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# HOME LITERACY ENVIRONMENT AS A RESEARCH CATEGORY – TOOLS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

## DOMOWE ŚRODOWISKA ALFABETYZACJI JAKO KATEGORIA BADAWCZA- NARZĘDZIE I PRZYSZŁE PERSPEKTYWY BADAWCZE

**Streszczenie:** W artykule podjęto problematykę dotyczącą domowych środowisk alfabetyzacji jako możliwego obszaru interdyscyplinarnych eksploracji badawczych ukierunkowanych na poszukiwanie czynników determinujących umiejętności językowe oraz czytelnicze dzieci

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i młodzieży. Omówiono w nim kierunki realizowanych w ostatnich latach międzynarodowych badań, dotyczących m.in. przebiegu wspólnych sesji czytelniczych (czytanie dialogowe), rozpoznawania uwarunkowań zaangażowania rodziców w czytanie dialogowe oraz związków wczesnych inicjacji czytelniczych z późniejszymi osiągnięciami szkolnymi, jak również udziału rodziców, nauczycieli i lokalnych instytucji samorządowych w partnerstwie na rzecz rozwijania umiejętności językowych i czytelniczych uczniów. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono w tekście charakterystyce wykorzystywanych w realizowanych projektach badawczych narzędzi pozwalających na ilościową i jakościową ocenę wybranych aspektów domowych środowisk alfabetyzacji. Integralną częścią tekstu są w końcu rozważania nad kierunkami przyszłych badań, które mogłyby przyczynić się do rozpoznania znaczenia domowych środowisk czytelniczych dla bardziej złożonych umiejętności czytania takich jak czytanie krytyczne.

**Słowa kluczowe:** domowe środowiska alfabetyzacji; czytanie, czytanie krytyczne, rodzina, narzędzia badawcze

**Abstract:** The article addresses the issue of Home Literacy Environments as a possible area of interdisciplinary research exploration aimed at finding factors determining the language and reading skills of children and adolescents. The text discusses the directions of international research conducted in recent years, concerning, among others, the course of joint reading sessions (shared reading), recognizing the conditions of parents' involvement in dialogic reading and the relationships between early reading initiations and later school achievements, as well as the participation of parents, teachers and local government institutions in partnership for the development of students' language and reading skills. Particular attention is paid to the characteristics of the tools used in the implemented research projects, allowing for the quantitative and qualitative assessment of selected aspects of home literacy environments. Finally, an integral part of the text is the consideration of the directions of future research that could contribute to recognizing the importance of home reading environments for more complex reading skills such as critical reading.

**Keywords:** Home Literacy Environment, reading, critical reading, family, research tools,

## Introduction

The issue of determinants of children's and youth's language and reading competences is related not only to the category of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) but also to the broadly understood concept of the Home Literacy Environment (HLE), which is a popular subject of research exploration undertaken both in the humanities and social sciences, especially psychology and education. This term refers to both activities directly related to reading, as well as access to reading resources that support the development of reading and writing skills (Puglisi et al. 2017). HLE are most often considered in the context of two types of experiences – formal and informal, related to children's early literacy (emergent literacy). While the former focus mainly on code and involve modeling literacy skills and direct teaching of the child, the latter focus on meaning and are related to sharing reading materials through shared play activities such as storytelling, dialogic reading, singing songs,

drawing, playing games, as well as going to libraries, bookstores, or community centers with the child (Sénéchal, LeFevre 2002). Although both types of experiences seem to be weakly correlated (Hamilton et al. 2016), they are important for different aspects of literacy. While the informal meaning-related activities supports language skills, the code-related activities are found to support letter knowledge and phonological awareness (e.g. Senechal & LeFevre, 2002; Torppa et al., 2022). In general, both types of HLE enrich the child's cognitive and linguistic experiences, enabling them to develop phonological awareness and explore both abstract and pragmatic aspects of reading.

Moreover, according to the concept of developing literacy proposed by William Teale and Elizabeth Sulzby (1989), depending on the dominant type of experience and the degree of involvement of the parent and child in the undertaken reading activities, HLE is usually also defined as: active, passive, or child-led. While the first type assumes mutual interaction of children and adults during joint reading activities, the second is related to preparing the child to learn to read and write by observing adults' reading behaviors, while the third – includes playful activities related to reading, undertaken by children on their own initiative. Regardless of the distinguished types of HLE, in each of them there is still a search for factors determining the future educational achievements of children at individual stages of education. These attempts are carried out by exploring selected aspects of HLE implemented in both quantitative, qualitative and pluralistic orientations using diverse research tools. Increasingly, they open up space for identifying factors related to more complex skills of children and young people, such as critical reading.

