike the other children in the traditional Kaluli families in whose lives books played no part, Osolowa's daughter continued to elicit the names of household objects and draw her mother into interactions based on object naming. From this observation, the researcher was able to determine that even though Kaluli society did not see literacy as relevant to the lives of their children, the impact of these joint-reading sessions between one mother and her daughter had significance.



In the third sketch the Schieffelin (1984) examined a refugee Chinese family from Vietnam now living in Philadelphia. The parents spoke very little English and Cantonese was the language of the home. The study focused on a 9-year-old boy who had developed literacy skills in a school context. The home environment did not provide any books and reading material for this boy and his siblings to read, and it was not customary in this family for parents to read to their children in any language.

An important finding in this study is the literacy role reversals. These young Chinese children were facilitating and assisting their parents with any literacy-related tasks. As these children could not rely on their parents for direct assistance with any school-related tasks, they were obliged to seek help from adults outside their familial network.

When observing this 9-year-old boy in his school environment, Schieffelin noticed how eager he was to assist the teachers, his peers and other adults with any literacy event. She stated as cited in (Goelman, 1984:17 ) that she felt his behaviour “was part of a much larger pattern of helping adults with literacy-related tasks” which she felt was evidence of his repeated assistance with his parents and extended family members.

Schieffelin maintains that this notion of a ‘literate environment’ does not pertain to the home environment of the Vietnamese family. The children acquire literacy skills in a school context and are part of a literate culture, even though their environment does not provide them with reading materials to explore. For this refugee family the acquisition of English is not for enjoyment and personal expression but their main priority is to be functionally literate in order to survive in their new country of residence. Schieffelin (1984, as cited in Goelman et al, 1984:18) states “for the non-English-speaking child, the social requirements for success in school and the achievements of literacy skills are of a different nature from the social requirements for the English speaker”.

From their ethnographic studies, Cochran-Smith and Schieffelin concluded that the home contexts of a variety of communities were where the beginnings of literacy may be located before a child enters formal schooling. After much

research they stated that the theme that emerged from all three of these studies is (Goelman et al, 1984 :22 ) “ that for an individual to become literate, literacy must be functional, relevant and meaningful for individuals and society in which they live”. Literacy should therefore be able to meet the needs of people for their own social purposes and objectives.

### **2.7.3 Social Influences on the Development and Practice of Literacy.**

Two other researchers, A.B. Anderson and S.J. Stokes (1980) were concerned with ethnic group differences in literacy, and therefore decided to study the literate practices associated with poor people of ethnic origins. Their study was conducted over a period of eighteen months, whereby they observed an equal amount of children from three ethnic groups namely; Black American, Mexican American and Anglo-American.

They were interested in noting which kinds of literacy events, other than story-reading, were taking place in the home that provided young children with systematic and useful sources of learning about print. Anderson & Stokes (1980, as cited in Goelman et al, 1984:28) state that “literacy events function not as isolated bits of human activity but as connected units embedded in a functional system of activity involving prior units of action”.

The literacy incidents that these researchers observed were socially assembled events. Anderson and Stokes identified nine domains of literacy activity located in the home environment. The data they collected revealed that the domain activity, which they had labelled ‘entertainment’ (where print is the source of the activity) scored the highest in their analysis table across all race groups.

However, they ascertained that Anglo-American families involved print more often in their home activities than members of the other two groups. Anglo-American parents seemed more frequently to initiate activities that communicate the value of literacy skills and techniques. This is comparable with Heath’s study of 1980 which reported that literate adults in black families in

Trackton usually waited for their preschool child to initiate a kind of interaction with print, rather than instituting it themselves.

Anderson and Stokes were aware of the fact that large portions of research in the United States suggested that the culture of the poor and ethnic minorities account for people's failure to succeed in literacy activities. They were thus very careful to investigate this hypothesis.

When comparing the patterns of literacy practice demonstrated by the three ethnic groups in their sample, they concluded that it was difficult to define ethnicity as a critical source of difference. They believed that certain features of the contexts in which literacy occurred advocates that "literacy is influenced largely by social institutions and not cultural practice namely: religion and language". None-the-less, they felt these factors had very little impact on the patterns of literacy use that they had been able to observe during their study.

In finalizing their results, Anderson and Stokes emphasized that when literacy is equated only with books, their research showed that lower-class families participated less frequently in literacy activities than middle-class families. Therefore, they advised that in order to facilitate the development of literate practices in the home we need to focus on the social institutions that serve as the basis for literacy, and those that extend beyond books.

#### **2.7.4 South African Studies**

In general the majority of studies have been conducted internationally. In the South African context research has mainly focused on literacy in the poorer communities and amongst children who were termed "environmentally deprived" in the De Lange report of (1980, as cited in Prinsloo & Bloch, 1998). In 1987 the Department of Education and Training implemented certain bridging programmes, and quoted Spodek as defining the term "environmentally deprived" to mean any environment which cannot provide the stimulation (physical, intellectual, social, emotional, cultural and educational) a

child needs to prepare him/herself to cope with the demands of the world in which the child will need to function.

Prinsloo and Stein (2001) collected data for a project done in the Western Cape and Gauteng of Children's Early Literacy Learning (CELL). This project chose to examine the nature of young children's early encounters with literacy as well as the influences that shape young children's literacy learning in school settings across multiple sites. The children in this study attended low budget educare and preschool centres that operated with very limited public funding, professional training and support in the urban townships around South Africa. Their findings show that different teachers engage with literacy activities differently and that the "pedagogic environment" produces certain kinds of messages about literacy.

Prinsloo and Stein (2004:70) discovered that "the substance and social interactions that framed these activities varied so dramatically that the children at each site were taking different orientations to literacy and meaning-making resources away with them". Despite following the same broad curricula the teachers at each site draw on different forms of knowledge and invent their own activities.

Carole Bloch (1997) explored the way children develop their understanding about literacy and how they spontaneously engage with written language before entering formal schooling. She studied her daughter Chloe's writing process in the print- rich environment of her home. She found that in a home that values and welcomes written language in different forms and usage, a child begins to model and experiment with written symbols and scribbles. Bloch (1997:5) states "parents are their children's first teachers". She also maintains that becoming literate is a process, which emerges as children learn and experience reading and writing practices in a personally meaningful way.

## **2.8 Other factors shaping literacy engagement in the home**

Peter Hannon (1997:1) an educational researcher from Sheffield University in the United Kingdom, discusses the relationship between home and school learning in his book "Literacy, Home and School". He focuses on the issue of improving the teaching of literacy through parent involvement. He maintains that "much of children's literacy learning takes place before school or out of school – mainly in fact, at home".

Hannon believes that literacy today is very different from that of the past. He attributes this to the transition in our culture and to technological changes. Hannon (1997:3) states "Information technology today will have repercussions in the future that are hard to predict". Written language has now taken on a new significance as a "method of human-machine communication", he says. Studies done by Hannon have questioned whether information technology will have the capacity to eliminate the need for children to acquire literacy or just alter the nature of their literacy.

One of the first stages in becoming literate is when a child starts to learn oral language. Most parents' talk to their youngsters from the day they are born and this learning begins long before the child is conscious of what language really is. Parents stimulate their children to take an interest in language by reciting rhymes, playing word games and reading stories with them.

Armstrong and Casement (1998) state that, with the way technology has now changed, considerable amounts of information comes to us in the form of images on a screen. Parents who introduce their children to computers at a young age often believe that they will enhance and advance the child's literacy learning. However, adults will be doing their children a disservice if they think that computers can take the place of talking and listening, as voices on a screen cannot replace a parent's speech.

Even though children in our society are surrounded by speech and print in their home environment, they will not automatically make the association between print and meaning unless they are led to understand what print represents.

Children find out what books are for by seeing adults use them. Armstrong & Casement (1998:89) state “Knowing what books are for and how they are used is particularly important, since this has shown to have a strong positive effect on how well children do in their early years at school”.

When a child sees a computer screen it usually represents another surface that demonstrates print. Armstrong & Casement (1998:90) maintain “The limitations of the screen as a medium for reading might lead a child to form a limited idea of what reading entails”. Electronic print seems to lack the structure and continuity of print on paper. Research from the McLunan Centre for Media Studies at the University of Toronto suggest that it is “essential that children start with fixed text before they experience ‘movable text’” (Armstrong & Casement, 1998:91). Fixed text allows the mind to move at its own pace and allows time for reflection that can encourage imagination.

Marilyn Adams (1990) in her book ‘Beginning to Read’ stresses the importance of reading aloud to children, as she sees it as an activity that builds knowledge and develops skills. Children need to become active participants when having stories read to them. In electronic books, it appears that children take on a more passive role by often just staring at the pictures on the screen. The story itself seems to take second place to the numerous visual deflections as the pictorial aspect becomes more dominant and Adams believes this can form an interference with teaching.

Armstrong & Casement (1998:99) state that “A number of research studies have found that using computers has little effect on young children’s ability to learn basic skills which are relevant to reading”. However these two researchers believe that the multimedia of different technologies will cause children to equate reading with visual entertainment, as the children keep searching for meaning instead of initiating it in their own minds.

Hannon (1997:9) outlines that “it is clear that literacy remains very unequally distributed in society and that it is strongly related to out-of-school factors, particularly home circumstances”. He says instead of considering children’s

literacy separately from parents or adult literacy, it would be more beneficial to think of the family's literacy in its entirety. The literacy that parents bring to the family will usually exhibit their own personal interests and upbringing. Even though parents will certainly influence and dominate their youngster's literary development, the child's own literacy will also reflect their own personal experiences. Hannon, thus believes that many factors control the extent to which families value literacy and this helps shape the direction of the children's literacy growth.

Hannon concludes that it is an error to think that most of children's learning occurs at school and that we should not underestimate the power of home learning. He says that in the pre-school years the primary teachers are usually the parents. In spite of this notable fact, research has been quite limited when studying home learning before school admission. Hannon (1997:37) feels this may be due to methodological difficulties and that "we know more about the 'what' of learning – than we know about the 'how' of learning in the home".

## **2.9 Summary**

The literature reviewed in this chapter has been applicable to this study, as it has focused primarily on literacy practices in the home environments of a variety of diverse communities. These research studies have also shown how literacy development has been used for different social purposes within different cultural contexts. I have also included a component on technology which has begun to dominate changes in the literacy events that are taking place in the home environment of families at present. The following chapter will give a description of the methods of data collection used in the investigation for this study.

## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a brief overview of the research design used for this study. I begin by describing the methodology employed and thereafter discuss how the site and sample of respondents was selected. I include, in the discussion, a description of the methods of data collection and elaborate on how data was triangulated. I conclude by providing a description of the ways in which the analysis process was undertaken, the ethical considerations as well the limitations of the study.

As this was a small-scale study, which sought to examine the factors influencing early literacy practices in the home environment, and how these are manifested in eight homes of reception year children, it seemed appropriate to use qualitative research methodology for reasons articulated below.

### **3.2 Methodology**

The discussion below begins with a broad overview of the methodology employed in the research. This description includes a discussion of the two broad methodological frameworks used in educational research, namely qualitative and quantitative research. I proceed by focusing primarily on the chosen methodology for the study. In this section I also pay particular attention to issues and topics of concern which arose in the course of the study.

