The Impact of the Home Environment on Children’s Attitudes Towards Literacy

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The Impact of the Home Environment on Children’s Attitudes Towards Literacy

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

M.S. Literacy Education

Supervised by

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Abstract
Based on the idea that literacy is a social practice and that literacy acquisition begins in the home, this study seeks to explore the question of how does the home literacy environment impact a child’s attitudes towards literacy? Two school-aged children and their parents were observed and interviewed in their home environments to better understand this question. The results of this study show that the structure of the home environment, along with parental attitudes and parental involvement, positively impact a child’s attitudes towards literacy. Implications include the importance of home-school relationships and the need for teachers to provide parents with the information necessary to support their children’s literacy development.
The Impact of the Home Environment on Children’s Attitudes Towards Literacy

Teachers and researchers alike have said that parental involvement is critical to a child’s success in both school and in life (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, and Weiss, 2006). Parents are their child’s first teacher, and most of the literacy experiences that a child brings to school with them are born out of the context of that child’s home environment (Heath, 2001). In her research, Heath (2001) discusses the important influence that culture plays in literacy development, and that cultural practices influence views of literacy among people of different cultural backgrounds. There are many factors affecting a child’s early literacy development, including cultural differences and norms, parental education and literacy levels, socioeconomic status, the presence (or absence) of print in the home, and early experiences with language and print. It has been said that early reading experiences in the home are important foundations for future success (Darling & Lee, 2003). These early reading experiences influence a child’s chances for success, especially in school. According to Darling (2004), low literacy levels can create a vicious cycle of school failure and economic disparity. Children of parents with low literacy skills do not always have access to the materials and experiences that are necessary for acquiring literacy prior to school. Fortunately, school-family partnerships in literacy have been shown to decrease the risk of children with low or illiterate family backgrounds (Burningham & Denver, 2005).

Through the development of family literacy programs that work to create partnerships between parents and schools, our children will be better prepared upon entering school and throughout their educational programs. By helping parents and families to understand the importance of literacy experiences from birth and beyond,
children will be better prepared and better equipped to succeed in both school and in life. This paper explores the question of “how does the home environment impact a child’s attitudes towards literacy”? It focuses on the need for teachers and schools to promote healthy relationships with families, to create strong and open lines of communication with families, and to provide families with the tools and means necessary to promote healthy literacy acquisition within their children. I draw on my own understanding of and experiences regarding family literacy and literacy acquisition, current research and literature surrounding this issue, and relevant data and observation of children and their families’ home literacy environment.

**Theoretical Framework**

Literacy is largely acquired through various social experiences, and is influenced by cultural expectations. As cultures change and develop, so do the expectations of one’s culture. New technologies such as computers, the internet, email, and other digital media, have led to rapidly changing ideas of what it means to be literate. A traditional view of literacy as strictly reading and writing can no longer be used to define literacy. Rogoff (2003) describes literacy as changing participation. As the requirements for participation in a culture change, so does the means of literacy acquisition. Because of this, it is important to consider a child’s literacy acquisition in light of his or her home culture. Through the observation of children and their families, I look to find a connection between family literacy practices and students’ literacy levels.

Literacy acquisition begins in the home. Children acquire language as a means of making sense of the world around them, as well as for meeting their own needs and
desires. Halliday (1969) explains that all language has meaning, and is based on a child’s experience of what does and does not work in their world. At a very young age, children are able to understand that language can be used to express feelings and emotions, and more importantly to communicate their wants and needs. Upon entering school, children must learn to use language for the more specific purposes of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. According to Goodman (2001), teaching should build on basic language principles, and reinforce the literacy discourses that children bring to school with them.

Literacy has often been defined as a social practice, embedded within social and cultural interactions (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Children acquire language through social interactions, at home, in school, and in the larger society (Goodman, 2001; Heath, 2001). I view literacy as being a means of participation in one’s own culture, through the use of oral and written language. Reading, writing, listening, speaking, and using various types of media, are all ways of using literacy for social purposes. Additionally, these literacy practices vary from culture to culture, and from family to family (Heath, 2001). One cannot attempt to define literacy without taking these contexts into consideration. Because literacy can vary among cultures and families, it often leads to conflict between a child’s home culture and school culture. The expectation that a child should come to school with a certain previously established set of literacy skills, often creates problems for children whose literacy experiences and understandings do not align with that of the dominant school culture (Heath, 2001; Rogoff, 2003). Therefore it is important that schools and teachers work to create
positive home-school relationships that work to build on family literacy and children’s backgrounds.

According to Heath (2001), culture greatly impacts a student’s literacy performance in school. If their cultural literacy is aligned with that of the school’s, this more positively impacts their school success. However, when there is a disconnect between home literacy and school literacy, problems may arise. Similarly, Halliday (1969) states that “much of [this] difficulty with language in school arises because [children are] required to accept a stereotype of language that is contrary to the insights [they have] gained from [their] own experience” (p. 50). For example, children who lack rich book reading experience prior to school are often at a disadvantage upon entering school. They often don’t learn to value reading and writing as it is expected within schools. Thoughtfully developed family literacy programs and parental outreach programs are necessary for helping children with literacy acquisition both at home and in school.

**Research Question**

Given that literacy is a social practice, and that literacy acquisition is embedded in one’s culture, this action research project asks, how does the home literacy environment impact a child’s attitudes towards literacy?

**Literature Review**

Family support and involvement are critical to a child’s educational development, particularly when it comes to literacy acquisition and literacy development. Prior to
entering school, parents and families are a child’s first and most important teachers. 
Phillips and Lonigan (2009) discuss emergent literacy as being “a skill set and knowledge base that begins developing in infancy and that is enriched across the early childhood period by exposure to language, printed materials, and opportunities for exploratory and instructional encounters with literacy materials” (pp. 146-147). It is important for parents and families to understand the critical role that they play in shaping emergent literacy skills for their children. Unfortunately, barriers such as socioeconomic status, parental education, and cultural beliefs and norms often prevent parents from fostering these early literacy skills and experiences in their children. As educators, we have a responsibility to bridge the gap between home and school, and to help families understand their role in literacy development (Brenner, Jayroe, Boutwell, & Henkin, 2003).