### Selected aspects of HLE

The analysis of scientific literature allows us to distinguish several aspects of HLE that are of interest to researchers from various research centers in Europe and around the world. One of the important areas of research investigations are the reading and writing activities taking place in the family home, undertaken by parent-child dyads. Researchers' interest usually focuses on identifying the course of joint reading sessions (shared reading) or parental teaching of reading skills to their children. Also of interest are factors influencing parents' verbal engagement during dialogic reading and the access to reading materials measured for example with the amount of books at home or the frequency of joint visits of parents and children to libraries and bookstores. Moreover, in this field of research, parents' beliefs and attitudes towards reading and their reading habits are often recognized. This part of the research provides data indicating that the frequency and course of family reading practices are significantly influenced by, among others, parental beliefs about literacy, parental expectations towards children, parental education, or reading resources at home, which are usually measured by the number of books owned (Frijters et al. 2000, Deckner et al. 2006, Dolezal-Sams et al. 2009, Davidson

et al. 2014, Esmaeeli et al. 2017, Giménez et al. 2017, Kuracki, 2022). The extent to which children participate with their parents in various activities, mainly of a playful nature, turns out to be particularly important for the acquisition of linguistic and reading competences in children. These relationships are observed both in the group of children with disabilities and typically developing children, as well as in children from different risk groups. In both cases, many longitudinal studies have shown that early reading experiences are determinants of later positive educational achievements (Al Otaiba et al. 2009; Davidson & Weismer 2014; Frijters, et al., 2000; Inoue, et al, 2018; Justice 2006; Karrass & Braungart-Rieker 2005; Ricci 2011; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2014; Silinskas et al., 2020; Torppa et al., 2022).

Factors differentiating the course of reading practices undertaken in the parent-child dyad include, among others, sociodemographic variables such as family income and cultural differences (Hart and Risley 1995; Adams 1990; Lindsay 2010), although the socioeconomic status of the family is not always the main predictor of parents' involvement in reading activities with their children (Szumski and Karwowski, 2012). In a wide range of studies devoted to this issue, it is emphasized that it may be related to a greater extent to e.g., parents' belief in their knowledge, skills and effectiveness in organising effective support for their child in learning ways of perceiving their own parental role and expectations towards their child (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1995; Reynolds and Werfel 2020; Ricci and Osipova 2012), as well as with access to social space, parents' professional activity (Hart and Risley 1995; Hoover-Dempsey, Whitaker and Ice 2010; Lally 2011). Moreover, it can also be related to psychological resources such as the sense of coherence (Kuracki, 2023) or with the child's interest in reading activity perceived by parents and their cognitive abilities enabling them to engage in the reading process (Frijters et al. 2000; Westerveld and van Bysterveldt 2017).

Another area of research is related to recognizing parents' reading and writing skills as factors determining children's later language achievements. Analysis of the literature in this area allows us to observe that as parents' language and literacy skills increase, the same skills also increase significantly in their children. The results of research projects conducted in recent years show that parents' language and literacy competences are significant predictors of language and reading skills of their children (Dickinson and Tabors 2001; Esmaeeli, Lundetrae, Kyle 2017; Giménez et al. 2017; Lyytinen et al. 2006; Pianta 2004; Taylor 1983; Torppa et al. 2011; Whitehurst and Lonigan 1998). Although parental reading skills are a risk factor for child's reading development, it should be emphasized, however, that when parents are informed by specialists about how they should work with their children to develop reading skills, they are more likely to initiate such activities in the home environment (Dail and Payne 2010; Pfeifer and Perez 2011). Interestingly, there is also research evidence that emphasizes the aspect of raising children in multigenerational families and the role of grandparents, who, by accompanying children in episodes of joint engagement (Schaffer 1994),

significantly influence the development of children's language competences as part of the so-called intergenerational learning (Gaudreau et al. 2020; Jessel et al. 2011; Milovanska-Farrington 2021).

