Literacy Goes to School: Emergent Literacy Experiences and Skills that Children Take to School

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Abstract

This study sought to establish emergent literacy experiences and skills among children in the age range of 2 and 6 years in Mwense Rural District in Zambia. A case study of two villages was conducted with a sample size of 40 participants comprising 20 children and 20 caregivers. The researcher used purposive sampling to select the district and the two villages. A simple random sampling was used to select 20 family households from the two villages with children in the required age range. The study employed qualitative research methods and data was collected using semi-structured interviews and participant observations. The data collected were grouped into themes which were then analyzed further to come up with findings. This study established that children engaged in various emergent literacy skills in the early days of their primary school. They demonstrated a number of emergent literacy skills and abilities. Emergent skills and abilities included pattern drawing, holding a pencil, scribbling, narrative and listening comprehension skills, singing, reciting bible memory verses and pretend reading which they went with to school when they started formal schooling. The study concluded that even though children in this study had no preschool background, the interaction they had with their family members had influence on the literacy experiences they engaged in which in turn had influenced the emergent literacy skills and abilities they developed.

Key Terms: Literacy skills, emergent literacy, pretend reading/ writing, literacy experiences

Background

There has been extensive research on 'emergent literacy' skills and experiences among children below the formal school age both locally and internationally. Such research has resulted from the emergent literacy view which postulates that early literacy begins long before conventional schooling and is nourished by social interactions with caring adults and exposure to literacy-rich environments, culture and literacy experiences at home, in the community and at school (Hall, 1987). Due to differences in emergent literacy experiences and exposure, children in different cultural and spatial contexts possess different literacy skills and abilities at different times (Hall, 1987; Wink & Putney, 2002).

In Zambia, scholars like Matafwali & Chansa-Kabali (2017), Kalindi, McBride, & Dan (2018), and Chansa-Kabali (2018) have established the existence of emergent literacy experiences among families from different social backgrounds. Some topics covered within the emergent literacy field that have been studied include reading techniques as well as storytelling skills among preschool children (Zimba, 2011), literacy behaviours among preschool children (Musonda (2011), effectiveness of reading rooms with talking walls in supporting early literacy (Chileshe, Mkandawire and Tambulukani, 2018; Chisenga, 2013), medium of instruction for initial literacy (Mwanza, 2011) and teachers' perceptions on the use of local languages as medium of instruction from grades 1-4 in selected primary schools (Mkandawire, 2017; Ndeleki, 2015). It should be noted that, most of these studies focused on children in urban and semiurban areas where there is a possibility of access to organised early childhood institutions such as preschools, which is the first level of education in Zambia (Mkandawire and Illon, 2018). Therefore, the aim of this study, was twofold; first, to establish emergent literacy experiences children with no preschool background in rural areas engage in

with their family members. The second one was to find out the resulting emergent literacy skills children possessed and possibly went with to formal primary schools.

Literature Review

Before the 1900s, most scholars studied literacy in connection to the reading and writing skills children achieved during formal learning. This was observed by Cummins (2007) who stated that literacy has traditionally been thought of, and taught as, reading and writing skills. This view limited literacy to activities which occur when children begin formal schooling. Any literacy-related skills displayed by children were referred to as pre-reading skills and were not treated with much importance (Ferreiro, 2002). This traditional conception is still reflected in today's formal assessments of academic achievement and in both public and private life where one is only considered to be literate if he or she can read and write in a conventional way (Street, 2005). It is increasingly evident through research, however, that traditional notions of literacy have been abandoned by researchers (Cummins, 2007). New trends in literacy studies include cultural literacy, media literacy, family literacy, conventional literacy and emergent literacy (Mkandawire, 2015; Stratton and Wright, 1991).

Despite growing trends, it is emergent literacy that has attracted much of the attention among scholars studying literacy acquisition among preschool aged children. Emergent literacy is a term first used by Clay (1966) to describe how young children interact with books when reading and writing, even though they cannot read or write in the conventional sense. The term emergent literacy goes beyond children's interaction with books. It encompasses all literacy practices that are within the environment where the child is born and nurtured as displayed by the child and this begins

with the learning of language by the child. Roth, Paul and Pierotti (2006) argue that children start to learn language from the day they are born. This stage, known as emergent literacy, begins at birth and continues through the preschool years and occurs in the environment (and the cultural context) where the child is nurtured (Fellowes & Oakley 2014). As they grow and develop, their speech and language skills become increasingly more complex. They learn to understand and use language to express their ideas, thoughts, and feelings, and to communicate with others. During early speech and language development, children learn skills that are important for the development of literacy (reading and writing).

Other scholars state that emergent literacy refers to the acquisition of reading and writing abilities (knowledge, skills and attitudes) that children develop, without formal instruction before they begin to read in a conventional way (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Emergent readers demonstrate literacy related skills, knowledge, and attitudes which are precursors to reading and writing (Mkandawire, 2018). Such skills include vocabulary, phonological awareness, print concepts, prototypical letter recognition, and print motivation (Fellowes & Oakley 2014, Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Young children's acquisition of these emergent literacy skills is an important foundation for their later language and literacy development. Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) state that the term emergent literacy is used to denote the idea that the acquisition of literacy is best conceptualized as a developmental continuum, with its origins early in the child's life, rather than an all-or-none phenomenon that begins when children start school. This view suggests that there is no clear demarcation between reading and pre-reading.

