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Original articles

Family literacy in preschoolers' linguistic and metalinguistic skill development

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: to verify family literacy practices with preschoolers from a public school in a municipality of the Northeast Region of Brazil.

Methods: 21 parents/guardians of pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students from a public school participated in this study. A questionnaire with 18 items on the parents'/guardians' participation in family literacy practices was develop for this research. The resulting data underwent descriptive and inferential analysis, with the significance level set at 5%.

Results: the preschoolers' mean age was 69 months, and that of the parents/guardians who answered the questionnaire was 31 years. The educational level of most parents/guardians was either high school or unfinished middle school. A significant, positive relationship, between the parents'/guardians' educational level and the following questionnaire items was seen: paying attention to the children when they spoke, calling their attention to the sound of letters and words, and teaching/encouraging them to write their names.

Conclusion: family literacy practices are not commonly developed in the culture of the Northeast Region of Brazil, and when so, most of them are similar to activities taught at school. There was also a weak correlation between the parents'/guardians' educational level and the family literacy practices.

Keywords: Health Promotion; Child Language; Child Development

INTRODUCTION

Guaranteeing child health involves health actions and services aimed at ensuring the right to life and well-being, considering social determinants and conditioning factors. One of the measures to provide these aspects is in primary health care, which promotes and attentively follows up the children's full growth and comprehensive development, particularly in early childhood. The practices that make them possible must include support to the families, aiming to strengthen family ties[1].

Health promotion involves enabling people regarding their life habits, not only in the biological aspect but also the broader concept of health[2]. It focuses on the person's comprehensive development and care, encompassing also human communication[3,4].

Carrying out promotion and prevention actions related to communication changes is greatly important to proper language development. The inclusion of literacy practices in everyday family life is one of the health promotion strategies that help develop language[5]. Literacy is the ability to put reading, writing, and mathematics skills into practice in day-to-day situations – which is different from learning to read and write, as this is the process of acquiring such skills[6].

Activities developed early, in preschoolers 4 to 5 years old, furnish better oral and written language performance and development, and are known as emergent literacy. It is dynamic and interactional, characterized by the following scopes of the emergent literacy activities: recognizing written material, getting acquainted with the letters of the alphabet and the code, playing games that involve reading and writing, and so forth. These early stimuli provide knowledge of and experiences with the written language that help prevent difficulties related to it[7].

A child can start learning the written language much earlier than being formally introduced to it – which mostly happens at school. Strategies involving expressive vocabulary, auditory discrimination, concepts of writing (e.g., how to read a book), letter identification, and rhyme identification and production are introductory aspects of written language that do not necessarily need to be taught at school[8].

Playing fun games focused on written language in the first school years have long-term results in its learning performance. The progressive performance of fourth-grade students evidences these findings as they are compared with their results in preschool regarding skills predictive of reading ability (such as vocabulary, auditory memory, and phonological awareness)[9].

Shared reading helps a child learn vocabulary at an early age. Three-year-old children presented to the shared reading of a picture book can relate unfamiliar words to images. Few occasions participating in the same reading are enough for them to learn to distinguish unfamiliar word-picture relationships from the other ones and even name pictured objects that used to be uncommon to their vocabulary[10]. It is also possible to identify sensitivity to phonological awareness in children this age, which is perfected as they grow older and have contact with written language[11].

The family plays an essential role in presenting and carrying out these activities. The parents' and the whole family's participation make the learning process more natural and significant, as they are the ones with whom the child begins to learn and, in some cases, with whom they spend most of their time[12].

Most parents believe that children have to participate in the stimulation to improve their performance in reading and writing skills. Hence, not only technical-practical (school) activities are used, but also holistic ones that require integrated reading and writing exercises in fun, functional, and informal situations[13].

The National Literacy Plan implementation guidelines include the families' participation in the children's process of learning to read and write. They are expected to encourage reading and writing habits and help them enjoy literature, actively including these in their everyday life. Hence, such reading and writing practices and experiences between children and their parents are called family literacy[14].

The 2016 National Literacy Assessment (ANA, in Portuguese) revealed that 54.73% of more than two million students who were finishing third grade had an unsatisfactory performance in the reading proficiency exam. This is worrying because the students had progressed to subsequent grades without having significantly learned. The objective is not only to code and decode (i.e., read and write) but also to do it so as to gain autonomy and understanding of these processes and apply them to practical daily situations. The reading and writing activities promoted by family members before formal education help the children be successful in learning them. Therefore, these practices have been encouraged and developed in other countries to prevent school failure[15].