Finally, a significant area of research on HLE is the one that concerns the participation of parents, teachers and local government institutions in a three-entity partnership for the development of children's and adolescents' language and reading skills. They emphasize that in the case of preschool and school environments, what is important for developing language and reading skills of children with diverse developmental needs is the provision of information support to parents by educational institutions in the scope of possibilities of optimizing the child's development, as well as the duration and intensity of intervention programs implemented in institutions (Al Otaiba, Schatschneider, Silverman, 2005), in particular those that are aimed at developing children's phonological awareness (Gonzales et al., 2010; Reichow et al., 2019; Sucena, Silva, Margques, 2023) and include an extended training program for teachers, as well as a program of classes aimed at implementation at home by parents (Bleses et al., 2018). It is also important to emphasize the data indicating the high effectiveness of those carried out with the help of volunteers from the local community. Thanks to their support, it is possible to devote more time to individual work with children and ensure continuity of activities to support their development (Fitzgerald, Robillard, O'Grady, 2018; Power et al., 2004). Moreover, this group of studies also indicates that both parents and teachers see significant benefits from various short- or long-term projects organized within the educational partnership, especially when they are aimed at preventive goals, promoting the idea of shared reading and eliminating specific difficulties children have in acquiring reading and writing skills (Kuracki, 2024).

## HLE recognition – selected tools

As described above, capturing the myriad of characteristics underlying HLE is not a simple nor straightforward task. Recognising HLE and assessing its characteristics is often reliant on methodological decisions which means that careful attention should be paid to the assessment of the home environment. The assessment of the home literacy environment has typically been approached from two perspectives: quantitative (focuses on the frequency of HLE activities, e.g., Logan et al., 2020) and qualitative (focuses on what those HLE activities are and how exactly they are organised, e.g., O'Fallon et al., 2022). Prior research (Anderson et al., 2019a, 2019b) has shown that although there is a correlative association between the frequency of HLE activities and parental use of higher-quality strategies during HLE activities, they are also uniquely associated with children's language and reading skills.

Questionnaire-based measures in assessing the quantity of HLE – pros and cons. The HLE activities have been most typically assessed by using parental

questionnaires, with items asking about the frequency of home literacy activities (e.g., Evans & Shaw, 2008; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). This approach focuses on how often certain types of activities are being shared by parents and children. Methodologically speaking, questionnaire-based research is fairly easy to conduct. It is time- and cost-effective, which helps achieve large samples and allows inspecting HLE from different theoretical or thematic starting points (e.g., parental activities, or parental beliefs). Parental self-reports on HLE are widely used and therefore there is also a wealth of validated measures and screeners tapping different aspects of HLE available (e.g., Gonida & Cortina, 2014). While questionnaire-based assessments offer benefits, they are not without drawbacks, stemming from at least three reasons. First, questionnaire-based data heavily relies on a specific (that can sometimes be quite limited and rigid) operationalization of HLE that comes with the selected measure. In view of this it is often impossible to explore versatile aspects of HLE, especially when the questionnaire space is often limited to few items. Second, response rates are never up to 100% meaning that the attrition can cast serious problems for the generalizability of the results. Lastly, the questionnaire-based measures are susceptible to bias stemming from over-reporting or under-reporting of certain activities. Parents may struggle to accurately and/or honestly estimate the frequency of these activities in the home (Elliot & Bachman, 2018).

Observation-based measures in assessing the quality of HLE – pros and cons. The qualitative characteristics of HLE activities have received considerably less attention in research compared to the quantitative characteristics. However, the available studies examining the quality of HLE activities reveal that certain qualitative aspects of HLE (such as the use of complex language (Crain-Thoreson et al., 2001), the use of open-ended questions and willingness to follow a child's interests (Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003), or print referencing (O'Fallon et al., 2022) are related to children's literacy skills.

Qualitative approaches are needed, because not only is it important to take into account how often activities are carried out, but it also matters what happens during these activities. Particularly the observational methods utilising video- or audio recordings or ethnographically oriented data collection methods have been introduced as main ways to glean into how parents interact, and use language and other interaction modalities during the shared activities with their children (e.g. de la Rie et al., 2016; O'Fallon et al., 2022).

