



## Pre-school children's literacy development in the Kazakh home learning environment

Assel Zhakim 



Department of Pre-school and Primary education, Faculty of Pedagogy and Management in Education K. Zhubanov Aktobe Regional University, Aktobe city, Republic of Kazakhstan.  
Email: [assel.zhakim@gmail.com](mailto:assel.zhakim@gmail.com)

### Abstract

The home environment and experiences before a child enters formal schooling have a significant impact on their educational progress and results. Most research in this area has been conducted in Western countries and may differ across different countries and cultures. The purpose of this study is to investigate how literacy skills are developed in Kazakh homes and the kinds of social interactions that take place between parents and children to foster this development. An ethnographic case study design through participant observations and interviews was used to further understand the relationship between the Kazakh home learning environment (HLE) and literacy development in four affluent and highly educated families. The findings of this study suggest that parent-child social interactions play an important role in the development of literacy skills in Kazakh families. The parents purposefully used play, joint book reading and storytelling to focus on oral language development and to establish skills in one language first despite the fact that Kazakhstan is a bilingual country that is gradually moving towards a trilingual policy (Kazakh, Russian and English). The study highlights the types of regular and high-quality literacy-related social interactions parents engage in to help their children succeed educationally in school and beyond. The findings of this study suggest that children would benefit from regular parent-child interactions and policymakers and other stakeholders responsible for early years learning and development should encourage parents to be actively involved in their children's learning and literacy development in the home environment.

**Keywords:** Child-parent interactions, Cross-cultural learning, Home learning environment, Kazakh families, Literacy development, Pre-school learning.

**Citation** | Zhakim, A. (2024). Pre-school children's literacy development in the Kazakh home learning environment. *Journal of Education and E-Learning Research*, 11(1), 142-154. 10.20448/jeelr.v11i1.5398

#### History:

Received: 9 October 2023

Revised: 30 November 2023

Accepted: 5 February 2024

Published: 16 February 2024

**Licensed:** This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

[Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) 

**Publisher:** Asian Online Journal Publishing Group

**Funding:** This study received no specific financial support.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The Ethical Committee of the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, UK has granted approval for this study on 25 May 2015 (Ref. No. EC/AZ/200215).

**Transparency:** The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

**Competing Interests:** The author declares that there are no conflicts of interests regarding the publication of this paper.

### Contents

1. Introduction .....	143
2. Literature Review: Child-Parent Literacy-Related Social Interactions .....	143
3. Findings .....	147
4. Discussion: Parent-child Social Interactions and Focus Children's Literacy Development in the HLE .....	150
5. Conclusion .....	153
References .....	153

### Contribution of this paper to the literature

This study attempts to make an original contribution to knowledge regarding pre-school children's learning and literacy experiences in general and uniquely in the Kazakh context.

## 1. Introduction

Existing research on the HLE and literacy development has found that the availability of learning resources, parental involvement in literacy activities and the quality of parent-child interactions are all important factors that contribute to children's literacy skills. However, most of this research has been conducted in Western countries and it is not clear whether the findings apply to Kazakh families. There are few studies in Kazakhstan exploring learning aspects that may develop literacy skills in children within the home context (Amantay, 2017). However, it is impossible to determine how parent-child social interactions influence children's development of specific literacy skills due to their goals and scope. Surveys conducted in Kazakhstan (e.g., the Statistics Committee of the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan (SCMNRK) the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (2016)) have suggested that certain arrangements in Kazakh homes (availability of resources, parents' involvement) have implications for early learning and literacy development and subsequent formal learning for children. This study used an ethnographic qualitative case study design to explore HLE and early literacy development in Kazakh families. Data was collected through participant observations and interviews.

### 1.1. The Home Learning Environment

The range of learning opportunities and materials that parents give to their children at home can help conceptualise the HLE. Parental skills and abilities, disposition and resources may influence the learning opportunities that parents offer to their children at home (Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2006). The availability of reading materials and child-parent joint activities using these reading materials are well-documented and researched (Baker, 2013; Lukie, Skwarchuk, LeFevre, & Sowinski, 2014; Wood, 2002). It has been suggested that the availability of learning resources in households is important in the development of literacy skills (phonological awareness and vocabulary), further school performance (including letter knowledge, concept of print and reading skills) and better IQ scores (Niklas & Schneider, 2017; The Statistics Committee of the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan (SCMNRK) UNICEF United Nations Population Fund, 2012). IQ is perceived as a sign of the intelligence test which may help researchers predict children's further achievements. However, this is a short definition of the HLE. Burgess, Hecht, and Lonigan (2002) perceived the home literacy environment as "complex and multifaceted" and suggested that various aspects of the HLE could lead to different developmental and educational outcomes. They can contribute to the development of oral language, phonological sensitivity, letter name knowledge and word decoding in children. Sammons et al. (2015) defined the home learning environment as "the frequency of educationally oriented" parent-child joint activities in the home setting. This study focused on the long-term impact of the HLE on children's educational attainment. According to Sammons et al. (2015), children's HLE learning experiences have a long-lasting effect on their academic achievement beginning in their early years and continuing "all along their academic career" (p.198).

## 2. Literature Review: Child-Parent Literacy-Related Social Interactions

In the context of this study, the term *child-parent social interaction* refers to parents' engagement with their children in various learning-related and everyday simple activities in the HLE to help them acquire basic literacy skills (oral language and emergent code-related skills). Children acquire basic language skills and competencies long before attending school through interaction with their main caregivers and social environment such as their parents, siblings and extended family (Baker, 2013; Baroody & Diamond, 2012; Melhuish et al., 2008; Niklas & Schneider, 2017). These interactions can help children develop their oral language skills, phonological awareness, early literacy skills and increase their motivation to read. There are many different types of social interactions that can occur in the HLE. Some common examples include *reading books together, looking through picture books, talking about books and other texts, singing songs and nursery rhymes, playing games that involve literacy and numeracy and communicating with extended family and neighbours* (Frumkin, 2013; Goodall, 2013; The Statistics Committee of the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan (SCMNRK) the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 2016; The Statistics Committee of the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan (SCMNRK) UNICEF United Nations Population Fund, 2012). Brooker (2003) proposed that the majority of high-quality literacy initiatives take place in homes where children are usually engaged in basic daily literacy activities such as paying bills, organizing household chores, making lists and reading magazines.

Socioconstructivists believe that the quality of parent-child interactions, particularly the beneficial effects of parental speech can help children develop their current language abilities and literacy skills. Numerous studies have supported this theory (De Bondt, Willenberg, & Bus, 2020; Li, 2002; Ren & Hu, 2014; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). Parental speech during child-parent interactions influences children's language, literacy and cognitive development (Dickinson & Neuman, 2006). According to Street (2003), literacy can be acquired through interactions with the social environment and is always ingrained in a specific social form. On the other hand, inadequate involvement in parent-child social interactions results in poor language skills in pre-school children (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002).

Many studies across different contexts have found a strong relationship between the quality of HLE and levels of children's outcomes. In one of these studies, it was shown that the HLE had a greater impact on literacy development than parental education and SES (Melhuish et al., 2008). Melhuish et al. (2008) claimed that children with a more stimulating and supportive home learning environment (HLE) are more likely to be overachievers at the age of five years old in their longitudinal study conducted among 2,857 children aged three years old and their families from 141 preschool centres in 6 local authorities in England. The study concluded that everyday social activities within the family (playing with friends at home and elsewhere, visiting relatives and friends, shopping,

watching TV, eating meals with family, regular bedtime) were not significant in promoting children's achievement while a number of learning activities with family members such as shared reading, library visits, being taught letter and numbers, drawing and singing songs and rhymes were crucially important (Melhuish et al., 2008).

