

**PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES OF 'STAY-AT-HOME MOTHERS' IN
RELATION TO THE EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR
CHILDREN**

by

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B. A. SOLOMON

ABSTRACT

The study operates under the belief that the period of early childhood is a critical time in the life of every individual; that it is crucial that a sound foundation is laid as far as a child's early literacy development is concerned and that the mother's role in this development is critical. Using the Vygotskian sociocultural perspective of education as a philosophical guide, the study addresses two main questions, namely: What are the perspectives of 'stay-at-home mothers' regarding their role in the in the early literacy development of their children; and what are the daily practices of these mothers in this regard?

This qualitative, multiple-case study investigates the perspectives and practices of a group of ten middle-to-high-income 'stay-at-home moms' and mostly 'stay-at-home moms' in relation to the early literacy development of their young children. Over a period of approximately seven months, individual and focus-group interviews and observations were conducted in the homes of participants.

The results show that both similarities and differences exist amongst participating mothers in terms of their perspectives and practices. The participants generally operate within the following models (or combinations thereof): facilitator-supporter; companion-teacher; and role model. The participating mothers find their experience as 'stay-at-home moms' both rewarding and challenging. They tend to put their challenges, which seem overwhelming to some of them at times, into perspective by considering the current positive results of their investment for their children and for themselves and by looking forward to good results which they expect to see in the future. In spite of the fact that participants are generally knowledgeable about what early literacy entails and about what they should be doing as critical role-players in this development, findings in this study indicate that SAHMs would benefit from both professional and informal support and training.

Finally, the perspectives and practices of 'stay-at-home moms' is an under-researched area, particularly in South Africa. Educators, parents and the community at large would benefit from increased research in this area as well from the implementation of specific programmes to provide support, training and intervention where necessary.

KEY WORDS:

'Stay-at-home mothers'

Early literacy development

Young child

Sociocultural perspective

Vygotsky

Mothers' roles

DECLARATION

I, BELINDA ANDRÉ SOLOMON,

declare that this dissertation submitted towards an M.Ed. degree at the University of the Free State is my original and independent work, and has never been submitted to any other university for degree purposes.

B. A. SOLOMON

NOVEMBER 2009

DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this dissertation to the following persons:

Lincoln John Solomon

and

Caylin Sarah Solomon

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I wish to acknowledge the following persons who assisted me in the submission of this research project:

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CHAPTER 1

ORIENTATING PERSPECTIVES

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The first seven years in the life of every human being is a period that is regarded by some as a 'window of opportunity' in terms providing quality care and education (Kuzma 2006:9; Hadeed 2005:1). The South African *Education White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Education* (Department of Education 2001:11), refers to evidence that shows that the period of early childhood, which it regards as the period of birth to nine years, is critical for the development of the potential of human beings (Department of Education 2001:7).

The years between the ages one and four especially, is a period of rapid brain development. The human brain will reach adult size by five or six years old and thus it is during this time that the greatest changes in mental capacity take place. The early years could therefore be considered as a prime time for learning (Kuzma 2005:422; Bardige & Segal 2005:72). Thus, during this critical time of a human being's life, rapid and important development is taking place, often unbeknown to others, since there is not always ready evidence thereof. For example, no literary texts are being produced, phonemes and word construction may not be quite in place, and books are not being read (that is, according to adult standards). However, much groundwork is laid before a child can actually read in the commonly understood sense of the term (Lancaster 2003:145). Literacy begins well before a child enters formal schooling, so it is therefore crucial that children be guided on their road to literacy whilst they are still young (Hodgskiss 2007:13; DeLaCova 2003:1; Du Plessis, Naude & Viljoen 2003:21; Mendelsohn 2002:193).

A myriad of studies have shown that early childhood literacy experiences lay the foundation for better performance in language and literacy, not only in the first and second grades of a child's schooling, but throughout the school years (Bardige & Segal 2005:2;

Willenberg 2005:165; Mendelsohn 2002:20). Few would probably argue that the development of literacy in the life of every child is essential to that child's development and ultimate success, but who is responsible for ensuring that literacy proficiency is achieved? Formal school literacy practices have, and still do play their important role in the life of the individual child. However, what about those literacy practices which take place outside of the school context – in different cultures, communities and families? Are they important? What about children who spend most (or much) of their time at home with their families? What kind of literacy experiences are they exposed to? How do the mothers of such young children understand their role in their children's literacy development?

This chapter begins the investigation to the above issues by providing a background to the research question. It describes the theoretical framework which will guide the research, namely the Vygotskian sociocultural model of education, and also introduces the research design and methodology, which will focus on observing unstructured, unfolding, real-life situations, and creating meaning by in-depth interviewing. This methodology follows both the Vygotskian philosophy, as well as the philosophical foundation of the so-called "New Literacy studies" (Ewing 2003:15; Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003:34,35). This chapter also provides for the reader, a clarification of important concepts and will finally provide a preview of what can be expected in the chapters to follow.

For the sake of ease of reading and writing, and with due acknowledgement of the sensitivity surrounding issues of gender, I will make alternate use of "he" and "she" in this paper.

1.2 BACKGROUND

1.2.1 Early childhood literacy development

The area of Early Childhood Development (ECD) has come under increasing attention in many countries in the last decade, as the recognition of the importance of this period of life

has become more widespread (Hall, Larson & Marsh 2003:xix; Bridgemohan 2002:253). This can be seen, for example in South Africa, where policies and attitudes have been changed in favour of early childhood development (Bridgemohan 2002:253).

Three global events have had a major influence in this regard. The first such event was UNESCO's *World Conference for All* in March 1990. This conference highlighted the fact that learning begins at birth and called for the involvement of families, communities, and appropriate institutional programmes in providing early childhood care and education. It also emphasised the importance of a primary schooling system which takes into account children's varied needs and cultures (UNESCO 1990).

The second event, the *World Summit for Children* (1990), which took place on 29-30 September 1990, synthesised the principles and concerns of children and urged the world's societies to work towards children's enhanced development. It was emphasised amongst other things, that a concerted effort should be made to reduce illiteracy and to provide educational opportunities for all children, enabling them to thrive in a supportive, nurturing cultural and social context as they grow towards adulthood (Bridgemohan 2002:53; UNICEF 1990).

The final event, the United Nation's *Convention of the Rights of the Child* in 1995, promoted the value of the family and the principles of shared parental responsibilities (Bridgemohan 2002:253). The convention emphasised the importance of providing the necessary learning environment for children and it recognised that parents have the most important role in the rearing of their children (UNICEF 1995).

The increased interest and investment in early childhood development in general, places specific emphasis on the area of early childhood literacy. Arguably, the most important area of the curriculum in the early years is learning to read and write (Hall 2003:315), since

early childhood literacy lays the foundation for future school performance (Mendelsohn 2002:200).

In the last two decades there has been increased political interest, as well as a resurgence of research in the area of early childhood literacy. Formal research into the ways in which children learn about the written language have been conducted for over a century, but the last few years have seen many changes in the definitions and concepts of early literacy development, important pronouncements about literacy, the establishment of programmes and promises to cure supposed low literacy rates (Gillen & Hall 2003:1; Comber 2003:355). Today, early childhood literacy development remains an ever-evolving concept and is seen as a dynamic social practice, where context and culture assume the primary roles (Gillen & Hall 2003:10; Cairney 2003:85; Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003:34,35). Furthermore, early literacy has moved beyond the limitations and restrictions of schooling and has extended to all kinds of domains including the essential domain of the home (Cairney 2003:85; Gillen & Hall 2003:10; Hannon 2003:99; Makin 2003:327; Reynolds 2001:332). This last point has special significance for this study, as it seeks to investigate this latter domain as an important site for literacy. Additionally, the fact that childhood experiences are now regarded as valid and essential to literacy acquisition provides sound rationale for conducting a study which will focus on this period of early childhood.

1.2.2 The context of the family

The home is an important site for early literacy. Many educators agree that the home is generally the place where children, with their families, have their first literacy experiences (Willis, Kabler-Babbit, & Zuckerman 2007:625; Aram & Levin 2002:202; Cairney 2003:85). Research has shown that young children's initiation into literacy practices, and indeed their success in this realm, is shaped by the interests, practices, attitudes, interactive styles, abilities, and the written language displayed by their parents and significant others (Hannon 2003:99; Cairney 2003:85; Bardige & Segal 2005:11,78). In fact, especially in the realm of family literacy studies, family literacy practices are seen as indispensable to a full understanding of how children become literate. Here, the role of the school in developing early literacy is seen as secondary to that of parents, and a full and genuine recognition of pre-existing family practices is accorded (Hannon 2003:99).

1.2.3 'Stay-at-home' mothers

The 'stay-at-home' mother commonly known as the 'stay-at-home mom' (SAHM), generally does not work outside of the home and stays at home to look after the children and run the household while her husband earns an income. Her main sphere of influence and occupation is thus her home (Einwechter 2004; Answers.com). There are a number of terms to describe such women, including the terms 'homemaker,' 'housewife,' 'keeper at home,' 'woman of the house,' and even 'Retro housewife' (Einwechter 2004; Answers.com). Although the role of the SAHM is filled predominantly by women, since the late twentieth century especially, there has been an increase in the number of fathers who stay home while their wives go out to work. Terms such as 'househusband,' 'stay-at-home dad,' 'stay-at-home spouse', or 'house spouse' are commonly in use for such husbands (The Guardian 2005; McKay, About.com; Weston, MSN Money).