Emergent literacy is also represented as a sociocultural process whereby emergent literacy development is highly influenced by the social and cultural contexts in which children are reared

(Mkandawire and Daka, 2018; Michael, 2013). Central among these social contexts is the home environment in which children are exposed to literacy-related materials and experiences in interaction with family members: parents, older siblings, grandparents and other carers (Weinberger, 1996). The emergent literacy perspective draws on sociocultural theory which esteems social interactions where more knowledgeable others act as mediators of children's interactions with the environment (Vygotsky, 1978). It is in the context of these child-adult-environment interactions that literacy development takes place.

Emergent literacy experiences in Zambia

In Zambia, there are several studies which show various literacy experiences families engage in with children. A study by Kasakula (2016) reveals that parents and other family members engage in storytelling with children. Storytelling in Zambia is a social activity which is practiced by most families. It is helpful in the development of language in children. Children who participate in storytelling use oral skills to mediate their way in life. Stories include folktales and other stories derived from real life experiences. Bruner (1994) argues that human beings organise thoughts and make sense of their lives through the stories they tell themselves and others. Storytelling exposes children to some form of language which is holistic, rich and complex. It has been discovered that storytelling allows children to tune into the rhythms and structures of language and broaden their conceptual worlds and their vocabulary to express themselves (Chansa-Kabali, 2017; Kasakula, 2016; Kipepe, 2016; Kombe, 2016; Musonda, 2011). Children in Zambia participate in other rich oral language contexts like riddles and proverbs. Most proverbs are rooted in folklore and have been preserved by oral tradition (Chansa-Kabali & Westerholm, 2014). From these contexts,

children develop vocabularies which they use to describe and talk about almost things within their environment. Other skills which children develop from such experiences are linguistic awareness and comprehension skills as they retell a stories which they hear from their peers or adults (Chansa-Kabali, 2017).

In some families, shared reading is an important literacy experience which is undertaken especially by either of the parents, mostly mothers, or older siblings and other extended family members (Gordon, 2014; Jere-Folotiya, 2014 ; Kalindi et al., 2018; Kombe, 2016). Shared reading is enriched by book ownership. Active parental help in the form of increased book ownership, information about frequency and style of book reading, the use of finger-pointing and interactive questioning along with shared story telling have all been shown to promote a number of important early literacy skills (Michael, 2013; Mubanga, 2015 ; Musonda, 2011). Some families in Zambia have encouraged their children to participate in pretend reading and writing. Engaging children in writing is one the crucial practices for early literacy development (Lynch 1986, Hill 2009). By having children explain what they write, they develop necessary phonological awareness and the ability to manipulate sounds which they hear. These sounds may be within the words or independent of words' meanings. In telling what they write or scribble, when correct spellings are shown to them, children easily associate the words to sounds and they begin to become familiar with the words long before they begin to learn conventionally. In addition, children develop comprehension skills which in turn help to comprehend advanced skills concerning writing and reading (Fellowes & Oakley, 2014). Despite the impediments faced by parents and early grade teachers in teaching valuable topics to children, all the topical points highlighted above are part of the curriculum for early childhood education in Zambia (Mkandawire, 2010).

Another important feature of familial literacy in Zambia is conversation or narrative talk within which families and children engage (Kasakula, 2016; Serpell, 2014; Serpell & Simatende, 2016). During narrative talk, parents have chances to scaffold children's learning through instruction, modeling, questioning and providing feedback for a child's vocabulary development. For those who have time to teach children do mostly through normal daily conversations. Narrative talk allows adults to provide examples of words and their meanings within a context where the words have an understandable real-life application (McCormick and Mason, 1986).

Kalindi et al. (2018) and Mubanga (2015) report that adults also attend to children's writing and reading by helping them with homework exercises. This help come sometimes from extended family members. Extended family members also helped with books and other literacy materials. Families with less print in their own homes would ask from their extended family members for books and writing materials. Kalindi et al. (2018) argue that family network in Sub-Sahara Africa plays an important role in forming part of common literacy resource. In such communities, it is very common for children to go to their uncles or any other adult in the neighbourhoods for help in literacy related issues.

Chansa-Kabali and Westerholm (2014) associates the number, effective and efficiency of literacy experiences in the family in Zambia to parent's knowledge, attitudes, expectations and availability. They argue that parental reading attitude formed a major part of their home literacy environment. However, these attitudes were tied to the overall gains that one gets from education after completing school.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative design as it sought to get views, opinions, and perceptions from family members and other members of the community about emergent literacy experiences and skills among children. In particular, a case study of two selected villages in Mwense Rural was undertaken. A case study was appropriate because the research sought to make an in-depth analysis of the two villages to gain a deeper insight into participants' views of the emergent literacy experiences and skills. Data were collected through observations and semi-structured interviews. The researcher sought to interpret his observations of the children's literacy skills on one hand, and respondents' views on the other to establish the emergent literacy skills among the children in rural areas of Mwense District.