Family literacy is not a new concept. However, it has traditionally been viewed as simply as parents reading books to their children at home. However, more modern views of family literacy encompass a broad range of literacy events that children take part in outside of the school environment, including reading, writing, conversation, play, use of various forms of media and environmental print (Jay & Rohl, 2005; Mui & Anderson, 2008). More specifically, Mui and Anderson (2008) state that children should be “engaged in functional literacy activities that also validate their home experiences” (p. 242). For the purpose of this literature review, my definition of family literacy includes any literacy activities that families engage in outside of school, and how the home environment is structured to support children’s literacy learning.
This literature review seeks to explore the various factors that influence family literacy, including parental involvement, cultural differences, parental education and attitudes, and aspects of the home literacy environment. Through the review of current literature, these topics consistently emerge surrounding the context of the home environment and how it frames early literacy development. Each of these areas helps to form a better understanding of how family literacy can be used improve children’s attitudes towards literacy and provide a foundation of literacy learning for the children involved. The literature shows that all of these areas of family literacy play an important role in children’s literacy development, and that it is important for teachers and schools to understand these factors in order to work to bridge the gap between home and school.

The Importance of Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is important both in and out of school. Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, and Weiss (2006) and Dearing, McCartney, Weiss, Kreider, and Simpkins (2004) claim that increased family involvement in school may lead children to have more positive attitudes towards education, and thus lead to better literacy performance in school. These authors examined family involvement in school and literacy performance in a longitudinal study of children from kindergarten through grade five. They found that children of less educated mothers tend to have more negative feelings about their education and literacy performance. However, for these children, if family involvement in schooling was high, this effect appeared to diminish over time. The effects of parental education on literacy development will be discussed further in a
future section of this review. It is important to note, however, that it is essential for schools and teachers to reach out to low-income, less educated families and communities to encourage family involvement.

Another study, by Drummond and Stipek (2004), questions the common misconception that low-income parents do not care or do not want to be involved in their children’s education. They investigated the question: Do low income and parents of diverse ethnic backgrounds believe it is their responsibility to be involved in their child’s schooling? What they found was that low income parents may view school success “in a larger context of community and family support and their child’s general well-being” (p. 210). This suggests that the definition of parental involvement or how it is enacted likely varies among families. Cultural values and differences indeed play a part in parental involvement, which will also be discussed later.

There are many barriers to parental involvement such as time, parental literacy levels, cultural differences, negative parental experiences with school, and comfort levels. Jay and Rohl (2004) suggest that family literacy programs need to work to increase parental awareness of family literacy and its’ effects on literacy development. Senechal and Young (2008) discuss three categories of parental involvement, including school-based involvement, home-based involvement, and home-school communications. This is important because while there may be many barriers that prevent parents from being involved, any type of involvement is better than no involvement at all. As teachers we need to view parental involvement in the context of the individual families involved. Parents’ lack of knowledge about literacy development
may often be reflected by low levels of participation in school activities. However, this lack of participation should not be misinterpreted as a lack of interest in their child’s education. When given the opportunity and means to participate in literate events with their children, and when given a voice in such school programs, parents express a genuine interest in their children’s education (Nistler & Maiers, 2000). It is important to note, however, that family involvement does not just mean that families must come to all school events or consistently volunteer in their child’s classroom. Family involvement can take place in the home as well. Involvement can take place through day to day interactions with their children and exposure to simple texts and forms of environmental print (Neumann, Hood, & Neumann, 2009). Parents need to be educated on the types of literacy activities that they can participate in to help their children. Successful programs form partnerships with parents and make them feel they are an equal partner in the process of their child’s literacy development both at home and in school. In addition, Senechal and Young (2008) conclude that the effects of parental involvement may be similar, regardless of parental reading level or socioeconomic status. All children will benefit from increased parental involvement in their learning, both in and out of school. While the effects may be moderated by things such as maternal education levels (Dearing, 2004) and cultural differences (Timmons, Walton, O’Keefe, & Wagner, 2008; Tett, 2000), parental involvement is important for early literacy development.

In another study, Drummond and Stipek (2004) suggest teaching parents how to model good literacy behaviors, and asking what the parents might need in order to become more actively involved. Additionally, several studies have shown that by valuing
parental beliefs, opinions, and suggestions, involvement is likely to increase (Brenner et al., 2003; Burningham & Denver, 2005; Jay & Rohl, 2005; McIntyre, Longwell-Grice, & Kyle, 2002; Tett, 2000; Timmons et al., 2008; Zeece & Wallace, 2009). This is because parents can come to feel more comfortable and feel that they are a valued part of their children’s education. See also Reutzel, Fawson, and Smith (2006) which describes a parent involvement program that ultimately gave parents the confidence to work with their children on reading and writing skills at home. By arming parents with strategies to help their children during reading and writing activities, parents are more likely to spend time on these activities. Teachers and family literacy programs should make use of parental strengths in an effort to increase involvement. Family literacy programs need to provide support and education for parents to be able to better interact with their children. We need to account for cultural differences, parental education, and home-school environmental differences (Burningham & Denver, 2005). Furthermore, when parents are involved in the process of developing programs and implementing literacy practices, they will come to value their involvement. McIntyre et al. (2002) stress that families want to spend family literacy nights together. Parents should be learning literacy strategies right along with their children. Timmons et al. (2008) found that family literacy seems to have a positive effect on family bonding. The research process in this study was aimed at improving or enhancing the quality of life for those involved, thus allowing for discussion and reflection by its’ participants. The participants felt valued, and were therefore more willing to participate. The techniques used in these studies are consistent with the belief that literacy is a social practice. The researchers seem to understand that literacy is best acquired through interactions among parent and child. I
believe that when parents learn to interact and practice literacy with their children, they will be better able to support their children’s learning. This highlights the importance of my question of “how does the home environment impact children’s attitudes towards literacy”. Parental involvement is just one way of creating a positive home environment in order to support literacy learning.

