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Home Literacy Environment and Children's Literacy Skills in Grade 2

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Abstract. We investigated the extent to which different aspects of home literacy environment (HLE) relate to literacy skills among Grade 2 students in Lithuania. The participants were Lithuanian second-graders (n = 522; 48% girls; M_{age} = 8.29 years, SD = .32) and their parents (88.3% mothers). Children were tested in their language and literacy skills; whereas parents completed questionnaires concerning HLE. We ran three hierarchical regression models to predict children's sentence reading fluency, spelling to dictation, and reading comprehension. Control variables (parental education, child gender, vocabulary and word reading fluency) were entered at the first step; the four variables of HLE (teaching of literacy, reading to a child, access to literacy resources, child's own independent reading) were entered at the second step. The results showed that HLE variables added a significant amount of explained variance to the regression models (5.4% for sentence reading fluency, 4.8% for spelling, and 4.9% for reading comprehension). Overall, the results suggest that in order to promote children's literacy skills in Grade 2 most effectively, parents should provide access to literacy resources and create opportunities for children's independent reading. When considering all HLE factors together in one analysis, children's actual independent reading of the reading materials emerged as an important factor in their success in reading and spelling.

Keywords: home literacy environment (HLE), parental involvement, literacy skills.

Raštingumo aplinka namuose ir antros klasės mokinių raštingumo įgūdžiai

Santrauka. Tyrime buvo nagrinėjama, kaip skirtingi raštingumo aplinkos namuose aspektai yra susiję su antros klasės mokinių raštingumo įgūdžiais. Tyrime dalyvavo 522 antros klasės mokiniai (iš jų 48 % mergaičių; amžiaus vidurkis 8,29 metų, SD = 0,32) ir jų tėvai (iš jų 88,3 % motinos), gyvenantys Lietuvoje. Tyrimo metu buvo vertinami vaikų skaitymo ir rašymo įgūdžiai. Tėvai pildė klausimyną apie raštingumo aplinką namuose. Taikant hierarchinę regresinę analizę, buvo patikrinti trys prognostiniai modeliai, siekiant nustatyti, kaip raštingumo aplinkos namuose aspektai prognozuoja vaikų gebėjimą skaityti sakinius, rašyti be klaidų diktuojamus sakinius ir perskaityto teksto supratimą. Pirmame šios analizės žingsnyje buvo keturi nepriklausomi kintamieji: tėvų išsilavinimas, vaiko lytis, vaiko žodynas

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ir žodžių skaitymas, o antrame – keturi raštingumo aplinkos namuose aspektai: tėvų mokymas vaiką skaityti ir rašyti, tėvų skaitymas vaikui, vaiko savarankiškas skaitymas namuose ir knygų skaičius namuose. Rezultatai atskleidė, kad raštingumo aplinkos namuose aspektai reikšmingai prisideda aiškinant vaiko skaitymo ir rašymo įgūdžius antroje klasėje, tiksliau, papildomai paaiškina 5,4 % vaikų sakinių skaitymo gebėjimo, 4,8 % sakinių rašymo ir 4,9 % perskaityto teksto supratimo dispersijos. Koreliacinės analizės rezultatai rodo, jog antroje klasėje mokinių raštingumo įgūdžiai yra veiksmingiau plėtojami, kai tėvai suteikia vaikams prieigą prie knygų namuose ir sudaro sąlygas vaikui pačiam skaityti knygas, nei kai moko vaiką skaityti namuose ar patys jam skaito. Nagrinėjant visų kartu raštingumo aplinkos namuose aspektų prognostinę reikšmę antros klasės mokinių raštingumo įgūdžiams, paaiškėjo, kad vaiko skaitymo ir rašymo įgūdžiams antroje klasėje svarbiausias veiksnys yra ne namuose turimų knygų skaičius, o savarankiškas knygų skaitymas namuose.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: raštingumo aplinka namuose, tėvų įsitraukimas, raštingumo įgūdžiai.