Research undertaken on parent-child joint activities and their impact on the development of literacy skills revealed that the frequency and nature of parent-child social interactions have a positive effect on children's literacy development (Wood, 2002). This paper demonstrated a small subset of data from a five-year longitudinal study researching various factors of the HLE. Wood (2002) empirically examined the nature and frequency of parent-child joint activities in the home environment and identified their influence on children's future reading attainment using descriptive statistics. Results obtained from the data collected from sixty-one preschool from two playgroups indicated that children whose reading proficiency was assessed as "above average" had frequent storybook reading and word games with their parents (Wood, 2002). Different kinds of daily cooperative activities that help children improve their literacy abilities to varying degrees such as letter-based activities, storybook reading, singing and playing games like picture dominos or the lottery appear to be beneficial to children (Wood, 2002). Wood (2002) suggests that children who engaged in a variety of parent-child activities in the HLE showed the best achievement in reading one year later. The frequency of joint activities was found to have an impact on reading attainment, vocabulary, memory and aspects of phonological awareness.

Cheung, Dulay, Yang, Mohseni, and McBride (2021) reviewed several research articles on the home literacy and numeracy environments across Asian countries including Kazakhstan. They suggested that parents in Asian countries usually have great expectations for their children. The goal of Cheung et al. (2021) was to determine how Asian home literacy contexts differed or resembled those of Western countries. Although this review cannot provide an exact answer, it still provides an overall understanding of Asian home settings. They claimed that the situation with Asian home environments is consistent with the situation in western countries. The HLE plays an important role in children's development. If the HLE offers various learning resources and supportive parent-child interactions, the better children can learn and develop their literacy and skills (Cheung et al., 2021). Meanwhile, Cheung et al. (2021) suggested that Asian parents tend to place a great emphasis on the academic achievements of their children and perceive themselves as responsible for their children's literacy development. They highlighted that some Asian parents are associated with laziness. In addition, the involvement of non-parental household members in taking care of and developing children was a common practice. Finally, a multilingual environment was a common feature among Asian families. Although this study provides some general overview of the situation with HLE in Asian countries, there is limited information on the Kazakh home learning environment. Therefore, it is important to pay special attention to children's home learning experiences and aspects that may possibly influence this process in Kazakh families.

### *2.1. Types of Literacy-Related Social Interactions in the HLE*

According to several studies, parents in the HLE primarily start with two types of literacy-related experiences: formal and informal (Martini & Sénéchal, 2012; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Since the HLE is an informal learning setting, it may be better to divide learning practices in the HLE in terms of how structured they are rather than how formal.

The child and caretaker focus their attention on written materials during more structured learning, discussing, identifying and memorising letters, phonemes and graphemes as well as learning how to blend and combine sounds to acquire code-related skills (Martini & Sénéchal, 2012; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002).

A five-year longitudinal study of 168 pre-school children from Canada revealed that early exposure to books was connected to the development of vocabulary and listening comprehension (oral language skills) in children while parents' direct teaching about reading and writing resulted in better emergent literacy skills in children (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Sénéchal and LeFevre (2002) highlighted that during storybook reading, children familiarised themselves with printed material in a more informal way and focused their attention mainly on the meaning of the whole story as well as on the meaning of particular unfamiliar words rather than on the written text itself. In this study, parents' involvement in teaching about reading and writing such as an engagement with an alphabet book was perceived as a structured activity that fosters the development of specific literacy skills such as alphabet knowledge and decoding ability.

The study also revealed that oral language skills were an important predictor of emergent literacy skills and vice versa (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). It was also explored that the pattern of interdependence was due to the inclusion of phonological awareness in the oral language aspect. Increasing literacy knowledge can help children realise that words are created with phonemes. Awareness of phonological structure may further facilitate children's emergent literacy skills by helping them spell words correctly. In addition, there is an interrelation between phonological awareness and vocabulary (oral language skills). In a nutshell, it can be summarised that children's reading comprehension is grounded in various factors of children's early learning experiences including structured and unstructured literacy learning practices (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002).

A study by Martini and Sénéchal (2012) conducted on 108 five years old children from 17 days cares in Canada aimed to assess the relationship between formal literacy practices in the home environment, parents' expectations, children's interest in literacy and their learning outcomes. Martini and Sénéchal (2012) also suggested that unstructured literacy activities such as shared book reading promote the development of children's oral language skills. However, they do not directly teach them print knowledge. At the same time, they noted that parents prefer naturally occurring learning activities in order to enhance children's knowledge about the alphabet, printing and reading. For example, parents frequently focused their children's attention on printed material and briefly taught them literacy skills during shared book reading. It appeared that parents who frequently engaged in literacy promoting activities with their children showed higher expectations for their children's literacy skills prior to grade 1. In addition, children who showed an interest in learning about literacy were more likely to have parents who reported directly teaching literacy skills to them (Martini & Sénéchal, 2012).

Sonnenschein and Munsterman (2002) proposed that parent-child involvement in storybook reading can affect children's acquisition of literacy skills in their study on the impact of home-based reading interactions on pre-



school children's reading motivation and literacy development. This study revealed that storybook reading can lead to the development of story comprehension, the growth of vocabulary, phonological awareness, grapheme recognition skills, familiarity with structures commonly used in books and increased motivation for reading in children. However, the researchers discovered that child-parent pairs frequently concentrated solely on the text's meaning when reading stories. They appeared not to specifically engage in conversation about code-related skills or phonological awareness. In addition, [Sonnenschein and Munsterman \(2002\)](#) suggested that the affective qualities of parent-child reading interactions may lead to better motivation for reading. It is underlined that a child's motivation for reading is a multidimensional concept that includes children's interest and attitudes towards reading, their sense of self-efficacy as competent readers and how they value various types of reading activities. It is believed that children who experience more pleasant reading activities and parents' emotional support may develop an interest in literacy. The dialogical nature of storybook discussion has the same importance as reading itself in the provision of literacy skills. Moreover, the frequency of reading interactions was the strongest predictor of children's literacy-related skills.

[Storch and Whitehurst \(2002\)](#) claimed that activities aimed at the development of oral language skills influence a child's reading ability by enhancing their vocabulary, syntactic skills (knowledge of word order in the sentence and grammatical rules), conceptual knowledge and story comprehension. Therefore, researchers believe that less-structured learning can predict receptive language skills that include the ability to understand words, speech sounds and language in general while more-structured experiences underpinned by the learning of code-related skills are more likely to predict the development of emergent literacy including alphabet knowledge and phonemic and graphemic awareness ([Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002](#)).

Play is a leading activity that triggers the development of abstract thinking, self-awareness and self-regulation in children ([Christie & Roskos, 2006](#); [Vygotsky, 1978](#)). Children can express themselves, take responsibility for their actions, discover the world and expand their boundaries of reality while playing. [Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, and Golinkoff \(2013\)](#) divided children's play into two categories such as free play and guided play. Free play is a fun, voluntary and flexible activity involving children's active engagement with make-believe elements and without particular extrinsic educational goals. On the other hand, guided play is an effective way to engage children in learning. This activity sits somewhere in between free play and direct instruction ([Weisberg et al., 2013](#)). It allows the child to be an active and engaged partner in the learning process. [Weisberg et al. \(2013\)](#) claimed that play guided by adults can positively influence children's learning attainment while still providing enjoyment of play. A study conducted by [Han, Moore, Vukelich, and Buell \(2010\)](#) also suggested that guided play can positively contribute to pre-school children's vocabulary scores. It is important to note that these studies focused on guided play taking place in a formal learning environment where teachers apply guided play to achieve particular learning goals. However, little is known about whether and how Kazakh parents apply guided play in their parenting practice to scaffold their children's learning outcomes.

It can be assumed that there is limited information about the role of the HLE and parent-child social interactions in Kazakh families with a particular focus on literacy. Therefore, the current study sought to understand the influences of the HLE and parent-child social interactions on children's learning and literacy development in the HLE. Moreover, many studies about the HLE, including parent-child literacy-related social interactions and their influence on children's literacy development discussed in these sections mainly relied on statistical analysis of measured inventories and were carried out in other parts of the world ([Baker, 2013](#); [Melhuish et al., 2008](#); [Wood, 2002](#)). The scope and nature of the research often caused them to overlook the particularities of each individual case especially the subjective nature of the information or the researcher's contribution to the drawing of the findings. Meanwhile, the application of a qualitative approach in this area may provide greater and more focused insights into people's behaviour in a socio-cultural context through understanding the distinctive nature of their perceptions, beliefs and attitudes ([Hammersley, 2006](#); [Jupp, 2006](#)). This approach offers a better opportunity to hear "stories behind numbers" and provides an overview of why participants prefer some literacy-related activities more than others in the HLE. According to [Heath \(1983\)](#) and [Scribner and Cole \(1978\)](#), studying literacy as a situated social practice requires a special approach to understanding the views of every individual case from an in-depth perspective. These considerations led the researcher to employ an ethnographic qualitative case study design to thoroughly understand how pre-school children develop literacy skills and how focused parents support their children's literacy learning in the HLE.