The number of mothers who work outside of the home exceeds by far the number of SAHMs. According to recent statistics, in the United Kingdom, for example, more than two-thirds of working-age women (68%) with dependent children were in employment in the second quarter of 2008 (National Statistics UK 2008). It is quite evident from the statistics that the age of the children does influence the employment rate. Furthermore, of those working women with children aged under five, 57% were in employment, while for those whose youngest child was aged five to ten, the rate was 71%, and 78% for those whose youngest child was aged 11 to 15 (National Statistics UK 2008). In the United States, during the four-year period 1994-98, the overall labour force participation rate of mothers with infant children (under age one) increased from 53 percent to 59 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2003). However, interestingly, between 1998 and 2002, the rate dropped from 59 percent to 55 percent, not different from the 1994 level. This marks the first recorded decline in labour force participation of mothers with infant children since the Census Bureau began calculating this measure in 1976 (U.S. Census Bureau 2003). According to Wallis (2007:89), in the United States, the proportion of working married mothers with children under age 3 dropped from 61% in 1997 to 58% in 2002.

According to Weston (Weston, MSN Money), the Bureau of Labor Statistics finds that 40% of mothers with children under 6 stay at home and that 13% of South African households include a stay-at-home spouse. In South Africa then too, the number of mothers in the workplace exceeds the number of those who are at home. According to recent statistics (Lehohla, Statistics South Africa (SA) 2009: xi), there has been an overall year-on-year increase (372 000 or 2.9%) in the number of “not economically active” persons in South Africa. It is interesting to note that home-makers contributed 301 000 persons to this figure. The number of homemakers has increased by 85 000 (3.3%) between the last quarter of 2008 and the first quarter of 2009 and the year-on-year change reflects a growth of 301 000 persons (12.6%) (Lehohla, Statistics SA 2009: x).

Again, with reference to South Africa, statistics reveal that in the first quarter of 2009, 8 212 000 women made up the labour force, and 7 998 000 women were not economically active (Lehohla, Statistics SA 2009:2). The unemployment rate for women is currently 26.2% (Lehohla, Statistics SA 2009:22). While many women, (more than one quarter of the female labour force) want to work, but are currently not working, and are thus unemployed, there are many women who choose not to work. According to the statistics, there are 7 278 000 women who are not economically active for reasons other than being discouraged job seekers (Lehohla, Statistics SA 2009:22). This study will concern itself not with mothers who are unemployed or who cannot find work, but it will deal with mothers who are employable and who are financially able to choose not to work.

1.2.4 Early Literacy Development: a South African Perspective

South African researchers and educators are in agreement with their international colleagues about the nature and the importance of early literacy development. They echo the stance expressed earlier, that literacy development stretches as far back as early childhood, and South African studies (which corroborate international research) provide evidence that good quality early childhood development experiences produce significant social, economic, and developmental benefits for all (Atmore & Arnott 2004:32; Du Plessis et al. 2003:21; Prinsloo & Stein 2004:69). Atmore and Arnott (2004:32) for example, state

that making a greater investment in the early years will do a lot to redress South Africa's problem with illiteracy in general.

A recent study by two researchers in the Western Cape Department of Education into the literacy and numeracy performance of Grade 6 learners revealed that almost two-thirds of the learners in this region failed literacy and numeracy tests. These two researchers attributed the cause of this dire situation to the lack of meaningful investments in early literacy development (Atmore & Arnott 2004:32).

The South African National Department of Education in South Africa agrees that an early investment is important, as it states that the evidence shows that the early years are critical for the development of the potential of human beings and therefore makes it clear that the government sees many benefits in investing in ECD. One of these benefits is that the child will benefit from a solid educational foundation during the early months and years of its life. The department foresees other positive spin-offs of such an investment, which includes increased productivity over a lifetime and a better standard of living when the child becomes an adult. Furthermore, later cost-savings in remedial education and health care, as well as higher earnings for parents will result from an investment in ECD (DoE 2001:11,12). The development of early literacy is seen to be of crucial importance in the South African context.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Internationally and locally, therefore, there is consensus that where it concerns the early literacy development of human beings, that the early years are important, and that families, and especially mothers, play a critical role in facilitating this development. However, it needs to be asked: What do mothers think? What do the primary role players in this whole scenario understand their role to be?

Willenberg (2002:3), when discussing the importance of a positive home environment with regard to the acquisition of literacy, contends that the beliefs of caregivers and their approach to child-rearing are likely to determine how, if at all, they interact with their children concerning literacy. For example, if adults perceive that their role involves teaching, it is expected that the interaction between adults and children tends to be didactic. Conversely, if adults see literacy as the domain of the school, it is likely that they will have more limited interactions around literacy with their children (Willenberg 2002:3). The mother's beliefs regarding her role in the development of her child will thus influence how she interacts with her child and what she exposes her child to. These early childhood experiences will impact in turn, on the child's success in literacy throughout the school years and possibly beyond. It is thus generally accepted that the mother's perception of her role as teacher will have a direct influence on the child and that her own literacy practices and beliefs will actually predict her child's print-related knowledge (Skibbe, Justice, Zucker, & McGinty 2008:68; Oosthuizen & Boucher 2007:68).

Since mothers' perspectives of their role in the early literacy development of their children impact so directly on what they do with their children, and since the early literacy experiences of young children are so vital to their literacy development, and the mother's influence so strong, it seems to make sense to investigate the perspectives of mothers themselves regarding their role. In light of this fact, the two-fold research problem can be stated as:

What are the perspectives of a group of SAHM's in relation to the early literacy development of their children; and what types of literacy experiences do they provide for their children on a day-to-day basis?

In South Africa, little is actually known about the specific strategies that mothers employ in order to develop the literacy skills of their young children. In general, research about out-of-school literacy experiences of children aged eight or younger is a vastly under-researched area (Knobel & Lankshear 2003:55).

1.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework which guides this research project is based on the Vygotskian view of learning.

1.4.1 The role of education in a child's development

For Vygotsky, it was imperative to understand the relationship between learning and development, or the relationship between school instruction and the mental development of the child in order that educational practices be established which would maximise the development of children (Newman & Holzman 1993:24).

Vygotsky posited that “learning leads development” not in the linear sense, where one is necessarily the cause of the other, but where one is a necessary condition in order for the other to exist. He maintained however, that teaching can only be effective when it “points the road for development” (Newman & Holzman 1993:147; Van der Veer & Valsiner 1991: 330; Vygotsky 1962:101). Vygotsky attempted to show that the “development of psychological foundations for instruction in basic subjects did not precede instruction but unfold in a continuous interaction with the contributions of instruction” (Vygotsky 1962: 101,102). The teacher, who may also be the mother, therefore, essentially creates the conditions for certain cognitive processes to develop, without directly implanting them in the child (Vygotsky 1962:101,102; Van der Veer & Valsiner 1991: 330). For Vygotsky then, intentional instruction is important in order for children to gain the necessary literacy skills.

1.4.2 The zone of proximal development

The place where unity of learning and development is achieved is, according to Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Newman & Holzman 1993:146). For Vygotsky, the ZPD is the difference between a child's “actual development as determined by

independent problem solving” and the higher level of “potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with a more capable peer.” It can also be seen as the divergence between a child’s actual development and proximal development, and thus basically refers to the idea that what a child can do collaboratively or with assistance today, he or she can do independently or competently tomorrow (Cole 1985:155; Van der Veer & Valsiner 1991:329; Moll 1990:3). For Vygotsky, child development cannot be understood by what the child knows “now” since that would be represent a denial of the fact that development begins before it becomes measurable in practice (Van der Veer & Valsiner 1991:329).

1.4.3 The sociocultural perspective of learning

Vygotsky believed that the individual and the social were “mutually constitutive elements of a single, interacting system [where] cognitive development was treated as a process of acquiring culture.” Vygotsky and his students called their approach a “sociocultural” or “sociohistorical” theory of psychological processes (Cole 1985:148; Moll 1990:1). He posited that all higher psychological functions are initially social interactions between people, and particularly between adults and children. The child initially experiences active problem-solving activities in the presence of others and eventually does so on his or her own (Brown & Ferrara 1985: 281, 282; Cole 1985:2).

In terms of early literacy, the last 25 years have seen the acceptance of the study of early literacy as a socioculturally situated practice “in which culture and context take on principle roles.” In this regard, the concept of community is important, and the relationship between language, literacy, culture, and development is highlighted (Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003:34; Baquedano-Lopez 2003:66; Pretorius & Machet 2004:131; Machet 2002:1).

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study considers the investigation of the following two questions as its primary aim:

‘What are the perspectives of a group of SAHM’s in relation to the early literacy development of their children, and what kinds of literacy experiences do they provide for their children on a day-to-day basis?’

1.6 RESEARCH DESIGN

This research project employs a qualitative design. Qualitative research may be defined as “a multiperspective approach (using different qualitative techniques and data collection methods) to social interaction, aimed at describing, making sense of, interpreting or reconstructing this interaction in terms of the meanings that the participants attach to it” (Bridgemohan 2002:79). My research will therefore focus on the participants’ perspectives – their interpretation of the realities that they experience. I will also rely on my own observations of the phenomena under scrutiny and describe, as objectively as possible, what it is seen and heard. I will thus play the role of a ‘participant observer,’ which involves intense observing and listening and where the researcher sees the world as the participant does (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:347).

1.7 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of this study, a small group of mothers will be analysed. Although this group will not be considered as representative of the entire population, if the research is meaningful and the report is well written, specific elements of the findings are transferable and can therefore be extended to other settings, according to Henning (2004a:71).

1.7.1 Selection of Participants

Purposive sampling, which is typical of qualitative research (Maxwell 2005:88), will be employed, as this method provides for information-rich cases (Hodgskiss 2007:34). The following selection or defining criteria have been selected to direct this process:

- mothers who are mostly at home, and who are primarily responsible for the care of their children;
- mothers whose child or children are between the ages of 3 to 5 years and who do not attend a learning centre on a full-time basis; and
- mothers who are at home by choice and not because they are unable to find work for whatever reason.