In educational research attention is directed to the methods and methodology used in a study. Cohen and Manion (1994:38) maintain that “methods are a range of approaches used to gather data which is to be used as a basis for inference and interpretation, for explanation and prediction”. The word ‘method’ refers to the procedures of bringing about responses to predetermined questions, recording the information and describing the facts. If methods allude to techniques and procedures used in the process of data-collection, then the aim of methodology is as Kaplan (1973, as cited in Cohen & Manion, 1994:39) states “...to describe and analyse these methods, throwing light on their



limitations and resources". In short methodology helps one to understand not only the products of scientific enquiry but the process itself.

In this study, I was interested in understanding why things are the way they are in our social world and why people act in the ways they do. Particularly, I was interested in examining what factors shape early literacy practices in homes perceived to be well-resourced as well as to obtain information on parent's roles and perceptions in early literacy development. It seemed most appropriate therefore to employ a qualitative methodological approach to the research.. Qualitative research as broadly defined by Strauss & Corbin (1990, as cited in Hoepfl, 1997:17) means "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification". Bryman (1988, as cited in Silverman, 1997: 64) agrees by stating that "the most fundamental characteristic of qualitative research is its express commitment to viewing events, actions, norms, values, etc., from the perspective of the people who are being studied" as opposed to producing results that emanate from figures.

Qualitative researchers usually take the known subject as their starting point and focus on understanding through contextualised data collection and interpretation. They talk about a need to perceive things from a participant's point of view. In a like manner, quantitative research also focuses on the knowing subject (this is one of the few points of commonality). However, quantitative researchers find that the raw data generated by the individual respondents is of little interest and therefore seek to reconstruct the answers from the individual subjects in terms of statistical measurements. Quantitative research thus focuses on finding out through decontextualised data collection and data analysis. This method has come to be identified with analysing data by mathematical formulae.

Qualitative methodologies can be used to comprehend more effectively any phenomenon about which little is yet known. They can also be used to gain new perspectives on matters about which much is already known, or to acquire more in-depth information that may be difficult to disclose quantitatively. Maja (as cited in Ravele 1997: 63) suggests that researchers who use qualitative

approaches are “interested in the quality of a particular activity, situation and relationship. Emphasis is on rich and holistic descriptions rather than numbers”.

A key feature of qualitative research is its emphasis on studying people in their natural setting. Ravele (1997) states that “data is usually collected through sustained contact with people in the settings where they normally spend time”. This, they suggest, allows the researcher to enter the world of the people s/he is studying and to listen, hear and observe the participants.

Another feature employed in this study relates to the manner in which the subjects are usually selected in qualitative research. In the main, respondents are selected using certain criteria and not by chance. Much of the data in this approach to research can come in the form, not only of words, but also of impressions, gestures and tones exhibited by the interviewees. Thus the importance of conducting the research in respondents’ natural environment as far as possible. This approach seemed appropriate because I was interested in the families’ personal stories and concerned with understanding the perception, actions and behaviour of the parents from their own frame of reference.

A key consideration in the use of any methodological approach is how it influences decisions about the type and nature of methods one can use to collect data. Since this study was interested in the opinions, actions and responses of parents and as qualitative research concentrates on the opinions, feelings and experiences of individuals, it seemed important to use interviews (discussed later in this chapter). Questions were posed which began with “how, why and in what way” in order to produce rich and rewarding descriptions that captured the words and their meanings of my respondents. The data produced, reflects as far as possible, relevant descriptions of the people, their environment and their literacy interactions in the family, and would not have been easily produced by a statistical procedure. As will be explained in-depth later in this chapter, by using the method of personal interviews, I hoped to obtain some reality of what people actually do, and not what they say they do, as often occurs when using a questionnaire.

My ultimate goal was to discover patterns which would emerge after interviewing and observing the participants, recording the data and analysing the information obtained in order not to make sweeping generalisations but rather contextual and pertinent findings. Thus, this process of discovery was the basis of using a qualitative approach.

### **3.3 Site**

The selected site for the study was the Hermanus area, a town situated about 120 kilometres from Cape Town on the east coast of the Western Cape and is surrounded by majestic mountains, hugging coastlines and an environment of exceptional beauty. It is represented by eight diverse communities, which amalgamated in 1994 under the umbrella of the Overstrand Municipality. By diverse I mean a variety of different communities that make up a representation population of South Africa's people. These include Greater Hermanus which is the administrative centre; Fisherhaven in the west; Voelklip at the foot of the Klein River Mountains; Hawston, one of the oldest historically designated 'Coloured' areas; Zwelihle, the former black township of greater Hermanus; and the new areas of Vermont, Onrust and Sandbaai which are predominantly Afrikaans-speaking. Even though English and Xhosa are spoken, the majority of people living in this area known as the Overstrand are Afrikaans-speaking. Hermanus was originally a fishing village surrounded by farming districts. However, it has since grown into a peri-urban town that thrives on tourism and a growing economy. This growing community has a population of close to 56,000 inhabitants. I chose Hermanus as my site as it was convenient because it is where I work and live.

The three schools that I selected for my study were in close proximity to where I lived. They were also the only schools that had reception year classes and the administration at these schools were prepared to allow me access to their learners and their families. The teaching medium at these schools was dual medium, so language did not play a specific role in this study. Afrikaans just happened to be the main language of instruction at two of the schools as a large majority of the learners were from Afrikaans-speaking homes. These

schools were selected *because* they were easily accessible, had a ready sample who fitted the category “well-resourced” and were willing to participate in the study.

### **3.4 Sample**

The sample comprised two sets of parents:

#### **3.4.1 Parents of three schools who filled in the initial questionnaire**

As I was interested in learners that came from specific environments, I sent out questionnaires to all families whose children were attending these three specific schools. To get an overall representation of the inhabitants of the area I specifically selected a site that was well-resourced for this research study. The three reception year classes formed the starting point for my inquiry. The learners from these schools and by extension their families provided a profile of households with diverse language, race and gender differences. Thus a total of seventy-two detailed questionnaires were sent out to respective parents of reception year learners at the various schools.

#### **3.4.2 Parents who were observed and interviewed**

For the interviews and observations I selected eight families from the large cohort sample for reasons articulated below.

In order to track similarities and differences within this select group, thoughtful attention was given to choosing well-resourced homes with parents of varying marital status, academic qualification and home language. Interesting responses to the questionnaire were also taken into consideration in order to get a broad spectrum of parents’ views and opinions for my purposive sample. These eight families were not chosen randomly but were selected to fulfil the criteria that I was looking for. I looked at the large cohort sample and the results that had been tabulated and then chose the eight families.

The following criteria was used:

- a) The marital status of the parents, in order to evaluate whether being a single, married or divorced parent influences the level of literacy in the home.
- b) The academic qualification and the levels of tertiary education, as they help to define the role the parents play in literacy practices in the home environment.
- c) The presence of resources in homes as a factor in ensuring both formal and informal literacy practices was taking place.
- d) Both genders were represented equally, thus the equality of gender in terms of the children to understand whether gender was a factor in influencing literacy practices in the home environment.

### **3.5 Gaining Access**

Lofland & Lofland (1971, as cited in Hoepfl 1997:25), suggests that the “participants are the ones to grant someone access to their lives, their minds, and their emotions, therefore permission has to be sought”. In my study however, permission was sought from two sources: the school and the parents.

A formal written letter was submitted to the various schools outlining my credentials and proposed plan of investigation (see Addendum 1). This was followed with a personal visit to the school principal to introduce myself and answer any questions that might have needed further clarification. One private school also requested further documentation – (my curriculum vitae) that needed to be submitted to the School Governing Board. Once permission was granted (see Addendum 2), letters of request (see Addendum 3) were written to the parents of the Reception Year learners asking them whether or not they minded participating in the research. Once responses were obtained, letters with the accompanying questionnaires were distributed (see Addendum 4).

Once the questionnaires were collected and the data analysed, further letters were written requesting the opportunity to interview the parents concerned (see Addendum 5). In the letters, I rearticulated the aims and objectives of my research. Based on specific criteria, I asked the school principal and class teachers for assistance and guidance in choosing the smaller sample of

parents. They in turn also sent out a letter to the parents requesting permission (see Addendum 6).

When the preliminary information had been collected, and the eight sample families had been selected, I telephoned parents requesting the opportunity to interview them in their home environment. I discussed the time involved, the nature of the research, the procedures that would be used and the issues of confidentiality. In order to gather views from people with different experiences, I engaged in a critical case sampling to ensure my research to yielded a detailed description of the phenomenon. Struwig & Stead (2001:123) states that “critical case samplings are those that are selected because they are central to the issue being studied”.

### **3.6 Ethics and Confidentiality**

“Ethics embody individual and communal codes of conduct based upon adherence to a set of principles which may be explicit or implicit, abstract and impersonal or concrete and personal”. Zimbardo (1992, as cited in Cohen and Manion, 1994: 362).

I gave careful consideration to ethical issues when conducting the study. I visited heads of schools to seek permission to carry out my study on the parents of the learners at their respective schools. All information collected and recordings made in the study were treated confidentially. In order to protect the anonymity of research participants, I have given pseudonyms to the names of the children and their families. I assured confidentiality to those parents who agreed to a face-to-face interview in order to protect their right to privacy. Even though, as the researcher, I will be able to identify participants and know who has provided information, no connection will be made public. As Miles Hierberman (cited in Kolagano 2000: 65) said, “We cannot focus only on the quality of the knowledge we are producing, as if its truth were all that counts. We must also consider the rightness and wrongness of our actions as qualitative researchers in relation to the people whose lives we are studying, to our colleagues, and to those who sponsor our work”.

I promised schools and parents that all information collected would be used only for analysis of and reporting on the research project. I also assured schools that if they were interested in the results of the study, I would make these available.

### **3.7 Data Collection Strategies**

The aim of the study was to examine the factors that influence early literacy practices in the home environment as well as the roles and perceptions of parents in early literacy development. Because I sought to understand factors influencing literacy practices in the home, using a variety of data collection tools seemed appropriate. These included a questionnaire, observations, interviews and tape recordings of literacy moments in the home.

#### **3.7.1 Triangulation**

In the research study, I used the technique of triangulation to explain more fully the richness and multiplicity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint. The researcher employed three methods of research as stated above to look at the same phenomena, as error is often much higher if only one method is used. Also reliance on a sole method may distort the researchers reality of what they are investigating. Denzin (1998, as cited in Silverman, 1997 :25) states that “triangulation uses several methods to reveal multiple aspects of a single empirical reality”. A notable conjecture of the triangulation strategy is that sociological research is a discovery process delineated to get an objective truth that may be arranged as an approved theory of social structure and process. I thus triangulated the data to verify the information and examine the phenomena from a variety of perspectives. I attempted to look at the subjects from more than one viewpoint in order to provide a broader picture with more inclusive knowledge about this selected group. For this reason the different strategies of data collection used and the various forms in which it can be interpreted have enriched the study. Denzin (1988 : 512) notes “that not only is

methodological strength added to the study through triangulation, but it is also the appropriate way of entering the circle of interpretation”.