Description of the study area

This study was conducted in two villages (Shima and Kasula, pseudonyms) in remote areas of Mwense District. The two villages were located more than 70 kilometres from the nearest District town, Mwense. The two villages are about 40 kilometres away from the main road and access is by a dirty road. Most people travel by bicycle, motorcycle or on foot. Vehicles occasionally reach the area. Further, at the time of this study, the two and other nearby villages had no preschool or any organised informal system for children below the school going age. It was for this reason that the researcher designated it as a rural setting and suitable for this study.

Population of the Study

Population in this study included all the children within the age range of 2-6 years and caregivers of these children. The sample for the study was drawn from two villages. 10 households with an average of four to six family members were selected from each village. One child from each family was observed while engaging in literacy experiences either alone or with other family members or friends. To de-identify child participants, children were given labels using letters of the alphabet with child 1 being "*a*", child 2 being "*b*" until the twentieth child. Only one of the parents or guardians was interviewed. Parents were coded using numbers. Parent 1 corresponds to child *a* and parent 2 to child *b*. This system continued up to parent 20 who corresponds to child *t.*

Sampling Procedure

The research employed a two-tier sampling strategy. It started with purposive sampling to include the two villages. Later, 20 households with at least one child between 2 and 6 years of age were selected with the help of a research assistant and other villagers from each village. This was in line with Kombo and Tromp (2006) who state that purposive sampling is used to target the group or subjects who are believed to be reliable for the study. The second tier was a simple random method in which 20 names of owners of those households from each village were written on pieces of paper. The names were then shuffled in a tin and a child was asked to pick 10 names for each village. Altogether, 20 names were picked. The 20 homes which were picked by the child made up the sample for the study.

Data collection methods

The study used semi-structured interviews with parents. The researcher visited homes of respondents and interviewed them

from their homes. The answers were followed up with questions where the researcher was not clear. Additionally, where the respondents requested to invite their neighbours to the interview, the researcher allowed them as this made the respondents more comfortable and consequently led to more discussions. As respondents expressed their views, the researcher was alert to capture subtle, meaningful cues and phrases in respondents' expressions and articulations of issues of emergent literacy experiences and skills. The interviews were recorded using an audio recorder. The use of the semi-structured interview facilitated follow-up questions to obtain deeper insight on certain issues that were raised by the respondents during the direct interviews. Moreover, semi-structured interview offered sufficient flexibility to approach different respondents differently while still covering the same areas of data collection. Being a face to face interview, discussion was also automatically incorporated. The second method of data collection was an observation. Children were observed as they engaged in literacy related activities within their homes and surroundings. Data were recorded on a checklist for observations. The researcher observed children to establish the emergent literacy experiences and skills they displayed while engaging in different activities.

Data analysis

Data were analysed qualitatively. The analysis commenced immediately the research began. The researcher made sure that the data were consistent during data collection. This was ensured by asking follow-up questions in order to make the data clarified. The researcher made sure that all data collected on a particular day were organised and summarised according to themes and then categorised under those themes.

Results

This section presents results of the study. Findings are presented according to the categories that the researcher came up with during and after data collection and analysis. There was no clear boundary between the categories because in most cases these sessions were happening simultaneously. To give a clear picture of emergent literacy experiences, three broad categories of prominent literacy experiences in Mwense rural were assumed. These categories include informal teaching, conversation circles/ narrative talk and singing sessions.

Literacy Experiences

Informal Teaching Sessions

Informal teaching sessions include situations where parent or older siblings instruct young ones in literacy related skills. Below are experiences family members and children engaged in:

Alphabetical order

It was found that twelve parents and other family members taught children letters of the alphabet. Parent 5 said that she taught the child to sing alphabet songs. Parent 7 and 14 reported that most of the time siblings helped each other to say the letters of the alphabet. Parent 9 had timetabled teaching of the alphabet letter in order to help the child achieve literacy. In Kasula village, Parent 16 helped her child to write the letters of the alphabet. Parent 16 added that sometimes the child was helped by a neighbour who was in school. In Shima village, Parent 7 and 9 said that they were helping the children although their children did not know how to write their names. Parent 7 said that *uyu umwana abamwafwa bakulu bakwe*, meaning, *this child is helped by his older siblings*. In Kasula village, Parents 12 and 15 said that they had been

helping their children to learn how to write their names, but their children did not know how to write their names.

Shared Reading

Data from the Interview Schedule revealed that six parents engaged their children in shared and pretend reading, that is, parent 5, 6, 9, 10, 16 and 18. This was a practice was performed by both parents and older siblings. Parent 2 stated that: *uyu nao tulamubelengela nangu taishishiba neefyo fipilibula,* meaning, *We read for this child even though he does not know the meaning of print.* Some parents assumed that their children did not know anything about reading and writing and because of this assumption; they did not consciously plan to read to their children. Further, in both villages, two parents read to children and pointed out important features of the text such as the title, font and the author.