**Embracing Cultural Differences**

Educators frequently claim to attempt to build on home literacies, but schools and teachers often don’t truly know about the local cultures and backgrounds of the students. Tett (2000) argues that different backgrounds do not mean that parents or families are uneducated simply because they don’t match up with that of the teacher. This is why schools need to work to bridge the gap between home and school (Brenner, Jayroe, Boutwell, & Henkin, 2003) and to embrace the various forms of literacy that children bring to school with them (Heath, 2001). Reading and writing are not the only literacy activities that are important. Tett (2000) found that parents engage in a wide range of literacy activities each day, but they are often considered insignificant in the school context. Timmons et al. (2008) add that literacy now “encompasses written communication, comprehension, the capacity to analyze text critically, and the skills needed to understand communications technologies, video, television, and new media, as well as the ability to use a wide range of information to function in daily life” (p. 94). It is important to value the various types of literacy that families bring to the table. Burningham & Dever (2005) discuss the importance of educating parents on how to create a literacy-rich environment in the home. This involves teaching parents useful
and effective ways to interact with their children during reading time. These include formal, school-like activities at home, such as reading and responding, as well as other informal, every day activities such as creating shopping lists, writing letters, playing certain board games, and other activities using environmental print (Mui & Anderson, 2008).

Several studies support the idea of using literacy bags to promote early literacy development (Burningham & Denver, 2005; Zeece & Wallace, 2009). Similarly, Timmons et al. (2008) designed “resource packs” that were sent home to supplement teaching. In each of these studies, children and families were provided with themed, culturally relevant, and developmentally appropriate sets of books, activities, and parent guides to support literacy learning. The idea is that “intentional, well-conceptualized and implemented literacy-based activities for children and families provide meaningful experiences for young learners” (Zeece & Wallace, 2009). Resources such as these may help parents to feel better equipped to model literate behaviors for their children. Parents must first establish the behaviors they want their children to exhibit (DeBruin-Parecki, 2009). According to a study by Burningham and Denver (2005), “parents reported that their families were watching television less and reading and interacting more” (p. 91) after participating in a program that used family book bags to promote family involvement. Sending home resources to guide parents who may not be familiar with literacy activities is a great way to help parents support their children’s literacy development.
Mui and Anderson (2008) studied the Johar family, whose literacy practices were not necessarily what schools might traditionally think of as being literate. The authors argue that “as teachers work with increasing numbers of children and families from different cultural groups, it is essential that they recognize and value the different ways that literacy is supported in homes and communities” (p. 234). In the Johar family, the children read only for functional purposes or out of necessity. Story book reading does not occur in the household. This may seem surprising and contradictory to other studies that argue that shared reading is an important component to early literacy acquisition (De-Bruin-Pareck, 2009; Phillips & Lonigan, 2009). Even though shared reading does not occur, the older children are considered top students in their school. Further, the siblings and nannies are constantly interacting and supporting each other. The roles of the parents are more as passive observers to their children’s literacy development. While they care a great deal about their children’s education, they are not directly involved in their activities. As Lankshear and Knobel (2003) state, literacy is a social practice. This concept is what seems to frame the literacy practices of this particular family. The authors used notes, interviews, conversations, photos, and literacy activities and artifacts to study the literacy practices of the Johar family. These are good examples of what teachers can use to learn about the literacy activities of the families that they are involved with. Because the family views literacy as a social practice, the majority of their literacy activities involve the children interacting and making school activities into fun and meaningful play. This study leads the reader to question not only the definition of what it means to be literate, but also of what “family” means.

Effects of Parental Education and Attitudes
According to Darling and Lee (2003), parents with good reading skills are better able to support their children’s education. This means that another important component of family literacy programs also involves educating parents who have low levels of literacy. This may take place in the form of parent groups, where teachers meet with parents to discuss their literacy skills and how to develop or refine them. Though it isn’t always clear in the research as to what “less educated” or “low literacy” parents means, for the purpose of this paper I will take it to mean parents may not have completed their high school education, and therefore read at a level below that of which is expected of their own children in school. Parent education should also take place in the form of modeling on behalf of the teacher. In Angela Maier’s first grade family literacy program, “parents were encouraged to use literacy in many ways with their children, including reading, writing, composing letters, journal keeping, and cooking. Adults were also encouraged to engage in these literacy behaviors at home” (Nistler & Maiers, 2000). It is especially important that parents learn appropriate ways to model literate behaviors, because children learn a great deal about literacy and education through interactions with their parents and through observations of parental attitudes and behaviors toward literacy. Parental attitudes towards literacy and literacy habits can greatly impact a child’s attitudes and performance (Nistler & Maiers, 2000; DeBruin-Parecki, 2008).

Dearing et al. (2004) found that for all children, greater levels of parental education lead to more positive feelings about literacy. Additionally, for children of less educated parents, parental involvement had an overall greater effect on their literacy achievement. Thus, it is important for educators to reach out to less educated families in order to provide the best opportunities for literacy success in children. Dearing et al.
(2006) found similar results in that increased family involvement tends to negate the effects of less educated parents.

Burningham and Denver (2005) also found that parental education (or lack thereof) can inhibit parental involvement. When working with parents in family literacy programs it is important to provide activities that account for various parental literacy levels. Once again, family book bags are a great way for parents to learn about their children and become more directly involved in their literacy learning. These learning experiences help to foster interactions between parents and children where many families may have not known how. Katzir, Lesaux, and Kim (2009) studied how aspects of the home environment impact a child’s reading self concept. They found that the literacy activities that parents actively engage in can influence the same activities in their children. Children are great observers, and much of their learning comes through observation, especially at a young age. When children observe a parent’s reading habits and other activities, this is just like a parent modeling these behaviors for the child. However, for children of low educated parents, this modeling may not occur as frequently. This is why it is important to understand the backgrounds of parents and families, and work to bridge the gap between the home environment and school. Parents want to help their children; they just need to know how.

A study by Nistler and Maiers (2000) showed that “regular interactions with parents to better understand their beliefs, attitudes, daily challenges, and perceptions of the roles they play in the literacy development of their children (p. 671) is an important and valued aspect of family literacy. The authors argue that family literacy needs to
involve a variety of perspectives including that of children and families. The attitudes and beliefs that young children have of literacy are often a direct reflection of the attitudes and beliefs that their parents hold about literacy learning. Further, Nistler and Maiers (2000) point out that “where literacy is valued it is nurtured” (p. 679). It is important to allow for open communication and shared responsibility between home and school.