### **3.7.2 Questionnaire**

While my study was not categorised as survey research, I used a self-reported questionnaire to gain information that was best derived from the use of such an instrument. I devised a set of questions which were geared towards my topic of research. Babbie (1982: 138) states: “We observe people by asking them questions and ‘observing’ their answers”. As a researcher one provides a stimulus (the question) and then measure people’s responses to it. The stimulus is as much a part of the measurement as the response it produces. The key to a successful questionnaire is reliability and validity. In order to achieve this goal, the questions asked should generate the desired information. I employed two types of survey questions. Firstly open-ended questions, whereby a question was asked and the respondents answered in their own words. These responses were then combined into categories and then coded. The second type of questions used were closed-ended type questions whereby a variety of desired answers were provided and the respondents were asked to choose which best represented how they felt.

When using open-ended questions it is often necessary for the researcher to make interpretations of the responses. One needs to be aware of not interpreting answers in a biased way which would affect the reliability of the study. On the other hand, closed-ended questions force the respondents to make the interpretations. The use of closed-ended questions makes the process of data collecting easier and faster, while also allowing for standardization and assuring a greater fidelity to the respondents’ feelings. I used both formats in my questionnaire in the hope of attaining a wide range of responses and as an attempt not to limit parents’ attitudes and opinions, but allow them opportunity to express themselves freely and honestly.

In administering the *questionnaire*, my intention was to gain demographic information from the parents. I also wanted to ascertain the reading habits of



families, as well as the literacy activities and experiences that shape literacy practices in the home environment. I was hoping to acquire an insight into the time and frequency spent on literacy events and whether technology and resources played a significant role in the child's social life and behaviour.

With the support of the school administration, I sent out a total of seventy-two questionnaires to families whose children were in Reception Year classes. Parents were asked to fill out these forms on their own and return them to the school. A covering letter explaining the questionnaire was attached as well as instructions on how to complete it. Those parents who did not send the questionnaire back within two weeks received a note as a reminder requesting them to complete the form and return it as soon as possible. On a few occasions, the class teacher made some phone calls urging parents to return the completed forms.

The questionnaire contained two sections (See Addendum 4). The first section included nineteen questions pertaining to the child and parents' reading/literacy habits in the home. The majority of these questions were closed-ended, whereby a set of responses was provided and the respondents were asked to choose the response most meaningful to them. Extra space was also provided after some questions for parents to specify and elaborate further if they so desired, or if they felt the need to give another response instead of the ones provided.

The second part of the questionnaire comprised questions regarding personal information, such as age, home language, academic qualification, marital status and personal acquisitions. From the answers from this section, I was hoping to address my research concerns, which were to investigate what practices in well-resourced home environments contributed to early literacy development.

The intention with the questionnaire was to use it as a descriptive rather than a statistical measuring tool. The main purpose was to gain descriptive information that could be used to obtain a profile of a large group of parents' views and perceived influences on literacy development in the home.

Cohen & Manion (1994:83) claim that “surveys gather data, at a particular point in time with the intention of describing the nature of existing conditions, or identifying standards against which existing conditions can be compared, or determining the relationship that exists between specific events”. Hitchcock & Hughes (1989:25) have cited several problems which can arise when doing social surveys. They state that “questionnaires may not be flexible enough to enable respondents’ true feelings or attitudes to come through. People often treat these kinds of instruments with suspicion”. They go on to say that structured questions may lead respondents into answering in a particular way that could affect the accuracy of the survey. Therefore, special attention was given to the presentation and overall wording of this structured questionnaire, also it was the first part of the data collection process.

The questionnaire information served two purposes. Firstly, to get an initial idea of the literacy practices children were experiencing with their family members and secondly, it was used as a selection tool for more in- depth interviews and observations.

### **3.7.3 Interviews**

Cohen and Manion (as cited in Robson, 1993: 229) have cited that “an interview is the one initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining relevant research information and focused by him on content specified by research objectives of systematic description, prediction or explanation”. Robson (1993: 228 ) states “An interview is the best tool to use in conducting a research of a small-scale inquiry. The interview is the flexible and adaptable way of finding things out. It is a kind of conversation with a purpose”. The researcher used a set range of questions in the field setting to collect additional data and then recorded these interviews (See Addendum 7). I chose the interview method of data collection because it is a two-way process where the researcher can be involved in the discussion with the interviewees, thus enabling the researcher and the interviewee to clarify any points of confusion instantly, as they arise.

I used a structured interview schedule in which the content had been organised in advance. The sequence and wording of the questions had been determined by the interviewer and followed a specified format. Even though I allowed some leeway for discussion and encouraged free talk, I guided the interview process according to the predetermined framework of questions that I had developed. Questions were asked about parents' own reading experiences when they were young, and I also included questions about current involvement in literacy practices with their children. Questions relating to television and computer usage among families were also pursued. Over a period of three weeks a total of eight respondents whose children were in reception year classes were observed and interviewed in their homes. Before conducting the interviews, the researcher assured the interviewees of the confidentiality of their responses.

Care had to be taken in terms of setting up the interview and I was only able to interview parents once. This can be attributed to a variety of reasons. Time constraints were a factor in that parents worked all day and when they got home they were reluctant to spend time on an interview. In addition, some respondents felt threatened and vulnerable having an educator asking them questions about their relationship with their children. One parent mentioned he/she had had an unpleasant experience in an interview situation, and had felt exposed and uncomfortable by the intrusion into their home setting. Thus I was sensitive to the need to put parents at ease when I telephoned for an appointment and was aware of their initial apprehension.

To administer the interview I read the questionnaire items to the respondents and recorded the conversation using a tape recorder, which I later transcribed. Each interview was conducted in the respondents' homes and lasted, on average, 30 minutes. I was sensitive to the fact that the introduction of a tape recorder can bring a sense of ceremony and structure to a situation. Therefore, at the onset of the interview, I tried to position the tape recorder in the least obtrusive area, with as little interference as possible. Initially, I found there was a degree of superficiality in the presence of the mechanical recorder, but after a

short time the respondents relaxed and conversations and interactions became quite natural. The reason I decided to use the tape recorder was for ease of process. According to Hoepfl (1997) “recordings have the advantage of capturing data more faithfully than hurriedly written notes might, and can make it easier for the researcher to focus on the interview”. Patton (as cited in Hoepfl 1997:348), has said: “A tape recorder is indispensable.”

Cohen and Manion (1994:281-282) claim “the most practical way of achieving greater validity is to minimize the amount of bias as much as possible”. They believe that sources of bias can stem from the attitudes and opinions of the interviewer, misperceptions on the part of the interviewer of what the respondent is saying as well as misunderstandings of what is being asked on the part of the respondent. In the hope of eradicating bias, the researcher took special care when formulating questions so that the meaning would be clear. In order to enhance ‘reliability’, Kitwood (1977, as cited in Cohen and Manion, 1994:282) maintains that “the main purpose of using an interview in research is that it is believed that in an interpersonal encounter people are more likely to disclose aspects of themselves, than they would in a less human situation”. The human element seems to be necessary to ensure validity and allow for a friendly transaction between interviewer and respondent.

### **3.7.8 Observations and Field Notes**

As a field researcher I jotted down notes during the interview hoping that they would spark my memory once I had left the field. Baker (1988:241) states that “note-taking is the backbone of collecting field data”. On arriving at the respondents’ home, I wrote down details of the physical environment with special reference to the type and amount of books and reading material that was visible. I made a concerted effort to write up detailed notes within twenty hours of the field observation so that it was still fresh in my memory. I was aware that the impressions that I gathered while making the observations were subjective in nature and could affect the validity of the data. Thus I chose a strategy whereby I made a conscious effort to focus on specific observations such as home setting, availability of resources, technological devices,

respondents body language and presence, responses to structured questions, as well as any other events or accounts taking place in the home. Cohen and Manion (1994:106) claim that “the purpose of observation is to probe deeply and to analyse intensively the multifarious phenomena that constitute the life cycle of the unit with a view to establishing generalizations about the wider population to which that unit belongs”. As I was trying to examine what factors influence early literacy practices in the home my observations concentrated on the natural environment of the child. As an investigator my aim was to perceive any ongoing behaviours as they occurred and to make appropriate notes about any prominent features. A total of about one hour was spent in each home this included the interview and observations. Once out of the field, I organised my notes according to various categories so that I was able to pick out any recurring themes that might assist me later when analysing and writing up my findings

### **3.7.9 Data Analysis Process**

Interview data was transcribed by the researcher, whereby she was looking for patterns of commonality that emerged as well as the repetitions of words and phrases. Excerpts of verbatim comments will be discussed in the findings section of the dissertation.

### **3.7.10 Analysis and interpretation of data**

An analysis and interpretation of the way in which the recorded data was organised and analysed will now follow, as the data collection strategies used have already been discussed. Patton (1990:371-372) comments that “the challenge is to make sense of massive amounts of data, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns, and construct a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveals.”

The questionnaire data was used as a basis for understanding a large sample perspective and to gain knowledge and insight about what parents were doing with children in the home in relation to literacy practices. Initially the

questionnaire was done to obtain the descriptive survey data necessary for the research. In order that maximum usage was made of the data collected, the analysis was done item by item. The data collected from the survey forms were coded, recorded and tabulated in order to identify common patterns and themes. Certain deductions were made from the data collected from the survey forms.

In order to obtain more complex and detailed data around emerging themes, as already described I then decided to continue the study by using interviews and on-site observations. Individual interviews with a selected group of eight parents was recorded and transcribed manually and electronically. I sought to identify patterns of commonality from these interviews to determine what specific factors were influencing early literacy practices in the home environment. The qualitative data obtained from the on-site observations was recorded manually and was analysed in order to pinpoint themes from the observations made.

The data collected was collated under different headings and sub-headings according to the categories that emerged from the given data. Different methods were used for interpreting the qualitative data as suggested by Sowden and Keeves (1988:523). These include a) identifying patterns and themes; and b) clustering similar responses and/or subjects”.

Petersen (1998); Patton (1990); and Guba and Lincoln (1988) view the “human element” as the greatest strength of qualitative research while positivist researchers view it as a weakness. Patton (1990) and Guba, et al (1988) argue that “qualitative research has validity, and that its validity can be sought through ‘internal scrutiny’ and ‘external assessment’”. Peterson (1998:55) states that “when doing qualitative research the research should at all times monitor his/her assumptions and reactions throughout the research”.

Thus for this study qualitative research was used to provide in-depth interviews and observations of a smaller number of participants through direct encounters

with individuals on a one-to-one basis. The interviews were planned around obtaining the answers as to why people behave the way they do, their attitudes and opinions to early literacy practices and how they are affected by the events around them.

## **CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The data in this chapter is presented with reference to the three instruments used in this study. Firstly, the data assembled from the completed forty-four questionnaires and secondly, the data collected from the eight in-depth interviews conducted in the home environment as well as associated observations.

The rationale for the different sets of data was firstly to obtain a broad overview of a large cohort of parents with regards to specific foci namely: a) whether the demographic profile made a difference to their reading practices b) whether indeed they were 'well- resourced' and c) whether any other features seemed to influence the literacy practices in the home environment. Secondly, the data from the in-depth interviews and observations was to gain a clearer understanding of the parents' perceptions of literacy as well as get a better grasp on the themes and trends that had emerged from the questionnaire.

