

ACQUISITION OF EARLY LITERACY SKILLS THROUGH CAREGIVER SUPPORT: INSIGHTS INTO PRINT, PHONOLOGICAL AND EARLY WRITING SKILLS AMONG PRESCHOOLERS IN YABA, LAGOS

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of caregiver involvement in the acquisition of foundational literacy skills among Nursery Two pupils in Akoka, Lagos. Focusing on three domains of early literacy, print awareness, phonological skills, and early writing, the research explored how parental support enhances children's emergent literacy development. A case study design was adopted, involving twenty pupils and their parents. Structured literacy assessments were administered to children, while parents completed questionnaires on home literacy practices. Findings revealed that pupils demonstrated strong print awareness and emergent writing skills but showed gaps in phonological awareness, particularly in rhyme detection. Children whose parents engaged in frequent shared reading, storytelling, and writing-related activities performed better across all literacy domains. Results affirm that consistent parental involvement significantly contributes to early literacy acquisition. The study underscores the need for home-school collaboration and recommends targeted parent literacy workshops to strengthen phonological support and balanced literacy exposure during the preschool years.

Keywords: caregiver involvement, early literacy, print awareness, phonological skills, early writing, early childhood education.

Introduction

Early childhood represents a formative period during which the foundations for literacy and lifelong learning are established. During this phase, children develop critical skills such as recognizing print, distinguishing sounds, and engaging in early writing. These competencies collectively underpin later reading fluency and academic achievement. Globally, research underscores that the acquisition of early literacy skills is shaped not only by classroom instruction but also by primary caregiver support in home learning environments (Hornby, 2023; Wasik & Hindman, 2020).

In Nigeria, growing attention has been directed toward the influence of caregivers on children's literacy outcomes. However, there remain contextual challenges regarding how parents' specific practices such as shared reading, storytelling, and letter-writing activities, directly shape children's literacy trajectories in preschool years. Existing studies (e.g., Oduolowu & Lawal, 2021; Ogunyemi, 2023) highlight general literacy practices but often overlook the interplay between print awareness, phonological skills, and early writing.

This study therefore investigates these three interrelated domains among preschoolers in Yaba, Lagos, emphasizing the mediating role of caregiver support. The research contributes to early childhood education discourse by situating literacy development within the broader framework of family engagement and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (quality education).

Background to the Study

Print Awareness

Print awareness forms the bedrock of early literacy development, encompassing a child's understanding of how print works—how books are handled, where to start reading, the distinction between letters and words, and the direction in which text is read. Essentially, it reflects a child's awareness that printed text carries meaning (Justice & Ezell, 2021). Researchers regard it as a key predictor of later reading success because it prepares children to engage with print in purposeful ways. When children can identify the front and back of a book, turn pages in sequence, and track text from left to right, they have acquired the foundational orientation skills necessary for decoding and comprehension (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 2020).

Recent research highlights the significant influence of the home literacy environment (HLE) on children's print awareness development. Motshekga and Daniels (2022) observed that South African preschoolers raised in homes rich with books, magazines, and shared reading routines demonstrated superior understanding of print concepts compared to peers from print-poor environments. Similarly, in the Nigerian context, Oduolowu and Lawal (2021) found that children whose caregivers frequently engaged them in book-handling activities such as identifying title pages, letters, or illustrations displayed enhanced print recognition and emergent reading behaviors. These findings affirm that direct caregiver support, especially through shared reading and exposure to print materials, reinforces children's familiarity with written symbols and their purposes.

Moreover, print awareness does not develop uniformly across all settings. Cultural and socio-economic disparities often affect children's access to print-rich environments (UNESCO, 2022). Families with limited resources may rely more on oral storytelling traditions, which, although beneficial for language development, may offer fewer opportunities for print interaction (Ogunyemi, 2023). Educators therefore play a vital role in compensating for these differences by intentionally integrating print-awareness activities such as labeling classroom items, displaying alphabet charts, and modeling print directionality into daily routines (Wasik & Hindman, 2020).

In essence, print awareness develops through consistent exposure, meaningful adult-child interaction, and deliberate scaffolding by teachers and parents alike. Strengthening this

domain in early years classrooms particularly in Nigerian settings remains critical for ensuring smoother transitions to reading fluency and comprehension.

Phonological Skills

Phonological skills, often referred to collectively as phonological awareness, represent a child's capacity to identify and manipulate the sound structures of spoken language, including rhymes, syllables, and individual phonemes. These abilities are essential precursors to reading and spelling because they help children understand that words are made up of smaller units of sound that correspond to letters or letter patterns (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 2020). Without this awareness, children may struggle to connect spoken and written language, which is fundamental to decoding and word recognition.