In order to find mothers who matched the criteria above, I commenced by approaching all the churches (eight) in a Bloemfontein suburb called Universitas, which is in the south-western part of Bloemfontein. A list of children in the 3-5 age bracket, who attend Sabbath schools and Sunday schools in the area were requested from churches, along with the telephone numbers of their parents. The parents were contacted telephonically in order to ascertain which of these families fitted the selection criteria. Mothers who matched the selection criteria were then requested to be part of the study. Those who acquiesced then introduced me to other potential subjects. The method just described is an example of purposive (Walliman 2005:279) or snowball sampling. Participants were fully informed about the aims of the study, either by a formal letter and/or by comprehensive discussion. Appointments were then made to begin the fieldwork process.

1.7.2 Data-gathering Methods

A number of different cases were investigated in an attempt to answer the research question. The approach to the study was therefore a multiple-case study approach. The particular methods that were employed to investigate the research question were individual, semi-structured interviews; a focus-group interview; and observations.

1.7.2.1 Semi-structured interviews

The primary data-gathering method that was employed was the semi-structured interview. All these interviews were conducted with each participant individually, in their homes. Since the interviews were audio-taped, they thus provide verbatim records about how the participants experienced the relevant phenomena (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:355; Denzin & Lincoln 2000:646).

The interviewing method was semi-structured. This type of interviewing, as opposed to the more formal, structured interviewing method is used in qualitative investigations because it is more “open-ended and flexible, allowing one to probe in order to obtain in-depth data” (Merriam, 2001 as cited in Hodgskiss 2007:38). Since specific information was required from all the respondents in this type of interview, specific themes were determined ahead of time, but as the need arose during the interview, new questions were added, and irrelevant ones were discarded.

1.7.2.2 Focus-group interview

Another qualitative data-gathering technique which was used to corroborate the data gathered by different means was the focus group interview. Such confirmation of data potentially increases not only the validity of the findings, but also the credibility of the study (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:360; Denzin & Lincoln 2000:651). Focus group interviews involve a systematic questioning of several individuals with similar backgrounds and experiences simultaneously in either a formal or an informal setting. It typically consists of between 8 to 10 individuals (Nkopodi 2006: 70; McMillan & Schumacher 2006:360; Denzin & Lincoln 2000:651). The focus group interview was both audio- and video-taped.

1.7.2.3 Participant Observations

A third data-gathering technique that was used was participant observation. Observation has been described as the “fundamental base of all research methods” (Denzin & Lincoln

2000:673). It involves recording ongoing behaviour without attempting to influence it, and thus takes place in natural settings (McBurney 2001:215; Denzin & Lincoln 2000:674).

The abovementioned observations can be reported in the form of descriptions either through “open-ended narrative” or through the use of checklists or field guides (Denzin & Lincoln 2000:674). In this study, the open-ended narrative approach was used, as well as an observation schedule. Field notes were taken during the observations, and reflective notes were written down thereafter.

1.7.3 Analysis of the data

In this study, data analysis is seen as an ongoing, emerging process as opposed to a linear process (Henning 2004b:127; Maxwell 2005:95), and thus in the analysis of the data, the first data set served as a foundation for further data collection and analysis (Corbin & Strauss 2008:162).

I firstly broke down the initial transcribed data set (first interview) into manageable pieces (natural breaks in thought or direction), then I examined each particular data section in depth, exploring for ideas and interpreting these ideas by brainstorming and writing what came to mind in the form of a memorandum (or memo) (Corbin & Strauss 2008:163). Each memorandum was then labelled with a concept which was subject to change and review as the analysis progressed (Corbin & Strauss 2008:163). Each memorandum reflected the date on which it was written, the conceptual label, with the actual text followed by the analysis (Corbin & Strauss 2008:164). When the first text had been analysed and interpreted, the following text in the data set was analysed in the same way, and a new concept or code was created. This process was followed until the entire document (first data set) had been analysed.

Once this had been completed, a summary memorandum was devised in which themes or categories were highlighted, allowing for further development of thought. The second data

set was analysed in the much the same way as the first, but at this stage, concepts had already been established and these were built on as further concepts were investigated (Corbin & Strauss 2008:185). The first set of concepts that had been obtained from the first data set was compared for similarities and differences against the following set. These concepts were then either expanded by adding new properties and dimensions, or new concepts were added to the list, or previous concepts revised when another term was found to be more suitable (Corbin & Strauss 2008:57).

After the data were analysed, they started to make more sense, and connections were made between the different categories (Corbin & Strauss 2008:139). The task then was to 'see the whole', or to discover the relationships between the categories and specific integrated primary themes were extracted and constructed from the categories. The processed and organised data were then used, along with evidence from the literature, to produce valid findings and to develop theory (Henning 2004b:106-108; Henning 2004c:5).

1.8 DELIMITATION OF THE RESEARCH

Children in the 3-5 year range (preschool children) and their mothers were the focus of this study. The type of mother used for the research was the SAHM, or the 'mostly' SAHM. The research was conducted in the city of Bloemfontein in the Free State Province.

1.9 OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

To remain in line with one of Vygotsky's aims, I will continue in my quest to create meaning in this dissertation by providing the definitions of a few key terms.

Perspective

The word *perspective* may be defined as “the state of one's ideas, the facts known to one,” (Perspective 1), or a “subjective evaluation of relative significance; a point of view” (Perspective 2). This study aims therefore, to come to an understanding of the point of view or the ideas of mothers regarding their role in the area concerned.

Practice

Practice in this context, refers to a “habitual or customary performance” or “custom”, (Practice) or simply, what is normally done by mothers

‘Stay-at-home’ moms

Although the research and its findings could similarly apply to fathers and mothers, SAHM's were the primary focus of this study. It is acknowledged however, that all mothers, whether they are at home full-time with their children, or whether they work full-time or part-time, have an important role to play in the development of their children. The importance of a mother's role does not become diminished in lieu of her working status. A ‘stay-at-home’ mom may best be described as either one of the following:

- the person within a family who is primarily concerned with the management of the household, whether or not she works outside the home; or
- a mother whose prime occupation is to care for her family and/or her home.

This study therefore includes the following types of mothers:

- those who are at home full time, who do not do any kind of work outside of the home and whose children do not attend preschool or play school at all;
- those who are at home full time, do not do any kind of work outside of the home and whose children attend preschool or play school five mornings a week or less; and
- those who work outside of the home occasionally (once or twice a week) when their children are at preschool. Their children attend preschool mornings only.

Early Literacy Development

The terms *early literacy*, *pre-literacy* and *emergent literacy* all refer to what happens to the child in terms of her literacy development before she begins to read formally. All three

terms will be used interchangeably. The concept of early literacy refers to the “reading and writing behaviours that precede and develop into conventional literacy, needed to become successful readers” (Pretorius & Machet 2004:39).

Young Child

Here, the focus will be on early childhood which generally refers to the period from birth to at least nine years (Department of Education 2001:5). For the purposes of this study, the focus will be on the 3-5 year age range, which is the preschool age group (Department of Social Development 2006:9).

1.10 DISSERTATION STRUCTURE

In order to give the reader both an indication of the issues discussed in this dissertation, and also to enhance meaning, a tentative structure for the rest of the document is provided.

Chapter one serves to provide an introduction to this research dissertation, primarily by stating the research problem, providing a background to this problem and by describing how this problem will be solved. Chapter two consists of an in-depth discussion of the literature relevant to this study. Chapter three serves to give to the reader a clear indication as to how the research problem is investigated and answered; thus, the research methodology. In Chapter four the data is presented, analysed and discussed. This chapter thus shows how the research problem is answered by providing a discussion of the research findings and the conclusions drawn from the results in the light of the literature reviewed. Furthermore, it shows how the findings relate to established findings, theories and current research. The final chapter, Chapter five, highlights the themes discussed in the previous chapter. It also deals with the implications of the findings, as well as recommendations for further research. Finally, it will include a brief discussion regarding the limitations of the study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter served as an introduction to this study. In it, I discussed issues such as the background to the study and the research problem namely, 'the perspectives and practices of mothers regarding their role in the early literacy development of their young children.' It also introduced the philosophical framework which guides this study, namely the Vygotskian sociocultural framework, the research methodology, a definition of important concepts and a brief summary of what can be expected in the rest of this dissertation.

This chapter begins by exploring the current understanding of early literacy. Thereafter, contemporary perspectives of early literacy are discussed including the current status of early literacy research. Issues surrounding learning to read and write are also considered. Contextual factors which affect early literacy development are highlighted next, and finally, the practical application of a few Vygotskian concepts are discussed.

Although this chapter discusses various perspectives of early literacy, as well as different components essential to literacy acquisition following the Vygotskian perspective, early literacy will be considered from a sociocultural perspective. In current early literacy research, it is generally agreed that "young children learn by exploring home, neighbourhood, and community while interacting with human beings who love and nurture them" (Reynolds 2001:332).

Another aspect of education which is derived from Vygotsky's work, is the consideration of

the active role that peers and adults play in guiding young children's cognitive growth (Chatry-Komarek 2003:62). In this study, the major role player of focus, will be the 'stay-at-home' mother (SAHM).

This chapter also discusses a myriad of concepts, skills and knowledge that need to be in place in the early years. However, it needs to be emphasised that reading has been given high priority by teachers and educators with regard to early literacy development (Willis et al. 2007:630; Palmer & Bayley 2005:5; Yola Center 2005:21; Aram & Levin 2002:203; Hirsch Jr. 1997:11), with claims by some, that reading aloud to children is the single most important thing that parents can do to help children build the skills essential for reading success (Willis et al. 2007:634; Aram & Levin 2002:203; Hirsch Jr. 1997:11). It has been shown that children who become good readers are likely to be successful both in school and in life (Bardige & Segal 2005:324,330,352).