The questionnaire data is presented in a tabulated form with an analytic discussion on the emerging trends. The data from the eight interviews and observations takes the form of a thematic approach identifying and analysing emerging themes and categories.

### **SECTION A: LARGE COHORT SAMPLE**

#### **Questionnaires**

This section is reported in two parts: 4.2 - refers to the demographic profile of the parents and gives a profile of the resources in the home and 4.3 – relates to the self-reported reading habits of the parents.



## 4.2 Demographic profile of the parents

The demographic profile examines the age of the parents, marital status, parent qualifications and home language.

An interesting outcome was that the majority of questionnaires were filled in by the mothers of these reception year children. Of the 44 responses to the 72 questionnaires that were administered to the respective parents at the three schools in the Hermanus area, 2 surveys were completed by both parents, 6 by the fathers and 36 mothers reported completing the forms on their own. It would appear from this data that mothers are the ones that take the responsibility for literacy development in the home.

### 4.2.1 Age of parents

Three categories regarding age were presented in the survey and parents had to demonstrate where they belonged.

**Table 1: Age of parents**

20 - 29 years of age	7
30 - 39 years of age	30
40 - 49 years of age	7

**Table 2: Age of parents: Male/Female**

AGE	FEMALE	MALE
20 - 29	6	1
30 - 39	26	4
40 - 49	4	3

Given the profile of these parents the average age is between 30 – 39 years of age. The information on the age of these parents discloses that these adults are fairly young and are perhaps still establishing their careers or ‘climbing the ladder’ of success. This stage in parent’ lives is usually the time when they are securing the base for their vocation. These implications could account for the

fact that parents stated later in the interviews that they were too busy to spend much time reading with their children.

#### 4.2.2 Parent qualifications

There are 52 responses to this question even though only 44 families filled in the forms. This is due to the fact that in some surveys both parents filled in the answers.

**Table 3: Parent qualifications**

	Male	Female
Grade 9 only		4
Matric only		8
1 year post school study	1	3
2 years post school study		2
3 years post school study	2	6
4 years post school study	4	14

Evidence indicates that parents' education has a relevant impact in the child's environment. Qualifications empowered the families in terms of income and financial ability enabling a high percentage of parents to own their own homes and other luxury assets.

Six of the seven male respondents indicated having formal degrees from a university. Three out of the four divorced mothers had furthered their studies and had achieved a formal qualification of four years or more. In the single mother category, three out of the four women had gone on to additional tertiary education after completing their formal schooling. This constituted between one and four years of extra studying.

Of the thirty-six married persons only ten had no formal qualification of any kind. The remaining twenty-six had achieved a diploma or a degree varying from one year of formal study to more than four years at a technikon or university. A total of fourteen respondents had higher degrees of some sort and

had gone on to complete additional qualifications besides the basic four- year diploma or degree.

It is noteworthy that the majority of children in the study were from homes where parents had furthered their studies after completing their twelve years of formal schooling. Of the occupations that were stated it is also interesting to consider that nine of the parents who responded to the questionnaire were working in the field of education. One would then assume that these parents would be well informed in the sphere of child development. Other occupations included three mothers in the Interior and Graphic design field, two women were in the nursing profession, one woman was a lawyer and another was a social worker.

The fathers' professional qualifications included a mechanical engineer, an architect, a degree in agriculture and one was in the Information technology field. The other occupations mentioned were business administration and secretarial work. Thus the majority of the parents of these Reception Year learners, it would seem were all white-collar workers.

The assumption that tertiary educated parents understand the need and importance of reading to their children daily is not questioned by this study. What was contended was the parents' role and perception of reading practices in the home environment.

### **4.2.3 Marital status and reading to children**

**Table 4: Marital status of mothers**

Single	4
Married	36
Divorced	4

Even though thirty-six out of forty-four respondents are married, the mothers reported that they spent more time engaging in literacy practices with their children than their spouses. The result suggests that marital status does not

play a role in reading habits in the home environment. Whether mothers are married or single they still seem to be the primary care giver in the home and appear to be the one responsible for engaging in literacy practices. Notwithstanding, that most mothers also work on a full-time basis, they still are the primary-carer who read to their children most frequently. This assertion is supported by results from the questionnaire that show that 44% of the mothers read to their children on a daily basis, as the table below indicates

**Table 5: Time spent on reading by mothers**

Number of mothers	Time spent on reading
19	Daily
6	4 x a week
10	2 x a week
6	1 x a week

Only 41 respondents answered this question. What this suggests is that mothers spend the most time reading to their children whether or not they have a spouse.

#### **4.2.4 Home language and preferred language of instruction**

The table below suggests that Afrikaans is the predominant home language in this study. This is emblematic of the social and cultural grouping of the area where this study took place. However, Table 7 serves to confirm the emphasis on English as the preferred language of instruction.

**Table 6: Home language**

English	10
Afrikaans	23
Xhosa	6
English & Afrikaans	4
Other	1

**Table 7: Preferred language of instruction**

English	18
Afrikaans	25
English & Afrikaans	1

Language does not appear to play a role in literacy episodes in the home, as there are no visible differences in the reading habits of the various language groups. Even though six Xhosa speaking families spoke their mother tongue in the home, they all chose English as the preferred medium of instruction for their children. Only one family favoured dual language instruction.

The table below indicates the relationship between the different home languages, time spent reading in the home and the frequency of these reading sessions. It appears that Afrikaans families spend more than twenty minutes daily reading to their young children, whereas in Xhosa -speaking households only one family reads to their child on a daily basis.

**Table 8: Home language and reading habits**

	ENGLISH	AFRIKAANS	XHOSA
Time Spent			
5 minutes		1	
10 minutes	2	3	
15 minutes		7	
20 minutes	2	2	
More	7	12	4
FREQUENCY			
Daily	7	13	1
1x a week	1	3	2
2 x a week	2	7	1
4 x a week	1	5	0
More	0	0	0

#### **4.2.5 Resource profile in the home**

In analysing the results it is important to take note of the academic background of these parents. Most of them had furthered their education and at present held professional jobs, and therefore the assumption is that they were in the higher income bracket by virtue of their position in the job hierarchy. One of the factors that the study took cognisance of was whether there was a relationship between academic qualifications, income and availability of resources in the home. However, information collected on parental income is somewhat unreliable and incomplete as very few families completed that section on the questionnaire.

The following tables give an overview of the number of television sets, computers, motor cars, home ownership and availability of books that were used to extrapolate levels of income. Not all sections add up to forty-four respondents as in some instances parents chose not to answer certain questions.

**Table 9: Number of resources in the home**

Number in the home	Cars	Television Sets	Computers
0			12
1	13	24	17
2	23	10	4
3		5	
4		1	

**Table 10: Home ownership**

Homes owned	31
Homes rented	13

Data indicates that thirty-one out of the forty-four respondents stated that they owned their own house and thirteen families reported living in rented houses. Given this profile, one can assume that materially this cohort of parents was well resourced.

As regards availability of books it can be seen from the table below, that the majority of children receive books as gifts or parents buy the books. Twenty-six parents reported that they would more commonly buy books for their children compared to only ten parents who said they would rather use the library.

**Table 11: Availability of books**

Buy books/Receive books as gifts	37
Use the library	10

The results from the tables above suggest that there is a positive relationship between the level of income and the ownership of books amongst children. As can be seen from the table many parents buy books for their children. The implication may be that the academic and possible social background of the parents influences the value parents place on books and other printed matter. The assumption can thus be made that this group of respondents are aware of the importance of reading and therefore have books in the home for their children's disposal.

**Table 12: Types of books children like to read**

Type of book	Girls	Boys
Picture books	12	19
Fairy tales	12	17
Nursery rhymes	5	7
Folk tales	3	8
Poetry	1	2
Non-fiction	4	3

In the survey a category was presented asking the parents to classify the types of books children most like to read. The parents were requested to rank the child's choices on a scale from 1-5. Not all categories were completed but picture books proved to be the most popular amongst both genders. Poetry was the least popular with only three families selecting this option. It also shows that

boys had a greater preference for fairy and folk tales as well as picture books than girls.

**Table 13: Types of activities children like to engage in**

Types of activities	Girls	Boys
Drawing	12	22
Scribbling	3	10
Colouring in	14	19
Writing letters	8	5
Writing words	6	3
Writing numbers	0	1

Most children enjoyed colouring in and drawing. The girls seem to prefer writing letters and words more than boys did. A lot of the categories in this section were not filled in by the parents. This could be attributed either to the fact that children did not like doing the activity or children were unable to perform the skill.

With regard to the large cohort sample, the data in this section suggests that many of the families have access to a variety of resources in the home environment. The resource profile indicates that parents are in a certain income bracket that enables them to purchase these assets. However, the amount of resources does not appear to influence the daily reading practices that are taking place amongst families.

### **4.3 Self reported supervised literacy habits of the parents**

The tables below indicate the self -reported supervised literacy opportunities of parents with their children, as well as the time spent on this activity. By 'supervised literacy opportunities' I am referring to controlled, managed occasions of reading practices. During these episodes parents participated in literacy activities with their children through the model of shared reading.



## READING HABITS

### 4.3.1 Frequency of parents reading to their children

**Table 14: Timetable of reading habits**

Daily	21
Once a week	6
Twice a week	10
Four times a week	6
More	1

Only twenty-one out of the forty-four families recorded reading to their children on a daily basis. The most common explanation for the lack of frequency was a shortage of time as parents said they were too busy and tired when they got home from work to engage in literacy activities.

### 4.3.2 Time factors: Time spent on Reading

**Table 15: Time spent on reading**

TIME	NUMBER OF FAMILIES
Five minutes	2
Ten minutes	9
Fifteen minutes	16
Twenty minutes	9
More	8

It is also evident from the table that the time spent on reading sessions varied substantially from five minute periods to more than twenty minute periods. The trend appears to be that, fifteen minutes of daily reading before bedtime was the most consistent time spent on average reading to children.

It is interesting to note that there was a 100% positive response rate to the question on the questionnaire, where parents were asked if their children

enjoyed being read to. This would intimate that all children in this study took pleasure in the activity of having stories read to them.

## **SECTION B: SMALL COHORT SAMPLE**

### **Interviews and Observations**

The following information was sourced from the in-depth interviews and observations with the eight specific families. Only mothers participated in the process in the interviews conducted in the home environment.

Eight of the homes visited had spacious gardens. From my observation there appeared to be a wealth of literary resources at the family's disposal by way of books, newspapers, magazines, videos and computer software in seven of the eight homes visited. The physical positioning of the resources in these homes, indicate ample availability and easy access for children and parents to interact in literacy practices on a daily basis.

### **4.4 Perceptions of Literacy**

When discussing informal literacy moments I refer to the incidents of simple, casual unprescribed interactions where parents engage with their children in literacy practices. These include sitting around the television and talking about programmes being viewed as well as joint sessions shared amongst families playing a computer or video game.