From the methodological point of view, qualitative methods have several advantages compared to quantitative (frequency-based) questionnaires. Especially video recordings are flexible formats of data allowing data examination and re-examination through the application of various coding procedures and interpretation approaches. Observational methods in general are effective in identifying processes, mechanisms and strategies embedded in parent-child interaction during HLE activities, and by applying several observational methods within the same study, a fuller understanding of the situational characteristics

of HLE and the bidirectional influences between parents and children can be gained. Observational data also generally allows zooming into HLE activities from an outsider perspective that might be more objective and less susceptible to self-reporting bias than questionnaires. Moreover, the combination of observational data and the information about parental reading skills facilitates a deeper understanding of mechanisms underlying the intergenerational transmission of difficulties and the ways in which parents with and without reading difficulties engage in HLE activities together with their children (e.g., Laakso et al., 1999). Potential differences in the home environment of families with and without reading difficulties have remained difficult to capture via questionnaires.

Similar to quantitative methods, qualitative approaches also come with limitations. Qualitative observations are typically conducted in laboratory settings because access to authentic home environments can be difficult to obtain. Being videotaped, and particularly in an unfamiliar setting, may affect behaviour of both the parent and the child, therefore causing context bias.. However, compared to video recordings, audio recordings can sometimes be a better alternative for measuring the qualitative aspects of HLE (especially its language-related components) causing less stress and discomfort for participants and thus helping to balance the sample and record more natural/less performative interactions.

Another downside of qualitative observational methods is that families are usually invited to participate in a limited range of pre-selected activities. This means that the data does not fully capture the natural diversity of parent-child interactions. There are also indications that the awareness of being observed causes bias as parents might feel compelled to offer more complex activities that are different from the activities that they normally organise. More broadly speaking, this might harm the quality of the data potentially leading to wrongful interpretations of and conclusions about the qualitative aspects of HLE activities. Finally, the qualitative data collection, coding and analysis is time consuming and expensive. The coding and analysis of the observational data requires specialised expertise, and the reliable use of observational instruments takes time to learn. Additionally, researchers with the necessary skill sets may not always be readily available for recruitment.

## Some future research directions

As described above, the earlier HLE research has predominantly focused on how home environment factors, such as shared reading (Bus, 1995; Noble et al., 2019; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994), print exposure (Mol & Bus, 2011), and parental involvement in school achievement and homework (Barger et al., 2019), are associated with the development of children's linguistic and literacy skills. The skills have ranged from early vocabulary and letter knowledge skills to reading fluency and comprehension. Despite the considerable attention given to the home literacy environment, its specific role in the development of more advanced reading

processes, like critical reading skills, remains unclear (Psyridou et al., 2024). It is likely that supporting children's and adolescents' critical reading may require more than the traditional home literacy practices, such as shared book reading or teaching decoding skills. Understanding these family influences on critical reading will be crucial for informing interventions aimed at promoting critical reading skills from an early age on.

Critical reading skills can be understood as part of the reading comprehension continuum, but they require a deeper level of engagement. While basic reading comprehension involves the ability to make simple inferences and understand text structures typically in single texts, critical reading demands even more advanced processes, such as integrating, interpreting, and evaluating information, synthesizing content across multiple sources, and reflecting critically on the material being read. These skills are essential for navigating in complex and information-rich world we live in today. Much of this information is encountered in digital context where there is vast variance in the quality of the information including also mis- and disinformation. Children and adolescents are not shielded from these challenges but face mis- and disinformation regularly (Lahti et al., 2024; Livingstone et al., 2017) often without adequate skills to handle them (Breakstone et al., 2021; Kiili et al., 2018). Many children and adolescents have reported to turn to their parents rather than to their teachers when something bothers them online (Smahel et al., 2020), which is understandable given that much of this type of information reaches children and adolescents in their freetime. These aspects stress the importance of examining the role of the families on critical reading.

We recently conducted a systematic review of studies on family factors associated with critical reading skills (Psyridou et al., 2024) to systematically examine what is known about the topic. In the review, we included all papers that assessed such reading comprehension skills that required complex inferencing, or comparing, evaluating, or integrating information and examined their associations with any types of family-related factors. The review suggested that availability and access to literacy resources (e.g., number of books at home, resources for learning at home), frequency of literacy activities, and shared reading in particular were positively associated with the development of critical reading skills. Although mere access to resources does not directly lead to improved skills, these resources can provide a foundation for literacy-related activities that foster critical reading. Additionally, the findings emphasized the differential influence of code-based versus meaning-related activities within the home literacy environment. While activities such as teaching letters and phonics may support early reading and decoding skills, they appear to have limited influence on the development of critical reading abilities. Instead, shared reading and broader literacy activities seem to be particularly important for nurturing critical reading. Furthermore, several studies also reported positive associations between the extent of parents' own reading and children's critical reading skills (Guzmán-Simón et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2019;

Yang et al., 2019). This relationship may reflect modeling behavior, where children learn from their parents' behaviors and attitudes towards reading, as well as parental knowledge, skills, and interest in books and reading, which may be transmitted to children in various ways at home.