2.2 THE CONCEPT: EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

2.2.1 What early literacy is not, versus what it is

Early childhood literacy has come to be a major research focus only since the beginning of the 21st century (Gillen & Hall 2003:1; Comber 2003:355). Prior to the 1960s, the behaviourist view, with its emphasis on biological maturation and reading readiness determined children's success in literacy and largely limited research into early literacy (Gillen & Hall 2003:4; Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003: 36; Lancaster 2003:145). According to this view, children had to reach the right 'stage' before they were 'ready' to cope with the cognitive and symbolic demands which reading and writing present (Lancaster 2003:145). Furthermore, childhood expressions of, or experiences with literacy have not always been taken seriously. Reading and writing in the conventional sense, were regarded as simply non-existent until a child went to school, since there was such a strong distinction drawn between being a reader and being a non-reader (Gillen & Hall 2003:4,5,6; Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003:36; Lancaster 2003:145). Children's early writing was traditionally described as merely 'scribbles' and was regarded as purposeless; simply necessary stages on the way to something more meaningful. Now it is clear that nothing is wasted and that each constituent of reading and writing behaviours continues to be used and to

evolve, and that each does reflect intention and meaning (Lancaster 2003:146,151,152).

The development of literacy cannot be measured in the same way that literacy, in its commonly understood sense, can be measured (Lancaster 2003:146). Even though there is no ready evidence in young children that this development takes place consistently, much groundwork is being laid (in ideal circumstances), before a child learns to read and write formally (Bardige & Segal 2005:5; Prinsloo & Stein 2004:69; Gillen & Hall 2003:6; Lancaster 2003:145). Learning to read does not happen overnight, or as soon as children find themselves in school. On the contrary, it is a process reflecting continuous development of literacy-related skills and experiences. This process takes many years and it includes both explicit instruction and lots of playful practice with words, sounds, symbols, stories, and books (Willis et al. 2007:625; Bardige & Segal 2005:2,3; Ewing 2003:19; Lancaster 2003:152; Mendelsohn 2002:193). Children younger than three are already exploring graphic systems and are learning how these systems can represent significant features of their personal, social and cultural experiences (Lancaster 2003:146). Babies, for example, as soon as they gain control over their movements, explore and learn whilst they do so. They notice sights and sounds that go together; they enjoy communicating and conversing, and expressing curiosity. All these early pursuits are the roots of language and literacy (Bardige & Segal 2005:3).

Children are not passive 'recipients' of literacy, and the literacy development that takes place in early childhood is not static, but continuous (Ewing 2003:19; Lancaster 2003:152). Neither is early childhood a time when children are restricted by a lack of cognitive, social and linguistic development; rather, it is a time when children are interested in learning, when they are actively involved in matters of making and representing meaning, testing hypotheses and assigning meaning to print (Ewing 2003:152; Gillen & Hall 2003:9; Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003:38). Children are said to have theories and experiences about the possibilities of language, literacy and other modes of communication (Prinsloo & Stein 2004:69), and that they have real knowledge and expectations about the reading and writing that develops during the preschool years (Pretorius & Machet 2004:133).

2.2.2. Conceptualising early literacy

Early literacy, or preliteracy, has been defined as “a child’s literacy-related exposures and experiences from birth until solo reading” (Willis et al. 2007:625). It therefore includes practices such as ‘pretend’ reading, writing, ‘scribbling’, as well as children’s symbolic play. In addition, it recognises the importance and validity of children’s own (genuine) theories and experiences about the possibilities of language, literacy and other modes of communication, as well as children’s expectations of reading and writing (Prinsloo & Stein 2004:69; Pretorius & Machet 2004:133). Early literacy includes a wide range of knowledge, concepts and skills that need to be in place before formal literacy learning can occur at school. This can include learning how to hold a book properly, how to turn the pages and interpret the pictures and also having books read to them (Willis et al. 2007:625; Palmer & Bayley 2005:79; Bardige & Segal 2005:5; Pretorius & Machet 2004:39). It basically involves children learning about the role of print in their lives as they try to recognise and interpret symbols, as they observe regular family activities such as watching mother or father make a shopping list, writing down a message or phone number and getting information from books, and as they simply communicate with their caregivers (Bardige & Segal 2005:5; Pretorius & Machet 2004:39). Children’s involvement in memorising and repeating rhymes or story refrains and making up their own stories are also important manifestations of early literacy behaviours (Willis et al. 2007:625).

The concept, early literacy development is one that is evolving constantly (Gillen & Hall 2003:10), and literacy pedagogy remains a hotly contested issue (Hall 2003:215). Today there are many different spheres or facets of early literacy that have been identified and that are emphasised by different researchers and educators. These include inter alia, emergent literacy, family literacy, the new literacy studies, as well as sociocultural views of literacy. Three of the aforementioned, namely emergent literacy, family literacy and the new literature studies will be discussed below.

2.2.2.1 Emergent literacy

The concept emergent literacy was first introduced by Clay (Hodgskiss 2007:6) in the 1960s to describe the behaviours seen in young children when they used books and other

written material in non-conventional ways (Hodgskiss 2007:6; Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003: 36). It suggested, as stated earlier, that there were continuities in children's literacy development between early literacy behaviours and those behaviours displayed by children once they could actually read independently, and that even young children were actively involved in assigning meaning to print (Gillen & Hall 2003:6; Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003: 37). Some define emergent literacy as the continuous development of literacy-related knowledge, skills and experiences that occur during the preschool period (Chatry-Komarek 2003:83; Mendelsohn 2002:193), or simply the precursors of formal reading such as have been described in the section above (Bardige & Segal 2005:5).

The emergent literacy model describes a process of integrated reading and writing which begins at birth, or as soon as a person interacts in an environment where reading and writing are integral to that environment (Chatry-Komarek 2003:85). Children coming from literate homes (so-called "lucky" children), have frequently spent 1000 hours in reading and writing, and have for years experienced enjoyable, informal participation in literacy (Chatry-Komarek 2003:85).

The emergent literacy model may explain to a certain degree why Grade 1 is such a challenge for many African children. Many such children come from 'oral' homes and have not been prepared for formal instruction in reading and writing. Moreover, many do not attend kindergarten or Grade R (most African villages have no Grade R classes) and have thus also missed out on this necessary support (Chatry-Komarek 2003:86). In South Africa, the majority of children start school without these necessary emergent skills. It is claimed that the reasons for this deficit is the high rate of illiteracy in South Africa, as well as a lack of a reading culture amongst many of its people. As a result, many children start school without the essential preliteracy skills and thus have little concept of what reading means, thus placing them at a serious disadvantage (University of South Africa 2009).

Emergent literacy has contributed greatly to current views of literacy research and teaching. It has emphasised literacy as much more than a set of print-related behaviours, and has placed greater importance on children as agents in meaning-making (Gillen & Hall

2003:6), a practice which Vygotsky considered essential to true learning (Van der Veer & Valsiner 1991:17). Emergent literacy has also helped to steer early childhood research in the direction of more focused work on literacy outside of schooling (Gillen & Hall 2003:6).

2.2.2.2 Family Literacy

The concept *Family Literacy* is based on the premise that families are a child's first and most important teachers (Family Literacy Project (FLP) 2007; Rodger 2003:115). It refers to the "social and cultural practices associated with written text ... how literature is constructed, developed and defined in families" (Cairney 2003:85). There is widespread agreement that the home is the primary learning environment and that children's earliest literacy encounters occur in the home with families, making this environment the "most important aspect of literacy" (Willis et al 2007:625; Fuller 2004:12; Rodger 2003:115; Machet 2002:21). UNICEF's Convention on the Rights of the Child refers to the family as the "fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of its members, particularly children" and states that families need to protect children by creating an environment where they can grow and reach their potential (UNICEF 2008).

Family Literacy represents not only a recognition of the important role that the family plays in the early literacy development of the child, but its methodology involves actually helping families as a whole to become literate. Parents are thus helped to become literate in order that they can help prepare children to read and to develop a love for books. In this way, literacy is made a shared pleasure and a valuable skill (FLP 2007).

The concept *Family Literacy* saw its inception in the United States in 1989 with the establishment of the *National Centre for Family Literacy* by Sharon Darling, recognised internationally as the leader in Family Literacy (National Centre for Family Literacy 2008). The South African *Family Literacy* project which began in 2000 is an NGO which operates nationally in the field of adult literacy. Its slogan is: *Masifunde Njengomndeni*, which means, 'Families reading together'. The project aims to motivate parents to get involved in their children's education by reading to their preschool children in order to help them

develop their language and preliteracy skills (FLP 2007; UNISA 2009). A current UNISA and *Project Literacy* joint project, which will be run for three years, aims to empower parents with the confidence to get involved in their children's education and to encourage people in the community to also become more motivated to read (UNISA 2009).

There are other projects in South Africa which target and support families as a means to provide better care and education for its children (Bernard van Leer Foundation 2009). It is thus clear that in South Africa, as well as internationally, the family's role in the acquisition of early literacy is encouraged and supported.

2.2.2.3 The 'New Literacy' studies'

'New Literacy Studies' refers to a trend in research that developed over the last two decades (Ewing 2003:15), presenting a fundamentally different conceptualisation of early literacy (Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003:34, 35). Its first assumption is that literacy practices are socially embedded and cannot be understood in isolation (Ewing 2003:15; Hall et al. 2003:xix; Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003:34; Cairney 2003:85). The second shared assumption follows from the first in that the object of literacy studies is seen to be 'literacies' as they appear in their various social situations (Ewing 2003:15,16). It is therefore concerned with the various ways in which literacy learners integrate written language into their everyday lives (Ewing 2003:16). Thus, it is never static, but like individuals and communities, it can adapt and grow (Ewing 2003:19).