## *2.2. The Theoretical Framework*

This study is grounded in a "context-interaction" model where two key aspects, the context (HLE) and social interactions are interconnected, interdependent and inseparable. The context-interaction model, drawing from bioecological theory ([Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2001](#)), socio-constructivism ([Vygotsky, 1978](#)) and social cognitive theory ([Bandura, 2002](#)) explains how the Kazakh context offers a possibly unique environment. Each aspect has a significant influence on the process of children's learning and literacy development in the HLE. An analysis of these aspects provided the research with a deeper understanding of how children learn and develop literacy skills in the HLE. This model was proposed as a core "frame" to provide a perspective on the Kazakh situation that focused on the social and cultural influences in the HLE.

## *2.3. Research Questions*

This study attempted to look at the following research questions with an emphasis on the Kazakh home environment: How do pre-school children learn and develop literacy skills in the Kazakh home environment and what types of parent-child social interactions support their literacy development?

## *2.4. Research Design: An Ethnographic Case Study*

An overarching interpretivist approach was adopted for the study. Ethnography allows the researcher to study cultural and social contexts through the eyes of participants understand their interactions and interpretations as well as reveal their patterns of values, beliefs, lifestyle, behaviour and language.

A qualitative ethnographic case study design that integrated features of both ethnography and case study enabled exploration of the focus of home environments in supporting early childhood literacy development. It provided a deeper and more focused understanding of the phenomenon in a socio-cultural context. It was possible to build a more thorough and planned understanding by concentrating on a small number of cases rather than a larger number of individual examples. Additionally, cross-case comparisons made it possible to find similarities and differences in the perspectives of the participants in a relatively brief period of fieldwork.

Participant observations and interviews with children and parent participants were used. Participant observations provided the research with important insights into the cultural context and interactions between participants. They also helped to explain participants' experiences by tying them to the context. Initially, participant observations were applied to understand the context (HLE) and provide insights into the nature of child-parent social interactions to conduct interviews with the participants. The study took place over four months. The focus of the study was on the occurrence of specific literacy skills and parent-child interactions that encourage their development rather than the progression of literacy skills in children. The main aim was to pick up parents' literacy-oriented habits in the informal setting and demonstrate what the children were capable of doing. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used in the study to find out how parents view their children's literacy development and learning in the HLE and to understand why specific literacy practices is used in their homes. Interviews in the form of short prompt-based or task-based conversations with focus children were applied and the term "learning conversation" which better suits the applied method was used.

**Table 1.** Focus families' profile.

Characteristics	Family A	Family B	Family C	Family D
Child's name	Ayaulym	Beksultan	Alikhan	Maksat
Gender	Female	Male	Male	Male
Mother's name	Guljaina	Rauan	Aigul	Assima
Child's age at the beginning of the study	4 years 5 months	3 years 2 months	3 years 8 months	3 years 8 months
Birth order	1 <sup>st</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>
Mother's education and occupation	Postgraduate degree (M.A. in linguistics) secondary school teacher	Graduate degree (Bachelor of finance, associate degree in medicine and manual therapy) manual therapist	Graduate degree (Bachelor of Finance) housewife	Postgraduate degree (PhD in surgery) doctor and specialist in pharmacological company
Father's education and occupation	Postgraduate degree (M.A. in journalism, PhD candidate) journalist	Graduate degree (Bachelor of finance) specialist in a private company	Graduate degree (BSachelor of laws) police officer	Graduate degree (Bachelor of economics) assistant manager
Number of family members in the household	5 members, including parents and 3 children	7 members, including parents, 3 children, and grandparents	4 members, including parents and 2 children	4 members, including parents and 2 children
Dominant language in the household	Kazakh	Russian/Partly Kazakh	Russian	Russian

### 2.5. Participants and Location of the Study

The main criteria for choosing participants were the *location of the family*, the *children's age*, *ethnicity* and *parents' level of education*. The Kazakh families, all with children aged 3-5 and living in Almaty city (Kazakhstan) were purposefully selected as a source of data to identify types of learning providing social interactions applied in the HLE and show influences contributing to pre-school children's literacy development at home. Four Kazakh families participated in the study. Table 1 provides more information about the research participants. Names have been pseudonymised in accordance with ethical considerations. Some personal information (addresses and districts where focus families are located and participants' exact work places) that could compromise the anonymity of the participants was omitted.

Parent participants in the focus families were highly educated. In terms of affluence, the four families largely belonged to the middle class. Only three focus families and three parent-child interactions were specifically included and explored in the following sections due to the paper's objective and scope. Moreover, data from only participant observations are presented in this article.

### 2.6. General Ethical Considerations

The consideration of ethical issues was aligned with international and local documentation on children's rights and ethics such as the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(1989\)](#), the [Scottish Educational Research Association \(2005\)](#) ethical codes, the [Kazakhstan Education Research Association \(KERA\) \(2020\)](#), Code of Ethics, University Ethical Guidelines, the [Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan \(1995\)](#) and the [Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan \(2011\)](#).

An informed consent form has been obtained from all participants included in this study. During the research, it was important to avoid any hierarchical approaches, the researcher's manipulation and unequal power relationships. Combining carefully selected research methods with important ethical considerations helped to prevent any tokenism or illusion of children's participation in the research. It also helped to empower participants, raise their confidence, and elicit narratives without causing any harm or other discomfort. It was important to establish reliable, friendly and trustworthy relationships with the participants so they could feel confident and secure. In addition, it was important to limit any negative impact on families and prevent any disruptions to their daily life schedules. The names of participants did not appear in the study at any stage to retain confidentiality.

### 3. Findings

The research question of the study aims to reveal the ways in which pre-school children from focus families learned and developed their literacy skills in their home environments and what types of literacy-related social interactions supported their literacy development. The findings of the current study demonstrated a social aspect of literacy learning in the HLE. The children and their parents often engage in social interactions purposefully during learning and literacy-related interactions such as play, joint book reading and looking through and discussing picture books, storytelling, drawing and joint writing as well as occasionally during simple everyday activities. There were various types of activities in the HLE that not only entertained but also encouraged the focus of children's learning and literacy development. In addition, the focus children often interacted with the wider social environment.

#### 3.1. Children's Play

The children frequently participated in pretend or socio-dramatic games which allowed them to develop their spoken language abilities while also learning to negotiate, cooperate and communicate in a variety of social contexts that took place in the HLE. During this activity, the children learned to use literacy in their everyday lives. An example of literacy learning through play can be found in the following observation excerpt where the children from one of the focus families were involved in pretend play.