In Shima village, parents 3,4,5,6 and 9 encouraged children to scribble and pretend write while playing. In Shima village, five parents read picture books with children. Parent 3 said *Uyu umwana tulabelenga nankwe ifitabo ifyo umwaba ifikope kwati cilabushiku,* meaning, *we read picture books with the child almost every day*. When asked if she read a picture book with the child, parent 2 answered the following: *nebo nshaishiba ukubelenga kwinenene lelo nda mutambisha ama* picture *apaaba balupwa*, meaning, *I do not know how to read properly but I show him the photographs of our relatives*. In Kasula village, it is only three parents who read picture books with their children four times a week. Parent 15 said that she did not actually read the picture book but the child's older siblings read *Lapenda* 1and 2 and Adult Literacy Program Book. Parent 15 was at some point involved in an adult literacy program which was no longer there at the time of research.

Drawing/Scribbling/Pretend Writing

Drawing was another literacy experience in which children particpated. In Shima village, eight out of the ten children were involved in drawing. In one village, four children were involved in drawing and these included l, n, r and t. The total number of children who participated in drawing represents 60%. When asked what the children were drawing, parent to child *r* had the following to say: *umwana uyu alitemwa ukudrawer utumazingulu elyo na abantu*, translated as *my child likes drawing circles and people*. The mother to child *d* said that her child drew whatever came to his mind and sometimes the things he drew did not make sense but if asked to explain what he drew, he was able to tell even though what he drew did not match with his explanation. The mother to child *a* said that sometimes children draw certain patterns as they played with their friends. Parent 9 also explained that her child initiated all the drawing activities that he did alone without involvement of elderly people. Sometimes he drew when he saw his older siblings do their homework. It was also discovered that some children were able to draw figures which resembled things they intended to draw. Another skill which went hand in hand with drawing was scribbling, simply put, pretending writing. In the two villages, all the children but two did some scribbling. Put together, both villages reported a 90% participation of children in scribbling. Parent 2 reported that her child used to scribble on the ground as paper was hard to find in the village. It was also observed that some of these children scribbled on pieces of paper which were provided by their older siblings who were in school. In Shima village, seven children were engage in scribbling/pretend writing. They did this mostly when their older siblings were doing their homework or as they played. Parent 3 said that her child used to write own-invented spellings which made sense only to him.

Narrative talk

Another literacy experience was narrative talk. Narrative talk or conversation included planned and unplanned situations where new words/vocabulary were introduced or taught to children. In Kasula village, three parents taught their children new words at least once a week. In Shima village, parents 1, 4, 6 and 10 had a detailed and informative conversation with the children nearly every day. Parent 1 said that this was done mostly when planting. Parent 4 reported that she used to have normal conversations over social issues in which she used to introduce new words although she never planned for what kind of words to teach. In Kasula village, Six parents had detailed and informative conversations with their children at least once a week. Parent 12 said *tulalanshanya maka-maka nga tulemufunda imisango iisuma* meaning, *we converse with the child especially when we are teaching him good manners.* In Shima village, parents 1, 2, 3 and 10 encouraged children to say what they wanted to say using complete sentences. This was done to encourage and correct oral language in children. In Kasula village, five parents encouraged their children to say what they (children) wanted using complete sentences. Parents 11 confirmed by saying that *tucitafye ifi nga umwana afilwa ukupwisha ifyo alelanda*, meaning, *this activity only happens when the child fails to complete what he or she is saying*. Meanwhile, parent 14 said that *ifi ficitikafye nga umwana afilwa ukubomfya ishiwi nangu umuseela bwino*, meaning, *this only happens when she uses a word/sentence wrongly*. Four Parents taught their children new words nearly every day.

Talking/conversation circles

Talking or conversation circles in this paper refers to any instances in which language was used for lighter moments, game of wit such as in riddles, entertainment or leisure.

Riddle and folktales sessions

To obtain findings on oral emergent literacy practices, the researcher used an Observation Checklist and semi structured interviews. In Shima village, it was found that nine children were engaged in riddle sessions. In Kasula village, all children participated in folktales sessions. Explaining why children participated in these riddle sessions, parent 1 said that "*kuno abaana ukucoleka ificoleko caaba kwati ni ntambi. Abaanna abengi balakolongana icungulo mukushimika utushimi elyo ne ficoleko*" meaning, *here, it is like a custom for children to gather in the evenings to tell folktales and riddles*. Folktales included *Kalulu na Cimbwi* (The Rabbit and the Hyena), *Umuntu Na Mafupa Yoko-yoko*, (The man and the monster) and *Impombo Na Fulwe* (The Duiker and the Tortoise).