An important implication of accepting and operating within this conceptualisation of early literacy is that as children are socialised into particular literacy practices, they are at the same time, socialised into cultural practices which enable them to be positioned within the larger social milieu (Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003:35). Literacy in this view is thus a socioculturally situated practice (Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003:35; Gillen & Hall 2003:7). Since the central tenet of sociocultural theory is the co-construction of knowledge between the individual and social processes (Dixon & Verenikina 2007:198), learning therefore, is not limited to children's simply accepting a socially determined world, but involves their real

involvement in transforming their world, whilst operating within its conventions (Gillen & Hall 2003:9). This sociocultural understanding of literacy, which is largely based on participants' construction of meaning is affected by their activities within their social, cultural and historical contexts (Nkopodi 2006:70; Hall et al. 2003:xix; Viruru 2003:14). This conceptualisation of literacy as a sociocultural practice remains a dominant theme in literacy research (Gillen & Hall 2003:7), as well as largely constituting the philosophical basis of this study.

2.2.2.4 Early literacy development today

Currently, early literacy development is regarded as a dynamic social practice, where context and culture assume the primary roles (Gillen & Hall 2003:10; Cairney 2003:85; Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003:34,35), and as such, it will probably never arrive at one final definition or understanding. Even though there is now considerable, though not complete agreement in the research field regarding how children become readers and writers, this consensus does not include literacy pedagogy, which remains a controversial issue. Exactly what constitutes literacy is also a hotly contested issue. Moreover, when agreement on the definition of effective literacy teaching is reached at any point, such a definition tends to have a rather short history (Hall 2003:315).

However, for now it may be safe to say that the concept has come to a point where it allows early childhood to be seen as a state in which children use literacy in a way that is appropriate and meaningful to them; that the literacy experiences and products of childhood are valid in their own right (Gillen & Hall 2003:10). It is now understood that "learning begins practically from birth in a literate society" (Makin 2003:327), and that children (like adults) are able to assign meaning to print as they draw on their own different childhood experiences (Gillen & Hall 2003:5). Furthermore, it has moved beyond the limitations and restrictions of the school environment and has extended to all kinds of domains including the essential domain of the home (Cairney 2003:85; Gillen & Hall 2003:10; Hannon 2003:99; Makin 2003:327; Reynolds 2001:332). Young children are regarded as being active participants in their early literacy acquisition; they engage in intentional meaning-making, and use signs, symbols and modalities not arbitrarily, but in a

structured way that reflects “strategic choices by them to represent things that are important to them” (Gillen & Hall 2003:9).

The study of early childhood literacy appears to be in a healthy, flourishing state (Gillen & Hall 2003:10). However, as stated earlier in this section, pedagogic practice remains an area where there is little agreement (Gillen & Hall 2003:10; Hirsch Jr. 1997:3), and the extensive research that is being done in the area of early childhood literacy appears to be making little impact on current views of pedagogic practice. No one method or programme has triumphed, the evidence of which can be seen in the lack of substantial progress in improving reading achievement scores (Sousa 2005:1; Gillen & Hall 2003:10). In the following sections, some of the issues surrounding learning to read and write will be discussed, and some solutions as presented by current research will be suggested.

2.3. LEARNING TO READ

Learning to read involves a continuous process of development that takes place over a number of years (Bardige & Segal 2005:2,3; Mendelsohn 2002:193). When helping the young child to acquire literacy, the emphasis should be on speaking and listening, since the success of this venture is greatly influenced by the language competence that the child will have already developed (Palmer & Bayley 2005:80; Sousa 2005:22). To the extent to which a child is exposed to, and understands spoken language at an early age, that child will learn to discriminate quickly between phonemes (speech sounds), will recognise word boundaries, and will be able to identify the emerging rules of grammar. Such a child will thus be able to more quickly figure out words and sentences, resulting in heightened comprehension (Sousa 2005:22; Bardige & Segal 2005:75). Children learn to read more naturally when a parent or caregiver spends a lot of time reading to them. When the child becomes more familiar with a favourite book, the child joins in by ‘reading’ (reciting initially), and becomes more familiar with particular sounds, words and patterns (Palmer & Bayley 2005:46).

To human beings, spoken language comes naturally, and we are neurologically hard-wired to distinguish the distinct sounds of languages (Sousa 2005:12; Yola Centre 2005:5). Eventually (with time, practice and good instruction), we are able to associate those sounds with arbitrary written symbols to express to others our thoughts and emotions (Sousa 2005:12). Our ability to read however is not an innate skill (Smydo 2007; Sousa 2005:32; Yola Centre 2005:6; Anderson 2000). Brain research suggests that there are no areas of the brain that are specialised for reading (Sousa 2005:32). It may thus be the most difficult task that is asked of the young brain to accomplish (Sousa 2005:32).

So how does the young brain do it and where does it all start? Reading, whether fluent or emergent, involves the blending of two basic processes which complement each other (Bardige & Segal 2005:5,6,75; Sousa 2005:37,71; Yola Centre 2005:7). One process is “learning how to decipher print and the other is understanding what the print means” (Yola Centre 2005:7). The deciphering process usually associated with ‘decoding’ or ‘sounding out words’, involves paying close attention to the symbols on the page. These symbols are analysed or interpreted in terms of the sounds they represent, and then each sound is again blended together to pronounce the word. When children know the names of the letters and the sounds (phonemes) with which they are associated (phonemic awareness), they are able to correctly ‘break the code’, or read. Decoding involves inter alia, phonemic awareness, phonics and fluency (Bardige & Segal 2005:5,6,75; Sousa 2005:37,71).

The reading act is not complete without the comprehension process. This process involves finding sources of information outside of the printed word that support the child’s understanding of the particular written words; for example vocabulary, knowledge of syntax and story schemas, appreciation of nuance, style, and significance (Sousa 2005:42,46,52; Bardige & Segal 2005:5,6,71,75). Here the reader brings her own background knowledge, experiences, and feelings to the text in order to make sense of it.

As we identify the words, they evoke meanings and associations. At the same time, our understanding of the text as a whole not only helps us to identify the individual words but also influences how we interpret them (Bardige & Segal 2005:5,6,75).

Comprehension requires adequate vocabulary and linguistic knowledge, and interaction with text to capture meaning (Sousa 2005:71).

Refer to section 2.3.4 for a more detailed discussion of a balanced approach to reading.

2.3.1 Phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, phonics and other skills

Many aspects play an important part in the development of reading. However, one of these aspects, *phonemic awareness*, has been the focus of extensive research, since it is seen as an important precursor to successful reading development (Reading & Van Deuren 2007; Lilly & Green 2004:19; Adler 2003:2). Phonemic awareness refers to the understanding that words are made up of distinct, individual sounds in spoken words and that these sounds can be manipulated to create new sounds. It also includes the ability to isolate a phoneme from the rest of the word, to segment words into component phonemes and to be able to delete and substitute phonemes (Sousa 2005:33,34; Adler 2003:2). This awareness enables children to associate sounds (phonemes) with the letters that they represent (graphemes) in order to read and build words (Sousa 2005:35). The understanding of the relationship between the phonemes and graphemes, which can be defined as “the smallest part of written language that represents a phoneme in the spelling of a word” is referred to as phonics (Adler 2003:5).

Phonemic awareness begins with a general awareness of sound; for example when a child is able to differentiate sounds from one another. This awareness is developed at birth or earlier, and develops as a child grows (Bardige & Segal 2005:205,206). Sound awareness is an important precursor to a child's developing phonological awareness (Bardige & Segal 2005:204), which refers to an awareness of sounds in language, and includes intonation patterns, sounds of words, syllables, and phonemes. This phonological awareness eventually enables the child's understanding to develop into the more sophisticated phonemic awareness (Palmer & Bayley 2005: 32; Sousa 2005:34; Lilly & Green 2004:17; Alder 2003:5).

Reading programmes that emphasise phonological and phonemic awareness have proved to be successful in schools (Sousa 2005:34; Hugo, Le Roux, Muller & Nel 2005:210). However, Lilly and Green (2004:19) caution that phonemic awareness should not be taught merely as an isolated skill, but that phonemic awareness activities should be interwoven in natural language and literacy practices throughout the day (Lilly & Green 2004:19). When there is a focus on enjoyment and the appreciation of literacy on the part of the child, the child will more likely want to read and write (Palmer & Bayley 2005:80).

There are other important skills, concepts and activities that need to be developed to help children acquire early literacy, such as learning to listen, talking, storybook reading, music, movement and memory, sight words and learning about print (Palmer & Bayley 2005:79). Some of these skills will be considered in more detail later in section 2.6.2.2.

To conclude this section, it is important to note that even though most 4- and 5-year olds are quite capable of learning the letters of the alphabet and the sounds the letters make, learning the more complex skills is a longer, ongoing process (Bardige & Segal 2005:2,3; Sousa 2005:1). These skills include oral language, background knowledge and motivation to learn in general and learning to read, in particular phonological and print awareness. The acquisition of these skills and knowledge require experience and practice, through activities that are embedded in children's daily lives. The foundation laid in the early years is therefore critical (Bardige & Segal 2005:2,3)

2.3.2 The 'whole-language' approach versus teaching phonics

The complex, fluid nature of literacy pedagogy has sparked a huge reading debate, referred to as the 'reading wars', which has been raging for many years. Currently, it involves two major perspectives, namely, the 'whole language' approach, and the phonics approach (Reyhner 2008; Smydo 2007; Sousa 2005:64).