**Aspects of the Home Literacy Environment**

There are conflicting beliefs as to whether or not the home literacy environment (HLE) is directly related to literacy development outcomes. Studies by Phillips and Lonigan (2009) and Roberts, Jurgens, and Burchinal (2005) have found that the HLE is a strong predictor of early language and literacy development. Roberts et al. (2005) believe that responsiveness of the HLE may be more important for early literacy development than specific literacy strategies. They suggest that these specific literacy strategies may become more effective later on in the school years when literacy becomes more print-based. In particular, emotional and verbal responsivity, acceptance of a child’s behavior, organization of the home environment, academic and language stimulation in the house, and parental involvement are of importance. “Parents who are responsive, sensitive, and accepting of a child’s behavior, and who provide structure, organization, and a positive general emotional climate at home, along with stimulating toys and interactions, facilitate children’s language and early literacy development” (Roberts et al., 2005, p. 347). On the other hand, Burgess, Hecht, and Lonigan (2002) suggested that directly engaging children in literacy activities in the home at an early
age may have a greater effect on literacy development than does the HLE as a whole. They suggest that by manipulating specific aspects of the HLE, such as shared reading, rhyming activities, and word decoding, that children will be better prepared with early language development skills. A study by Jordan, Snow, and Porche (2000) also emphasizes the role of storybook telling in promoting literacy development. This study found that when the frequency of shared reading was increased, along with parent-child communication during the reading, that literacy development is enhanced. The importance of high quality language interactions is highlighted, and the findings of the study “demonstrates the powerful contributions of families to children’s preliteracy accomplishments” (p. 527). Despite the conflicting evidence, it only seems appropriate to assume that the HLE as a whole, as well as specific literacy activities, are all contributing factors to a child’s literacy development. It remains to be decided which factors have the biggest influence.

Nuemann, Hood, and Neumann (2009) and Lenters (2007) point to the importance of using environmental print to expose children to a variety of literacy experiences in the home. They also suggest a multisensory approach to literacy, incorporating body movements, household objects, and using letter names, sounds, and shapes in order to make learning relevant and engaging to young children. In addition, this may also allow for literacy events and activities to be more enjoyable for parents, especially those of low literacy, because environmental print is familiar. The use of enjoyable and engaging activities for both parents and children not only improves literacy learning, but may also foster positive relationships between parents and children. The work of Lenters (2007) also proposes that the enjoyment of reading at
home may help children to incorporate this enjoyment into other areas of life, such as at school and during play with friends. She holds that parents should try to instill their own enthusiasm for reading in their children, in hopes that this enthusiasm will carry over into. Examples of this may be to turn reading into play, acting out story lines, writing new stories, or turning stories into songs with friends.

Another factor that influences the HLE is the degree of household order. Johnson, Martin, Brooks-Gunn, and Petrill (2008) suggest that characteristics of an orderly household “give rise to both orderliness and better reading skills in children” (p. 462). The study shows that HLE predicts reading ability in children whose mothers are of average reading ability. Household order may provide calm and structure for children whose mothers are of average reading ability, which may lead to an increase in reading ability.

These studies all help to paint a better picture of how the home environment influences children’s early literacy development. While there are still many gaps in the research and various opinions as to which aspects of the home environment are most influential or most important, it is clear that we as educators must consider all of these aspects when thinking of family literacy. Parental involvement, cultural differences, parental education, and the home literacy environment all play a part in shaping early language and literacy. This review of the current literature on family literacy leads me to further question how the home environment, including the factors discussed above, impact a child’s attitudes towards literacy.
Methods

Context

This study took place in the participants’ homes. Both homes are located in a rural school district of Western New York, less than five miles from the school. The school district is comprised of two buildings, an elementary school and a combined middle/high school. The district serves approximately 600 students in grades K-12, with a student to teacher ratio of 13:1. There are approximately 17-19 students in each class. Both are single-family homes located on the outskirts of town, with few neighbors and no other children nearby. Both families are working, middle-class families. Jamie (a pseudonym) lives with her father and two brothers, one older and one younger. Her parents just recently divorced, and she sees her mother only every-other weekend. Sammy (a pseudonym) lives with her mother, father, and older brother. Their home is located across the street from Sammy’s grandparents’ home (her father’s parents). Jamie and Sammy are cousins, and the children from both families spend their time before and after school at their mutual grandparent’s house while their parents work.

Researcher Stance

For this study, I took on the role of a Passive Observer. I entered the participants’ homes to observe how literacy is used in their homes. I am currently a graduate student at St. John Fisher College, working towards my Master’s Degree and teacher certification in Literacy. I currently hold a Bachelor’s Degree in Education and teacher certification in Childhood and Special Education.
As the researcher in this study, I am also a relative of the participants. I bring to this study prior knowledge and assumptions of the families lives and of each participant’s personalities. I use my observations and the data that I collected, and compare it to my prior knowledge and assumptions, in order to interpret my findings.

**Participants**

Jamie is an eight year old Caucasian female who is friendly, caring, and also very self-conscious. Because she lives with her father and two brothers, she has a lot of male influence in her life. She sees her mother only four days out of each month. Jamie enjoys playing soccer, attending girl scouts, and collecting eggs on her grandparents’ farm. She is in a third grade regular education classroom. Her father says she excels in spelling and math.

Jamie’s father, Danny, is the primary caretaker of Jamie and her siblings. His recent divorce from the children’s mother has caused him a lot of stress. He works full time, usually fifty or sixty hours a week, in the tool and die trade. He has a high school education, but no college. Danny has spent a lot of time reading to his children, and has done his best to teach his children that school is important.

Sammy is a seven year old Caucasian female in a second grade regular education classroom, at the same elementary school as Jamie. Sammy is an energetic, playful, and sometimes outspoken young girl. She enjoys girl scouts, playing with her dog, and swimming during the summer months. She also likes spending time on the computer.
Rebecca is Sammy’s mother. Rebecca is a college educated professional who works in graphic design. Rebecca and Mark, Sammy’s father, spend a lot of time bringing their children back and forth to girl scouts, boy scouts, dance classes, soccer, and other activities. They believe that it is important for their children to be involved in social activities outside of school. The children of both families often appear to be in competition with each other, as they spend a lot of time together. While both Danny and Rebecca want their children to succeed, Danny’s focus appears to be more on education, while Rebecca and Mark’s focus tends to be more of fun and socialization.