Religious circles

Religious circles involved instances when children were involved in reciting memory verses, prayers and bible sharing. It is mostly at such sessions where children were seen to be inquisitive as they wanted to understand the mystery of the religion. Three children were reported that they could say a sensible prayer in iciBemba. Parent 3 said that her child was able to memorise verses from the bible if those verses were read to him by his older siblings, friends, or leaders at church. In the two villages where the study took place, 6 children were reported to be inquisitive. The mother to child *b* said that her child used to ask a lot of questions about things or people he did not know. Parent 2 said that *uyu umwana alashupa ngateshibefye icintu kano wamulondolwela*. *Limo-limo alepushapo pali balupwa abo teshibe,* meaning, *this child troubles me if he doesn't know someone or something unless you explain to him. Sometimes he even asks about relatives whom he does not know.*

Singing Sessions

Singing sessions involved singing different types of songs. All parents reported that their children involved themselves in songs. These songs differed, most of them being those dubbed from popular Zambian music, songs used when playing games, gospel songs (or hymns) or other songs sung while playing. Others included songs which accompany folktales. *Ifisela* included songs which children sung while they played.

Emergent Literacy Skills

As a result of the various literacy experiences that they were engaged in, children developed various emergent literacy skills. These were different from child to child.

Holding a pencil/pen correctly

Observations in Shima village show that six children were able to hold a pencil or pen correctly. In Kasula village, three children were able to do so. This number of children who would hold a pen or pencil correctly represents 45%. The parent to child *b* explained that the child used to hold the pencil correctly using the left hand. It was hard for the child to hold a pencil using the right hand and so we decided to let him continue holding using the left hand. The findings revealed that some of the children were able to correctly hold pencils and pens even though they could not write conventionally with good handwriting.

Drawing

In Shima village, eight out of the ten children were involved in drawing while two did not. In Kasula village, four children were involved in drawing and these included *l*, *n*, *r* and *t*. The total number of children who participated in drawing represents 60%. When asked what the children were drawing, parent to child *r*

had the following to say: *umwana uyu alitemwa ukudrawer utumazingulu elyo na abantu,* translated as *my child likes drawing circles and people*. The mother to child *d* said that her child drew whatever came to his mind and sometimes the things he drew did not make sense but if asked to explain what he drew, he was able to tell even though what he drew did not match with his explanation. The mother to child *n* said that sometimes children draw certain patterns as they played with their friends. Figure 1 below, taken from Kasula village, showing some of patterns children drew. This pattern is called *Kabangili.*

Figure 1: Consented Field Data

Parent 9 also explained her child initiated all the drawing activities that he did alone without involvement of elderly people. Sometimes he drew when he saw his older siblings do their homework.

Scribbling

In Shima village, nine children were involved in scribbling and only one child did not. In this village it was found that nine children (90%) exhibited the skill of scribbling. In Kasula

village, all the children did some scribbling except for child *o* who was not reported to have been involved. Put together, both villages reported a 90% participation of children (18 children) in scribbling. Parent 2 reported that her child used to scribble on the ground as paper was hard to find in the village. It was also established that some of the children scribbled on papers which were provided by their older siblings who were already in school. Furthermore, it was found that children were involved in scribbling as exeplified in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Consented Field Data showing children scribbling in Kasula.

Pretentious Writing

In Shima village, seven children engaged in pretend writing. They did this mostly when their older siblings were doing their homework or as play. Parent 3 said that her child used to write own-invented spellings which we did not know. He wrote words which he could read alone. In Kasula village, five children were also involved in pretend writing. The total percentage was 60. This means that only 12 children (60%) in the sample were able to pretend write, some of whom made their own spellings. The mother to child *n* explained that the child used to mix those things

which looked like letters and things which were totally different from letters.

Correct holding of a book

In Shima village, two children were consistently holding the book correctly. The rest of the children would sometimes hold it correctly and sometimes not. The mother to child *d* explained that "*ine umwana wandi limo-limo alekata bwino ibuku lelo limo-limo alapilibula ico ashaishiba umwakubelengela, aba abakuti babuulafye amabuku nga bamona abakulu balebelenga,"* meaning *my child sometimes holds the book correctly while other times he holds it upside down because he doesn't know how to read and that they (children) only get books when they see those who are older than them reading*. Another parent said that it was difficult for children to know how to hold the books properly because they had not yet started going to school.

In Kasula village, four children were able to hold the books correctly while the rest of the children did not. If put together with those in Shima village, the total number would be six representing 30%. Parent 13 explained that children were only able to hold the books the correct way if there were pictures in side; otherwise, they would not use words because they did not know the letters of the alphabet.

Moreover, children exhibited the skill of holding the book correctly especially with books that had pictures in them. For books without pictures, children had difficulties knowing how to hold them. From this stage, children begin pretend read. Children pretend to read while pointing to and labelling pictures or naming actions in their storybooks.

Print and letter Knowledge

Children had knowledge on various aspects of letter and print. In Shima village, two children showed print knowledge. When asked what the meaning of print was, child *a* said that *ifi fyakubelenga* meaning *these are for reading*. In Kasula village, only one child was able to tell the use of print. In terms of percentage, only 20% of children were able to tell the use of print. Shima village, child *c* could point at words correctly, following them from left to right. Parent 3 explained that the child started by just moving his finger from any point on the page to anywhere. Thereafter, the child, through the help of older siblings who were attending school, started pointing at the words correctly. In Kasula village, three children were able to point at the words in any book correctly.