Thus, focused on health promotion regarding the aspects of human communication, language stimulation practices the families use with their children must be found. This led to the research question: "Do the preschool children's families know the linguistic skills that must be developed in the process that precedes their learning to read and write?". Hence, this study aimed to verify family literacy practices with preschool children from a public school in a municipality of the Northeast Region of Brazil.

METHODS

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the *Faculdade Tiradentes* in Jaboatão dos Guararapes, Brazil, under protocol number 4.375.509.

This is a quantitative, descriptive, explanatory, survey study, designed as such because surveys provide a quantitative description of the sample's behaviors. These results, in turn, can be inferred to a broader population[16].

Initially, the research focused on the 45 parents/guardians of preschoolers attending pre-kindergarten and kindergarten at the José Rodovalho Municipal School, located in Candeias, a neighborhood of the municipality of Jaboatão dos Guararapes, Pernambuco, Brazil. This school was chosen because the health team to which one of the researchers belongs works there in a multiprofessional residency program, carrying out the activities of the School Health Program and other health actions. This school serves low and middle socioeconomic classes, and its 687 students are enrolled in 20 classrooms from preschool to ninth grade, encompassing morning and afternoon classes.

The authors developed a questionnaire on family literacy practices based on the family guidelines of the "Tell me" (*"Conta pra mim"*, in Portuguese) family literacy program of the Ministry of Education[17]. The material provided by the program, whose objective is to broadly promote family literacy, includes an explanatory guide with the concept of literacy and suggestion of activities to develop it.

The closed, Likert-scale questionnaire had 18 questions with five answer options (always, often, sometimes, rarely, or never) from which the participants should choose the one that best described their reality. The questions were divided into three main categories to provide a better presentation of the results, namely: a) Verbal Interaction; b) Activities Predictive of Reading Ability; c) Contact with Writing. Within each category, the questions on the activities were related to verbal interaction, conversational reading, storytelling, contact with writing, and the child's motivation generated by their parents/guardians. These fields are based on the guidelines and activities proposed in the said family literacy program guide.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the school's in-person activities were canceled and were taking place remotely, instead. Once a month, though, the students' parents/guardians went to school to receive food staples provided by the city government. Hence, it was arranged with the school principal to administer the questionnaires when they came for the food staples, meeting all the sanitary and physical distancing protocols.

Initially, the 45 parents/guardians of preschoolers enrolled in the school were invited to participate in the research. However, not all of them came for the food staples. Besides that, having discussed the issue with the principal, it was decided not to carry out the survey online because many families had limited Internet access and comprehension difficulties. Thus, the inclusion criteria encompassed the parents/guardians of children in the school grade approached in the study who attended the interview in person. There were no exclusion criteria because both literate and illiterate parents/guardians should be identified regarding their family literacy practices. Therefore, only the 21 parents/guardians who attended the interview in person participated in the research.

When they arrived at the school, the preschoolers' parents/guardians were invited to a classroom where the researcher was. She explained to them the purpose of the research, its importance, and that they were not obligated to participate. The parents/guardians who agreed to participate signed the informed consent form (ICF). The researcher gave them the option of reading the questions and checking the answers themselves or, if they preferred, she read them aloud to the parents/guardians and they indicated the answers that best described their reality, thus ensuring trustworthy results.

After administering the questionnaire, they received instructional material about family literacy practices, with suggestions of activities the parents/guardians could develop with their children to stimulate language development. Nevertheless, this study did not assess any data on the use of this material.

Descriptive and inferential analyses of the data were conducted. In the descriptive analysis, demographic data was collected – the children's age and the parents'/guardians' age and educational level. Pearson chi-square test to verify the relationship between the parents'/guardians' educational level and their family literacy practices was used in the inferential analysis. The significance level was set at $p \leq 0.05$.

RESULTS

The preschoolers' age frequency is shown in Table 1. Their mean age was 69 months (± 7). As for the parents/guardians who answered the questionnaire, their mean age was 31 years (± 8). Their age frequency is shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Preschoolers' age frequency

Age (months)	*f* (%)
55 – 69	10 (47.6%)
70 – 79	11 (52.4%)
Total	21 (100%)

Caption: *f* = frequency

Table 2. Parents'/guardians' age frequency

Age (years)	*f* (%)
18 – 29	9 (42.9%)
30 – 55	12 (57.1%)
Total	21 (100%)

Caption: *f* = frequency

Regarding educational level, eight children were enrolled in pre-kindergarten and 13, in kindergarten. The distribution of the parents'/guardians' educational level (most of whom had finished high school) is shown in Figure 1. Fifteen out of the 21 participants asked the researcher to read the questionnaire – eight of whom had dropped out of school during basic education (Figure 2).