Method

Data collection

During this study I used observation, surveys, and interviews to collect data on how literacy is used in the homes of each participant, and to evaluate the participants’ attitudes towards literacy. I entered each participants home on one occasion, took notes on any environmental print in the homes, interviewed the parents about the use of literacy in their homes (Appendix A), and administered surveys (Appendix B and C) to each child participant in order to help better understand how their home environment may influence their attitudes towards literacy. Each observation took approximately one hour, and was done on separate days. I used my field notes, questionnaire responses, and parental interview responses to investigate my research question.

Trustworthiness
With any research study, it is important to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research being done. Mills (2007) describes credibility as accounting for the various complexities of the study in order to deal with patterns that are not easily explained. This includes triangulation, or the use of multiple sources of data to inform your research. I ensured the credibility of my research by using observation, field notes, interviews, questionnaires, and the examination of documents and artifacts from my research.

Transferability is described by Mills (2007) as the belief that the data being studied is context-bound. This means that the data being collected and studied is specific to the participants and their unique situations. In order to make my research transferrable to other possible settings, I collected as much detailed and descriptive data as possible, and provided detailed descriptions of the context in which my research had taken place. Another important component of research is dependability. Dependability is the stability of the data (Mills, 2007). By using multiple methods of data collection, as described above, I ensured that the weaknesses of one method is compensated for by another. I also relied on my critical colleague to review my methods and data collection procedures. Finally, confirmability is defined as the neutrality or objectivity of the data collected (Mills, 2007). This was ensured through the practice of triangulation, which is discussed above, and through the revealing of any assumptions or biases that may affect the research findings. I did this by reflecting on my observations immediately after leaving the homes of each participant, and comparing my notes and reflections from each participant’s home.
Ethics

Participant protections are of utmost importance in any research study. In this study, I used informed consent to provide the participants with information about the study, their rights, and their option of participating. I used parental permission forms to inform the parents of the purpose for the study and to gain permission to use their child in my research. I also used a written assent form for each child, asking for their permission to participate in this study. Finally, I provided the parents with a consent form that allowed me to interview them and use their responses in my research. All participants, including Jamie, Sammy, and their parents were informed that their names would remain anonymous and that any identifying marks would be removed from the artifacts that I used in this study.

Data Collection

Throughout this process I used various forms of data collection to inform my research. I used passive observation upon entering the participants’ homes, to gather information about how each family incorporates literacy into their daily lives. I took notes on any environmental print throughout the home, books, and how the home was (or wasn’t) set up to support literacy activities. I then interviewed the parents to gather information on their literacy backgrounds, education, their own literacy attitudes, the literacy performance of their children in school, literacy activities that take place in the home, and their views of their children’s attitudes towards literacy. Next I spent some time with each child to gather information on their attitudes towards literacy. This included touring their bedrooms, talking with them about literacy activities, and providing
them with a questionnaire to assess their attitudes towards literacy. I also reviewed artifacts that displayed their attitudes towards or interest in literacy. This included school work that was displayed in the home and even diaries or journal entries. Finally, I reflected after each observation and recorded any thoughts or important facts about my interactions with each family.

**Data Analysis**

Upon completion of my data collection, several steps were taken to organize and analyze the data. I began by first reading through all of my data once. This included my observations, parent interview responses, child reading and writing surveys, and any other field notes and artifacts that were collected. I then began to reexamine each piece of data for a second time, looking for common themes throughout. I read through my initial observations and field notes from each of the participant’s homes. I made note of any important themes that may have emerged from my initial observations. For example, was it clear through initial observation that literacy activities occurred in the home.

Next I read through the parent interview responses, and recorded similarities between them. I then read through each child reading survey and writing survey, noting the similarities and differences among the responses. For the purpose of this study, the information gathered from these surveys was analyzed from an informal approach. The Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (Appendix B) was used to gather general information about each child’s attitudes towards reading. This included comparing scores on recreational and academic reading, but did not include the use of percentile
scores. The Elementary Writing Attitude Survey (Appendix C) was also reviewed to gain a better understanding of each child’s attitudes towards writing, but did not include the use of percentile scores.

Finally I read through the entire data set for a third time, and made note of similarities and/or disconnect between each child’s survey responses and her parent’s interview responses. This was an important step because it helped me to understand how the parent’s attitudes and beliefs were related to their child’s attitudes and beliefs.

**Findings and Discussion**

Through careful analysis of the data, two themes emerged which helped me to better understand the impact of the home environment on children’s attitudes towards literacy. Parental attitudes towards literacy, as well as the structure of the home environment, seemed to have the strongest impact on how the child feels about literacy. More specifically, the stronger the parents felt about the importance of reading and writing, the more positive the child’s attitudes towards reading and writing. Additionally, the more engaging the home environment was towards literacy, the more positive the child’s attitudes. Based on the data that I collected, these two aspects of the home environment appear to positively impact children’s attitudes towards literacy.

**Parental Attitudes**

As previously discussed, parental attitudes towards literacy impact their children’s attitudes towards literacy and performance in school (Nistler & Maiers, 2000). Based on parental interview responses and the corresponding child’s responses, it was
clear that a child’s feelings about literacy were a reflection of their own parent’s feelings about literacy. For example, Jamie’s father, Danny, responded that reading and writing are “very important for success”, adding that he hopes his daughter excels in reading and writing so that she goes “far in life.” Through examination of Jamie’s reading attitude survey, she scored significantly higher on the academic aspect of reading than on the recreational aspect. I suspect that this was an indirect result of having listened to her father’s responses during the parent interview. Her father stressed the importance of reading and writing several times in the interview. Based on my previous experiences with Jamie, I believe that her responses to the attitude surveys were genuine; however I also believe that she was making an effort to please her father. Through my personal experiences with Jamie as she has grown up, I have found that she is always willing and eager to please her father. I believe that this experience only helps to add to the finding that the stronger a parent’s attitudes toward literacy, the stronger their child’s attitudes as well. Parental beliefs and attitudes are very important for the literacy development of young children.