Pretend reading

In Shima village, three children were doing pretentious reading. These children would look at the page in a book and say words which were not in the book or on the paper. In Kasula village, six children did pretend reading. Altogether, nine children exhibited pretend reading. Children pretended to read and sometimes showed lip movement as if they are about to pronounce the words they were looking at on a paper or book. They recognised some of writings, symbols, labels or signs.

Narrative and Listening Comprehension skills

All children proved to have listening comprehension skills. They were able in some cases to retell the folktales which were told by their peers or adults. The children were also able to tell the story in the order of *introduction*, *main body* and *conclusion*. Narrative skills include being able to understand and tell stories and being able to describe things. During sessions of folktales, the researcher observed that most of the children were able to retell the stories which they heard from adults.

Discussion

Emergent Literacy Experiences

This study reveals that there are various emergent literacy experiences that children in Mwense Rural were engaged in with their family members. In some homes, shared reading was an important practice was undertaken especially by older siblings. This study shows similar but not exact results with those found by Hill (2009) in Australia. In Australia, a lot of parents were involved in reading to and for children. Active parental help in the form of increased book ownership, information about frequency and style of book reading, the use of finger-pointing and interactive questioning along with shared story telling have all been shown to promote a number of important emergent literacy skills in Australia and elsewhere by (Hill, 2009, Musonda 2011). Other literacy experiences families engaged in with their children were pretend writing, drawing and scribbling. Engaging children in writing is one the crucial practices for emergent writing just as Lynch (1986) and Hill (2009) put it in their studies.

It was seen in this study that most households, knowingly or unknowingly, did much to help the children to develop their emergent literacy skills. It was found that parents and capable peers told stories to children in the comfort of their homes. This practice resulted in children developing strong oral literacy skills which they used to mediate their way in life. This finding links with what Bruner (1994) had in mind when he argued that human beings organise thoughts and make sense of their lives through the stories they tell themselves and others. Storytelling exposes children to some form of language which is holistic, rich and complex. It has been discovered that storytelling allows children to tune into the rhythms and structures of language and broaden their conceptual worlds and their vocabulary to express themselves. Additionally, this study shows that most children participated

in other rich oral language contexts like riddles and proverbs. Proverbs are rooted in folklore and have been preserved by oral tradition. From these contexts, children developed vocabularies which they could use to describe and talk about almost all the things within their environment. The other skill which children developed from this practice is that of linguistic awareness which has been discussed. It was moreover found that children developed comprehension skills as they could retell a story which they heard from their peers or adults. Although Mwense is a rural district, the sampled villages provided rich emergent literacy context. That is why Banda and Mwanza (2017) argued that children, even in rural areas, are incrementary being exposed to home literacies which should work as resources upon entry into school as stepping stones to learning formal literacy skills.

As Hall (1987) pointed out, parents and other caregivers are important in as far as developing literacy skills is concerned. The picture presented in terms of parents encouraging children to tell the story they write in order to see the words in print in Mwense rural somehow differs from what other research findings show (See McCormick and Mason, 1986). What should be noted here is that by having children explain what they write, they develop necessary phonological awareness which is the ability to manipulate sounds which children hear. These sounds may be within the words or independent of words' meanings. In telling what they write or scribble, when correct spellings are shown to them, children easily associate the words to sounds and they begin to become familiar with the words long before they begin to learn conventionally. In addition, children develop comprehension skills which in turn help to comprehend advanced skills concerning writing and reading. When adults use conversations to expand children's knowledge, they are using a technique known as scaffolding in the Vygotskian language. Parents have chances to scaffold children's learning through

instruction, modelling, questioning and providing feedback for a child's vocabulary development. For those who had time to teach children did mostly through normal daily conversations they had. This is referred to as narrative talk (see McCormick and Mason, 1986). Narrative talk allows adults to provide examples of words and their meanings within a context where the words have an understandable real-life application.

The findings of this study also reveal that some parents changed books for their children to read. This finding is in line with what Bus (2001) found. Bus (2001) further states that changing books for favourite and interest of children increases children's motivation to interact with written materials and eventually increase the chances and opportunities for children to acquire emergent literacy. Bus (2001) states that children's knowledge in both areas of phonological awareness and written language awareness arises from similar contexts and practices, primarily adult-mediated interactions with oral and written language embedded within meaningful, contextualized early childhood experiences. It was also shown in this study that households helped the children to name the letters of the alphabet. In addition to this, some households had time to help the child learn the sounds which letters of the alphabet make (e.g., 'K' makes the /k/ sound). This situation is in agreement with that of Murray (2006) who states that as children learn their alphabet and begins to read, their phonemic or phonological awareness improves.

Emergent literacy skills

As a result of the various literacy experiences, children in Mwense rural developed various emergent literacy skills and abilities.