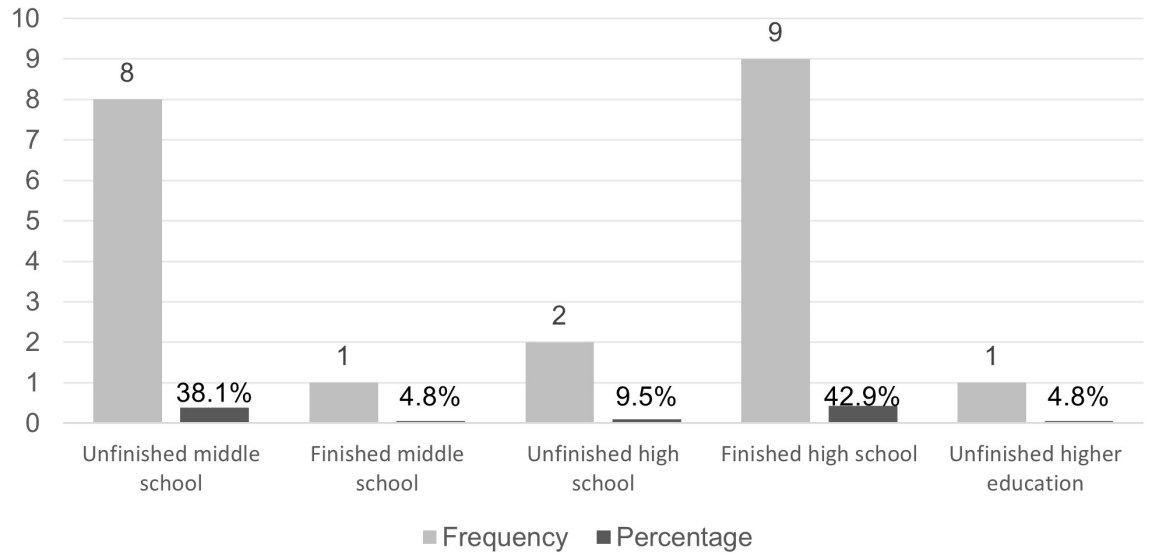

Figure 1. Parents'/guardians' educational level

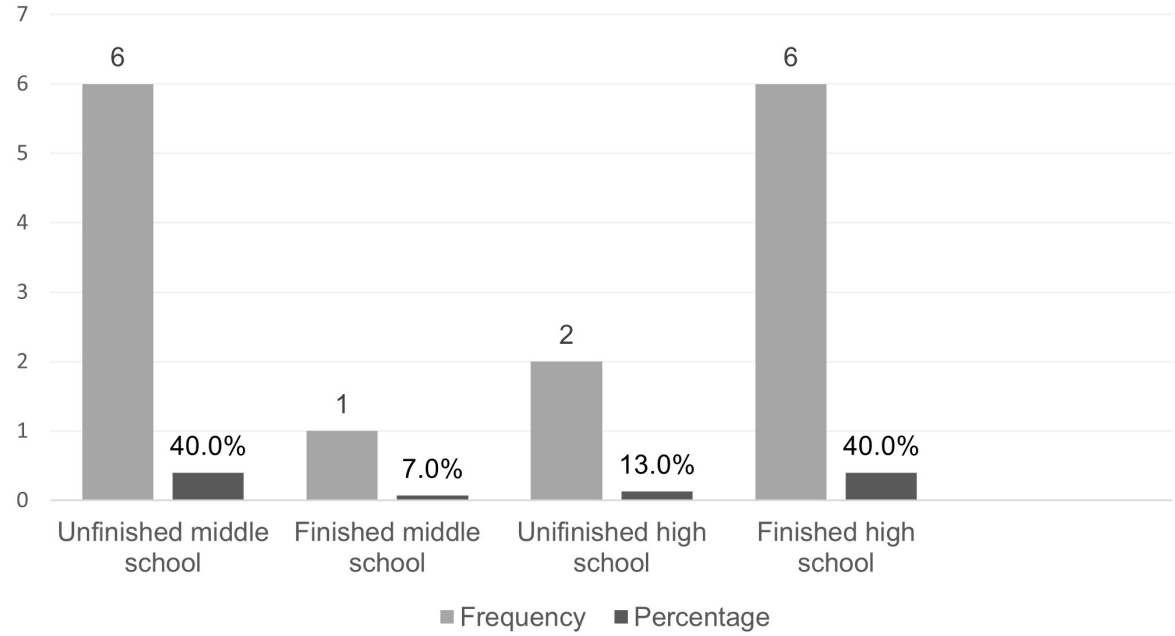

Figure 2. Educational level of the parents/guardians who asked to have the questionnaire read to them

The answers to the questionnaire are shown in Tables 3, 4, and 5, according to the categories (respectively, Verbal Interaction, Reading, and Contact with Writing).

The relationship between the parents'/guardians' educational level and the questions on family literacy practices is shown in Table 6. There was a statistically significant relationship between the educational level and the following items: "Do you pay attention to your son/daughter when they speak?"; "Have you ever called your son's/daughter's attention to what words and letters sound like?"; "Do you teach/encourage your son/daughter to write their name?".

Table 3. Frequency of the parents'/guardians' answers about verbal interaction practices

Questions/ Answers	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1	14 (66.7%)	3 (14.3%)	3 (14.3%)	1 (4.8%)	-
2	7 (33.3%)	7 (33.3%)	6 (28.6%)	1 (4.8%)	-
3	15 (71.4%)	5 (23.8%)	1 (4.8%)	-	-
4	14 (66.7%)	2 (9.5%)	5 (23.8%)	-	-
5	10 (47.6%)	5 (23.8%)	6 (28.6%)	-	-
6	10 (47.6%)	5 (23.8%)	4 (19.0%)	1 (4.8%)	1 (4.8%)

Captions: 1- Do you pay attention to your son/daughter when they speak?; 2- Do you talk about what the child is paying attention to?; 3- Do you usually ask your son/daughter how their day was at school or anywhere else they went to?; 4- Do you usually compliment your child when they do something positive?; 5- Do you talk to your son/daughter while carrying out routine tasks?; 6- Do you show new things to your son/daughter or talk about some they have seen or heard?

Table 4. Frequency of the parents'/guardians' answers about predictors of reading skill