The 'whole language' approach essentially says that in order for children to learn to read in

a way that becomes enjoyable and meaningful to them, they should be exposed to a print-rich environment, where children's literature, writing activities and communication activities are emphasised and are used across the curriculum to teach reading (Cromwell 1997). Whole language proponents believe that when a child encounters an unfamiliar word, they can search for semantic, syntactic, and phonetic cues in the text to establish its meaning (Sousa 2005:65). The focus is therefore not primarily on decoding text (Reyhner 2008). Some whole-language proponents believe phonics to be important, but maintain that it should not be explicitly taught, and that as a child is exposed to text, phonics learning happens in a more "opportunistic ... than systematic" way (Smydo 2007; Sousa 2005:65). The meaning of texts over the sounds of letters is thus emphasised.

In the other camp, the phonics, or 'skills instruction' proponents believe that a sequential way of teaching reading, where each word is broken up into its individual phonemes and then blended again to form a word, will help learners to master reading in a more organised way (Sousa 2005:65; Yola Centre 2005:7; Cromwell 1997). The most important skill at the beginning stages of reading is, they say, the ability to read single words accurately, completely and fluently (Sousa 2005:65). Phonics proponents believe that phonics is an essential element of learning to read, and that the alphabet principle must be taught explicitly to children since they cannot learn this merely by exposure to print (Sousa 2005; Anderson 2000). Furthermore, they contend that, in contrast to what whole-language proponents say, learning to read and write is not something into which we can simply be immersed in order to enable us to master the skills of reading and writing (Smydo 2007; Sousa 2005:65; Anderson 2000).

The National Reading Panel (NRP), which was commissioned by the U.S. Congress in order to ascertain what really works best with regard to learning to read and to prevent reading difficulties in young children (NRP 2000:1), released its report in 2000. It recommended explicit instruction in five areas: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension (Smydo 2007; Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003:34). These have become the 'proven' aspects of teaching reading today (Smydo 2007). The report emphasised the importance of systematic phonics instruction, but stated however, that phonics should always be integrated with other reading instruction to create a balanced

reading programme (Reyhner 2008).

Many educators today suggest a 'balanced' or 'comprehensive' approach to teaching literacy, which includes a phonics component, as well as enriched text (Sousa 2005:65; Yola Centre 2005:7). It is essentially a blending of the two philosophies as discussed above, into a programme that is tailored to learners' specific needs with the aim of producing an optimal learning environment (Smydo 2007; Cromwell 1997). Its reading programme thus incorporates elements of both didactic or play-oriented programmes, and takes into account each learner's learning style, demonstrated strengths and weaknesses (Sousa 2005:67,71; Cromwell 1997; Holloway, Rambaud, Fuller & Eggers-Piérola 1995:470). According to the Yola Center, the strengths of the whole-language approach, are "its insistence on a print-rich environment to stimulate a child's desire for reading", while the strengths of the skills approach are its "insistence on the explicit instruction of sound-symbol associations, both in isolation and in context to foster a child's word recognition ability" (Yola Center 2005:7,8).

There is continuing debate about whether this balanced approach is based on sufficient scientific evidence. However, it is interesting to note that it has been found that most children learn to read, irrespective of the mode of instruction (Yola Centre 2003:2). It seems somewhat futile therefore, to expend great amounts of time and energy on trying to decide on a 'one size fits all' approach to teaching literacy. Rather, parents and teachers can focus on equipping young learners with a good foundation in basic skills and knowledge, in providing for them, an active learning environment. It may also be important for parents, educators and policymakers to recognise the following basic principles:

- reading is a *learned skill* which, according to research in neuroscience, involves practice, intensity, cross-training, adaptivity, motivation and attention (Sousa 2005:67,68);
- the success of learners is dependent on teachers and parents who are flexible in their approach and who know how to make the reading experience both exciting and meaningful. Such teachers and parents acknowledge the findings of scientific studies about the brain, that explicit instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness is

essential since it helps the beginning reader to understand the alphabet principle and to apply it to reading and writing (Sousa 2005:217; Coles 2003:167);

- enriched text complements the reading and writing process in making it provide relevant and enjoyable reading experiences (Sousa 2005:217);
- since writing and reading are not innate skills, careful instruction is critical (Smydo 2007; Sousa 2005:218; Vygotsky 1962:101,102);
- successful reading is the result of the interaction between the decoding and comprehension processes (Sousa 2005:71);
- literacy is a social practice, and parents and teachers need to remain aware of the sociocultural influence with regard to literacy (Cairney 2003:85; Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003:34; Anderson 2000); and
- according to reading experts, no matter which approach is used, parental involvement remains a critical factor (Cromwell 1997).

The last point two points deserve special emphasis since they correlate with the philosophical framework which guides this research project. It matters not how well structured or comprehensive a reading or writing programme is if this programme does not take into account the influence of language and culture on learning. Reading is more than simply a decoding process as it has a strong social element (Gillen & Hall 2003:4; Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003:34). The work of Lev Vygotsky and his followers in the field of socio-cultural influences on education has led educationists to recognise that societal influences contribute greatly to, and are therefore inseparable from, the interactivity that comprises literacy teaching and learning (Anderson 2000). It is thus important to genuinely seek to understand the interconnections of race, wealth, opportunity and class in society and their interactions with teaching children to read (Anderson 2000).

2.4 EARLY WRITING

Much research has been done in language and reading development, but not as much on early, or emergent writing (Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003: 38). Traditionally, the view was held that writing is predominantly a “transcription of speech” (Lancaster 2003:145). Speech therefore had to be developed first, before real writing could be produced and a certain

level of proficiency in spoken language had to be reached before children would have the necessary skills to understand or produce written language (Lancaster 2003:145). It was believed that children would not be able to produce real letters of the alphabet, or images which actually look like real objects (Lancaster 2003:150). However, it is now recognised that early writing systems and behaviours are important (even for children in the zero to three age range) and that the earliest marks made by children do reflect intention and meaning (Lancaster 2003:146,151,152), even before a direct connection with language is made (Lancaster 2003:146).

Furthermore, dynamic links have been found between reading, writing and oral language development, and it has been found that these develop simultaneously in formal and informal contexts. Written and oral language are now regarded as being two sides of the same coin and the focus is on teaching them in an integrated way (Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003:38; Chatry-Komarek 2003:67). It is now recognised that spelling, vocabulary and grammar show greater improvement with free reading and writing than direct separate instruction (that is, without meaningful integration). The whole-language approach relies on such an integrated approach to reading and writing (Chatry-Komarek 2003:67).

2.4.1 Learning to write

Children learn to write gradually, as they do when they learn to read. In order to make a straight line in the sand, for example, children must develop the small-muscle skills and good eye-hand coordination. Young children start with pictures which consist firstly of lines drawn in different directions. They then progress to drawing circles and lines and use crayons and markers to produce abstract art. After a while, children may want to sign their drawing. This may initially amount to squiggly lines, but with affirmation and encouragement, they soon produce the real thing (Bardige & Segal 2005:220,221; Palmer & Bayley 2005:54). A child's writing then, will progress from scribbles, which include squiggles and wavy lines and pictures to letter-like shapes, and eventually, to real letters and words as children are exposed to print in books, in advertisements and in the environment (Neuman 2006). Vygotsky recognised a continuity in children's writing from gestures to drawing, and then to writing (Newman & Holzman 1993:104).

If children are supported and encouraged in their writing, they will continue their exploration and make use of invented spelling or 'phonic spellings' as it is now called. These invented spellings are important because they assist children in learning to segment words into phonemes. Their ability to hear separate sounds in words and connect them to letters is a critical precursor to children's ability to use phonics to decipher words. Invented spelling is also a useful ability that helps children write freely and think creatively (Neuman 2006). The desire and motivation to write is what counts in these early years, not perfect spelling (Neuman 2007). With time, and with adequate instruction and support, children gain a better understanding of how words should be spelled. When a child is 5 or 6 years old, suggests Neuman (2006), she should be taught about the mechanical aspects of writing such as capitalisation and punctuation.

Children in the emergent literacy stage have acquired basic concepts about print such as the following:

- they understand that adults can write down words and ideas they want to communicate to others;
- they feel that they can write, and convey ideas successfully, like the adults who encourage them;
- they have seen children writing on a horizontal line, from left to right, and they try to do the same;
- they have seen that adults write using letters and have, as a result, drawn letter-like forms to write down their own names; and
- they know that people can read to others what they have written.

(Chatry-Komarek 2003:85,86)

2.4.2 When and how to teach writing

As with reading, the issue of learning to write has its controversial elements. There are differences in opinion amongst educators as to exactly when a child should be taught to write. Palmer and Bayley (2005:54,69) caution against starting too early with writing. They state strongly that the formal teaching of writing, that is, "small scale, careful writing of

letters and words” should be delayed until at least kindergarten, since starting too early with formal writing, they suggest, can do more harm than good. The aforementioned authors (2005:84) state further that in Sweden and Finland, which in international studies have the greatest success in teaching literacy, they have a completely oral curriculum until children are seven years old. Vygotsky believed that instruction in writing should be done when a child is mature enough cognitively (Vygotsky 1962:105). He referred to the sensitive period (named such by Montessori and others) as a good time to teach a child any subject, since this is the time a child will be most receptive to it (Vygotsky 1962:104). He thus believed that the school years are the best time for teaching writing since he saw this period in a child’s life as being better suited for teaching operations that require such awareness and deliberate control as does writing. He also believed that instruction in writing enhances the development of the higher psychological functions while they are developing (Vygotsky 1962:105). Vygotsky stated further that “drawing and play should be preparatory stages in the development of children’s written language” (Vygotsky 1978 in Newman & Holzman 1993: 103), and he regarded proficiency in written language as a “unified process of development” (Newman & Holzman 1993:104). He also recognised that preschoolers can ‘write’ *before* they know how to write properly in the conventional sense (Newman & Holzman 1993:104).