Holding a pencil/pen correctly

In many children, it was observed that this skill was acquired through different experiences such as participating in and

observing other siblings or parents writing. This skill was well developed in some children and here, suggestions can be made that teachers of grade one can build on the skills children come to school with. Such sentiments have been expressed elsewhere by Hall (1987) who argues that literacy skills that children already possess such as holding a pencil should not be ignored by teachers when they teach initial literacy to children. Children sometimes practice this skill by using sticks with which they draw on the ground. In this way, children can be said to have been prepared for conventional literacy even before they go to school.

Drawing

Drawing was another skill found among children in Mwense District. This paper argues that drawing is like a double edged sword which does not just help children to handle and hold a pencil correctly, but also helps them to become creative as they plan what to draw and how to draw what they have planned. This process takes higher mental activities in which children have to translate what they imagine on to paper, ground or floor as the case maybe. This means that children strive to put on paper the exact picture they have in their minds. Consequently, their mental faculties become sharp which in turn makes it easy for them to acquire literacy and other skills as (Ferreiro & Teberosky (1982). As has been seen from the findings, children were able to draw certain patterns on the ground which prepare them for pattern and shape drawing in early grades when they start formal schooling. Grade one NBTL pupil activity book from pages 1 to 11 have drawing and pattern drawing which would benefit greatly from the emergent literacy experiences that children engage in at home.

Scribbling

It is argued that scribbling advances from drawing circles to producing "text" that young children identify verbally as writing.

Just like drawing, this skill is important as it helps children to learn how to hold a pencil and to help them to see their thoughts in print. When asked if she involved in herself in the scribbling activities of children, one parent said that "*awe abana basambililfye ku sukulu ifya kulemba*" meaning, *no, children only learn at school how to write*. This emanates from the idea that the teaching of reading and writing was entirely the work of teachers. Musonda (2011) argues that in the Zambian perspective, teaching children to read and write is seen as a job of teachers. It is unfortunate to think of learning as something that takes place only in school because much of human learning occurs outside the classroom, and people continue to learn throughout their lives.

Correct holding of a book

Correct holding of books by a child is very important as it reveals a lot about a child's print knowledge. Firstly, if a child knows how to hold a book correctly, it means that he or she knows the flow or direction of print. Secondly, it can be said that a child who knows how to hold the book correctly knows that there is a direction in which print can be read properly and a direction in which it cannot be read properly. This understanding leads us to another conclusion that the child knows that reading follows certain norms and rules. This understanding facilitates in the child's acquisition of literacy as he or she pays attention to the rules governing a particular orthographic representation of a particular language. What can be seen here is what Hall (1987) refers to when he writes about children's amazing ability to handle books. He gives examples of studies which show children practicing pretend reading on books and newspapers which are read by their parents. .

Print and letter Knowledge

Print knowledge is knowledge of standard print and its concepts such as print moves from left-to-right and that turning pages

follows a front-to-back orientation. It was observed that children who had print knowledge were more likely to point at the words and move their finger from left to write as they pretended to read. The researcher concluded that the task of print knowledge was accomplished by children as books are constructed according to a set of conventions that can be understood without being able to read as Clay (1966) puts it. In English and Bemba, these conventions include the left-to-right and top-to bottom direction of print on each page, the sequence and direction in which the print progresses from front to back across pages, the difference between the covers and the pages of the book, the difference between pictures and print on a page, and the meaning of elements of punctuation, including spaces between words and periods at the ends of sentences. This study found that come children had print concept and knew certain conventions about print. This situation is like that of the children found in Clay's (1966) study and it can be said that knowing these conventions of print aids in the process of learning to read and write. For example, Bowey, Tunmer & Pratt (1984) found that scores on Clay's (1966) concepts about Print Test at the beginning of first grade predicted children's reading comprehension and decoding abilities at the end of second grade even after controlling for differences in vocabulary and meta-linguistic awareness. In this study, there was no single child who showed knowledge of all the conventions on print knowledge but almost all the children showed some knowledge about print.

Pretend reading

Children in Mwense rural displayed emergent reading. They pretended to read and sometimes showed lip movement as if they are about to pronounce the words they were looking at on a paper or book. They recognised some of writings, symbols, labels or signs. Teale and Sulzby (1986) argued that pretending to

read and reading environmental print are examples of emergent reading. Before children can read words, they are often able to recognize labels, signs, and other forms of environmental print. It is the argument of this study just like other advocates within the emergent literacy movement such as Goodman (1986) have suggested, this skill demonstrates children's ability to derive the meaning of text within context.