Questions/ Answers	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
7	1 (4.8%)	6 (28.6%)	8 (38.1%)	1 (4.8%)	5 (23.8%)
8	7 (33.3%)	6 (28.6%)	5 (23.8%)	2 (9.5%)	1 (4.8%)
9	7 (33.3%)	4 (19.0%)	6 (28.6%)	1 (4.8%)	3 (14.3%)
10	9 (42.9%)	2 (9.5%)	6 (28.6%)	1 (4.8%)	3 (14.3%)
11	6 (28.6%)	6 (28.6%)	4 (19.0%)	-	5 (23.8%)
12	8 (38.1%)	2 (9.5%)	5 (23.8%)	-	6 (28.6%)
13	6 (28.6%)	2 (9.5%)	9 (42.9%)	1 (4.8%)	3 (14.3%)

Captions: 7- Have you ever called your son's/daughter's attention to what words and letters sound like?; 8- Do you explain the meaning of words your child does not know yet?; 9- Do you usually read to your son/daughter?; 10- Do you usually look at pictures in books and talk about them with your son/daughter?; 11- Do you tell stories to your son/daughter?; 12- Do you ask your child questions about the story you have read or told them?; 13- Does your son/daughter have access to books, magazines, comic books besides those provided by the school?

Table 5. Frequency of the parents'/guardians' answers about contact with writing

Questions/ Answers	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
14	6 (28.6%)	3 (14.3%)	7 (33.3%)	1 (4.8%)	4 (19.0%)
15	8 (38.1%)	5 (23.8%)	5 (23.8%)	1 (4.8%)	2 (9.5%)
16	14 (66.7%)	3 (14.3%)	1 (4.8%)	1 (4.8%)	2 (9.5%)
17	15 (71.4%)	3 (14.3%)	-	1 (4.8%)	2 (9.5%)
18	2 (9.5%)	3 (14.3%)	6 (28.6%)	2 (9.5%)	8 (38.1%)

Captions:14- Do you usually show your child day-to-day examples of writing, for instance, reading posters, product labels, TV commercials, letters, and so on?; 15- Do you usually draw with your son/daughter and encourage them to do it?; 16- Do you teach/encourage your son/daughter to write their name?; 17- Do you teach/encourage your son/daughter to write numbers and alphabet letters?; 18- Do you include your son/daughter in writing tasks, like making a shopping list or writing a note to someone?

