

Parental Involvement in the Intellectual Nurturing of Children through Family Literacy during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This research study is about how parents in the villages of Chhota Udepur district, Gujarat intellectually nurtured their children in the area of literacy skills such as reading and writing during the Covid 19 pandemic. This study is also a quest to understand the causes for parents neglecting their involvement in the intellectual development of their children through Family literacy.

Thirty parents from ten villages of Chhota Udepur district participated in this Quantitative research. The findings of this research show that although parents wanted their children to read and write at home during the Covid-19 pandemic, most of them were not able to help them because of their own illiteracy.

This research highlighted the need for literacy in the community especially among parents so that they can be involved in Family literacy. This study revealed the need for Mother Tongue Education for the children in their initial years of schooling.

Keywords

Literacy skills, COVID, pandemic, family literacy, villages. intellectual development

Leeladi, Antudi, Dumshi, Tabu, Timo and Bhailo live in a neighborhood in Sanada. Sanada is a village in Chhota Udepur district of Gujarat. They love playing together. They climb trees, pluck fruits, run through the fields etc. They all also go to school except Bhailo. They wear their uniforms, carry their books and happily go to school. In the village, government school children are also provided with lunch.

Suddenly as a result of the pandemic, the schools were closed. The Covid 19 pandemic has eliminated this happy scene of children going to school. Now, Antudi, who is 10 years old, takes her goats for grazing. Dumshi who is 9 years old, helps her mother in taking care of her baby brother Dilip and does various other chores.

Their parents did not have the privilege of going to school. As a result, they cannot read and write and so they now cannot teach their children how to read and write. They cannot read bedtime stories for these kids. The children dream of the days when they would go to school again.

This research is aimed at knowing how the parents in Chhota Udepur district managed to nurture their children to read and write at home during the Covid 19 pandemic.

The **purpose of this study** is to understand parental involvement in the intellectual nurturing of their children through literacy skills like reading and writing during the Covid 19 pandemic.

Literature Review

What is Family Literacy?

Denny Taylor coined the term 'Family literacy' after observing for 5 years from 1977 to 1982, six middle-class, suburban families, each with children who were learning successfully to read and write. Her goal was to find out what parents in these families did to foster literacy among their children. She describes how parents in these six families

encouraged and participated in their children's actual reading and writing experiences (What Is family literacy? n.d.).

Yet Family literacy is in fact based on the most ancient of educational traditions: intergenerational learning. Intergenerational learning practices are rooted in all cultures, and educational programmes with literacy components involving families are found in all world regions, although these are not always referred to as "Family literacy". Family literacy and learning presents adults and children with an opportunity to become independent, proactive lifelong learners. (*Learning families*, 2015, p. 7)

"The term 'Family literacy' can be used to refer to literacy practices within families as well as to describe an intergenerational educational programme with a focus on literacy" (Desmond & Elfert, 2008, p. vii).

Intellectual Nurture of Children, a Responsibility of Parents or Adults at Home

Parents are the children's first teachers. Parents play an important role in the child's development and learning. Everything the child and the parents do together will teach the child important lessons which will help them grow and learn more about life (Early childhood a parent child's first teacher, n.d.).

It is the parent's responsibility to create a supportive learning environment at home including Family literacy so that children develop a love for reading. Telling stories is important too (*Concern worldwide and family literacy in Lebanon*, n.d.).

Connection between Family and Literacy

Family literacy strengthens the bond between the children and parents. Literacy activities at home helps families to relax (Desmond & Elfert, 2008, p. viii).

It also bridges families and schools. Sandra Land lists some habits and practices that would help children perform well at school.

...buying and reading newspapers and books, reading to children, reading and talking about the newspaper and its contents, keeping documents such as invoices and receipts or records of family history, communicating with people by email, SMS or old-fashioned letters, playing games like scrabble, doing crosswords, reading the Bible or other religious texts, keeping diaries, writing shopping lists... encouraging tiny children to scribble and write or, just as valuably, to pretend to write, and so on. (Desmond & Elfert, 2008, p. 54)

Sandra Land says that children reach a higher level of literacy when they engage in literacy at home. (Desmond & Elfert, 2008, p. 55)

Context of the Study

This research focuses on the children and their families living in the villages of Chhota Udepur district, Gujarat. Chhota Udepur district is situated in the central-eastern part of Gujarat. There are 894 villages in this district and has a population of about 10.7 lakhs. Its average literacy is 65.20%. It is a district which has a large tribal population among which Rathwas are the majority. They worship nature, ancestral spirits, gods and goddesses and also a mural painting called *pithora*. Their main occupation is agriculture. They also rear cattle and gather forest products. Their staple food is maize '*roto*' (bread). They love singing and dancing. They play a wind instrument called '*Piho*', which is made of bamboo. In the villages, the majority of the people speak the language, Rathwi (c.f. District Chhotaudepur, Government of Gujarat, n.d.).