These incidents came to my attention during the interviews and observations I conducted with the mothers. It appears that parents' perceptions of literacy moments were only recognized as formal reading sessions where printed materials such as books were being utilised. I felt this lack of perception of opportunity on the part of the parents, was an important issue that had surfaced from the data. The parents main concern was not having enough time to read stories to their children, however they seemed unaware of the potential

opportunities that were emanating from the informal time spent together in families using other forms of resources besides books.

Parents' perceptions related to early literacy practices in the home are identified and discussed. They seem to fall into four broad themes:

#### **4.4.1 Reading is the main focus of literacy development**

Parents' perceptions of literacy moments in the home environment focused mainly on *reading activities* with little emphasis being placed on the times they spent on other visual media moments such as family television viewing and the playing of video and computer games.

One parent suggested:

*Anna* – “I would love my children to get hooked on books. It is an important way for them to learn to read but I won't force them. I will always want them to be available for them and that is why I have books in the house”.

*Lucy* – “I know how important books are in learning to read and they enjoy it when I read to them.

#### **4.4.2 School as the main repository of literacy development**

From the data it is apparent that all the children in Reception Year classes are exposed to literacy experiences at school. This usually takes the form of story reading and letter recognition. Some parents stated that they are not familiar with the reading/literacy programme at their child's school but did know that their child was hearing a story daily. Most parents appeared to trust in the school and the teacher to develop their child's literacy habits.

*Rose* - “I know 'L' starts off with a story in the morning at school and he loves that.”

*Heather* – “I don’t know what kind of reading programme is going on at his school only that they read stories to the children every day – at the end of the day before they leave.”

*Anna* - “I don’t know about the reading programme at school but he is coping. I asked his teacher is his reading alright – is he coping and she said yes I don’t need to worry.”

*Judy* - “All I know is that the teacher reads a story to them every day – at the end of the day.”

*Ellie* - “At school they get to go to the library so I don’t have to take him.”

From the information above it would appear that parents perceive the school to be the major player in their children’s literacy experiences and don’t seem to believe in the urgency of daily reading to their children as this practice is taking place at school.

All eight parents interviewed recalled that they learnt to “read” only when they started formal schooling. There appears to be little recollection of any emergent literacy taking place in the home prior to schooling. This appears to create the perception that literacy learning takes place only in the formal environment of the school, as parents do not see the home as an important factor for developing literacy skills.

*Lucy* - “I couldn’t read before I went to school. I learnt at school.”

*Diana* - “I definitely learnt to read at school. Not before school.”

*Ellie* - “She learnt at school – about after a year. Isn’t that what school does?”

*Judy* – “ Definitely at school – primary. I played a lot. I learnt at school.”

#### **4.4.3 Other forms of literacy practices are inconsequential to literacy development**

*Heather* – “I don’t think you can get much from T.V. It doesn’t allow the child’s brain to develop as well as a book does. There are plenty of opportunities for reading as there are always books lying around but my child prefers television and computer games.”

#### **4.4.4 Resources can in and by themselves provide literacy development**

*Elle* – “He doesn’t like to read but he likes to watch tapes over and over again until he can say the words. He likes to play out the roles from films he has seen.”

From the data it would appear that parents perceive reading as the main form of literacy development. The school is viewed as the main receptacle of reading and this perception may be due to their own childhood experiences where they learnt to read. Informal literacy moments such as conversation, playing of computer games and the watching of television do not appear to be seen as opportunities for literacy learning. Parents do not seem to be aware that resources if mediated can also assist in literacy development.

Though while parents do read, they do not seem to consider this practice as part of literacy development merely as an exercise to do because they believe that “reading” will be learnt in school.

### **4.5. Role of the Parents, Modelling and Reading Practices**

Of the eight families interviewed only three said they read to their children daily and discussed the importance of reading in the home environment. The other five mothers all said they read very little to their children, even though they knew they should do more as time was a constraint.

#### **4.5.1 Fathers' roles and modelling**

While reading appears to be the sole responsibility of the mothers, the fathers' position is often that of a supportive role.

*Indira* - "When her dad is available they can read a little but he is so busy. They sometimes have a reading session but it is rare – 'cause it's usually mom that reads to the children."

*Lucy* - "My husband is a busy doctor and doesn't have time to read. He doesn't enjoy reading. I once read a book and said to him you will really enjoy it – Read it! He didn't. He would rather go and fish or do something else."

*Anna* - "My husband is not a reader but sometimes he reads the stories to the children. He is quite good at it and he supports me in getting the children to love books."

*Judy* - "My husband is an engineer and works on the computer all the time."

*Elle* - "His father doesn't read novels. He reads about informative things. His dad spends a lot of time playing games with him and going camping."

*Diana* - "My husband reads at times but he prefers the computer."

*Rose* - "His father doesn't like to read. We're divorced and when they go to their father they just watch T.V. He doesn't read books to them."

It appears that fathers do not necessarily make the connection between reading habits and literacy development of their children. They do not seem to model reading behaviour that children can emulate.

#### **4.5.2 Mothers' roles and modelling**

Even though most mothers are working fulltime they stated that it is one of their functions as the primary carer to ensure that children do their homework and receive a bedtime story.

*Anna* – “I choose the books that the children read. My mom read to us everyday until we could read to ourselves.”

*Indira* – “When they were younger I chose their books as I’m very particular about illustrations. It’s rare for her dad to read to her as he is very busy. Anyway it’s the mom that usually reads to the children.”

*Judy* – “When I have time I take them to the library. If it’s a nice story I enjoy reading to them. They choose their own books at the library. I try to but they insist on what they want.”

When mothers were asked about their reading experiences when they were young, besides being read to by an adult, two recalled seeing their fathers read the newspaper and one respondent stated her mother read to her brother a lot as he was blind. She used to sit close by and listen to the story. One woman said she remembers her parents reading when they were on holiday and had more time. Another woman stated her mother used to read books from her book-club. This literacy demonstration would indicate that some parents were exposed to the modelling of reading by parents when they were growing up.

## **4.6 Lack of Reading For Pleasure**

One of the interesting findings that emerge from this study is the notion that, in some families reading is associated with work and not for pleasure. Very few children appear to see leisure reading sessions taking place in the home environment.

The following excerpts demonstrate the nature of this issue in five homes:

*Rose* - "Most of the reading I do is studying. I only get to read academic stuff. I love reading but I don't have time for books. My children associate reading with work not with pleasure and enjoyment. Children don't get stimulated to read. There's so many projects to do in the afternoons. As soon as I give my child a book to read he sees it as a schoolbook. I try to tell my older son that if you could read more the impact is so much quicker and you don't have to concentrate on each word to get the message of the story."

*Judy* - " I read a lot for my work. I have to so does my husband. The children see us both read a lot especially for our work. I work at home a lot. We have a big table and the children see me sitting and working so they like to sit at the table with me and write and draw. The children see us working with books and stuff and reading a lot. I think this helps them. If it wasn't like that I don't think they would read so much."

*Anna* - "My father would only read material and magazines associated with his work. My mother is also not a fiction reader. She read a lot of religious books. She always had them around her. I give extra lessons at home in the afternoons so my children see me working with books."

*Lucy* - "My husband doesn't enjoy reading. At home, he only reads his medical journals and work stuff. I joined a book-club about four months ago so it is forcing me to read. I only read when the children have gone to bed and I have more time."

*Heather* - "I am a prolific reader. The books alternate between subjects of a more academic nature and novels. I fluctuate between the two."



#### **4.7 Parents' recollections of early literacy experiences in the home and current practices**

From the information gathered from the interviews, and observations made five parents shared memories of a positive experience of being read to by their parents. The three other respondents stated that they had little recollection of shared reading sessions with their parents when they were young. All parents in this study stated that reading events usually always occurred just before bedtime. Two out of the eight mothers recalled being read to by their fathers, one by both parents and the rest by their mothers.

*Anna* – “I remember even my father reading to us. He wasn't a big reader but when he got hold of a good story he read it to us. I remember in the Huisgenoot there was a story on puppies that he read to us. I remember it specifically.”

*Judy* – “We read bible every evening. I remember my father reading to me always at night before I went to sleep.”

*Rose* – “Both my mom and dad read a bit to me, more so than I read to my children. I don't get a chance and the children are busy watching T.V..”

Although the impact of the experience of being read to by the father is expressed as considerable, not one of the fathers of the eight families in this study read to their children. What this suggests is that early parental reading experiences do not necessarily perpetuate the pattern of shared reading experiences in families. Parents were also unsure if this matter was a contributing factor to the early literacy development of their young son or daughter.

All eight parents interviewed recalled that they learnt to read only when they started formal schooling. Even though some parents witnessed their own parents reading in the home they still appear to make the connection that reading takes place in the school environment. This could be attributed to their

own reading experience where they all stated that they learnt to read when they got to school and not in their home environment.

#### **4.8 Influence of Older Siblings**

The following narratives describe that some mothers in the study recall that the eldest child in their family was often directed by the parents to read to their younger siblings.

*Indira* - "I had two older siblings and they would read to me. I in turn would read to my younger brother and sister. You know you learn to read that way. It was just picking up words as they read to me."

*Heather* - "I was the eldest and I read to my sister. She would copy me."

*Anna* - "I'm the oldest of the four children and I use to read to the others sometimes. But with my children, my oldest in grade one wants to read his books to the others in the family."

It appears that even though the parents in this study were exposed to reading events taking place in their homes when they were young, this exposure has not had a noteworthy impact of the parents reading to their own children.

#### **4.9 Reading Practices relative to birth-order**

Three of the parents interviewed stated that they had spent more time reading with their firstborn child than with their other children. It would appear from the data that with the second and third born children the parents were not as involved in literacy practices as they once were. This could be attributed to various factors, but time constraints seem to be the most prevalent.

*Lucy* - "He is not as keen as his sister but then I did spend a lot more time with my daughter, she is my firstborn, than I did with him. 'H' my eldest was a very

easy child. She would sit down and listen to stories and she is still like that and she loves reading.”

*Lucy* - “I must say like everybody else I suppose with the first child I use to read so much even during the day. And she knew all the nursery rhymes and all the songs but then with the second child not so much. Time was an issue.”

*Diana* - “I have four children. But I don’t read as often to the little one. The others I read to every night when they were small. Sometimes two stories. The older ones now read to my youngest child. “M” will get her sister to read to her at night if she wants a story. I also read to her but only if she really insists. She always wants a whole story and she picks books with long stories.”

*Anna* - “I have started to read every evening to my son who is in grade one. It is my time with him. I don’t always have time to read to my little girl but when she is in grade one then I would like to do the same with her as with my son.”

It is evident that the eldest children were given more attention and encouragement in literacy practices by their parents who engaged more frequently in reading at an early age. It appears that supervised and structured literacy moments are therefore factors contributing to the development of early and continuing literacy.

Another interesting feature that emerged from the interviews was that due to parent’s busy workload and home responsibilities, they too (like their parents) were getting their older children to read their reading homework to the younger sibling. In this way mothers felt that the child was getting a chance to do their school reading, and at least their younger child was having an opportunity to be read to even if it was by a sibling.

*Rose* – “I don’t have time to read to my children. What I do is let the elder one who has to read his story for homework read it to the younger one. My older son is not very good at reading. So I say just try and read it so it sounds like a story. And it’s the younger one who points out to him when he is losing track.