For Sammy’s mother, Rebecca, her reply was that reading and writing are “extremely important for learning, knowledge, and comprehension”. However, most of her responses to the remaining interview questions focused on the social aspect of her daughter’s learning. When asked to describe her child’s attitude towards school, she responded “she loves school, she loves to be social”. She went on to say that reading and writing were “not the first thing she (Sammy) would want to do”, and that if Sammy did not want to read with her before bed she did not make a point of it. As suspected, Sammy scored slightly lower on her responses to academic reading than recreational
reading, and she scored lower overall on her responses than Jamie. My feeling is that while Sammy’s mother states that she believes that literacy is very important, she does not impart this belief on her daughter on a regular basis, or at least not as much as Jamie’s father Danny does. During my time spent with Sammy, I found that she enjoyed school, but more for the social aspects of it than for the learning aspects. It is evident that Sammy’s mother sees her outgoing and energetic personality as strength, and seeks to encourage this in her daughter.

It became evident that Rebecca’s attitudes towards her daughter were nothing but positive and encouraging, though in a different way than that of Jamie’s father Danny. Although Rebecca’s attitudes more strongly influenced Sammy to be outgoing and sociable, it is still support for the perception that a parent’s attitudes, whether towards school or not, have a great impact on their children’s attitudes. The stronger a parent’s feelings towards a particular concept, then it is likely that their child’s feeling towards that concept will also be impacted. As Nistler and Maiers (2000) state, “where literacy is valued it is nurtured” (p. 679). As in Danny and Jamie’s case, Danny truly values the importance of reading and writing, and he noticeably has imparted this belief on his daughter Jamie. Because he genuinely values the importance of literacy, he then both directly and indirectly fosters this in his children. Jamie is able to see that her father values literacy and education, and this is evidenced by her strong desire to please her father. While Rebecca states that she does value reading and writing, it may not be as important to her as other aspects of school and life, such as forming relationships and learning to interact with others. It is clear that Rebecca nurtures these aspects in her daughter. Rebecca’s attitudes more closely reflect the idea of literacy as a social
practice (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Language and literacy develop within the context of home, school, and other various social interactions (Heath, 2001), and therefore are a means to participation in society rather than a requirement.

**Structure of the Home Environment**

A second theme that emerged from the data is the idea that the structure of the home environment, including literacy activities that may or may not occur in the home, impact how a child feels about literacy. Both Jamie and Sammy’s homes had evidence of literacy-based interactions and showed support for literacy development. However, one important piece of information stood out. In Jamie’s home, there were toys and books throughout the house, and each child (including Jamie’s siblings) had a bookshelf in his or her room. The house appeared to be very “lived in”, and neatness and order did not appear to be a priority. However, in Sammy’s home, everything seemed to have a place. The house was neat and picked up, and the children’s toys were all put away in the “play room”. The play room contained a bookshelf and several boxes and shelves where games and toys were located. Sammy and her brother did not have bookshelves in their rooms. This stood out to me as I observed their homes.

When asked about reading at home and in her free time, Jamie stated that she would rather read alone, and that she most often read books that she brought home from the library. When asked why this was, she told me that it was because she has already read most of the books that she has at home, and that she gets to bring home a new book from the library each week. Jamie’s father stated that he has always read to his children before bed, and that recently Jamie has requested to read on her own.
Danny continues to read to his other children before bedtime. However, each child has a collection of books in their own room so that they are encouraged to read something each day.

        Sammy, on the other hand, stated that she does not read much while at home, unless it is for homework. Her mother Rebecca concurred, stating that Sammy “looks through books occasionally.” She was quick to add that Sammy does have several collections of books at home. I found it interesting that the books that Rebecca’s children had were kept in a central location of the home. This suggested to me that reading may not occur as frequently during free time because the books may not be as readily available. It is worth noting, however, that Sammy did make use of a journal that her mother bought for her at Christmas a few years ago. Both Sammy and Rebecca stated in their interviews that they used journals as a way of recording their thoughts during their free time. Rebecca had said that she uses a journal as a creative outlet for her thoughts at the end of a busy day. I suspect that Sammy is aware of her mother’s journaling and attempts to emulate this. Her mother stated that she talks to Sammy about her journals, but that she tries not to make it a “chore”, suggesting to me that she wants to encourage writing as more of a recreational activity than an academic one.

        In addition to the availability of books in the home, was the use of environmental print. Both homes had a plethora of children’s artwork and various school assignments displayed on the refrigerators. Jamie’s refrigerator also included a set of magnetic letters, which the children used to make words, spell their names, and just goof around
with. Both families appeared to support literacy activities through the honoring of good grades on spelling tests and other assignments.

Another important aspect of the structure of the home environment was how each family made use of homework time. In her interview responses, Rebecca stated that she checks over her daughter's homework when she has it, and that she is always there for any questions that Sammy may have. Homework is usually a nightly routine in their house, but she also said that there are nights when it may be "put on the backburner" to make time for the children's other activities such as soccer and girl scouts. Again, this highlights the importance of social responsibilities in their household.

Jamie's father also makes a point to help his children with their homework. He was quick to point out though, that Jamie has become much more independent during her homework time over the course of this school year. While her older brother often procrastinates and delays the completion of his homework each night, Jamie has taken on the responsibility of making sure her homework is done each night before showing it to her father. Again, this is evidence of Jamie's desire to please her father and to do well in school.

Through the analysis of the data, it has become apparent that the more structured the home environment is around literacy and literacy activities, the stronger the child appears to feel towards the importance of literacy. Jamie's home is more academically focused on literacy as a daily aspect of life, while Sammy’s family is more focused on the social and recreational aspects of the larger society. Overall, both parents value and support their children's education and literacy development. It
becomes clear, however, that homes that provide more opportunities for literacy activities to occur, may better support a child’s attitudes towards literacy.

**Implications**

There are many influences in a child’s life, but none as important as the parents and/or family members that the child interacts with on a daily basis. Parental influence and involvement, along with early literacy experiences in the home, have been shown to impact a child’s success in school (Darling, 2004; Darling & Lee, 2003; Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006). As teachers it is imperative that we take these parent-child relationships and interactions seriously, and that we work to support these relationships and value them as an integral part to our students’ school success. Several factors of the home environment have been shown to have an impact on how a child feels about literacy, including parental attitudes, parental involvement, parental education, cultural differences, and the structure of the home environment.