A number of studies have shown that children's *Home Literacy Environment* (HLE) plays a significant role in the development of children's literacy skills (e.g., Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014; Silinskas & Davolyte, 2025). While most of them concerned children at the starting point of their reading acquisition (preschool, kindergarten, or transition to Grade 1; Manolitsis et al., 2011; Silinskas et al., 2010b, 2012, 2021), there is evidence to suggest that HLE may continue to play a role in children's literacy development even beyond early years (Deng et al., 2015; Georgiou & Zhang, 2024). Investigation of this possibility was the main aim of the present study. Another important aspect of this study is the Lithuanian sample. That is, constructs of HLE and children's literacy skills are particularly sensitive to the language and educational environments. Thus, research in each new language makes a valuable contribution to the expansion of scientific knowledge on this topic.

According to the Home Literacy Model (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014), children can be exposed to formal and informal literacy activities at home. Formal (or code-related) literacy activities refer to exposing a child to print per se, for example, teaching a child to read or spell correctly. In contrast, informal (or meaning-related) literacy activities are the activities where print is present, but the focus is on the parent–child interaction, such as parent reading to a child or the number of children's books at home. Informal home literacy activities (i.e., reading to a child) before formal schooling in Grade 1 enhance children's subsequent language skills, such as vocabulary and listening comprehension (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Silinskas et al., 2020b; Torppa et al., 2006). Formal activities (i.e., teaching of reading) before Grade 1 were shown to promote children's emergent literacy skills, such as letter knowledge (Silinskas et al., 2020b; Torppa et al., 2006) or decoding (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). However, the results for effects of these activities among children in Grade 1 or later are mixed (Silinskas et al., 2010a, 2012).

In later developments of the Home Literacy Model, some researchers identified the "number of books at home" as a distinct separate HLE factor (Georgiou et al., 2021; Georgiou & Zhang, 2024), suggesting that it is a part of the construct of "access to literacy resources". This makes sense, given that owning books is not an activity as such, and it becomes an activity if the book is actively used. The number of books was found to predict phonological awareness and vocabulary in Grade 1 and reading comprehension in Grade 3 among Canadian English-speaking children (Georgiou et al., 2021). In

that study, formal and informal HLE activities were in a model and did not predict any of the children's literacy skills, thus further validating access to literacy resources as an important and distinctly separate aspect of HLE. Relatedly, further expansions of the Home Literacy Model also took into account children's independent reading as an important HLE activity that children engage in on their own (Georgiou & Zhang, 2024; Silinskas et al., 2013, 2020a; Torppa et al., 2020). Previous evidence suggests that children's independent reading as a literacy-related activity at home can be longitudinally related to children's reading skills, particularly to reading comprehension in later grades (Torppa et al., 2020). This activity is possible during later stages of reading development (e.g., grade school), after children have reached a certain level of literacy skills (Silinskas et al., 2020a; Torppa et al., 2020). Taken together, the current study included four aspects of the HLE: formal literacy activities (i.e., teaching literacy [reading/spelling]), informal literacy activities (i.e., reading to a child), child's access to literacy resources (i.e., the number of books at home), and child's independent reading.