My older son is not so intimidated when he reads to 'L'. When he reads to me he gets nervous but when he reads to his brother it's okay."

*Judy* – "She has a great interest in books and reads to her younger brother. She likes to read."

*Lucy* - "If it is rush hour and my daughter must still do her reading for school I say go and read to your brother."

*Diana* – "Her eleven year old sister reads to her. I don't have to read as much as the older children read to my youngest daughter."

*Indira* – "I feel the first child always has a rather raw deal in that they get pushed. There's a responsibility on them. They're asked to look after the family."

In four families where busy lifestyles create time constraints the formal, supervised reading sessions are undertaken by the older literate children. These siblings have reading homework thus they involve the younger members of the family in the literacy event. Parents seem to perceive the literacy activity as a family responsibility in order to help save time when they are too busy.

#### **4.10 Reading Practices relative to the Gender of the Child**

This section explores whether the gender of the child played a role in the literacy opportunities offered to the child. The data and information from the interviews indicates that the girls appeared to be more interested in drawing, copying words and reading than the boys.

All four girls whose parents were selected for the interview enjoyed spending time drawing, writing letters of the alphabet, looking at pictures in books and having stories read to them. All of the mothers mentioned that their daughters

(age 5-6 years) were beginning to recognise letters and sounds and were actively involved in the process.

The following excerpts from the interviews demonstrate the nature of the girls' pursuits.

*Judy* - "From a young age my daughter liked to draw. She taught herself to read. She started with writing and copying words from books. Girls are different, she likes the end product. She makes books every day of her life. She reads not fluently but she can read anything. She makes the sounds of the letters of the alphabet. She likes to sound out letters. She has a great interest in it. 'N' takes a book and pages through it and sees if she can read it or not. My son takes a book only for the pictures."

*Anna* - "My daughter is not interested in the computer or television. She loves to draw and colour in. She goes into her own world. She also likes to page through books and look at the pictures."

*Diana* - "My youngest daughter likes to look at the pictures and she remembers what we've read to her. On weekends she is not interested to sit and watch television, she would rather draw and play with her dolls. She can recognise letters of the alphabet especially her friend's names. We write out the names and tell her the sounds of the letters. She likes to play school with her sister and loves hearing stories."

*Indira* - "When I was pregnant with her I was really big on what she must be getting through the womb and what she must be hearing. I read her poetry. Today she loves poetry. There's definitely a correlation. She is reading because of the active approach at her Montessori Pre-school and she was ready. I have letters of the alphabet on the wall and she can recognise the big and little letters. I also have a box of words which I play with her. I've read to her and now she 's reading to herself. If she is not sure she will come and ask me. For her birthday on Saturday one of the presents I got her is a book with rhymes and limericks. I try to keep our lives very simple. We don't have a television and

she loves drawing and loves doing projects with papers and playing teacher-teacher. She can sit for a long time doing one thing. She begs to be read to.”

According to the data from the interviews the boys interests and activities differ from the girls. One mother in particular stated that she volunteered at her son’s school once a week. At this time she did reading with only the girls in the class and was amazed at how this experience differs from reading to boys. She said the girls were calm and could concentrate for longer than boys. The following excerpts are illustrative:

*Rose* - “My youngest son likes to hear stories but doesn’t like to read. He can’t sit still and concentrate for too long. He likes building and working in the garage and riding his bike. ‘L’ loves to play outside. He is not a T.V. fan, he’d rather be on his bicycle.”

*Lucy* - “He is not as keen as his sister on books. He prefers non-fiction – he wants the real thing. He likes books on animals. He is not into fairy-tales. He is more an outside child. I also think boys and girls are different. My daughter knew all the nursery rhymes and all the songs but with the second child, my son he wasn’t interested. He was a boy and also time was an issue. If I sit with him he can sound the words but he likes to watch T.V. and play computer games. They go through stages – you know! He would play Lego for a week then all of a sudden he would go back to computer games again. He loves to play outside and if I leave him he is happy to stay there for a long time.”

*Ellie* - “It’s because he is a boy and boys are slower aren’t they? I read to him but he has had more exposure to television and films. He loves books on dinosaurs and he plays computer games. He is an only child and likes lots of active play. He is always walking around with sticks. Boys do that you know! I don’t think his concentration is so wonderful, if you want him to colour in he starts off fine but can’t concentrate for long. He goes off to play another game outside. He loves to draw and they seem to be dreadful pictures – all monsters with lots of heads! He likes to watch cartoons on T.V. and watches videos over and over again until he can say the words himself.”

*Heather* - “He likes books on animals. He loves T.V. – actually too much and he likes to play games on the computer. My son rarely asks to be read to. We need to initiate it. He likes to draw – he is very good at drawing but we have to coax him.”

What is striking though is that these were not perceived as potential opportunities to engage children in literacy development.

#### **4.11 Accessible resources in the home and literacy practices**

Even though I observed that books and other printed materials were available in the homes I visited, the television and computer seemed to occupy a focal point in seven of the eight homes. The seven mothers stated that their children really enjoyed watching television and that they had to enforce time limits otherwise their child would choose to watch incessantly.

*Heather* – “We try to limit the amount of television that my son watches but it’s hard. When I turn my back the kid is running back to the computer or the television. He will watch anything and everything.”

*Lucy* - “If I let them they will watch a lot so I try to limit it to an hour a day.”

As children often model their parents’ behaviour it would appear that they see their parents watching much more television than the reading of printed material.

*Diana* - “Of course she likes T.V. She also plays games on the computer with her father. My husband prefers to be on the computer rather than read a book.”

*Judy* - “She likes T.V a lot. I try to limit it but my husband watches from when he comes home in the evening. I can’t sit still and watch I need to do something

but I have it on in the background. I have to put the T.V. off if I read to them otherwise they don't listen very carefully."

*Rose* - "When I get home from work that's where I find them sitting in front of the T.V. for hours on end. It's the easy way for parents."

*Indira* - "We don't have a T.V. but when she gets to see it, it is a lovely special thing. She loves reading though."

It is interesting to note that the information from the questionnaires reveal that twenty-five families spend two to three hours a day watching television and nine families watch at least one hour daily. The remaining respondents stated that they watch more than three hours of television per day. This is in contrast to the amount of time that families spend on reading activities. A total of nineteen parents quoted that they read to their children on a daily basis and that the average time span amounts to 15 minutes. Nearly all these reading sessions appear to be contrived and supervised by an adult. No parent ever mentioned that shared reading takes place spontaneously or inadvertently.

The trend appears to be that children watch television for lengthy periods of time and this activity is unsupervised as parents are involved in work related tasks at the office and at home. Parents also appear to have little free time to supervise leisure activities.

It is evident that there is an awareness on the part of the parents of the problems that can arise from unsupervised leisure activities such as watching television, playing on the computer and the playing of video games. However, this awareness does not alter the level of intervention between parents and their children to bring about more guided and controlled literacy activities.

*Rose* - "The children like to watch everything on T.V. and I don't think it is good for them but I'm not there to supervise them."



*Diana* - "I don't think T.V. is that important but I am not there in the afternoons so I don't know how much she watches."

*Lucy* - "What is on T.V. at the moment I think is not very important but if I don't make it happen they will watch all the time."

*Anna* - "They are allowed to watch one hour of T.V. in the afternoon. Books are important and I would love them to get hooked on books but I won't force them."

In this study I found that if the children were not watching television they were engaging in computer activities mainly with their fathers.

*Rose* - "'L' can use the computer. He likes anything with a screen. He'll sit there for a while but he wants to see a result. Something must be printed."

*Diana* - "She can play games on the computer. I'm not interested in it like she is and her father is. He prefers the computer to reading."

*Elle* - "'D' sees his father use the computer a lot and his granddad. There is a spare computer, an old one which is his. He has seen it being used since he was small."

*Lucy* - "He plays computer games that his dad just bought. I think it is rubbish but they like to play. It's a boy thing."

*Anna* - "I restrict them on the computer and they are not allowed to sit there for hours. My husband chooses the computer games. They have nothing to do with reading just motor skills. I'm not a big computer fan but luckily my husband is."

*Judy* - "My husband taught her to use the computer. He is an engineer and works with the computer all the time, so I think that is also one of the reasons they like it so much. He helps them all the time."

Documented parental comments in the interview situation revealed that parents' views on resources in the home pertain mainly to television and computers.

*Indira* - "By seeing a movie on T.V. you are robbing a child of creating imagery in their head. When we provide too much visualisation in your child's life they become passive instead of active thinkers."

*Heather* - "Overall reading is better than T.V. I don't think you can get as much from T.V. It's a very passive form of learning. Computers are a little more active and you are using your brain more. But how do you stop children watching television and how do you get them to read books?"

*Rose* - "Children shut down when they watch T.V., they just stare at the screen. I don't think it's good for them."

*Diana* - "I don't think T.V. is that important but I think computers are. Look at the future. All the jobs you now do you need to be computer literate. You don't have to go to the library, you don't have to buy lots of books – it's all there. They can get everything from the computer."

Time constraints appear to prevent parents from reading to their children on a regular basis. However, parents do not seem to appreciate that these informal moments when children are watching television or playing on the computer could also lead to literacy development if they had the time to mediate these activities. Thus resources in the homes in this study appear to be used in a non-mediated manner.

#### **4.12 Family Lifestyles**

From the data, the trend appears to be that both parents work fulltime and that their children are either attending after-school care or they are being cared for by a domestic worker in the home. Family lifestyles have changed from when

the parents themselves were young children. Today's family time seems to revolve around technological appliances in the home such as television and computers which seem much more seductive and passive in comparison to joint family reading periods.

The priority of reading does not appear to be a spontaneous activity, but rather an organised session that needs to be fitted into a busy schedule.

From the data there appears to be other activities in the home, which are visually more appealing than books such as television, videos, and computers. Most family leisure time seems to involve the watching of television.

From the questionnaires and interviews it appears that technology is influencing events that are transforming the daily lives of children and families. The National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC) maintains "that technology is playing a significant role in all aspects of American life today, and this role will only increase in the future" (Young Children, September, 1996:11).

*Indira* - "I try to keep our lives simple. I just think that children are bombarded visually today. It's such 21st century problems. These are created by the lives we lead these days."

*Rose* - "When we were young we played a lot. Today I don't get a chance to read to my children as I am busy and they are watching T.V.."

*Elle* - "I think computers and television have taken over. When I was young it was mainly books. I was over six years old when we got T.V. My son sees me use the computer and he also wants to do it. This is the new way now."

*Anna* - "My mom didn't have any help at the house, she did everything on her own. Today we both work so on Friday nights we have a family evening. We try to do it every week but it doesn't always happen."

*Judy* - "I don't know what happens in the afternoons when I am not home. My maid is with the children."

*Heather* - “I think that T.V. and computers have a place because we are in the 21st century now and they are the technology of the present and they are important.”

Family leisure time appears to have changed since these parents were young. In their youth the choices were limited, whereas today’s children have a greater array of alternatives because of technological advances.