It is important to recognise individual differences in children and to take into account that some children from language rich backgrounds may be ready to start writing by the time they are in Grade R and others only in Grade 1 and beyond. Children who are advanced and ready to write should not be kept back, but should be guided and shown the correct way of forming letters and numbers (Palmer & Bayley 2005:72,86).

Many educators believe that writing should not be seen as distinct from reading but that a child’s early writing should be supported and encouraged and should be allowed to develop naturally. As has been mentioned in section 2.4, the whole-language approach teaches that reading and writing should be developed simultaneously, and that they actually reinforce each other. Whole-language proponents teach that children learn writing by writing meaningful texts (instead of exercises) such as messages, lists or short stories that reflect their own interest and experience (Chatry-Komarek 2003:70-72). For them,

writing skills are developed in the child's daily experiences and the foundations of writing, which involve the practices of drawing pictures, scribbling, writing and 'driting' (early writing which consists of a combination of drawings, letters, and letter-like shapes) are laid in the years before the first grade (Chatry-Komarek 2003:155).

Palmer and Bayley (2005:72,86) advise that until a child is six years old, there should be a more playful, less formal approach to teaching literacy, and an emphasis on developing skills such as speaking, listening, music, social and physical skills - all essential skills for learning literacy. Furthermore, plenty of practice with letter formation, along with providing a link to music, dance and art, provides a good foundation in the development of neat, fluent, handwriting at a later stage (Palmer & Bayley 2005:69,72,86).

Palmer and Bayley (2005:72) further advise that handwriting movements should begin with large-scale movements. Initially, children can be taught to do the movements symmetrically, using both arms. Then they can progress to using only one arm. Thereafter, they can try "skywriting" with the forefinger, or mark-making with a stick in the sand, squeeze bottles of water, or with wet sponges on a board. Finally, when the shape, direction and movements of each letter is firmly established, shape-making can be brought down to a smaller scale using writing implements such as chubby pencils, crayons, chalk, and felt pens. Here, whole-language proponents would caution that when teaching specific letters, the letters should first be placed in a meaningful context and then the experience will prove to be more meaningful to children (Chatry-Komarek 2003:152).

As far as holding a pencil is concerned, since this places quite a bit of strain on the thumb and the first two fingers of the hand with which a child writes, children should not be required to hold a pencil for longer time than for which a child's muscles are equipped, since this can be painful, and may put some children off writing completely. Practice with crayons, chubby pencils, and marker pens is therefore a good idea as children engage in drawing, colouring and tracing, thus helping them to gradually develop an effective pencil grip. When a child grasps a pencil incorrectly, it is best to intervene immediately. The pencil must be placed appropriately between their fingers and they should be guided

gently as they draw or trace. It is important to remember to keep the activity light-hearted, to encourage and praise their efforts, to provide thoughtful feedback, making gentle adjustments where necessary, always following the child's lead (Palmer & Bayley 2005:74; Neuman 2006). It has been discovered that "children learn best in environments that support their earliest writing experiments" (Neuman 2006). Parents and other caregivers should therefore make an effort to understand how their children learn about and master the formal aspects of writing, and to support them in these endeavours (Neuman 2006).

2.5 CONTEXTUAL FACTORS THAT IMPACT ON EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

As has been discussed earlier (cf. 2.2.2.3 & 2.2.2.4), it has come to be accepted that children's literacy experiences are embedded in their day-to-day practices, and "rooted in family, community and cultural beliefs, attitudes, values and practices" (Hall et al. 2003:xxi). The following section will discuss some of the more important contextual issues that influence a child's success in acquiring literacy.

2.5.1 Relationships: the basis of a child's motivation to learn

Since learning is socially constructed, according to the educationist Vygotsky (Gifford 2005:16), it makes sense that a child's development will occur in the context of positive, warm, loving relationships (Junn & Boyatzis 2007:51; Bardige & Segal 2005:352). The early years provide parents and other caregivers with an opportunity to build such relationships with children, thus providing children with a strong basis for further success in learning (Bardige & Segal 2005:352; Fuller 2004:72).

When children know that they are loved, respected and valued, this impacts positively on the way they feel about themselves. This is especially so in the case of a young child; how that child feels about himself and how he feels about his ability to succeed (self-efficacy), play as important a role in his ability to learn new skills, solve problems, and motivate himself as does what he knows, what he can do and how he reasons (Bardige & Segal

2005:7; Bandura 1994). For example, when a nine-month-old child pulls herself up to a standing position for the first time, and the parents applaud her in response, rewarding her behaviour, the baby will probably beam with pride. The baby will most likely try it again and again since she now has confidence in her ability to succeed in this endeavour. A child's early exploratory and play activities provide opportunities for parents for enlarging their repertoire of basic skills and their sense of efficacy, as well as helping them overcome feelings of self-doubt (Bardige & Segal 2005:7; Kuzma 2005:634; Bandura 1994). Young children who have developed a sense of their own efficacy are eager learners by nature, and if the climate within which learning takes place is suitable, and parents teachers communicate to children their respect and concern, children feel safe and secure, and are more ready to respond to their teacher's communications. They are emotionally ready to learn (Bardige & Segal 2005:8,27).

During the preschool years, according to Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, children learn to take the initiative and enjoy doing tasks they can achieve on their own (Bardige & Segal 2005:27). A safe risk-taking environment, where all pressure and anxiety associated with learning are removed, and where children are given ownership of learning activities, gives children a measure of control of their learning during the preschool stage (Bardige & Segal 2005:27). Children experience a great deal of pleasure in learning, being able to demonstrate what they have learnt, and in spotting mistakes. When caregivers make use of creative humour and children's playfulness, including elements of suspense and surprise, this encourages involvement and curiosity on the part of the child. This, in turn, enhances learning, creates opportunities for new competencies to develop and enhances children's self esteem (Gifford 2005:24-26,28).

2.5.2 The role of parental involvement and family characteristics in a child's early literacy development

Family involvement in a child's early education in general is critical and essential in early literacy acquisition (Hill & Taylor 2007:37; Singh, Mbokodi & Msila 2004: 301; Gillen & Hall 2003:10; Cairney 2003:85; Hannon 2003:99; Reynolds 2001:332). Interestingly, parental involvement also has benefits for parents since such involvement also has positive effects

on parents' self-development and parenting skills (Hill & Taylor 2007:37).

Family involvement is diverse and includes various household members such as parents, siblings, caregivers and extended family members (Cairney 2003:85). The influence of the family does not stop when a child starts school, but that influence can be seen throughout the years of schooling. Quality parental involvement in a child's literacy development can be linked not only to reading achievement, but also to improved social, cognitive and emotional skills (Hadeed 2005:116; Flouri & Buchanan 2004:143,150; Hannon 2003:99; Cairney 2003:85). A large share of variance in learner school achievement can be attributed to differences in family background (Bardige & Segal 2005:11,78; Singh et al. 2004:301; Cairney 2003:85).

The South African Department of Education recognises the important role that parents and families play. There are programmes and policies in place that are specifically geared towards the families of young children. Its plan includes social developmental programmes for unemployed women with children younger than 5 years, as well as plans to educate and empower parents and caregivers and to deliver services directly to children using home visits and home day care (DoE 2001:25,61).

While the mother's role has always been the dominant one (Weiss, Mayer, Kreidner, Vaughan, Dearing, Hencke & Pinto 2003:880), evidence regarding the positive effects of paternal involvement is increasing (Flouri & Buchanan 2004:142,144; McBride, Schoppe, & Rane 2002: 998), as well as the actual levels of involvement by fathers. While this is true, fathers still continue to spend significantly less time than mothers do in caring for children (McBride et al. 2002:998), even in dual-earning families (Renk, Roberts, Roddenberry, Luick, Hillhouse, Meehan, Oliveros, & Phares 2003:313).

Even though the research findings and recommendations could apply to both mothers and fathers, the focus of this study is on the well-documented role that the mother plays as a

child's first and most important teacher (Farrer 2000). Regarded by some as a "critical resource" (Kabiru, Njenga, & Swadener 2003:363), she is probably the best person capable of educating her child, especially during the sensitive periods of infancy and early childhood (Hadeed 2005:123; De Wet, Kherehloa, Masheane & Botes 2001: 369).

Demographic characteristics such as socioeconomic status, education, ethnicity and cultural background give us clues as to the reasons why some mothers tend to be more involved in their children's education than others. Furthermore, particular personal parental characteristics are also associated with parental school involvement (Hill & Taylor 2007:38; Singh et al. 2004:301).

A child's range, type and style of literacy exposures, and indeed, their success in this realm as well as in their later school achievement, are related directly to their parents' level of literacy, education, employment, the available literary resources and domestic situations, as well as a parent's personal early literacy experiences, parental warmth, beliefs, practices, interactive styles and abilities (Willis et al. 2007:626,628; Bardige & Segal 2005:11,78; Hannon 2003:99; Cairney 2003:85). Learners tend to adopt their parents' beliefs with regard to achievement (Singh et al. 2004:304).

Parents' socio-economic status will determine the development of children, as well as the level of their involvement in their children's education. In general, studies have shown that the higher the status, as well as the level of education, the greater the involvement and support that are displayed and the more school supportive the home environment will be (Evans 2007:142; Hill & Taylor 2007:38; Driessen, Smit & Slegers 2005:512,513; Drummond & Stipek 2004:198; Singh et al. 2004:301). For example, the likelihood of mothers' reading out loud on a daily basis to their preschool children is increased by each year of the mother's education (Willis et al. 2007:626).