Methodology

This quantitative research study was conducted in the villages of Chhota Udepur district, Gujarat. 30 parents were asked to participate in this research and the goal was to find out their involvement in the intellectual nurturing of their children through literacy skills like reading and writing during the Covid 19 pandemic.

The research questions that drove this study were

1. How are parents involved in the intellectual nurturing of their children through literacy skills - reading and writing at home, (Family literacy) in the rural areas of Chhota Udepur district especially during the Covid 19 pandemic?
2. What are the causes of parents neglecting their involvement in the intellectual development of their children through Family literacy?

Participants

In this research, simple random sampling method was used where 30 parents of children aged 3 to 15 years were chosen from 10 villages: Ambala, Ambali, Ferkuva, Gunata, Jamla, Koli, Nuni, Padaliya, Rangpur and Sanada. The participants were either the mother or father of the children. The data was collected more from the mothers (70%) compared to the fathers (30%) because of the availability of the mothers.

Data Collection

A questionnaire was prepared with the help of Likert scale with 30 questions. It was prepared in English and translated to Rathwi language. The primary data through questionnaires was collected by visiting the participants personally because they are from a rural background.

Date Analysis

Data was analyzed by first checking the raw data collected through questionnaires. They were arranged according to the villages surveyed. Then, the data was entered into the computer manually. They were analysed through simple percentage method and reported with the help of pie charts, bar diagrams etc.

Findings

The findings of this research study are as follows:

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1. Parents spend time with their children even though most of the parents do not play with their children. 93.3% of the parents talk to their children naturally about their context like farming, festivals, animals etc. and also eat with them. But 56.7% of the parents strongly disagreed to playing with their children except 43.3 % of them who have infants. They said that the infants caused them to play. Parents playing with children is not very obvious in their culture.

2. Parents pass on their traditions, culture and practices orally. 93.3% parents agreed to talking to their children about their own culture, traditions and practices. This is orally passed on to the children by their parents. They do not teach the children with printed small books or story books about their culture and context. The children learn naturally by listening to their parents, keenly observing them and overhearing their discussions with others. The parents also pass on the skills which they are familiar with. Children learn to plant '*dangar*' (paddy), bring '*kod*' (grass) for the cattle, etc. The little ones join the adults who dance in a circle at the weddings and at an early age learn their traditional dancing steps.

3. Though many parents wanted their children to read and write at home during the Covid 19 pandemic, they couldn't teach them because of their own illiteracy. All of the parents (100%) believed that it was important for their children to read and write at home during the long lockdown of the Covid 19 pandemic.

72.4% of the participants did not have informal or formal education and they cannot read and write. So, 90% strongly disagreed to reading stories to their children. 77.7% of them disagreed to spending at least half an hour every day with their children to teach from their text books. This is a huge percentage in a special situation like the Covid 19 pandemic when the children were solely dependent on their parents for their learning.

The parents also cannot be role models when it comes to reading since they speak Rathwi at home and the children's medium of instruction in school is Gujarati and so the parents feel helpless.

4. Though parents couldn't teach their children most parents supported their children by being with them when they study. Many parents (73.3%) agreed that they sit with their children when they write. Mostly in the evenings when the parents come back from work, they spend some time with the children.

A parent said that they have also prepared their '*maalo*' (bamboo attic) for the children to study. 90% of parents strongly agreed that they allowed (gave time) the children to read and write during the Covid 19 pandemic.

5. Parents bought for their children the needed stationeries to enable them to write at home. 100% of the parents made sure they spent some money on the needed stationeries like pencils, pens, notebooks etc. so that their children would write and thereby study at home.

Writing is one of the basic literacy skills that children must develop. To develop writing, reading comprehension is necessary. Copying without comprehension will not be helpful in learning.