Previous theories and empirical evidence provide a good overview of how HLE relates to literacy skills at the early stages of reading development. However, this raises the question whether the same applies in later grades, after children have mastered the basics of reading. In particular, would children in Grade 2 – already mastering certain amount of basic language and literacy skills due to instruction at school – benefit from the HLE? One study provides a rationale for our expectations (Georgiou & Zhang, 2024). The authors investigated the role of HLE in reading and spelling beyond early years in Cypriot and Chinese samples. Among Grade 3 students in China, the authors reported that formal and informal HLE did not predict, but access to literacy resources did positively significantly predict literacy skills (sentence verification [sentence reading fluency in our study] and passage comprehension [reading comprehension]). In the Cypriot sample of Grade 4 speakers of Greek, neither formal nor informal home literacy activities predicted child reading or spelling outcomes. In contrast, access to literacy resources and children's independent reading positively predicted three out of four child literacy outcomes (word reading efficiency, passage comprehension, reading ability test scores, and spelling to dictation). However, access to literacy resources and child's independent reading were never included in the same model together. This suggests an avenue for our current study, that is, including the four aspects of the HLE (formal and informal literacy activities, access to literacy resources, and child's independent reading) into one model to predict children's literacy outcomes (sentence reading fluency, spelling to dictation, and reading comprehension). Georgiou and Zhang (2024) investigated these predictions in Grades 3 and 4 in different cultural environments (China and Cyprus). Consequently, the aim of our study was to examine the extent to which HLE relates to children's literacy outcomes beyond early years (i.e., Grade 2) among students in Lithuania (a new cultural environment).

Method

Participants and Procedure

We analyzed data from the "*Get involved! Learning in primary school*" study (Silinskas & Raiziene, 2025) (ethical approval was obtained from University of Jyväskylä, Finland, number 1599/13.00.04.00/2020; December 17, 2020), which were collected during the first half of Grade 2 (autumn, 2021) and included 522 parent–child dyads in Lithuania. Parents (88.30% female) answered paper questionnaires about the home literacy environment; children (mean age 8.29 years, 48% girls) were tested on their language and literacy skills in small groups. Small groups of children were tested by their school psychologists. Prior to data collection, parents provided consent for their own and their children's participation.

Instruments

Home Literacy Environment (HLE)

Parents were asked about the frequency of three literacy activities in their home on a 5-point scale ('1' = never, '2' = seldom, '3' = sometimes, '4' = often, and '5' = very often). *Teaching literacy (reading and spelling)* (7 items, e.g., *How often were you and your child learning to read? How often were you and your child learning to spell words correctly?* Cronbach's alpha = 0.829), *reading to a child* (5 items, e.g., *Mother reads to the child*; *Other people in the household read to the child*; Cronbach's alpha = 0.822), and *child's independent reading* (4 items, e.g., *The child reads children's books independently*; *The child leafs through a book or a newspaper/magazine by her/himself*; Cronbach's alpha = 0.864). Also, to assess a *child's access to literacy resources*, parents reported the amount of books available at home (2 items, i.e., *How many children's books are there at home? How many books are there at home?* Cronbach's alpha = 0.808) on a 5-point scale ('1' = up to 5 books, '2' = 6–10 books, '3' = 11–50 books, '4' = 51–100 books, and '5' = more than 100 books). These items were based on the ones used in previous Lithuanian (Silinskas et al., 2021; Silinskas & Raiziene, 2019), Finnish (Silinskas et al., 2010a, 2013), and Greek/Chinese studies (Deng et al., 2015; Georgiou & Zhang, 2024; Manolitsis et al., 2011).

Children's Language and Literacy Skills

Dependent variables were three literacy skills: sentence reading fluency, spelling to dictation, and reading comprehension (based on Silinskas et al., 2024, and Silinskas & Raiziene, 2019, but adapted for Grade 2). For the sentence reading fluency, children had 3 minutes to read 60 sentences. One point was given for each correctly marked sentence as right or wrong (True/False) (Cronbach's alpha = 0.956). For the spelling to dictation test, children wrote down 5 sentences that were read by the experimenter (no time limit). The number of correctly written letters and punctuation marks was an indicator (Cronbach's alpha = 0.900). To measure reading comprehension, children silently read 3 stories

and answered 13 questions by choosing one of the 3–4 answer options (no time limit) (Cronbach's alpha = 0.835).

Besides the child gender and parent education, control variables included two child tests: receptive vocabulary and word reading fluency (based on Silinskas et al., 2024, and Silinskas & Raiziene, 2019, but adapted for Grade 2). To evaluate receptive vocabulary, children had to mark one of the 4 alternative pictures in response to the word pronounced by the test administrator (30 tasks, no time limit) (Cronbach's alpha = 0.912). To evaluate the word reading fluency, children silently read four phonologically similar words and had to connect the correct word with the accompanying picture by drawing the line between the two. There were 80 tasks for the 2-minute duration (Cronbach's alpha = 0.931).