*3-year-old Akbilek gave her sister Ayaulym (4 years old) a doll.*

*Ayaulym: "Would you like me to make a puppet-play?" Akbilek nodded her head. Ayaulym took the doll's house and commented on her activity. "This is their house." She put two dolls in a face-to-face position and started playing.*

*Mummy, when are we going to Taraz? I am so bored of staying here.*

*Very soon, dear. I will take you to the zoo today. What do you think?*

*Hurray! Hurray!*

*"They are going to the Zoo. The 'mother' doll holds her daughter's hand. Then they went to a place where they saw an elephant." (An old doll was an elephant. At this moment, Tomiris came and said 'Hey!' implying that it is not ok to ride another doll. She took the pretend-to-be-an-elephant doll from the floor).*

*Ayaulym: "Tomiris, what are you doing? So, she continued, after riding the elephant, they came back home. Then, the daughter asked again, Mummy, will we go to Taraz? Mother said, Yes, we will.*

*Then they travelled to Taraz. Here, sister Nurgul greeted and hugged them. This one, who wore a dress will be sister Nurgul. She asked: "Where is my lovely little sister?"*

*(Participant observation notes, 31/07/2015).*

In this children's play four years old Ayaulym acted as a facilitator. During this activity, Ayaulym paid special attention to the dialogues between the characters. The comments of the pretend to be a mother doll and her daughter were different. Phrases (speech), expressions and actions were selected in a meaningful way and were relevant to the pretend-play situation. By holding her daughter's hand, the pretend to be a mother doll demonstrated her care and responsibility. Ayaulym showed only one episode with an elephant in the zoo and then decided to send her dolls to another city where her mother and daughter met their relatives. The appearance of this city and its relatives in the play was not accidental. The children's maternal relatives lived in Taraz. Unlike her little sister, Ayaulym demonstrated her ability to substitute objects. This episode may indicate the development of symbolic representations as well as the maturation of the overall cognitive skills including speech in Ayaulym. In this play, Ayaulym demonstrated her growing competence in oral language skills especially story comprehension, pronunciation, awareness of sentence structure and familiarity with direct and indirect speech. In addition, the child used correct endings according to the *synharmonism* rules typical of the Kazakh language. She adjusted her speech to play out the scenario and intuitively demonstrated the child and mother's behaviour and language patterns. She was practising her speaking skills as well as acting as a role model for her siblings providing them with language and playing practices. During the play, she was narrating the story in the third person. It was possible to distinguish characters' speech from another as well as from 'author's speech. Speech characteristics of mother and daughter were helping her sisters to recognise differences in age and personalities of the characters which is an important story comprehension skill. In general, the play scenario and the participants' comments and behaviour imply that Ayaulym was able to reproduce and imitate a real-life situation.

Several times, the children in this family engaged in play with an interactive alphabet poster with or without parents. When parents joined in the children's play with the alphabet, they encouraged Ayaulym and Akbilek to learn letter sounds and memorise tongue twisters and proverbs using this poster. The excerpt demonstrates how the two sisters engaged in literacy development using a learning resource.

*'Akbilek closed the living room door to play with the interactive alphabet poster. She said, 'An apple' and looked at her father, waiting for praise. Then her older sister joined her. They were finding letter sounds and words together. Sometimes, Ayaulym held Akbilek's hands to prevent her from pushing the button. She often tried to press the button herself. However, when her little sister could not find an answer, Ayaulym showed her the correct answer and encouraged Akbilek to press' (participants observation notes, 20/09/2015).*

This example demonstrates how the sisters played together and how the older sister helped her younger sister to develop alphabetic knowledge by guiding her. Akbilek looked at Ayaulym and was trying to memorise and replicate her responses and reactions to certain questions. Both children used the interactive poster for their personal enjoyment. The girls were repeating letter sounds and finding letter names and words starting with the same sound. During this alphabet play, Ayaulym demonstrated her familiarity with all 42 letter sounds of the Kazakh alphabet. She was able to recognize and name the letters and match them with the letter sounds.

Sometimes, a degree of competitiveness between the sisters was evident: Ayaulym tried to prevent her little sister from pushing the button and attempted to do it herself. Ayaulym was aware that both parents and I were observing and wanted to demonstrate her growing letter and sound knowledge and her ability to complete other tasks from the poster such as repeating tongue twisters and proverbs that contribute to the development of oral language skills. At the same time, the play scenario encouraged the sisters to work collaboratively to achieve



success in the alphabet play. Both sisters were thrilled when they found the correct answers and Ayaulym became extremely disappointed when the poster automatically turned off.

Play-based learning was a main goal for some of the focus families. Mothers in two focus families tend to teach their children new skills using play considering the child's natural desire to play. For example, in 3-year-old Beksultan's family, his mother, Rauan, often acted as a play partner who supported the child's play and aimed to develop particular literacy skills in him as illustrated in the parent-child exchange below:

*Beksultan: Mum, build a house for me, please.*

*Rauan (Rauan sat on the floor. Beksultan came and sat close to his mother). Ok, Beksultan, let's build a house together. We are building a house. Look, what colour is that?*

*Beksultan: This is red.*

*Rauan: No, it isn't!*

*Beksultan: It is orange.*

*Rauan: That's correct. We will build it like that.*

*Beksultan named the colours and gave his mother detailed instructions on how to build it. Pointing to a figure that appeared on the floor, Beksultan exclaimed, this is a square!*

*(Rauan and Beksultan finished the house (participants observation notes, 26/09/2015).*

In this excerpt, Beksultan and Rauan engaged in a play activity together. Beksultan initiated the activity. He also suggested and guided Rauan about which sticks they needed to use to 'build' a house. Rauan commented on their activity, providing examples of correct parental language patterns in Russian asking the child to name the colours of the sticks and correcting him if he made any mistakes. Rauan tried to support the child's initiative and intention to be engaged in learning activities. Beksultan was enjoying the building activity, Rauan asked questions to consolidate his colour and shape recognition skills. In addition, special attention was paid to the child's oral language skills. The naturally occurring conversation between the child and his mother provided more insights into how the child learns and develops oral language skills in the HLE and how the mother motivates and encourages his learning by providing emotional support. This activity contributed to Beksultan's shape and colour recognition and oral language skills development (particularly pronunciation, the correct position of word stress, and the correct grammatical forms in Russian) which are important precursors for his overall literacy skills.

### 3.2. Joint Book Reading and Talking About Picture Books

Joint book reading is a common activity in HLE. The focus children demonstrated their interest and motivation to engage in joint book reading, talking about picture books and pretend reading. For example, one mother used joint book reading to teach her children about letters and sounds. Another child voluntarily engaged in pretend reading and demonstrated his interest in printed materials. These examples show how joint book reading can be used to promote literacy development in young children. Parents can help their children develop their oral language skills, learn about letters and sounds and develop an interest in reading by engaging in joint book reading.

Many researchers have claimed that joint book reading contributes to the development of oral language skills in children (Martini & Sénéchal, 2012; Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). These types of social interactions occurred frequently in the home environment. The extract from the associated observation notes provides an example of the way in which Ayaulym and her sibling engaged in joint book reading with their mother:

*Ayaulym (4 years old) was sitting next to her mother and Akbilek (3 years old) sat comfortably on her mother's lap. The girls were looking at the book with interest. Guljaina started reading a fairy tale named 'Who is stronger?' After a while, she asked her daughters to continue with the story. The mother took another book, focused their attention on the illustrative pictures and asked the girls some prediction questions to encourage their participation and interest in the discussion. Then she read out a riddle. The girls could not find an answer. Then, she asked the same question again, but this time pointed at a word which was the answer to the riddle: 'Which letter sounds are these?' Ayaulym: 'O and T'. She looked at her mother, waiting for her response. Mother: 'O and T. Then what word is that? Can you put them together and read?' Ayaulym: 'O T' She could not merge the sounds. Mother: 'It is Ot (fire). Let's read it once again.'*

*(Participant observation notes, 27/08/2015).*

This excerpt reveals how the family typically engages in a reading activity together. As the mother decided to read for them, the children came and sat closer. The children participated in the reading activity by answering the questions or commenting on some details. Since most of the books had been read previously, the mother asked the children to continue with the story (recall). Prior to reading a book, the mother asked the children prediction questions such as 'What kind of book is that? What do you think will happen next? Please, look at this picture carefully. Can you describe it? What do you think the story is about?' The mother focused the children's attention not only on the meaning or content of a rhyme, story or fairy tale but also on the separate words and sounds that they came across while reading. She intended to develop the children's oral language skills such as pronunciation, correct grammatical forms, story comprehension and briefly taught them code-related literacy skills (familiarity with the alphabet and merging sounds) during joint book reading. The mother specifically encouraged Ayulym and her sister to sound out the letters and to learn to merge them. During child-parent interactions emphasis was also placed on the discussion of unfamiliar words.