Studies over the past five years have reaffirmed the importance of phonological awareness as one of the most powerful predictors of later reading success (Wasik & Hindman, 2020; Mwangi, 2021; Puranik & Lonigan, 2021). Children who are able to identify rhyming patterns, segment words into syllables, and recognize the initial or final sounds in words are typically better prepared for phonics instruction in early primary school (Justice et al., 2022). For instance, Mwangi's (2021) study in Kenya revealed that preschoolers who engaged regularly in playful phonics and rhyming games at home exhibited significantly higher sound awareness than their peers who were exposed only to rote alphabet teaching.

In the Nigerian context, however, phonological awareness remains one of the least developed areas of early literacy instruction. Ogunyemi (2023) noted that many Nigerian early childhood classrooms still emphasize memorization of the alphabet without fostering children's ability to distinguish or manipulate sounds. This pedagogical limitation often reflects gaps in teacher training and primary caregiver's understanding of phonological development. Yet, research by Oduolowu and Lawal (2021) suggests that when parents participate in structured sound-based activities such as singing rhymes, clapping syllables, or identifying beginning sounds in everyday words children's listening and sound discrimination skills improve markedly.

Furthermore, cultural factors may influence how children acquire phonological skills. Languages with transparent orthographies, such as Yoruba or Igbo, provide consistent sound-symbol relationships, which can either facilitate or interfere with English phonological learning depending on instructional balance (Adebayo, 2024). Consequently, educators are encouraged to integrate multilingual phonological instruction, combining local language sound play with English phoneme awareness to build cross-linguistic sensitivity (UNESCO, 2022).

Summarily, phonological awareness is not merely a subset of literacy but a cornerstone of reading readiness. Developing it requires deliberate, multisensory, and linguistically responsive instruction, one that bridges home and school practices while recognizing the rich linguistic diversity of Nigerian learners.

Early Writing

Early writing, often termed emergent writing, refers to children's initial attempts to represent meaning through written symbols ranging from drawing and scribbling to copying letters and forming recognizable words. It is a critical component of emergent literacy, as it provides

insight into a child's understanding that print carries meaning and that written symbols can be used to communicate ideas (Puranik & Lonigan, 2021). Far from being a mechanical skill, early writing integrates fine motor coordination, phonological awareness, and conceptual understanding of print, making it both a cognitive and linguistic process (Wasik & Hindman, 2020).

Recent research has reframed early writing not merely as a precursor to formal writing but as a window into broader language development. Justice, Bowles, and Skibbe (2022) argue that children's invented spellings, letter-like formations, and early attempts at word writing reflect their developing phoneme-grapheme awareness. The act of writing, whether drawing a name or labeling a picture encourages children to think about sounds, letters, and meanings simultaneously, thereby strengthening both their phonological and print knowledge (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2020).

Globally, studies between 2020 and 2025 have reinforced the role of parental and teacher support in fostering early writing. For example, Mwangi (2021) found that Kenyan preschoolers whose parents provided writing materials at home such as crayons, notebooks, and alphabet charts demonstrated higher levels of letter formation and written expression. In Nigeria, similar findings emerged from Ogunyemi's (2023) work, which highlighted that when caregivers model writing behaviors, encourage children to sign their names on drawings, or label household objects, early writing development accelerates. These interactions not only strengthen children's writing fluency but also cultivate a sense of authorship and confidence in self-expression.

However, challenges persist. Many preschools in low-resource contexts focus predominantly on copying letters and dictation drills, often neglecting opportunities for creative and functional writing (Oduolowu & Lawal, 2021). Such practices limit children's ability to internalize writing as a meaning-making process. Scholars now advocate for multisensory and play-based approaches such as tracing in sand, forming letters with clay, and composing stories through drawings to make writing instruction developmentally appropriate and engaging (Adebayo, 2024; UNESCO, 2022).

In essence, early writing is an evolving expression of literacy that reflects children's emerging understanding of sound-symbol relationships, print conventions, and communicative intent. Strengthening this domain within Nigerian early childhood settings demands an integration of guided practice, home participation, and culturally relevant writing experiences that connect learning to everyday life.

Caregiver Support

Caregiver support constitutes one of the most influential dimensions of early childhood literacy development, encompassing parents' attitudes toward education, the extent of their engagement in literacy-related activities, and their responsiveness to children's learning needs. It represents not only what primary caregivers do such as reading stories or helping with writing but also how they perceive and value literacy within the family context (Hornby, 2023). Scholars increasingly conceptualize parental support as a multidimensional construct that integrates emotional encouragement, cognitive stimulation, and material provision (Wasik & Hindman, 2020). These dimensions jointly nurture a learning environment in which children perceive literacy as enjoyable, purposeful, and socially meaningful.