Table 6. Relationship between the parents'/guardians' educational level and the questionnaire items

Questions	p-value
Do you pay attention to your son/daughter when they speak?	0.038*
Do you talk about what the child is paying attention to?	0.861
Do you usually ask your son/daughter how their day was at school or anywhere else they went to?	0.692
Do you usually compliment your child when they do something positive?	0.884
Do you talk to your son/daughter while carrying out routine tasks?	0.181
Do you show new things to your son/daughter or talk about some they have seen or heard?	0.111
Have you ever called your son's/daughter's attention to what words and letters sound like?	0.002*
Do you explain the meaning of words your child does not know yet?	0.458
Do you usually read to your son/daughter?	0.402
Do you usually look at pictures in books and talk about them with your son/daughter?	0.412
Do you tell stories to your son/daughter?	0.524
Do you ask your child questions about the story you have read or told them?	0.287
Does your son/daughter have access to books, magazines, comic books besides those provided by the school?	0.362
Do you usually show your child day-to-day examples of writing?	0.368
Do you usually draw with your son/daughter and encourage them to do it?	0.544
Do you teach/encourage your son/daughter to write their name?	0.036*
Do you teach/encourage your son/daughter to write numbers and alphabet letters?	0.492
Do you include your son/daughter in writing tasks, like making a shopping list or writing a note to someone?	0.391

Statistical test: Pearson's chi-square, *p-value<0.05.

DISCUSSION

In practical terms, family literacy involves verbal interaction, conversational reading, storytelling, contact with writing, the children's motivation to reading and writing, and various activities involving music, dance, outings, and other entertainments that can be associated with language stimulation. These literacy practices developed by the family make it easier for children to learn to read and write[17]. When parents teach their 2-to-3-year-old children to identify letters and sounds and practice shared reading with them before they enter preschool, they benefit both their letter recognition and phonological awareness and vocabulary development. Hence, they acquire more precise and fluent reading when they reach first grade, as well as good reading comprehension results in subsequent grades[18].

Therefore, considering the importance of this stimulation in early childhood, preschoolers, particularly those in the age group encompassed in this research, are expected to have already acquired various linguistic skills (such as an understanding of the basic grammatical system of the language) and metalinguistic skills (such as phonological awareness) and be able to temporally organize facts in a narrative[19,20].

The questionnaire revealed that some of the parents'/guardians' habits favor verbal interaction. This is a positive factor for the children's language and cognition development since family interactions based on learning models and diversified stimuli contribute to the children's vocabulary development. This linguistic component favors oral language and is significantly related to reading and writing performance[21].

The answers regarding reading practices indicate that most of the interviewees read to their children or look at pictures in books and talk about them at least sometimes. Early shared reading practices involving parents and children promote in them better linguistic skill development (language comprehension and production)[22]. Also, children directly exposed to reading in preschool or kindergarten have better decoding and reading fluency than their peers who did not have the same experience. Moreover, they have better results in phonological processing tests and maintain a high reading speed[23].

Contact with writing is another relevant aspect in this study, as the data show that parents/guardians encourage more formal writing, which is more closely related to what the children learn at school than to natural routine activities. Pre-formal writing habits and knowledge of conceptual and functional aspects of the written language acquired with fun activities are greatly important to reading and writing performance in the grades that follow preschool education[9]. Encouraging writing and metalinguistic pondering of this process benefits both the writing itself and the reading process because they use such pondering on grapheme-phoneme correspondence when they read[24].

Regarding the parents'/guardians' educational level, most of them had finished high school, whereas only one participant was in higher education. This reflects on the family literacy practices because, as pointed out in the literature, the parents'/guardians' educational level results in greater quality and quantity of stimulation to their children. Also, mothers with a college degree tend to read more often to their children, which leads to good vocabulary performance as early as 2 years old[25].

Concerning the parents/guardians who asked to have the questionnaire read to them, eight out of the 15 had dropped out of school during basic education. Hence, their request may have been due to reading and/or interpretation difficulties. Their reading difficulty may have consequences on how much they stimulate their children's language, especially written language, as they have less contact with it. Observing the educational level of parents/guardians whose children are competent in reading and writing and those of children who have difficulties in these skills, there are more of them who have not finished middle school in the second than in the first group. Moreover, children in such conditions usually have family members with the same difficulties[26].