Results

Descriptive analyses (Table 1) for the HLE variables revealed that, on average, parents of Grade 2 students reported teaching their children reading/spelling between 'sometimes' and 'often', they 'sometimes' read to their children, reported that their children 'sometimes' read independently, and the household owns an average of children's and adults' books falling between categories '11–50 books' and '51–100 books'. Reading to a child was not related to any of the child literacy skills, whereas teaching of reading/spelling negatively weakly correlated with sentence reading fluency (–.097) and spelling sentences (–.124). We found correlations of .210–.231 between access to literacy resources and child literacy outcomes and correlations of .342–.398 between independent reading and child literacy outcomes.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations

		M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Child literacy skills													
1	Sentence reading fluency	21.05	7.50										
2	Spelling to dictation	138.08	23.92	.469***									
3	Reading comprehension	9.05	2.57	.471***	.491***								
	Home literacy environment												
4	Teaching of reading/spelling	3.49	0.69	-.097*	-.124**	-.058							
5	Reading to a child	2.92	0.86	-.043	-.025	.002	.363***						
6	Independent reading	3.11	0.93	.398***	.342***	.363***	.228***	.228***					
7	Access to literacy resources	3.69	0.80	.220***	.210***	.231***	-.018	.293***	.232***				

		M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Control variables													
8	Vocabulary	21.63	4.07	.348***	.387***	.465***	-.144***	.092*	.274***	.240***			
9	Word reading fluency	14.97	6.18	.643**	.406***	.381***	-.070	-.085	.283***	.129**	.308***		
10	Gender (girl = 1, boy = 2)	1.52	0.50	-.038	-.177***	-.077	.073	.054	-.038	.020	-.057	-.057	
11	Highest education in a family	4.58	0.71	.181***	.239***	.232***	-.225***	.042	.051	.377***	.224***	.119**	.048

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Table 2

Multiple Regressions Predicting Children's Literacy Outcomes

	Sentence reading fluency				Spelling to dictation				Reading comprehension			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	β	*p*	β	*p*	β	*p*	β	*p*	β	*p*	β	*p*
Step 1 – *Control variables*												
Vocabulary	**.140**	**<.001**	**.078**	**.029**	**.240**	**<.001**	**.184**	**<.001**	**.351**	**<.001**	**.306**	**<.001**
Word reading fluency	**.585**	**<.001**	**.520**	**<.001**	**.317**	**<.001**	**.254**	**<.001**	**.252**	**<.001**	**.189**	**<.001**
Child gender (1 = girl, 2 = boy)	.005	.876	.015	.646	**–.160**	**<.001**	**–.149**	**<.001**	–.053	.168	–.047	.201
Highest education in a family	.065	.062	.032	.370	**.107**	**.006**	**.084**	**.043**	**.100**	**.010**	**.090**	**.029**
Step 2 – *Home literacy environment*												
Parental teaching of reading/spelling			**–.075**	**.045**			**–.087**	**.043**			.003	.948
Parental reading to a child			–.052	.163			–.055	.201			–.087	.043
Child's independent reading			**.241**	**<.001**			**.235**	**<.001**			**.228**	**<.001**
Child's access to literacy resources			**.076**	**.043**			.041	.339			.058	.175
R^2	**.427**		**.473**		**.261**		**.304**		**.268**		**.311**	
ΔR^2			**.054**				**.048**				**.049**	

Bold is used to highlight significant results at $p < .05$ level

To answer our main research question, we ran three hierarchical regressions (Table 2). Control variables were entered at the first step (Model 1); as the second step (Model 2), parental reports on the HLE variables were entered. The main results of this study concerned associations between HLE variables and children's literacy outcomes, and we found that parental HLE added 5.4% of explained variance to sentence reading fluency, 4.8% to spelling to dictation, and 4.9% to reading comprehension. First, the results showed that parental teaching of reading/spelling negatively predicted sentence reading fluency and spelling

to dictation, and parental reading to a child negatively predicted reading comprehension. Second, a child's access to literacy resources positively predicted sentence reading fluency, whereas a child's independent reading positively predicted all dependent variables.