During joint book reading in the focus family B, Rauan familiarised Beksultan with letter symbols, taught him to pronounce sounds and merge two sounds. The following observation extract demonstrates how Beksultan engaged in literacy-related interactions with his mother:

*Beksultan: It is A...*

*Rauan: Pronounce it louder. Let's stretch the sound and sing it. It is A-A-A-A*

*Beksutan: -A-A-A-A.*

*Rauan (pointing to the angel): Who is this? Do you remember? Angel.*

*Beksultan: Angel. This is Arbuz (watermelon).*

*Rauan: Correct! (She pointed at the picture of Stork) This is*

*Beksultan: Clamingo (Flamingo).*

*Rauan: No, it is not flamingo. It is Aist (Stork) and this is*

*Beksultan: Autobus (bus).*

*Rauan: This is the arch (both pointed to the arch).*

*Rauan: Do you remember this letter?*

*Beksultan: IO (Yu).*

*Rauan: No, it isn't! It is U.*

*Beksultan: Uuuu.*

*Rauan: Yes, you're right! Well done!*

*Rauan: Can you read this for us?*

*Beksultan: Ayu.*

*Rauan: No. It is Au. You need to read them together. Auuuu.*

*Beksultan: Au.*

*Rauan: Well done, Beksultan!*

*(Participant observation notes, 26/09/2015).*

During this participant observation, Beksultan demonstrated his growing competence in letter and sound recognition as well as his ability to name words starting with a particular sound. Rauan was continuously correcting, encouraging and guiding him. The mother often applied a scaffolding strategy to help the child accomplish the difficult task under her supervision. Special emphasis was placed on the vowels and the fact that they can be stretched unlike consonants.

Although there were a limited number (four) of children's books, and joint book reading was not established as a family routine in one of the focus families, occasionally this activity took place at home. In the following excerpt, Alikhan demonstrated interest in printed material and his ability to describe and talk about pictures:

*'Alikhan was sitting on the sofa. He suddenly stood up on the sofa and took a magazine from the shelves. He chose a new issue of a parental magazine named 'My child' and started looking through it and commenting on some of the photographs and pictures. He provided short descriptions of selected photographs demonstrating his understanding of the situation in the picture.*

*The child continued turning pages. Then he focused his attention on an advertisement for a drug called 'Linex'.*

*Alikhan: 'Tateshka (auntie) has some pain in her tummy here. Look! There she does not have pain. She is happy again'. Suddenly, he saw a small coloring booklet inside the magazine.*

*Alikhan: Look! Look! (He laughed and looked excited) There are little men!*

*Researcher: Where are they?*

*Alikhan: Here. (The child pointed at the picture of the fairy-tale. There were many mushrooms on the stump. Two mushrooms were playing football) Here is a mushroom and there is another mushroom.*

*Researcher: What is it?*

*Alikhan: This is a mushroom. This one is a tree!*

*Researcher: Well, it used to be a tree. But now it looks like a stump.*

*Alikhan: - Yes, aha, stump. I think that Tateshka still struggles with her tummy.*

*He continued turning pages looking for the same advertisement.*

*(Participant observation notes, 23/09/2015).*

This short extract from the observation, where the researcher was accepted as a participant included several important aspects. First, the child voluntarily engaged in pretend reading and demonstrated his genuine interest in printed materials. He was willing to interpret the pictures and construct his own understanding. His intention to invent a story contributed to his oral language skills development (story comprehension). He used the Kazakh kinship term such as 'Tate' modified in the way of the Russian language with the suffix -shka. This fact demonstrated his familiarity within Kazakh kinship terms.

Alikhan had a choice to select between his own children's books and a parental magazine. He chose a colourful parental magazine with photographs of children on the cover and a small children's booklet inside. It is possible that he felt this was more relevant to him because the pictures were colorful, eye-catching, and interesting. This suggests that a special emphasis needs to be placed on the content of the children's books. Books need to correspond to the children's personal interests and their age group in order to increase their interest and motivation to read. In addition, to reach magazines and books the child had to stand up on the sofa while all toys including technology gadgets were stored on the lower shelves of the cabinet in a more accessible area. This highlights the importance of having children's bookshelves in an area where children can easily access them whenever they want. Nevertheless, this evidence suggests that the child's interest and motivation in reading and printed materials can be further developed by the provision of various learning resources including various children's books and comics that can be of particular interest to the child.

### 3.3. Storytelling

Storytelling was another parent-child interactive activity that the families engaged in with their children and that also contributed to the development of oral language skills in children. During the participant observation, the mother encouraged Ayaulym and her 3-year-old sister Akbilek to tell their favourite fairy tale 'Makta-kyz and the Cat' that they had previously read. It was possible to determine that the children were comfortable with telling stories, fairy tales and nursery rhymes eloquently and expressively as they paid attention to pauses and stressed key words and phrases within the text from the observation extract below. For example:

*Akbilek: Makta-kyz is waiting but the cat is not coming.*

*Ayaulym: Please, let me tell you. Once upon a time, there were Makta-kyz and the cat. One day, Makta-kyz found a raisin and called for her cat: 'Cat, come here, please, but the cat did not come. Then Makta-kyz called her again, 'Cat, where are you? Please, come here. The cat did not come and Maktakyz ate the raisin herself.*

*Akbilek: Then, the cat came to Makta-kyz and asked, 'Makta-kyz, why did you call me?' (Akbilek said it emotionally and eloquently).*



*Ayaulym: Makta-kyz said, 'I found a raisin and called for you but you did not come. Then I ate it myself!' Then, the cat got angry and spilled Makta-kyz's milk.*

*Akbilek: (Jumped from her seat immediately) and then Makta-kyz cut off the cat's tail!*

*The cat cried, 'Oh no, please, give me my tail back, Makta-kyz But Makta-kyz said, 'I'll not give you your tail until you bring me some milk!'*

*Guljaina: Do you know what the cat did next?*

*Ayaulym: Then, the cat came to the cow and asked to give her some milk. She told about her tail. (Ayaulym and Akbilek. Participant observation notes. 27/08/2015)*

This excerpt emphasises that both Ayaulym and Akbilek were skilled at telling stories. They were familiar with direct and indirect speech and used intonation and pauses to focus the listeners' attention on important details in the story. This suggests that the children were able to thoroughly understand the meaning of the story and reproduce the heroes' feelings. The parent-child observation indicated that both parents encouraged their children not only to simply memorise rhymes and fairy tales but also to reproduce them with expression using gestures and mimics. The sentence structures used by Ayaulym and Akbilek also suggested that they were able to express their thoughts and produce a coherent piece of narrative that illustrates the development of their oral skills. While telling fairy tales, they used book language, literary forms and structures that commonly occurred in fairy tales.

Telling stories contributes to the development of oral language skills that are considered a foundation for reading and writing in children. Training to tell stories contributed to their story comprehension, enhancement of vocabulary, expression of thoughts, improvement of pronunciation, memory recall, sequencing, cause and effect and helped them to master their speaking skills in general.

#### 4. Discussion: Parent-child Social Interactions and Focus Children's Literacy Development in the HLE

It may be inferred from the current study's findings that parent-child interactions in the target Kazakh home environments, including both formal and informal (structured and unstructured) practices are similar to those in the western HLE (Martini & Sénéchal, 2012; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). The children and their parents often engage in social interactions purposefully during learning and literacy-related interactions such as play, joint book reading and looking through and discussing picture books, storytelling and drawing as well as occasionally during simple everyday activities. There were various types of activities in the HLE that not only entertained but also encouraged the focus children's learning and literacy development. In families that tended to prioritize literacy development such as focus families A, B, and D, the children and their parents (mainly mothers) engaged in activities aimed at literacy development. Importantly, the common congruity of all parent-child social interactions is parent-child language (Baker, 2013) which means that parents who involve themselves in more language-rich social interactions with their children positively encourage their language and literacy development during early childhood. Cheung et al. (2021) highlighted that children in Asian households learn multiple languages (multi literacies) in the HLE. This can be seen from the current study. The focus families were bilingual. However, the parent participants gave preference to either Kazakh or Russian. Since the environment was bilingual, the focus children were still introduced to both languages whether parents encouraged them to learn both languages or not. However, without special emphasis being placed on the provision of bilingual literacy in the HLE, the focus children spoke one language only. At the same time, they were able to understand a second language, name some words, use special kinship terms and answer simple questions. Children from the focus families were occasionally introduced to English books and cartoons.