It would appear that watching television or playing computer games involves less active intervention on the part of the parents. These same adults expressed the fact that they often come home from work tired and stressed and that it is an easier option to watch television than engage in formal literacy activities with their children.

*Ellie* states – “ We didn’t get T.V for a long time. I had other interests and was never a great T.V watcher as I missed out in the beginning. I would much rather read a book as that’s what I’m used to.”

*Heather* comments – “I never read to my child as much as I should have because I am busy. I put him in front of the T.V. It was easier.”

The key point that emerges from the data is that the watching of television and the playing on computers are occurring in the homes but that parents are not mediating and facilitating these activities.

### **4.13 Summary**

In this study I found that if the children are not only watching television they are playing games on the computer. From the interviews and observations, it would appear that young children are readily using the accessible resources in the home. The general pattern that emerges is that parents view reading as one of the main forms of literacy development. They also appear to see the

school as the main repository for literacy learning and don't seem to appreciate that informal literacy opportunities may arise when children are watching television or playing on a computer. However, it appears from the data that both parents are working to provide sufficient income to provide resources in the home. Parents appear to be aware of their role but due to time constraints and perceptions are unable to facilitate their children's reading practices daily. This will be explored further in the next chapter where the data is analysed and interpreted.

## **CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The aim of this study was to examine the parents' roles and perceptions of early literacy development in well-resourced environments. Therefore this chapter provides an analysis of the researched evidence with reference to the literature review in Chapter Two. Furthermore this analysis highlights certain themes which have emerged during the study.

The chapter will critically examine these emergent themes that help shape early literacy development in the home, namely: demographic profile of the parents, time constraints, the home environment, repositories for literacy development, accessibility to resources and technology and the key fact, parents' perceptions of literacy development. An analysis of the role of parents and their perceptions regarding their role in early literacy development, relevant to these emerging themes, is woven into this detail. The discussion then explores literacy evidence in both a supportive and contradictory context relative to the study.

### **5.2 Demographic profile of the parents and literacy practices**

The demographic profile in this study indicates that the majority of parents have gone on to further their education after their schooling and have achieved additional qualifications. Most of these parents fall into the age category of 30-39 years old. This would infer that this fairly young educated group of adults are striving to establish their careers and earning dependable incomes as they are providing a variety of resources in the home. These parents show that their professional standing, and education, have certainly been an enabler in permitting them to access resources created in their home environment.

The study shows that irrespective of marital status the mothers are the primary care-givers in the family. The mothers reported that they spent more time engaging in literacy practices with their children than their spouses. It would

appear from the data that fathers follow their own life practices, which were often, determined when they were growing up. Even though both parents reported working, the mother seems to be the one participating in reading activities with their children, whereas the fathers will only spend time with the children on the computer. Although some respondents indicated that when they were young they recalled being read to by their fathers, in this study this appears not to be the case.

### **5.3 Time constraints**

While the current findings suggest that parents are aware that literacy practices should be happening in the home, they also appear to accept that time constraints due to workloads prevent them from giving more time to their children's literacy events. From my observations and interviews it would appear that an environmental tension exists: parents understand the need to spend quality time with the family, but the need to work and earn money to provide resources and other assets sometimes dominates.

It is interesting to note that even with all the resources that are available some children appear to still not be interested in reading. Data from this study has shown that all children enjoyed being read to. Nonetheless, from the information gathered from the parents it is apparent that they are aware that they should be reading with their children but are unable to do this due to restrictive time circumstances. It would seem that parents see their role as that of providers and enablers yet they are not mediating the literacy events that are taking place in the home.

### **5.4 Home environment**

Shapiro and Doiron (1987) believe that the home is an ideal environment for providing enriching experiences and opportunities for young children to gather information and assist in their learning. Theorists such as Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1983) have emphasized the importance of the mediating role of the

parent in young children's literacy development. Most homes in this study were rich in print and other materials. In order for reading to take place children need to see adults involved in the use of literacy skills. This can be accomplished when parents model and actively engage in literacy practices. Vygotsky says that there needs to be interaction with the tool if it is to become a learning experience.

The parents in this study appear to be providing their children with the necessary print material in the home environment but no mediation and scaffolding seems to be added. Vygotsky's theories stress the importance of social interaction and state that when an adult assists or mediates the learning process the child's chances of success are promoted, whereas if a child is presented with knowledge that they do not understand and no assistance is supplied the child may struggle. Vygotsky and Bruner both maintain that when an adult adjusts their level of assistance (scaffolding) it provides support for the child to perform a task or solve a problem that could not be achieved alone.

Teale (1981) is of the belief that reading to young children directly improves their literacy development and he advocates shared book-reading episodes in the home environment as an effective way to orientate children to the functions and uses of literacy. Heath (1980) reports that in her study done with Roadville parents, they considered the reading of stories to their children as an important form of literacy acquisition. Other parents in a community known as Trackton which is in the same area, did not appear to expose their children to printed material, yet both sets of children started school being able to recognise environmental print.

Heath attributed this to the fact that the children had been spontaneously socialised into the habits of literacy which included the opportunity to view parents modelling reading behaviour. She also maintains that young children learn a set of master patterns of language usage, which serves as a basis for the acquisition of other patterns of language. Children are also able to link an item from one setting to another and are able to discover their own way to the numerous literacy strategies. Heath goes on to say that in order to maintain



these literacy behaviours children need repeated opportunities and occasions to engage in literacy events in the home environment.

## **5.5 Repositories for literacy development**

From the data it would appear that parents view schools as the main repository for literacy development. This occurrence surfaces from the statements made during the interviews whereby parents stated that they learnt to read when they started school and believed that their children would do the same. They also expressed the fact that even though they may not have the time to read to their children they had the knowledge that their children were exposed to daily story reading at school. There is evidence by Heath (1980) that reading was able to be conducted as an informal spontaneous event but that it often needed to be initiated on the part of the parent. Researchers such as Goodman (1967), Clay (1966) and Teale (1981) claim that shared book-reading experiences are an important way for young children to become literate. They believe that through this process children learn to assimilate and adapt information as a result of print awareness that is established early in life.

## **5.6 Accessibility to resources, use of technology and literacy practices**

In analysing the findings in chapter four it is evident that there is an awareness and perception on the part of the parents that the access to resources such as books, television, computers and electronic games are a factor in the development of a child's early reading skills. However, these activities are often used to keep children occupied and parents do not seem to mediate the tool as they appear not to view these informal moments as times when literacy development can take place.

According to Hannon (1997) literacy today is very different from that of the past. Technology has changed the ways and amounts of information that reach across to children. At present home environments in this study are equipped

with an abundance of different forms of media. These different forms of media and images will also assist in the development of literacy if applied with knowledge and understanding. However, in order to enhance and advance children's literacy learning Armstrong and Casement (1998) maintain that adults will be doing their children a disservice if they believe that computers and television can take the place of human interaction or that the tool in and by itself can enhance literacy.

From the information gathered, the use of television and computers are viewed as leisure activities with little or no relevance to literacy. Parents do not perceive the potential importance of informal literacy moments that could be achieved through mediation or interaction with their children in watching television or playing computer games. All reading activities seem to be viewed as structured events and parents appear to be unaware of their complementary role in this practice. The Kaiser Family Foundation (1999) states that they have found that a large majority of children are exposed to a variety of media in well-resourced homes. These families spend a great deal of time watching television or playing computer games as a form of entertainment and a way to occupy their time. The Foundation acknowledges that it is evident today that some children live in media-rich environments. Nevertheless, they believe that parents still need to supervise and guide their children's media exposure in order for it to enhance their children's literacy experiences. However, this does not appear to be the case with this cohort of parents.

Armstrong & Casement (1998) also express the view that children don't automatically make the association between print and other media unless they are guided and supervised in the process. Television and computers can represent another medium that demonstrates print, but it has its limitations and parents need to mediate to ensure that children don't become passive participants but are actively involved in the experience.

## 5.7 Parents perceptions and roles

Parents appear to have the perception that reading will just happen naturally and take its due course. This seems to not only be an assumption that South African parents make but also parents in other countries. Cochran-Smith (1983) did a study in Philadelphia with families who came from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds yet had a lot in common. Most of the parents were college educated and held professional positions. Through her investigations she discovered that these parents took literacy for granted in their own lives and believed that their children's early print interest would emerge naturally as they developed normally. Cochran-Smith maintains that print interest does not surface naturally but rises out of a particular cultural positioning and that children need to be socialised and orientated into this practice.

Vygotsky's Social Development Theory further supports Cochran-Smith's view, as he states that social interactions greatly influence cognitive development. According to Vygotsky in (Riddle 1999:1) "humans use tools that develop from a culture, such as speech and writing, to mediate their social environments." Initially children develop these tools to serve only as social functions, a way to communicate their needs. But Vygotsky believed once they have internalised these tools they will then lead on to levels of higher thinking skills. He claims that thought and language cannot exist without each other. In contrast some psychologists at a symposium in British Columbia in 1982 claim to view literacy development as innate and state that children will acquire the skills of literacy if the right amount of good instruction is delivered at the right time in their lives. All they will need to achieve success is constant monitoring and quality control. As such, some parents are also of the belief that if they provide their children with a variety of resources they will naturally become literate.

However, Vygotsky says that not much will happen if parents don't mediate the learning process that is taking place. That is why he believes that parents or a significant other need to have access to tools that enable them to "push" children into the Zone of Proximal Development so that children can achieve

that little bit more and bridge the gap. Parents can create and mediate between what is known and what can be known and that is what is important. Scaffolding produces immediate results and also presents the skills that are needed for children to complete tasks successfully on their own as well as apply the acquired skills to similar tasks in the future.

An interesting finding that emerged from this study was the notion that children and parents perceive reading as a work-related activity and not something that is done for leisure and pleasure. The modelling of reading by parents that is taking place in the home environment appears to be connected to academic studies as well as activities associated with parents' jobs and careers. Frank Smith (1984) is of the opinion that children need opportunities to observe and be involved in literacy practices in order to make sense of literacy in their personal lives. That is why it is important for children to view their parents interacting with books. However, in this study this appears not to be happening as mothers are reading for their own pleasure after they have put their children to bed and fathers are busying engaging in other activities besides reading.

Researchers such as Schieffelin and Cochran Smith (1984) argue that in order for an individual to become literate, literacy must be functional, meaningful and relevant to the society in which they live. Literacy events should not be seen in isolated forms but as connected units that are able to meet the needs of individuals for their own social purpose and destination.

## **5.8 Summary**

While this study cannot make claims about adults parenting skills, values and beliefs, it appears from the research that certain resources are replacing parent involvement in the home environment. Technology has changed the direction of access to information that children come into contact with these days. However, even though parents have the knowledge and skills required to mediated literacy practices and activities, time constraints and perceptions of literacy development seem to get in the way of these interactions.

## **CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION**

### **6.1 Conclusion**

The study found that the roles and perceptions of parents in early literacy development in well-resourced environments are not dissimilar to studies done in under-resourced settings.

In both under-resourced and well-resourced environments the parents don't seem to be involved in mediating their children's early literacy practices but for different reasons. In well-resourced homes parents are literate and have access to and are providing a variety of resources. However, due to time constraints and work pressures they are unable to mediate and facilitate these resources. In fact they may not understand the need for their mediating role. They assume that resources will perform the function of literacy development and that the children will naturally learn to read by being surrounded by multi-media.