However, this study has not generally shown that there is a direct causal link between the ability to read environmental print and later word identification skills, but has shown that children are able to identify and recognize words which they see in their environment on sign posts, posters and notice board and the clinic, bible and other books in the home. Take for example in this study were able to "read" writings on the pack of Chiko biscuit. And when presented with two different brands of biscuits, bibi and chiko, children were able to point out which one was Chiko and which one was Bibi just by "reading" the labels on the packets. Clay (1966) argues that pretend reading comes with intentionality on the part of the child. Clay (1966) and other scholars have assessed a factor that is termed "intentionality" by asking children what printed words on a page might signify. Children who indicate that they understand the functions of print (e.g., that the print tells a story or gives directions) have high levels of print intentionality. In contrast, children who have low levels of print intentionality do not indicate that they understand that print is a symbol system with linguistic meaning (e.g., they may simply name letters when asked what words might signify). Like children in Mwense rural, Purcell-Gates (1996) found that children's understanding of the functions of print (i.e., intentionality) was related to children's print concepts, understanding of the alphabetic principle, and concepts of writing (i.e., use of letter-like symbols). A number of qualitative studies such as that of Musonda (2011) have examined how preschool-aged children behave in situations in which

reading is typically required in order to uncover the knowledge and beliefs that children may have concerning reading. For example, Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) conducted an extensive study of 4-to 6-year-old children in Argentina and described what appeared to be an orderly developmental progression of children's understanding of print. For instance, 4-year-old children recognized the distinction between "just letters" and "something to read" (typically three or more letters). Some evidence suggests that these early manifestations of print motivation expressed by children are associated with emergent literacy skills and later reading achievement (Thomas, 1984). A child who is interested in literacy is more likely to facilitate shared reading interactions, notice print in the environment, ask questions about the meaning of print, and spends more time reading once he or she is able.

Letter Knowledge

Further, the study showed that some children had knowledge of letters as some parents and older siblings taught letters to the children. The teaching of letters was done in different ways. The most prominent ones included singing the alphabet song and spelling sessions held by older siblings who were in school. What is being put across in this study is that a beginning reader who does not know the letters of the alphabet cannot learn which sounds those letters relate to. In some cases, this task is facilitated by the fact that some letter names provide clues to their sounds. Take for instance, "k" has a sound /k/ and the letter "p" has the sound /p/. Knowledge of the alphabet at entry into school is one of the strongest predictors of short-term and long-term literacy success. It is again suggested here, that higher levels of letter knowledge may reflect a greater underlying knowledge of and familiarity with print or other literacy-related processes. Consequently, whereas teaching letter names may increase surface letter knowledge,

it may not affect other underlying literacy-related processes, such as print familiarity. A number of related studies, however, have indicated that letter knowledge significantly influences the acquisition of some phonological sensitivity skills (Stahl and Murray, 1994).

Narrative and Listening Comprehension skills

All children proved to have listening comprehension skills. This was observed during storytelling and riddle sessions carried out every evening and round a fire. Children were able in some cases to retell the folktales which were told by their peers or adults. The children were also able to tell the story in the order of introduction, main body and conclusion. Narrative skills include being able to understand and tell stories and being able to describe things. During folktale sessions, the researcher observed that most of the children were able to retell the stories which they heard from adults. This retelling of the story came from what they heard from capable peers and adults. This practice was also observed in South Africa among children below the school going age (Holdaway, 1979).

Based on all the findings of this study, it can be reiterated that emergent literacy is an important component in children's literacy development. Emergent literacy can be associated to horizontal discourse which Bernstein (1999) describes as everyday common sense knowledge while school literacy is called vertical discourse. Thus, in the school set up, Mwanza (2016) advised that teachers should view and use the horizontal discourse (emergent literacy) as resources or stepping stones to accessing the vertical discourses. That is why teacher training institutions need to ensure that teachers are prepared adequately both during school-based learning, peer teaching and school teaching experience (Manchishi and Mwanza, 2013; Manchishi and Mwanza, 2016

and Manchishi and Mwanza 2018) on how to practice integrating home based literacies and school-based literacy in the process of teaching initial literacy. Further, there is also need to sensitise parents on their role in heling children develop emergent literacy due to its usefulness during formal schooling. This calls for positive attitudes towards collaborative home reading between parents and children as well as parental resourcefulness in literacy. Parents', children's and teachers' positive attitudes towards emergent literacy is very crucial both for the development and appreciation of emergent literacy because as Mwanza (2017, 2017) observed, attitudes held by implementers are crucial in the successful execution of any undertaking.

Conclusions

This study gives various insights into the emergent literacy experiences that children participate in with their families in Mwense District. These experiences result into emergent literacy skills which children go with to school. One conclusion drawn from in this study is that literacy experiences are embodied in the social and cultural ways of life as literacy practices and events happen in people daily lives. For instance, children participated in riddle, song and session not as a school activity but as a way of life in which they learn about their society. Further, school activities and home activities are in some cases intertwined because of the ecological system in which children were brought up. As a result, it was difficult to isolate literacy experiences which were sorely familial and those which were school related as family members who engage in literacy experiences with children were either part of the school going community or had been to school before. This means that teachers should start from what children already know from so that the transition from home literacy to school literacy can be smooth. This study further concludes that even though formal

teaching of reading and writing to pre-schoolers is not done in Mwense rural, children generally exhibited enough literacy skills. Apart from peer scaffolding of literacy practices, other factors including parental scaffolding in literacy related practices, child participation in activities such as wall decoration and sculpting led to children developing emergent literacy skills. All these skills can be developed by formal instruction by teachers.

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