##### 4.1. The Role of Play in Literacy Development

Play is an important part of early childhood development. It helps children learn and develop a variety of skills including literacy skills. There are many different types of play and each type can contribute to literacy development in different ways. For example, socio-dramatic play can help children learn about different social roles and develop their language skills. Letter play can help children learn about the alphabet and letter sounds, and guided play can help children learn specific literacy skills, such as how to read or write (Weisberg et al., 2013; Wood, 2002). The key to using play to support literacy development is to make sure that the activities are meaningful and engaging for the children. Children should be able to see the connection between the play activities and the literacy skills they are learning. Unlike the study conducted by Cheung et al. (2021) on Asian home learning environments, the focus families in the current study considered play as a vital activity for their children's learning and development. Two of the mother participants even encouraged guided play themselves.

In this study, the children engaged in a variety of play activities that supported their literacy development. For example, they played with an interactive alphabet poster which helped them learn about the alphabet and letter sounds. Sénéchal and LeFevre (2002) suggested that engagement with the alphabet is a structured activity that fosters the development of alphabet knowledge and decoding ability. Specifically, the findings of this study suggest that engagement in play with letters was more associated with initial familiarization with alphabetic knowledge (letter names) and letter sounds which has not yet resulted in reading (decoding) ability.

They also played socio-dramatic games such as pretending to be a mother, teacher or doctor which helped them to learn about different social roles, develop their language skills such as story comprehension, pronunciation, the correct grammatical forms and syntactic knowledge, engage in collaborative story composition and storytelling, and, importantly, develop their imagination. The findings of this study reveal that the children often meaningfully selected and applied language and behaviour patterns adopted from people in their lives such as fairy tale or story heroes and pretended to play characters. During socio-dramatic play, the focus children were able to construct and describe various imaginary situations, use language patterns suitable for a particular context, express themselves, articulate their choices and negotiate with each other about play scenarios and substitute objects. The focus of children's play was often based on their personal experiences, knowledge and understanding of various real-life situations (mother and daughter's trip to the zoo, visiting relatives, preparing homework, and fishing), stories that were read (a play inspired by 'Uncle Stepa'), and cartoons or movies that were watched. Socio-dramatic

play helped children engage in various social interactions with playing partners and meaningfully apply literacy skills in everyday life.

Children in the focus families also participated in the guided play where mothers acted as facilitators and aimed at the development of particular literacy skills. According to Weisberg et al. (2013), guided play is an effective way to engage children in learning. The mother participants from the focus families were able to effectively apply guided play to teach children to merge sounds or increase their color and geometric shape recognition.

Moreover, in play, the focus children demonstrated their initiative, motivation, sense of purpose and desire to undertake various learning-like activities such as pretend reading, naming letter sounds, and reciting tongue twisters as well as to engage in social interactions with each other. The manifestation of intentional and motivational behaviour in the focus children while engaging in play supports Vygotsky's (1978) and El'konin's (2017) ideas about the importance of play in children's learning and literacy development. These activities can be considered important in children's learning and the development of literacy skills, depending on the availability of learning resources and the quality of engagement with more experienced playing partners. For example, the children who engaged in play with an interactive alphabet poster, electronic ABC and magnetic letters were gradually developing their familiarity with code-related skills (familiarity with alphabetic knowledge, letter names, and identifying orientation towards print) and mastering their oral language skills by repeating tongue twisters, proverbs and nursery rhymes. According to Sénéchal and LeFevre (2002), engaging children regularly in play with letter sounds and letter names influences children's literacy skills. Indeed, the children were able to name some letter names and words that start with particular letter sounds. However, it was difficult to track the extent to which the children were able to use literacy skills acquired during the letter play in their everyday lives and whether it helped them with environmental print recognition within the limited time of data collection.

It is important to note that when the children engaged in guided play with their mothers, in play with an interactive alphabetic poster under parents' supervision or in socio-dramatic play with their siblings or parents, all these activities provided enjoyment. Moreover, these activities influenced children's literacy skills development and contributed to the development of fluent pronunciation, the identification of correct endings and the correct position of stress in words and the use of correct syntactic structure. These literacy skills were developed through engagement in a social context where the focus children were able to practice their emerging literacy skills. Children often interacted with others including more experienced partners such as parents and older siblings who supported the development of their language skills while playing. Play with siblings or individual play may also help children to try on various social roles, experience behaviour and language patterns observed in real life, and develop a wide range of skills (literacies). Focus children often use literacy skills in their everyday lives and these skills play an important role in social interactions with others while playing.

#### 4.2. The Role of Joint Book Reading and Storytelling in Literacy Development

*Joint book reading and talking about picture books* was a common literacy-related parent-child interaction that was established as a family routine in the focus families. Joint book reading and storytelling are two important activities that can help children develop their literacy skills. Many researchers have suggested that joint book reading influences the development of oral language skills in children (Martini & Sénéchal, 2012; Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). The findings of this study are consistent with this claim.

A joint book reading is an activity where a parent or caregiver reads to a child. During joint book reading, the adult can point to the pictures, ask questions about the story and talk about the meaning of the words. This helps children develop their oral language skills, learn about the structure of stories and get familiar with print.

Storytelling is an activity where an adult or children themselves tell a story. During storytelling, the adult can use different voices, facial expressions, and gestures to make the story come alive. Children who observe these types of interactions may use the same ways to engage in their own storytelling. This helps children develop their imagination and listening skills.

Both joint book reading and storytelling can help children develop the following literacy skills:

*Oral language skills:* These skills include vocabulary, grammar, and fluency as well as pronunciation.

*Story comprehension:* This is the ability to understand the plot, characters and setting of a story.

*Phonological awareness and knowledge about print:* This helps in the recognition of sounds in spoken words that will lead to decoding symbols, blending sounds and reading while knowledge about print includes skills such as familiarity with letter names and sounds and concepts of written words (Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002).

*Phonics:* This is the understanding of the relationship between letters and sounds.

*Writing:* This is the ability to write letters, words and sentences.

Oral language skills are the foundation for all other literacy skills. Children who have strong oral language skills are more likely to be successful readers and writers (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002).

Depending on the nature and quality of the scaffolding provided by parent participants, parent-child joint book reading interactions influenced the children's cognitive abilities and expanded their oral language skills. If parents provided more sophisticated scaffolding during joint book reading by describing the illustrative pictures, encouraging children to identify the meaning of some unfamiliar words, asking various guiding, prediction, causal, and inferential questions and encouraged them to provide complete answers, it resulted in better story comprehension skills in children. Children from these families actively engaged in discussions with mothers during and after joint book reading, recalled familiar text and told a narrative. In addition, they began to develop an awareness of language structures often used in books and learned to apply direct and indirect speech, speak in the voice of the characters and use intonation during the storytelling activity.

The focus children were familiarized with the meaning of unfamiliar words during joint book reading. In this study, parents' attempts to familiarize their children with new and unfamiliar words and children's intention to identify the meaning of words that they came across during joint book reading were perceived as important precursors for children's vocabulary enrichment. During this activity, children not only familiarized themselves with the meaning of unfamiliar words but also learned how to use them in everyday life. Vocabulary knowledge is a skill that contributes to literacy success. From this perspective, joint book reading and ongoing, follow-up

discussions created a platform for the focus children and their parents to discuss and understand the meaning of unfamiliar words and enhance vocabulary knowledge.

In the two focus families, the mother participants intended to introduce their children to letter names and sounds and to teach them to divide words into syllables and merge sounds during joint book reading. In families A and B, mothers intentionally focused their children's attention on the written text while reading it. Sonnenschein and Munsterman (2002) suggested that when engaging in storybook reading child-parent dyads commonly focus on the meaning of the text rather than on code-related skills. Moreover, researchers such as Sénéchal and LeFevre (2002) perceived story book reading as a less structured activity when children familiarized themselves with printed materials in a more informal way. Although, during joint book reading, the children and parents were more focused on the plot of the story, they still intended to briefly focus on the written words. This fact suggests that the mother participants placed emphasis not only on the children's oral language skills such as story comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, fluent pronunciation, syntactic skills, the correct position of stress in words and correct endings but also on their initial familiarization with decoding skills. They tried to ensure that the children had a solid language foundation prior to school.