Parents don't appear to perceive the importance of their role to mediate and interact in informal literacy practices in the home. They seem to believe that literacy activities are structured events and that the school is the main repository for acquiring literacy skills.

The study results indicate that this cohort of parents is not reading to their children daily but are providing an assortment of resources in the home in the belief that the children's early literacy development will emerge as a matter of course. What is highlighted in this research on the part of the parents is a lack of perception of the significance of their role in their children's literacy acquisition.

## 6.2 Recommendations

- This study recommends that parents need to develop an understanding of their role as mediator as a key feature of early literacy development.
- Parents need to understand the potential of informal literacy moments in the home and need to learn to use every opportunity as a literacy opportunity.
- Parents need to view the potential value of technology in terms of literacy development in the home environment and understand their role in guiding and supervising activities appropriately.
- Parents need to understand the importance of their role as the primary literacy provider and value the perception that young children will model and imitate their literacy behaviour.
- Parents need to understand that the roots of children's literacy development stems from their childhood experiences that they encounter as they interact within their family environment.

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## **ADDENDUMS**

### **Addendum 1: Letter to schools**

Principal  
Pre-Primary  
Hermanus  
7200  
March 2003

Dear L\_\_\_\_\_

Just giving you a little feedback and input on myself and what I am currently doing as per your request.

I am currently a Master's student at the University of Cape Town and am in the process of doing research for my dissertation. The topic of my thesis is "Examining factors associated with early literacy development in the home environment in changing social contexts"

In order to complete my dissertation I need to send out questionnaires as well as interview parents of Reception Year children. All identities of those participating in my investigation will not be disclosed, and all information will be treated with the strictest confidentiality.

My background is in the field of education. I was a classroom teacher for many years both in South Africa and America. The last eight years have been spent in teacher training at a tertiary institution in Cape Town.

My interest lies mainly in the literacy development of young children and how they learn to read as well as how to assist teachers and parents in getting their children interested in reading. I have run workshops for parents, teachers and students in the Western Cape for the past couple of years. I am willing to supply you with my C.V on request.

Hope this gives you some clarity on my intentions as well as my research. Look forward to hearing back from you.

Sincerely

Shelley Aronstam

## **Addendum 2: Permission letter from the schools**

SHELLEY ARONSTAM  
Educational Consultant  
P.O. Box 777  
Hermanus  
7200

Dear Shelley

Thank you for your letter dated 4<sup>th</sup> March 2003, about your research on “Examining factors associated with early literacy development in the home in changing social contexts”.

The Board approved that you may conduct your research in our school amongst parents of 5 and 6-year-old children.

Please conduct all information through \_\_\_\_\_, the Acting Principal, or myself.

Yours sincerely

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principal

### **Addendum 3: Letter to the parents**

Pre-Primary School  
Hermanus

Dear Parents

I am currently a Master's Student at the University of Cape Town and am in the process of doing research for my thesis.

The topic of my thesis is "Examining factors associated with Early Literacy Development in the Home in Changing social Contexts."

In order to complete this dissertation I need your assistance in filling in the attached questionnaire. At a later stage I may also request a short interview with your family.

I would greatly appreciate it if you could assist me in my current research. All identities of those participating in the investigation will not be disclosed, and all information will be treated with the strictest confidentiality.

Once you have completed the questionnaire please return it to the class teacher.

Thanking you in advance

Yours Faithfully

Shelley Aronstam

## Addendum 4: Questionnaire

All participants will remain anonymous.

All information will be treated with the strictest confidentiality.

The questionnaire seeks to investigate early literacy practices in the homes of children aged 5-6 years of age.

1. DOES YOUR CHILD ENJOY BEING READ TO

 YES NO

2. CAN YOUR CHILD READ

 YES NO

3. DOES YOUR CHILD READ TO HIM/HERSELF

 YES NO

4. HOW MUCH TIME DOES THE CHILD SPEND:

Reading  minutes  hours

Watching television  minutes  hours

Playing on the computer  minutes  hours

5. APPROXIMATELY WHAT PROPORTION OF TIME DOES THE FAMILY SPEND:

Reading  minutes  hours

Watching television  minutes  hours

Playing/working on the computer  minutes  hours

6. HOW OFTEN DO READ TO YOUR CHILD

 daily  1x a week  2x a week  4x a week

more – specify \_\_\_\_\_

7. HOW LONG IS EACH READING SESSION

5 minutes

10 minutes

15 minutes

20 minutes

more / specify \_\_\_\_\_

8. WHAT TIME OF DAY DO YOU READ TO YOUR CHILD MOSTLY

morning

afternoon

evening

night

9. WHO ELSE IN THE HOUSEHOLD WHO LIVES WITH YOU READS TO THE CHILD

sister	
brother	
grandparent	
housekeeper	
friend	
other / specify	

10. WHERE DOES THE CHILD LIKE TO SIT MOST TIMES WHEN READING:

\_\_\_\_\_

RANK THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ACCORDING TO THE GIVEN SCALE:

5	Is most frequently	
4	Frequently	
3	Less frequently	
2	Seldom	
1	Least frequently	

11. WHERE DO YOU GET THE BOOKS

Rank from 1 to 5

LIBRARY	
PURCHASE	
BORROW	
GIFTS	
OTHER / SPECIFY	

12. WHO CHOOSES THE BOOKS

Rank from 1 to 5

MOTHER	
FATHER	
CHILD	
GRANDPARENT	
FRIEND	
OTHER /SPECIFY	

13. TYPE OF BOOKS CHILD LIKES MOST

Rank from 1 to 5

Fairy tales	
Picture books	
Nursery rhymes	
Non-fiction	
Poetry	
Traditional folk tales	

14. DOES YOUR CHILD LIKE TO:

Rank from 1 to 5

DRAW	
SCRIBBLE	
COLOUR IN	
WRITE LETTERS	
WRITE WORDS	
WRITE NUMBERS	
OTHER/SPECIFY	

15. HOW DO YOU PERCEIVE YOUR CHILD'S READING & WRITING SKILLS

excellent	good	average	poor	weak	very weak
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16. WHAT DOES THE TEACHER SAY ABOUT YOUR CHILD'S LITERACY LEVEL

excellent	good	average	poor	needs improvement
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17. DOES THE CHILD PLAY COMPUTER GAMES

YES

NO

18. HOW OFTEN

daily	1x a week	weekends	other /specify
-------	-----------	----------	----------------

19. TIME SPENT ON COMPUTER

5 minutes	10 minutes	15 minutes	20 minutes	30 minutes
more/specify				

PERSONAL INFORMATION

1. AGE

20 - 29	30 - 39	40 - 49	50 - 59	60 - older
---------	---------	---------	---------	------------

2.. GENDER

male	female
------	--------

3. HOME LANGUAGE

english	afrikaans	isixhosa	other
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4. LANGUAGE YOU PREFER

5. HIGHEST STANDARD/GRADE PASSED

6. YEAR YOU FINISHED SCHOOL



7. HAVE YOU HAD ANY OTHER EDUCATION AFTER FORMAL SCHOOL

 YES NO

8. IF YES PLEASE ELABORATE ON THE TYPE OF EDUCATION YOU RECEIVED.

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9. INSTITUTION OF POST SCHOOL EDUCATION

university	college	technikon	other – please specify
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10. YEARS SPENT ON POST SCHOOL STUDY

one	two	three	four	more
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11. MARITAL STATUS

single	married	divorced
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12. HOW MANY CHILDREN DO YOU HAVE? \_\_\_\_\_

13. WHERE DOES YOUR 5 / 6 YEAR OLD FIT IN?

eldest	youngest	middle	other – specify
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14. DO YOU OWN YOUR OWN HOME?

 YES NO

15. NUMBER OF BEDROOMS \_\_\_\_\_

MOTOR CARS \_\_\_\_\_

TELEVISION SETS \_\_\_\_\_

COMPUTERS IN THE HOME \_\_\_\_\_

16. ANNUAL INCOME

- R50,000 - R99-000 a year
- R100-000 – R199-000 a year
- R200-000 - R299-000 a year
- More than R300-000 a year

CHILD'S FIRST NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR TIME AND INPUT

Shelley Aronstam  
UCT – Master's Student

## **Addendum 5: Second letter to the parents**

Dear Parents

I would like to thank you for taking the time to complete the questionnaire I sent out to you earlier this year. In my letter I mentioned I would also be requesting permission to conduct a short interview with you.

I am now at that stage of my research where I need to ask you a few simple questions. All information will be treated with the strictest confidentiality.

If you would be prepared to assist me in this endeavour I would be most grateful as you would be helping me to complete my thesis on early literacy practices.

Please sign the form below stating that you give the school permission to give me your phone number so that I may call you and set up a short interview. It should not take more than 20-30 minutes of your time and I will come to your home whenever it suits you.

Thanking you in advance

Yours faithfully

Shelley Aronstam  
UCT Masters Student

I, \_\_\_\_\_ give permission for the school to give you my phone number so that you may contact me.

The best time to get hold of me is \_\_\_\_\_

At the following number/s \_\_\_\_\_

Please return this form to the class teacher

## **Addendum 6: Letter from school to parents**

September 2003

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

Shelley Aronstam is doing her Master's on the topic Early Literacy Development in the home. Earlier in the year you kindly completed a questionnaire to help her with this. She now asks permission to interview you. She has assured me that these interviews will not take too long and that she is prepared to accommodate you where and when it suits you.

Needless to say that all information will be strictly confidential.

If you are willing to assist please complete this and send it back to school on Wednesday 18/9.

Yes / No my telephone number may /may not be given to her.

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Telephone number

## **Addendum 7: Parent interviews**

### Questions for Parent Interviews

1. What were your reading experiences as a child?
2. Did your parents read to you?
3. When did this usually take place?
4. Did anyone else read to you?
5. Do you remember when you first started reading to yourself?
6. What did you like to read as a child?
7. What do you like to read these days?
8. When did reading first start to make sense for you?
9. Can you remember something you enjoyed reading that was not necessarily academic?
10. How did you learn to read?
11. What has your life experience been as a reader?
12. What has your life experience been as a parent who reads to their child?
13. Do you read to your child?
14. When do you read to your child?
15. Do you enjoy reading to your child?
16. Tell me about a typical day in your life.
17. Can you recount a special reading experience you have had with your child. (Give scenarios)
18. Does anyone else read to your child?
19. How is your child's reading programme unfolding?
20. What shapes the literacy practices in your home?
21. Are there older siblings or is he/she an only child?
22. Can your child use a computer?
23. What are your views on computers and television?
24. What value do you think the computer holds today?
25. Who chooses the software?
26. What do you think are the benefits of books, computers, television?
27. Does your child ask to be read to or do you initiate it?
28. Are you aware of what reading activities take place at your child's school?
29. What does your child prefer to do in his/her free time?
30. Do you ever go to the library?
31. Does your spouse enjoy reading?
32. Where do you get your reading material?
33. What are the reading habits of your family?
34. What reading opportunities is your child exposed to in the home?