Based on my findings, parental attitudes towards literacy directly influence their children’s attitudes towards literacy. The stronger a parent feels about the importance of reading and writing, the more positively the child responded to questions regarding the academic aspects of literacy. Similarly, Nistler & Maiers (2000) argue that “where literacy is valued it is nurtured” (p. 679). Parents who value literacy almost automatically instill this value in their children. In addition, these parents are likely to structure their home environments to support their children’s literacy acquisition. The structure of the home learning environment, including organization, parental involvement, environmental print, and academic and language stimulation, is important for children’s early literacy
development (Roberts et al., 2005, p. 347). My findings also suggest that the more structured the home environment is around literacy, and the more literacy activities that occur in the home, the more positive the child’s attitudes about the importance of literacy.

The parents that I interviewed and observed were well educated, middle class, members of the dominant culture. Both families spend a good amount of time with their children and value education. Within a classroom, however, students come from a variety of different backgrounds, have many different home environments, and have parents of various educational backgrounds and with different attitudes and ideas about the value of literacy. It is important for teachers to make an effort to understand the various backgrounds that students bring with them. Many parents and families may not have the appropriate education, experiences, or resources available to them to create a home environment that supports literacy acquisition and learning. Teachers and schools can and should help parents to understand the importance of literacy and to provide them with the knowledge and resources to support their children’s literacy learning at home and in school.

Although I have found that a positive relationship exists between the home environment and children’s attitudes towards literacy, there are other factors that I would like to examine further in future research. My case study consisted of middle class families in a suburban school district. In order to further my research and strengthen my conclusions, I would like to complete the same components of this case study with families of less advantaged backgrounds and with children in various rural or
urban school districts. I believe that it would be beneficial to study the attitudes of students whose home environments may not be as structured and/or supportive of literacy learning, and to see how various other family backgrounds impacts children’s attitudes. Also, I believe that it would be of further importance to gather information on student performance and attitudes in school. While the data that I gathered was useful in answering my question, it would be of further importance to know how these same children responded to the questions while in school and with their classroom teachers.

**Conclusion**

The goal of this paper was to address the question of how the home environment impacts children’s attitudes towards literacy. Based on the idea that literacy is a social practice (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003), several important areas were reviewed to better understand how a child’s home environment impacts their feelings towards literacy. The interactions that a child has with his or her parents, caregivers, and other family members, along with other aspects of the home environment, all play a role in the a child’s literacy development and help to form early attitudes towards literacy. Based on a review of current literature and a study of the home environments of two elementary students, it can be said that parental attitudes and beliefs, parental involvement, and the structure of the home environment all positively impact a child’s attitudes.
References


Appendix A

Parent Interview

1. Tell me about your child.

2. Do you read with your child? When? How often? What do you read?

3. Do you write with your child? When? How often? What do you write?

4. Do you help your child with homework?

5. What does literacy mean to you?

6. What kinds of books do you have in your home?

7. Do you read for pleasure? What types of things do you read?

8. Does your child read for pleasure? What does she read?

9. Do you write for pleasure?

10. Does your child write for pleasure?

11. Do you believe reading and writing are important for your child’s success? Explain.

12. Tell me about your education.
13. How would you describe your own reading and writing abilities?

14. When you were growing up, was reading and writing important in your home?

15. How would you describe your child's attitude towards school? Towards reading? Towards writing?
Appendix B

Elementary Reading Attitude Survey
Directions for use

The Elementary Reading Attitude Survey provides a quick indication of student attitudes toward reading. It consists of 20 items and can be administered to an entire classroom in about 10 minutes. Each item presents a brief, simply worded statement about reading, followed by four pictures of Garfield. Each pose is designed to depict a different emotional state, ranging from very positive to very negative.

Administration
Begin by telling students that you wish to find out how they feel about reading. Emphasize that this is not a test and that there are no “right” answers. Encourage sincerity.

Distribute the survey forms and, if you wish to monitor the attitudes of specific students, ask them to write their names in the space at the top. Hold up a copy of the survey so that the students can see the first page. Point to the picture of Garfield at the far left of the first item. Ask the students to look at this same picture on their own survey form. Discuss with them the mood Garfield seems to be in (very happy). Then move to the next picture and again discuss Garfield’s mood (this time, a little happy). In the same way, move to the third and fourth pictures and talk about Garfield’s moods—a little upset and very upset. It is helpful to point out the position of Garfield’s mouth, especially in the middle two figures.

Explain that together you will read some statements about reading and that the students should think about how they feel about each statement. They should then circle the picture of Garfield that is closest to their own feelings. (Emphasize that the students should respond according to their own feelings, not as Garfield might respond!) Read each item aloud slowly and distinctly; then read it a second time while students are thinking. Be sure to read the item number and to remind students of page numbers when new pages are reached.

Scoring
To score the survey, count four points for each leftmost (happiest) Garfield circled, three for each slightly smiling Garfield, two for each mildly upset Garfield, and one point for each very upset (rightmost) Garfield. Three scores for each student can be obtained: the total for the first 10 items, the total for the second 10, and a composite total. The first half of the survey relates to attitude toward recreational reading; the second half relates to attitude toward academic aspects of reading.

Interpretation
You can interpret scores in two ways. One is to note informally where the score falls in regard to the four nodes of the scale. A total score of 50, for example, would fall about mid-way on the scale, between the slightly happy and slightly upset figures, therefore indicating a relatively indifferent overall attitude toward reading. The other approach is more formal. It involves converting the raw scores into percentile ranks by means of Table 1. Be sure to use the norms for the right grade level and to note the column headings (Rec = recreational reading, Aca = academic reading, Tot = total score). If you wish to determine the average percentile rank for your class, average the raw scores first; then use the table to locate the percentile rank corresponding to the raw score mean. Percentile ranks cannot be averaged directly.