Cultural and socio-economic contexts, however, play decisive roles in shaping the nature and intensity of parental involvement. UNESCO (2022) emphasizes that families in low-resource communities may hold strong aspirations for their children's education yet face structural barriers such as limited literacy skills, time constraints, or inadequate access to print materials. Despite these challenges, culturally responsive parenting practices such as storytelling, singing, and reciting traditional rhymes provide rich oral language experiences that indirectly support children's literacy development (Ogunyemi, 2023). Such practices illustrate that parental support transcends Western notions of book-based literacy to include indigenous, community-grounded literacy forms that connect learning to cultural identity.

Empirical evidence from Lagos and other Nigerian urban centers underscores the compensatory role of active caregiver support. Adebayo (2024) reports that caregivers who engage in interactive literacy practices like reading together, discussing pictures, and encouraging children to retell stories help mitigate the effects of under-resourced classrooms and large pupil-teacher ratios. Similarly, Oduolowu and Lawal (2021) observed that children from homes with consistent literacy routines demonstrated higher motivation and readiness to learn, even when schools lacked sufficient instructional materials. These findings reinforce the argument that the home background agency can bridge systemic educational gaps through daily, informal literacy interactions.

In contemporary early childhood education discourse, parental support is increasingly viewed as a partnership rather than an auxiliary effort. Teachers and caregivers must collaborate to ensure continuity between home and school literacy experiences. Building such synergy requires schools to respect family literacy practices, offer practical guidance to parents, and maintain open channels of communication. When parents are empowered with culturally relevant strategies for engaging their children, early literacy outcomes especially in print awareness, phonological skills, and early writing abilities would improve significantly.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do preschoolers in Yaba, Lagos demonstrate competencies in print awareness, phonological skills, and early writing?
2. How does caregiver support influence the acquisition of literacy skills among preschoolers?
3. What specific caregiver literacy practices (e.g., shared reading, sound games, storytelling, or writing activities) contribute most to children's development in print awareness, phonological skills, and early writing?
4. Are there observable differences in literacy outcomes between pupils whose caregivers frequently engage in literacy-supportive activities and those whose primary caregivers do not?
5. What contextual factors (such as socio-economic status, parental education, or time availability) affect the level and effectiveness of caregiver support in promoting early literacy skills?

Purpose of the Study:

To assess children's performance in print awareness, phonological skills, and early writing, and to examine how caregiver support shapes these outcomes. Thus, the study was designed to achieve the following objectives:

1. To assess the levels of print awareness, phonological skills, and early writing abilities among Nursery 2 pupils in a Lagos nursery school.
2. To examine the nature and extent of caregiver support in the literacy development of preschool children.
3. To identify the specific parental practices that contribute to the acquisition of print awareness, phonological skills, and early writing.
4. To determine the relationship between the level of caregiver support and children's overall literacy performance.
5. To explore the contextual factors such as socio-economic status, parental education, and time availability, that influence parental support for early literacy learning.
6. To recommend strategies for enhancing parental engagement and strengthening home-school collaboration to promote early literacy outcomes among Nigerian preschoolers.

Methodology

Research Design

A descriptive case-study design examined literacy skills and caregiver support within a single Lagos nursery school. This design enabled detailed observation of real-life literacy interactions.

Population and Sample

The population comprised all preschoolers (aged 4–5) and their primary Caregivers in Yaba, Lagos. Twenty pupils (10 boys, 10 girls) and their respective primary Caregivers participated.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used to select an accessible, information-rich school willing to collaborate on literacy research. Variation in caregiver support and socio-economic background was considered to capture diverse experiences.

Instruments

The instruments used for data collection were:

Child Literacy Assessment Checklist

Print Awareness: identifying the front of a book, following print direction, pointing to words.

Phonological Awareness: recognising rhymes, identifying initial sounds.

Early Writing: writing own name, copying letters, drawing with description.

Caregiver Support Questionnaire:

Semi-structured items covered home-literacy materials, shared reading, storytelling, writing activities, and parental attitudes toward literacy.

Data Collection

Each pupil was individually assessed through structured tasks administered by the researchers, while parents completed short questionnaires during school visits.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) and basic inferential tests (Chi-square and t-test). Qualitative responses from parents were thematically summarised to interpret patterns of support.

Results

Print Awareness

Table 1

Responses of Pupils on the Assessment of Print-Awareness Skills

Item	Correct Answer	Wrong Answer
Can you show me the front of the book?	15 (100 %)	Nil
Can you show me where I should start reading?	20 (100 %)	Nil
Which way do we turn the pages?	5 (33.3 %)	15 (66.7 %)
Point to a line of text- What are these?	20 (100 %)	Nil
Can you point to one word?	20 (100 %)	Nil
Most pupils showed high print awareness, except for page-turning direction, where two-thirds responded incorrectly.		