The results from the review (Psyridou et al., 2024), thus, strengthened the understanding of the importance of the early literacy activities, parental model, and resources also for critical reading. This is understandable, since critical reading also requires good/adequate basic reading skills (Forzani et al., 2018; Kanniainen et al., 2022). However, the review also revealed that there is very little research on the association between home environment and critical reading skills, and particularly so during the later school years. Moreover, as there was a considerable variability across the studies in terms of the skill and home environment measurement, the overall conclusions are not yet based on a strong foundation. More studies are needed in this research area.

The review revealed for example that, more studies examining critical reading skills and family factors related to digital contexts are needed. Only two studies including digital devices in the home together with other family/home related factors were identified (Chen et al., 2022; Cho et al., 2021). While critical reading is important in all modes (e.g., on print or online), the rapid spread of information online and the increase of digital reading should urge more research on HLE in digital context and its possible associations with children's critical reading skill development. The digital HLE research is, however, characterized with similar shortcoming with the research on the more traditional HLE measures in that it, too, has mostly focused on early childhood and early school years (e.g., Krousorati et al., 2022; Lehrl et al., 2021; Segers & Kleemans; Sonnenschein et al., 2021). At the early years the traditional HLE and digital HLE environments seem to be rather separate constructs from each other and have also distinct associations with children's literacy outcomes are measured as emerging reading skills (Neumann, 2016). Limiting focus on digital HLE in early childhood is problematic, since as the children grow older, the types of activities the children are engaged in change and become increasingly digital, as well as parental practices towards the use of digital devices are likely to change (Livingstone et al., 2017; Sonnenschein et al., 2021). The vastness and nature of the internet challenges the home environment. Compared to reading books, spending time online can, when linked to information-seeking, be associated with better online reading skills (Wu & Peng, 2016), but the effect can also be reversed especially if much of the time is spent on social media (Maced-Rouet et al., 2020; Wu & Peng, 2016). Browsing online content may take time from actual reading and may not include critical evaluation of the content, for example. It becomes, thus, even more crucial to consider what types of content both the parents and their children encounter online, what type of skills they require, and which factors in the home environment best support children's and adolescents' critical reading online.

To better understand the possibilities of families to support children's critical reading skills, we recently asked experts (Paakkari et al., 2024) as well as parents and adolescents (Manu et al., 2024) to describe the family factors they considered important for critical reading. Based on these interviews, currently our research group is developing a parental questionnaire on the family factors supporting or hindering critical reading (Ruotsalainen et al., 2024). Such questionnaires are important additions to quantitative studies examining associations between the home environment factors and children's skills. In the interviews, the experts, parents, and adolescents brought up partially the same factors as the previous literature, factors such as shared reading, adequate resources and parental model for reading, but they also included novel factors related to critical reading; They emphasized certain practices needed today, such as evaluating the trustworthiness of the text, as well as need for an atmosphere at home that allows having differing viewpoints in the family, having space for children's thoughts at home, and engaging children in the family discussions. These factors underline the need to support children's agency, motivation, and critical thinking and provide knowledge on topics, which all are necessary for critical reading. The experts and parents also brought up the importance of parents' own skills. Since digital reading is still a rather new phenomenon and subject for rapid change, parents themselves may lack the necessary skills to support their children's critical reading. In fact, many children report helping their parents with difficulties encountered online (Smahel et al., 2020), and especially children from low-SES households consider their online skills better than those of their parents (Livingstone et al., 2011).

Overall, as critical reading becomes increasingly essential in navigating today's complex and information-rich world, better understanding regarding the possibilities and resources of families to support their children's and adolescent's skills are needed. Such studies are important also in informing educational interventions leveraging home-school interaction in promoting critical reading skills from an early age onwards.

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