The findings in the study indicate that the children who frequently engaged in joint book reading with parents and who actively participated in ongoing and follow-up discussions had *good story comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, and syntactic skills* (knowledge of word order in sentences and grammatical rules). This is consistent with Sonnenschein and Munsterman's (2002) and Storch and Whitehurst's (2002) studies. The focus children who actively participated in joint book reading and talking about picture books were able to provide more complete and correct answers compared to the children who did not frequently participate in such activities. On-going and follow-up discussions were a significant part of joint book reading, and three of the focus families placed special emphasis on this activity, perceiving it to be a vehicle for the development of language skills and moral education. The mother participants encouraged their children to recall familiar text, tell a meaningful piece of narrative and actively engage in discussions of the text and answer questions. These activities may help children to thoroughly understand and analyse the text as well as increase their interest in reading. These efforts may contribute to the improvement of children's reading literacy later at school by introducing them to ways of engaging with written text from an early age.

The findings of the study are consistent with previous studies' results which claim that joint book reading mainly influences children's oral language skills (improves story comprehension, expands vocabulary and knowledge of words, familiarizes children with structures used in books, raises phonological awareness and knowledge about print) (Martini & Sénéchal, 2012; Neumann, Hood, & Neumann, 2009; Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). At the same time, it was noticeable that some participants intended to develop not only oral but also code-related skills. The development of oral language skills such as story comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, familiarity with grammatical forms and syntactic skills coupled with occasional familiarization with code-related skills during joint book reading may influence and raise children's future attainment in reading. These skills can be perceived as building blocks for future literacy development in primary school.

### 4.3. Storytelling

A joint book reading activity was often followed by *storytelling*. In two focus families, the mother participants intended to encourage their children to recall a familiar story. They guided and supported their children to produce a meaningful piece of narrative by asking questions and encouraging the children to recall a familiar plot. The storytelling activity took place not only after joint book reading but also occasionally during photograph discussions while the focus children were sharing their memories and experiences about important events or negotiating aspects of pretend play. During this activity, the children demonstrated their growing competence in recalling past events and experiences and describing important details. Since the focus was on children engaging in narrating a story during photograph discussions or pretend play, this activity was also considered storytelling. From this perspective, oral language skills allowed children not only to communicate with others and share their stories but also to be a part of society. It is worth noting that their story comprehension skills were different depending on the instructions that they received from their parents.

The children who often engaged in joint book reading and storytelling activities were *able to memorise the moral of the story, its main characters, describe important details and recall a familiar story plot*. Moreover, they tended to answer various predictions, inferential and causal questions and provide complete answers, narrate stories eloquently and expressively, use direct and indirect speech, apply correct grammatical forms and structures and demonstrate fluent pronunciation.

In this study, parents engaged in storytelling activities with their children and naturally applied scaffolding strategies that they believed would help them to support story comprehension skills in their children. However, in the example of the focus cases, it is important to note that listening to text being read in itself did not lead to the development of story comprehension unless it was coupled with active engagement (parent-child interaction) in the form of answering questions and parents' storytelling. Focus children learned story comprehension skills from their parents and followed their example in narrating stories. It was important for children to hear the story with their parents' interpretation. Often, mother participants adapted materials they read to facilitate their children's understanding.

Oral storytelling is still common in some Kazakh homes today and can be perceived as a useful way of developing children's oral language skills since the country's rich oral history and historical nomadic predecessors have shaped Kazakh culture. This is especially applicable in families who prefer not to burden their children's everyday lives with 'formal-like' literacy activities or who claim children's inadequate interest in joint book reading. It is likely that this activity occurred across all the focus home settings. However, this activity was probably overlooked by parent participants since they considered more formal-like parent-child social interactions as key literacy providing activities. Storytelling could be a great starting point to familiarize pre-school children with oral literacy and increase their interest in stories and fairy tales. It is likely that storytelling occurs across all families at different times of the day. In the case of four focus families, this activity was mainly observed after joint book



reading while it could be an independent activity initiated by parents to increase children's interest in stories and enhance their literacy skills.

The findings of the study are consistent with the findings of previous studies which suggest that joint book reading and storytelling enhance children's story comprehension, oral retelling, story concept and recognition of elements of a story and enrich vocabulary (Baker, 2013; Melhuish et al., 2008; Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002; Wood, 2002). In this study, parents facilitated storytelling with their children and naturally applied strategies that they believed contributed to the development of story comprehension in their children. These activities helped children enhance their oral language skills regardless of whether the focal children expressed personal experiences and recollections or recalled a well-known story plot.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that parent-child social interactions play an important role in the development of literacy skills in Kazakh families. According to this research, children who had regular and excellent literacy-related social interactions with their parents such as reading books together or telling stories to them showed signs of developing more early literacy skills than children whose parents did not get involved in these activities. Focus children who were deliberately supported in their literacy development by parents gained the skills (mainly oral language skills) that they needed for further success at learning. This study was in line with previous studies claiming the importance of parents' input in children's literacy learning (Melhuish et al., 2008; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002; Wood, 2002). Parent participants tended to believe that their literacy teaching role was to ensure that the children had solid language foundation particularly oral language skills and that this would help them once they started school. During parent-child social interactions, they mainly focused on oral language skills such as fluent pronunciation, correct position of stress in words (in Russian), correct grammatical forms and syntactic structure, vocabulary knowledge and story comprehension rather than on specific code-related skills such as alphabetic knowledge and merging sounds. Although the country's language policies aimed to stimulate the learning of all three languages (Kazakh, Russian and English) from the school level, the parent participants selected either Kazakh or Russian as the language of everyday communications, instruction and guidance. They believed that pre-school children should become proficient in one language first before they start to learn the next one.

In this study, a comprehensive context-interaction model based on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model and Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory extended by the inclusion of Bandura's social cognitive theory was applied in the context of the focus Kazakh families. This eclectic model facilitated the understanding of the learning and literacy development of four focus children in the HLE by taking into account several aspects such as the individual characteristics of children and parents, the types and quality of parent-child social interactions in the HLE and the context all together. It specifically helped to reveal the importance of various child-parent social interactions occurring in the home setting on pre-school children's literacy skills development.

The findings reported in the study broadly align with current literature about pre-school children's learning and literacy development in the HLE pertaining to other parts of the world (Baker, 2013; Melhuish et al., 2008; Wood, 2002). Meanwhile, many of these studies quantitatively measured the extent of parental engagement in child-parent joint activities and tended to focus on large numbers of cases (The Statistics Committee of the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan (SCMNRK) the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 2016). However, the nature of literacy-related social interactions that children from Kazakh families engage in at home and the ways in which these interactions impact the development of specific literacy abilities in the HLE remain unknown. Previously, these issues had not been specifically researched in the Kazakh context from an in-depth perspective. Without making any claim for generality, this study acknowledged some important aspects of parent-child social interactions that influenced pre-school children's literacy development in the focus Kazakh home environments.

### 5.1. Suggestions

The findings of this study have implications for parents suggesting that they should make time for regular literacy-related social interactions with their children. These interactions can be simple such as reading a book together or talking about a story. However, it is important that the interactions are meaningful and engaging for both the parent and the child. The findings also have implications for policymakers suggesting the need to support programmes and interventions that promote parent-child activities. Such programmes could provide parents with resources and training on how to engage in literacy-related social interactions with their children such that these interactions become increasingly prevalent and frequent. Fathers should also be encouraged to participate. For early childhood educators, the findings of this study suggest that they also have a role to play in advising and supporting parents. They could advise on and supply resources and building mesosystemic relationships with families would further help foster the quality of literacy practices within the HLE.