Comparing the parents'/guardians' educational level with their family literacy practices, a statistically significant relationship in only three out of the 18 items in the questionnaire was observed. "Do you pay attention to your son/daughter when they speak?" was the verbal interaction question which had a significant association with their educational level. Paying attention to what a child has to say reinforces their self-esteem and, along with other verbal interaction practices, encourages their speech and increases their comprehension ability[17]. The lack of correlation between educational level and the other verbal interaction questions, as well as the results that point out that parents develop these practices (though not frequently), highlight the importance of interacting as naturally as possible, thus encouraging the children's verbal expression. The frequency with which adults interact verbally with children, especially those 18 to 24 months old, is a

predictor of the performance they will have at 9 to 13 years old in linguistic and cognitive skills[27].

Another inferential analysis result regarding activities predictive of reading ability showed that the higher the parents'/guardians' educational level, the greater the probability that they will call their son's/daughter's attention to the sound of words and letters. Stimulating them to the sound of words and letters is an activity related to phonological awareness, present since early childhood, at 3 years old, when this skill is already being developed as syllable awareness. These skills gradually improve as they grow older and advance in school grades[11]. Phonological awareness is consistently associated with reading and writing because it requires sound recognition, which is important to learn to read and write[28]. It is greatly important to stimulate this skill in preschoolers – especially in those who attend public schools, as research shows inferior results in phonological awareness tests and early reading and writing skills in this population than in those who attend private schools[29].

Regarding contact with writing, there was a significance between the parents'/guardians' educational level and the practice of teaching/encouraging the son/daughter to write their name. Writing one's name is important to the process of learning to write because it is both functional and affective. Therefore, since this activity is significant to the child, it helps them develop motor coordination, which is necessary to writing[30]. Stimulating writing in kindergarten, making it functional, and using fun resources benefit reading and writing performance at the orthographic processing level[9].

Both education and health professionals must get acquainted with family literacy practices so they can encourage them and aim for the children's proper language development. This statement is even more relevant because parents/guardians and students had to reorganize their routine due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In such context, parents/guardians, especially those of preschoolers, played an essential role in stimulating language for them to learn to read and write. This is strongly evidenced by shared reading, which is one of the activities that help increase the children's vocabulary and strengthen the parent-child bonds[31].

Considering further the importance for health professionals to know family literacy practices, primary health care, which is the closest contact they have with many families and where these receive broad health guidelines, must be highlighted. Hence, literacy can be encouraged in these settings as child health promotion, establishing a comprehensive perspective of child development[1,5].

Knowledge of prevention practices must be acquired, as the literature points out that many parents/guardians and physicians habitually wait for the child to be 4 or 5 years old before properly referring them to speech-language-hearing therapy. Also, almost half of the health and education professionals interviewed in previous research did not refer them to such therapy when their parents presented complaints regarding their children's language[32,33].

Although this study had few participants, the results show the relevance of stimulating language at home. Also, such a small number is explained by the ongoing pandemic at the time when the research was carried out and by many parents'/guardians' limited Internet access and difficulties understanding the online format, which would hinder them from answering an online questionnaire. Another limitation of this study is the lack of information about aspects of the preschoolers' language development. Despite these limitations, this research contributed to scientific knowledge of family literacy practices, which is still scarce in the Brazilian literature. Moreover, the questionnaire that was developed can be helpful in further research on this topic.

Lastly, this study helped parents/guardians learn about literacy practices for them to stimulate their children's language at home. Also, the researchers provided them with material suggesting verbal interaction, phonological awareness, attention, reading, and writing activities.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that family literacy practices are not commonly developed and, when they are, most are similar to activities taught at school. There was also a weak correlation between the parents'/guardians' educational level and the family literacy practices.

Further research comparing data on family literacy between parents of public and private school students should be carried out, as well as broadening the research to encompass data on the language development of children in this age group and its relationship with the parents'/guardians' knowledge of family literacy. This would help understand the extent to which it interferes with linguistic and metalinguistic skills, leading to human communication prevention and promotion actions.

Lastly, the families' reality regarding literacy practices, especially in the Northeast Region of Brazil, must be understood. Once these children's needs are identified in the context where they live, the social impact of such practices will stand out, aiming to improve their literacy indexes in subsequent grades.

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