6. Schools in the community failed to equip the parents through a Family literacy programme. 63.3% of the parents did not have contact with the teachers. Very few teachers visited the children's home during the Covid 19 pandemic.

If Family literacy programmes were conducted by schools, the parents would have helped the children in literacy education. Schools in such a community where the parents are illiterate need to teach them also to read and write.

7. Causes for parents neglecting their involvement in the intellectual development of their children.

1. Illiteracy of parents is the key cause for parents neglecting their involvement in the intellectual development of their children. 72.4% did not have any formal or informal education. 80% of the participants are not confident in reading and they can't help their children to read and write.

So, they are unable to intentionally spend time with the children reading stories for them, teaching them to read and write, playing word games, reading the newspaper and discussing it with their children, reading the scriptures with the children etc.

2. Children are expected to do chores, farm work etc. 86.7% of the parents agreed that their children spend time on chores.

During the Covid 19 pandemic, children spent a lot of time at home and so their parents sent them to graze the cattle, took their help during plantation and harvest seasons etc. Children were exhausted at the end of the day. This could have demotivated the children to go back to their books.

3. Many parents lacked motivation to learn to read and write or upgrade themselves further in education. 70% disagreed with learning to read and write or upgrade themselves with literacy skills.

Some have taken effort to learn to put a signature but have stopped with that. To learn something new in their adulthood requires a lot of motivation. So, parents could not help their children with their reading and writing.

4. Parents lacked priority to spend a larger amount for their children's education.

60% of the parents said that the children had some instruction through mobile phones during the Covid 19 pandemic. But some parents couldn't afford a smartphone. 40% strongly disagreed to 'they could not afford a smartphone'.

Those who know the value of education and made it their priority, somehow make investments for the children's education. One parent said she sold a goat to buy a smartphone for her sons, so that they can continue to learn even during the Covid 19 pandemic.

Recommendations

Government

- To initiate Family literacy programs with the help of the government schools to equip the parents or adults so that they will be able to help their children.
- To educate the children in their mother tongue Rathwi, in anganwadis and in their first three years of primary education.
- To produce books in Rathwi, based on their context and culture to use in anganwadis and the primary schools.
- To recruit Rathwi speaking, educated teachers and train them for Mother tongue education.
- To derive policies and methods or ways to manage such unexpected pandemics or disasters so that children's education will not be interrupted.

Schools

- To build relationships with the parents of their school children.
- To equip the parents to read and write and train them to guide their children.
- To be aware of the community and context in which they serve.

Educators and NGOs

- To create an awareness and network among the stakeholders of the community.

- To advocate for mother tongue education and Family literacy.
- To create a good monitoring and evaluation system.

Parents

- To spend more time with children especially for the intellectual nurturing of them.
- To understand the value of education and make it a priority.
- To be willing to join hands with the school to equip themselves so that they can help their children.

Scope for Further Study

There is scope for multiple areas of further study in relation to family and literacy. Some of these areas are ‘Parents and children bonding’, ‘Why parents do not play with their children?’, ‘How to manage unexpected events like pandemic in a rural set up’, ‘The reading ability of primary school children in Gujarati and English’, ‘The children’s perspective of reading and writing during the Covid-19 pandemic’, ‘The dropout rate in primary schools’, ‘The fear aspect in the school going children’, ‘The children’s ability to study the subjects like Mathematics, Science etc.’, ‘Developing Family literacy programs based on their cultural settings’, ‘Effective pedagogy and materials for early literacy’, ‘How to motivate the parents to increase the value of education’, and ‘The indigenous ways of learning and teaching different concepts.’

Conclusion

The main cause for parents not teaching the children at home through Family literacy activities to read and write is illiteracy. Most of the parents put the responsibility on the teachers to educate the children and took a supportive role of meeting their needs like being with them when they study, buying stationery, arranging a space for them to study etc. But the Covid 19 pandemic still widened the huge gap between the schools and families. The children had less motivation at home to learn in a language which is not their mother tongue

while busily engaged in doing chores, farming etc. This further disconnected them from regular learning.

Parents even though they were not able to teach them how to read and write, they spent time with them by orally passing on their traditions, culture, practices and the skills they are familiar with. Most parents are interested and invested in their children's lives and education but the lack of parental literacy becomes a stumbling block for family literacy.

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