## References

- Amantay, A. (2017). *Kazakh family engagement in early language and literacy learning: A case study in urban Kazakhstan*. Master's Dissertation. Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education.
- Baker, C. E. (2013). Fathers' and mothers' home literacy involvement and children's cognitive and social emotional development: Implications for family literacy programs. *Applied Developmental Science, 17*(4), 184-197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2013.836034>
- Bandura, A. (2002). Social cognitive theory in cultural context. *Applied Psychology, 51*(2), 269-290. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1464-0597.00092>
- Baroody, A. E., & Diamond, K. E. (2012). Links among home literacy environment, literacy interest, and emergent literacy skills in preschoolers at risk for reading difficulties. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 32*(2), 78-87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0271121410392803>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (2001). The bioecological theory of human development. In N.J. Smelser & P.B. Baltes (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of the social and behavioral sciences*. In (Vol. 10, pp. 6963-6970). New York: Elsevier.

- Brooker, L. (2003). Learning how to learn: Parental ethnotheories and young children's preparation for school. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 11(2), 117-128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760304703>
- Burgess, S. R., Hecht, S. A., & Lonigan, C. J. (2002). Relations of the home literacy environment (HLE) to the development of reading-related abilities: A one-year longitudinal study. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 37(4), 408-426. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.37.4.4>
- Cheung, S. K., Dulay, K. M., Yang, X., Mohseni, F., & McBride, C. (2021). Home literacy and numeracy environments in Asia. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 578764. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.578764>
- Christie, J. F., & Roskos, K. A. (2006). Standards, science, and the role of play in early literacy education. In D. G. Singer, R. M. Golinkoff, & K. Hirsh-Pasek (Eds.), *Play = learning: How play motivates and enhances children's cognitive and social-emotional growth*. In (pp. 57-73). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195304381.003.0004>.
- De Bondt, M., Willenberg, I. A., & Bus, A. G. (2020). Do book giveaway programs promote the home literacy environment and children's literacy-related behavior and skills? *Review of Educational Research*, 90(3), 349-375. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654320922140>
- Dickinson, D. K., & Neuman, S. B. (2006). *Handbook of early literacy research*. In (Vol. 2). New York: Guilford Press.
- El'konin, D. B. (2017). Toward the problem of stages in the mental development of the child. In *Revival: Soviet Developmental Psychology: An Anthology*. In (pp. 538-563). London: Routledge.
- Frumkin, L. A. (2013). Young children's cognitive achievement: Home learning environment, language and ethnic background. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 11(3), 222-235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718x13482272>
- Goodall, J. (2013). Parental engagement to support children's learning: A six point model. *School Leadership & Management*, 33(2), 133-150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2012.724668>
- Hammersley, M. (2006). Ethnography: Problems and prospects. *Ethnography and Education*, 1(1), 3-14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457820500512697>
- Han, M., Moore, N., Vukelich, C., & Buell, M. (2010). Does play make a difference? How play intervention affects the vocabulary learning of at-risk preschoolers. *American Journal of Play*, 3(1), 82-105.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jupp, V. (2006). *The Sage dictionary of social research methods*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Kazakhstan Education Research Association (KERA). (2020). *Code of ethics of educational researchers of Kazakhstan* (1st ed.). Nur-Sultan: Kazakhstan Society of Educational Researchers.
- Li, G. (2002). *East is East, West is West? Home literacy, culture and schooling*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Lukie, I. K., Skwarchuk, S., LeFevre, J., & Sowinski, C. (2014). The role of child interests and collaborative parent-child interactions in fostering numeracy and literacy development in Canadian homes. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 42(4), 251-259. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-013-0604-7>
- Martini, F., & Sénéchal, M. (2012). Learning literacy skills at home: Parent teaching, expectations, and child interest. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science/Revue Canadienne Des Sciences du Comportement*, 44(3), 210. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0026758>
- Melhuish, E. C., Phan, M. B., Sylva, K., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Taggart, B. (2008). Effects of the home learning environment and preschool center experience upon literacy and numeracy development in early primary school. *Journal of Social Issues*, 64(1), 95-114. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2008.00550.x>
- Neumann, M. M., Hood, M., & Neumann, D. L. (2009). The scaffolding of emergent literacy skills in the home environment: A case study. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 36, 313-319. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-008-0291-y>
- Niklas, F., & Schneider, W. (2017). Intervention in the home literacy environment and kindergarten children's vocabulary and phonological awareness. *First Language*, 37(5), 433-452. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142723717698838>
- Ren, L., & Hu, G. (2014). An ethnographic multiple-case study of mother-child interaction strategies in Singapore-based Chinese families. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 24(2), 274-300. <https://doi.org/10.1075/japc.24.2.07ren>
- Sammons, P., Toth, K., Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Siraj, I., & Taggart, B. (2015). The long-term role of the home learning environment in shaping students' academic attainment in secondary school. *Journal of Children's Services*, 10(3), 189-201. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCS-02-2015-0007>
- Scottish Educational Research Association. (2005). *Ethical guidelines for educational research*. Scottish Educational Research Association. Retrieved from <https://www.sera.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2018/08/SERA-Ethical-GuidelinesWeb.pdf>
- Scribner, S., & Cole, M. (1978). Unpackaging literacy. *Social Science Information*, 17(1), 19-40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847801700102>
- Sénéchal, M., & LeFevre, J. A. (2002). Parental involvement in the development of children's reading skill: A five-year longitudinal study. *Child Development*, 73(2), 445-460. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00417>
- Sonnenschein, S., & Munsterman, K. (2002). The influence of home-based reading interactions on 5-year-olds' reading motivations and early literacy development. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 17(3), 318-337. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0885-2006\(02\)00167-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0885-2006(02)00167-9)
- Storch, S. A., & Whitehurst, G. J. (2002). Oral language and code-related precursors to reading: Evidence from a longitudinal structural model. *Developmental Psychology*, 38(6), 934-947. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.38.6.934>
- Street, B. (2003). What's "new" in new literacy studies? Critical approaches to literacy in theory and practice. *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, 5(2), 77-91. <https://doi.org/10.52214/cice.v5i2.11369>
- The Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan. (2011). *On marriage (matrimony) and family*. No. 518-IV, [ER]. Retrieved from <https://adilet.zan.kz/eng/docs/K110000518#:~:text=518%2DIV.&text=This%20Code%20determines%20purposes%2C%20objectives,of%20the%20Republic%20of%20Kazakhstan>
- The Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan. (1995). *Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan*. Retrieved from <https://sud.gov.kz/eng/content/constitution-republic-kazakhstan>
- The Statistics Committee of the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan (SCMNRK) the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). (2016). *2015 Kazakhstan multiple indicator cluster survey, Final Report*. Astana, Kazakhstan: The Statistics Committee of the MNE RK, UNICEF and UNFPA. Retrieved from [https://mics-surveys-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/MICS5/Europe%20and%20Central%20Asia/Kazakhstan/2015/Final/Kazakhstan%202015%20MICS\\_English.pdf](https://mics-surveys-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/MICS5/Europe%20and%20Central%20Asia/Kazakhstan/2015/Final/Kazakhstan%202015%20MICS_English.pdf)
- The Statistics Committee of the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan (SCMNRK) UNICEF United Nations Population Fund. (2012). *The state of children and women in Kazakhstan. The result of the multiple indicator cluster survey 2010-2011*. Retrieved from <http://mics.unicef.org/files?job=W1siZiIsIjIwMTUvMDEvMjcvMDgvNTUvMTcvNDZL01JQ1NfSW5mb2dyYXBoaWNzX0VuZy5wZGYiXV0&sha=f6997aeb4f3696>
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. (1989). *Treaty No. 27531. United nations treaty series, 1577, 3-178*. Retrieved from [https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1990/09/19900902%2003-14%20AM/Ch\\_IV\\_11p.pdf](https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1990/09/19900902%2003-14%20AM/Ch_IV_11p.pdf)
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: Development of higher psychological process*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Weigel, D. J., Martin, S. S., & Bennett, K. K. (2006). Mothers' literacy beliefs: Connections with the home literacy environment and preschool children's literacy development. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 6(2), 191-211. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468798406066444>
- Weisberg, D. S., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2013). Guided play: Where curricular goals meet a playful pedagogy. *Mind, Brain, and Education*, 7(2), 104-112. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mbe.12015>
- Wood, C. (2002). Parent-child pre-school activities can affect the development of literacy skills. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 25(3), 241-258. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9817.00173>