Discussion

We investigated the extent to which different aspects of HLE are associated with children's literacy outcomes among Lithuanian students in Grade 2. Two main findings emerged. First, we found that, after the beginning stages of learning to read (later than Grade 1), the contribution of parents' formal and informal literacy activities on their children's literacy performance is minimal. If anything, the relation is more likely to be negative. This contradicts the research among children at the beginning stages of reading (before Grade 1; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014; Torppa et al., 2006) but is in line with some research among children in later primary school (Georgiou et al., 2021; Georgiou & Zhang, 2024). This suggests that the role of parents changes as children grow older and become more experienced readers. It is possible that parental formal and informal literacy activities become less frequent and are increased only when a child needs additional help from the parents due to reading difficulties (Silinskas et al., 2012, 2020a). Thus, parents may gradually switch from acting as instructors/initiators of joined literacy activities to facilitators/motivators by providing literacy resources and encouraging children's own engagement with literacy. Alternatively, the negative associations between parents' HLE activities and children's literacy skills may reflect compensatory parental behavior in response to children's difficulties, rather than causal effects of parental involvement. Some longitudinal studies provide evidence for the latter explanation (Silinskas et al., 2012, 2020a).

Second, we found that important factors in the development of children's literacy skills in Grade 2 are access to literacy resources (measured as number of children's and adults' books at home) and children's own independent reading of a variety of reading materials (e.g., children's books, journals, comics). These results align well with the findings among students from China and Cyprus (Georgiou & Zhang, 2024) and Finland (Silinskas et al., 2013; Torppa et al., 2020). The finding suggests that, by having easier access to books and reading materials, children might be inclined to spend time reading them. In contrast, those who do not have such access, for example, due to financial or location/geographical reasons, might be at greater risk of reading difficulties. Our study took one step further and included both access to literacy materials and children's independent reading into one analysis. The results were surprising, given that the importance of access to literacy resources significantly dropped, and the child's independent reading became the only HLE aspect that consistently positively and significantly predicted children's literacy skills. One interpretation of this finding suggests that access of reading materials is important, but, above that, it is more important that the reading materials are read. Alternatively, it is possible that positive associations between independent reading, access to literacy resources, and children's literacy skills may indicate that more proficient readers naturally engage in these behaviors and environments more frequently.

The study has limitations. First, the data were cross-sectional, that is, collected from both parents and children during the first half of Grade 2. While we assumed that HLE would be predicting child literacy outcomes, there are studies suggesting that the opposite can also be true (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2014; Silinskas et al., 2010a, 2012). Longitudinal and experimental studies are needed to make stronger conclusions about the direction of influence. Second, the study did not include variables reflecting children's learning at school (e.g., teachers' literacy instructions for the whole classroom, or a mixture of remote and onsite learning due to ongoing COVID-19 pandemic). Sensitivity in interpreting the results is needed when placing the results within a broader learning and societal background.

In practical terms, the results of the study suggest that parental involvement in formal and informal literacy activities with their Grade 2 children exert limited benefits for children's literacy development. Instead of extensive parent-led literacy activities, parents should facilitate access to literacy resources and encourage children's own independent reading. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that owning reading materials is a good first step but is not enough since, in order to improve one's literacy skills, reading materials have to be read.

Author contributions

Gintautas Šilinskas: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, funding acquisition, methodology, project administration, resources, visualization, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.

Saulė Raižienė: data curation, investigation, project administration, writing – review and editing.

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