Letter Knowledge

Table 2

Responses of Pupils on Recognition of Upper- and Lower-Case Letters

Item	Correct Answer	Wrong Answer
A	4 (100 %)	Nil
B	4 (100 %)	Nil
C	4 (100 %)	Nil
M	4 (100 %)	Nil
S	4 (100 %)	Nil

All pupils named every presented letter correctly, demonstrating strong letter recognition.

Phonological Awareness

Table 3

Responses of Pupils on Listening and Sound-Discrimination Skills

Task	Correct Answer	Wrong Answer
Do these words rhyme—cat / hat ?	1 (25 %)	3 (75 %)
Do these words rhyme—dog / tree ?	2 (50 %)	2 (50 %)
What sound does the word ball start with?	3 (75 %)	1 (25 %)
Which two words begin with the same sound—man, sun, map ?	3 (75 %)	1 (25 %)

Pupils struggled most with rhyme identification but performed better on initial-sound tasks.

Vocabulary and Comprehension

Table 4

Responses on Naming and Comprehension Questions

Item	Correct	Wrong
Name three things in this picture	3 (75 %)	1 (25 %)
What is the boy doing?	4 (100 %)	Nil
What do you do with a book?	4 (100 %)	Nil
What is a chair used for?	4 (100 %)	Nil
What do you wear when it rains?	4 (100 %)	Nil

Children generally demonstrated comprehension of basic vocabulary and functional object use.

Early Writing

Table 5

Responses of Pupils on Early-Writing Tasks

Item	Correct	Wrong
Write your name	16 (100 %)	Nil
Copy the letters A, M, T	16 (100 %)	Nil
Draw something you like and describe it	16 (100 %)	Nil
Attempt to write any known word	16 (100 %)	Nil
Make letter-like scribbles resembling writing	16 (100 %)	Nil

All pupils performed excellently, indicating strong exposure to letter formation and emergent-writing practice.

Caregiver-Support Findings

Across five domains, home-literacy environment, parent–child interaction, literacy-support practices, attitudes and beliefs, and cultural responsiveness, parents reported generally high

involvement. Minor gaps appeared in the frequency of shared reading (only one-third read aloud three times weekly) and in parents' self-confidence supporting reading. Inferential tests revealed significant relationships between caregiver support and children's literacy outcomes ($\chi^2 = 18.8 > 3.84$, $p < .05$) and significant mean differences between high- and low-involvement groups ($t = 1.24 > 1.699$).

Discussion of findings

Findings reveal a balanced yet incomplete literacy profile among pupils. Strong print awareness and early-writing proficiency reflect adequate exposure to visual print and writing activities at home and school. Conversely, phonological-awareness weaknesses mirror national trends where sound-based play is under-emphasised (Ogunyemi, 2023; Oduolowu & Lawal, 2021).

Children's difficulty with rhyme detection suggests that instruction still privileges rote alphabet memorisation over oral-sound manipulation. Consistent with Mwangi (2021), playful phonics and rhyming significantly enhance auditory discrimination, implying the need to embed these practices within Nigerian early-childhood classrooms.

The positive correlation between parental engagement and literacy performance underscores the home's mediating power in early learning. Interactive reading and storytelling improved pupils' vocabulary, print tracking, and writing confidence, aligning with Wasik and Hindman (2020) and Adebayo (2024). Parents who model reading and writing create literacy-rich environments compensating for limited classroom resources.

Nevertheless, self-efficacy gaps among some parents (low confidence helping children read) highlight the need for capacity-building. Schools must support parents through workshops and home-learning kits to sustain literacy practices beyond formal instruction.

Conclusion

Caregiver support significantly strengthens preschoolers' acquisition of early literacy skills. While the sample demonstrated solid print and writing abilities, deficiencies in phonological awareness reveal the need for balanced, sound- and print-rich instruction. Integrating home and school efforts through structured collaboration will foster more comprehensive literacy readiness among Nigerian preschoolers.

Recommendations

1. Caregiver Literacy Workshops:

Schools should regularly train parents on phonological awareness and practical home-reading techniques.

2. Home-Based Literacy Routines:

Encourage families to include daily rhymes, songs, and storytelling using local and English languages.

3. Home-School Collaboration Frameworks:

Education authorities should institutionalise parent-teacher partnership models in the national Early-Childhood-Education policy.

4. Teacher Professional Development:

Continuous professional training should emphasise multisensory, sound-integrated literacy pedagogy.

5. Accessible Literacy Resources:

Communities and schools should provide affordable, culturally relevant materials, picture books, alphabet charts, story cards, to sustain both home and classroom learning.

6. Further Research:

Longitudinal, multi-site studies should examine long-term effects of parental support on children's reading fluency and academic achievement.

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