McKenna & Kear
Elementary Reading Attitude Survey

School_________________ Grade_____ Name_____________________

Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

1. How do you feel when you read a book on a rainy Saturday?
   - [ ] Happy
   - [ ] Bored
   - [ ] Mad
   - [ ] Anxious
   - [ ] Happy

2. How do you feel when you read a book in school during free time?
   - [ ] Happy
   - [ ] Bored
   - [ ] Mad
   - [ ] Anxious
   - [ ] Happy

3. How do you feel about reading for fun at home?
   - [ ] Happy
   - [ ] Bored
   - [ ] Mad
   - [ ] Anxious
   - [ ] Happy

4. How do you feel about getting a book for a present?
   - [ ] Happy
   - [ ] Bored
   - [ ] Mad
   - [ ] Anxious
   - [ ] Happy

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Survey designed by Dennis J. Kear, Wichita State University
Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

5. How do you feel about spending free time reading a book?

6. How do you feel about starting a new book?

7. How do you feel about reading during summer vacation?

8. How do you feel about reading instead of playing?
Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

9. How do you feel about going to a bookstore?

10. How do you feel about reading different kinds of books?

11. How do you feel when a teacher asks you questions about what you read?

12. How do you feel about reading workbook pages and worksheets?
Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

13. How do you feel about reading in school?

14. How do you feel about reading your school books?

15. How do you feel about learning from a book?

16. How do you feel when it’s time for reading in class?
Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

17. How do you feel about stories you read in reading class?

18. How do you feel when you read out loud in class?

19. How do you feel about using a dictionary?

20. How do you feel about taking a reading test?
Elementary Reading Attitude Survey Scoring Sheet

Student Name________________________________________________________
Teacher_____________________________________________________________
Grade________________________ Administration Date________________________

Scoring Guide
4 points Happiest Garfield
3 points Slightly smiling Garfield
2 points Mildly upset Garfield
1 point Very upset Garfield

Recreational reading Academic reading
1. ___ 1. ___
2. ___ 2. ___
3. ___ 3. ___
4. ___ 4. ___
5. ___ 5. ___
6. ___ 6. ___
7. ___ 7. ___
8. ___ 8. ___
9. ___ 9. ___
10. ___ 10. ___

Raw Score: _____ Raw Score: _____
Full scale raw score . . . . . . . . . . . . (Recreational + Academic): _____
Percentile ranks: . . . . . . . . . . . . Recreational . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Academic . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Full scale

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Appendix C

Writing Attitude Survey
Directions for use

The Writing Attitude Survey provides a quick indication of student attitudes toward writing. It consists of 28 items and can be administered to an entire classroom in about 20 minutes. Each item presents a brief, simply worded statement about writing, followed by four pictures of Garfield. Each pose is designed to depict a different emotional state, ranging from very positive to very negative.

Administration

Begin by telling students that you wish to find out how they feel about writing. Emphasize that this is not a test and that there are no right answers. Encourage sincerity.

Distribute the survey forms and, if you wish to monitor the attitudes of specific students, ask them to write their names in the space at the top. Hold up a copy of the survey so that the students can see the first page. Point to the picture of Garfield at the far left of the first item. Ask the students to look at this same picture on their own survey form. Discuss with them the mood Garfield seems to be in (very happy). Then move to the next picture and again discuss Garfield’s mood (this time, somewhat happy). In the same way, move to the third and fourth pictures and talk about Garfield’s moods—somewhat upset and very upset. Explain that the survey contains some statements about writing and that the students should think about how they feel about each statement. They should then circle the picture of Garfield that is closest to their own feelings. (Emphasize that the students should respond according to their own feelings, not as Garfield might respond!) In the first and second grades read each item aloud slowly and distinctly, then read it a second time while students are thinking. Be sure to read the item number and to remind students of page numbers when new pages are reached.

In Grades 3 and above, monitor students while they are completing this survey. It is not necessary for the teacher to read the items aloud to students, unless the teacher feels it is necessary for newer or struggling readers.

Teachers should review the items prior to the administration of the survey to identify any words students may need defined to eliminate misunderstanding during completion of the instrument.

Scoring

To score the survey, count four points for each leftmost (very happy) Garfield circled, three points for the next Garfield to the right (somewhat happy), two points for the next Garfield to the right (somewhat upset), and one point for the rightmost Garfield (very upset). The individual scores for each question should be totaled to reach a raw score.

Interpretation

The scores should first be recorded on the scoring sheet. The scores can be interpreted in two ways. An informal approach would be to look at where the raw score falls related to the total possible points of 112. If the raw score is approximately 70, the score would fall midway between the somewhat happy and somewhat upset Garfields, indicating the student has an indifferent attitude toward writing. The formal approach involves converting the raw score to a percentile rank by using Table 1. The raw score should be found on the left-hand side of the table and matched to the percentile rank in the appropriate grade-level column.

Measuring attitude toward writing
## Writing Attitude Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Cartoon Images</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How would you feel writing a letter to the author of a book you read?</td>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Cartoon Images" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How would you feel if you wrote about something you have heard or seen?</td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Cartoon Images" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How would you feel writing a letter to a store asking about something you might buy there?</td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Cartoon Images" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How would you feel telling in writing why something happened?</td>
<td><img src="image4" alt="Cartoon Images" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. How would you feel writing to someone to change their opinion?

6. How would you feel keeping a diary?

7. How would you feel writing poetry for fun?

8. How would you feel writing a letter stating your opinion about a topic?

9. How would you feel if you were an author who writes books?
10. How would you feel if you had a job as a writer for a newspaper or magazine?

11. How would you feel about becoming an even better writer than you already are?

12. How would you feel about writing a story instead of doing homework?

13. How would you feel about writing a story instead of watching TV?

14. How would you feel writing about something you did in science?
15. How would you feel writing about something you did in social studies?

16. How would you feel if you could write more in school?

17. How would you feel about writing down the important things your teacher says about a new topic?

18. How would you feel writing a long story or report at school?

19. How would you feel writing answers to questions in science or social studies?
20. How would you feel if your teacher asked you to go back and change some of your writing?

21. How would you feel if your classmates talked to you about making your writing better?

22. How would you feel writing an advertisement for something people can buy?

23. How would you feel keeping a journal for class?

24. How would you feel writing about things that have happened in your life?
25. How would you feel writing about something from another person’s point of view?

26. How would you feel about checking your writing to make sure the words you have written are spelled correctly?

27. How would you feel if your classmates read something you wrote?

28. How would you feel if you didn’t write as much in school?