Parents with a low socioeconomic background on the other hand, face more barriers to

involvement such as nonflexible work schedules, lack of resources, transportation problems and stress due to residing in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Additionally, because such parents generally have fewer years of education themselves, they tend to feel less equipped to play an active role in their children's schooling (Hill & Taylor 2007:38).

However, social class and socioeconomic differences do not simply refer to differences in access to economic resources, but rather, they “reflect consistent differences in the values, attitudes, behaviours, physical environment, and social environment of individuals coming from different social backgrounds” (Fergusson, Horwood & Boden 2008:290). Interestingly, growing up in a poor family, in and of itself does not render a child doomed to failure. There are other factors such as “collective socialisation, peer-group influence, and institutional capacity” which are presumably part of the reason why growing up in a poor neighbourhood will have a great influence on that child's development (Sampson, Morenoff & Gannon-Rowley 2002:443). Furthermore, social class and socioeconomic differences do not merely refer to differences in access to economic resources, but rather reflect “consistent differences in the physical and social environment, as well as values, attitudes, and behaviours of the individuals coming from different social backgrounds” (Fergusson et al. 2008:290). In a 25-year longitudinal study by Fergusson and others (2008:292), who wanted to understand the link between socioeconomic status at birth and later educational attainment, it was found that the main mediating factors were childhood cognitive ability, family aspirations, and classroom behaviours and that there was no evidence to suggest that factors such as poverty, material deprivation, or school factors contributed to the association. Since individual differences and social environmental influences contribute largely to educational attainment in children, South African educators, researchers and policy-makers should pay increasing attention to these issues in their attempts to decrease the educational gaps amongst the learners in our country.

Since the 1950s, the research emphasis seems to have been on at-risk children, while there is very little research results available on those who find themselves at the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum; namely, those living in affluent families (Luthar 2007:154). However, recent research suggests that issues which the more affluent experience, such

as excessive pressures to achieve and isolation from parents (both literal and emotional), could result in rather serious manifestations such as substance use, anxiety and depression (Luthar 2007:161). Luthar (2007:161) believes that parents (particularly those who are in danger of this problem), need to be educated about the emotional damage that children can experience as a result of the “unrelenting pursuit of ‘more’”. The high productivity usually associated with affluence may often result in little leisure time, resulting in people being increasingly prone to distress (Luthar & Latendresse 2005:208).

Parents’ own experiences with schooling also influence their involvement in their children’s schooling. As a parent prepares her child for school, her own school experiences may influence her approach to her child’s education (Hill & Taylor 2007:38).

Apart from demographic factors and personal experiences, psychological states, parental self-perceptions and beliefs regarding education also affect parental involvement (Skibbe, Justice, Zucker, & McGinty 2008:68; Oosthuizen & Bouwer 2007:68; Hill & Taylor 2007:38; Willenberg 2002:3; Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris 1997:539). Parents who suffer from clinical depression, for example, are less likely to be involved in preparing their children for school than those who are not depressed. They also tend to continue to be less involved during the child’s school years. When parents have negative feelings about themselves or about their abilities, it is manifested in their level of involvement with their children’s schooling (Hill & Taylor 2007:38). Conversely, when parents believe that they can make an important difference, they will do so. Personal efficacy is thus seminally important (Hill & Taylor 2007:38,39; Grolnick et al. 1997:539). According to Hill and Taylor (2007:38), parents’ confidence in their own intellectual abilities may be the most salient predictor of their school involvement.

Parental beliefs regarding their role in their children’s literacy development is another important influence on their involvement in this area (Willenberg 2002:3). For example, in some traditional communities where parents have little education, learning at home primarily consists of observing adults as they engage in their everyday activities. In these communities, it is believed that school-related learning is the sole responsibility of the

teacher. In contrast, where adults are better educated, parents tend to believe that they have a role to play and therefore, are more likely to try to motivate their children's interest in learning, as well as engaging in more frequent verbal interaction with their children (Holloway et al. 1995: 468). It is generally accepted that the mother's perception of her role as teacher will have a direct influence on the child and that her own literacy practices and beliefs will actually predict her child's print-related knowledge (Skibbe et al. 2008:68; Oosthuizen & Bouwer 2007:68; Grolnick et al. 1997:538). This fact provides further rationale for conducting this study. It is important that researchers examine parental beliefs in greater depth and even go a step further to consider how best to help parents to translate their beliefs into practices (Drummond & Stipek 2004:211).

2.5.3 Mothers' working status

2.5.3.1 The effects of a mother's working status

In this section, the mother's working status with regard to its effect on her involvement with her children's education, is discussed. Here, working status is considered according to two categories, namely the (full-time) working mother and the non-working mother (who does not work as a result of her own choice not to do so).

Numerous studies have shown that the mother's involvement in her child's education, which has a positive influence on the child's scholastic achievement, could be "adversely affected by increased maternal employment" (Weiss et al. 2003:880). Weiss and others also concluded in their own study that mothers who work or study full-time were less involved in their children's schooling than were other mothers (Weiss et al. 2003:888).

Interestingly, in contrast to these findings, a few studies suggest "positive effects of maternal employment on family educational involvement for mothers from a range of income backgrounds" (Weiss et al. 2003:881). Weiss and others (2003:881,882) discuss a study by Gottfried and his colleagues, where it was found that employed mothers participated in more educational activities with their children than non-working mothers did.

The results of the study conducted by Weiss and others revealed that part-time work or part-time school status was “positively associated with school involvement.” In other words, mothers who worked part time or who studied part time, were more involved in their children's schooling than were other mothers (Weiss et al. 2003:888).

Another study has revealed that the rise in the last century of the number of women in the workplace market has *not* significantly diminished the time that mothers spend with their children (Bianchi 2005:401) and that there are therefore, not “many direct, negative effects” on children whose mothers work (Bianchi 2005:409). A few reasons posited for these surprising results are the fact that it has been found that although ‘stay-at-home’ mothers spend more time with their preschool children than mothers who work, that the difference between these two groups of mothers regarding time spent with their children in direct care, play/education was found in one U.S. study to be less than one hour (Bianchi 2005:405).

Naturally, these findings cannot be applied in all contexts, and it is also not clear whether these findings are also true in the South African context. The South African situation may be somewhat different to the situation in the United States, in that domestic workers are comparatively inexpensive; thus potentially enabling South African SAHMs to spend more time with their children. On the other hand, domestic workers also serve as nannies at times (as is the case in at least two of the homes of participating mothers), and some mothers have the option of leaving their children in the nanny's care.

The findings above show that the working status of mothers does not necessarily predict the type or amount of involvement of the mother in a child's scholastic activities. However, there are mothers who choose to leave the work place and stay home specifically to be involved in their children's development. There are also those who, by default, become more involved in their children's education. This issue will be discussed in a little more detail in the following section.

2.5.3.2 The 'stay-at-home mother'

Since the rise of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, women have made significant advancements in the labour market. However, it is a recent trend that some women, finding the demands of the 'double shift' too demanding, are either postponing having children or are leaving the work force and devoting themselves to home and family (Wallis 2007:89). This is especially true in the case of mothers in the professional or managerial classes (Luthar 2007:161; Wallis 2007:89). There are also those mothers, for whom the rising cost of living has become a drain on finances, and feel that day-care for children has become the less attractive option (Associated Press 2008). The current poor economic climate has also resulted in many mothers losing their jobs (Associated Press 2008). Although the ratio of working mothers versus mothers at home is higher in favour of working mothers in South Africa and abroad, the number of SAHMs is on the increase (Lehohla, Statistics SA 2009:xi; U.S. Census Bureau 2003).

This trend is an interesting one which has generated some questions and debate concerning the reasons for this apparent exodus from the workplace. It seems that the reason why some mothers opt out of successful careers is that finances are not a problem for them, and there are thus more options available to them. Some of these women therefore choose to devote themselves to taking care of their families (Luthar 2007:161; Rubin & Wooten 2007:337; Wallis 2007:89). Other mothers choose to stay at home to take care of their families, irrespective of financial constraints and limitations (Associated Press 2008). Other reasons for this trend are the rising cost of living (Associated Press 2008), and the apparent inflexibility of the workplace to accommodate the needs of mothers who would like to spend more time at home, thus almost "forcing" them to either work full time or to give up their jobs completely (Skills portal 2009; Stone 2008; Associated Press 2008; Sachs 2005).

The "Mommy Wars" (between mothers who stay at home and those who go out to work) seem to have created guilt and criticism from both sides (Schlessinger 2009; Stone 2008; Edmunds 2007; Albert Mohler Programme 2006). One South African SAHM, quoting anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hardy, describes motherhood as a "trade-off between a

parent's own needs and that of her infant's to ensure optimal survival," and says that when we look at it that way, it vindicates both the working mother and the mother who stays at home to care for her baby. She further explains the mother's dilemma as follows:

Many of my peers find themselves between a rock and a hard place. I was groomed for a career, almost in reaction to past presumptions that a woman's place was in the home with the baby. That's the rock. The hard place is having built the career, realising that making a family demands deviation from the career, and working out how to do that successfully. I can no longer buzz off to Kabul or Gaza at the drop of a hat, or work through the night to a deadline. But I can do other things to raise a bit of cash while providing the home-cover. And even though my status may be reduced in the eyes of those who still think of career and motherhood as the two poles of female existence, I think of myself at all times as a working woman (Edmunds 2007).

There seems to be a dearth of research on SAHMs in South Africa. There is also a gap in the research regarding on women who have achieved a undergraduate or postgraduate education and choose to stay home with their children (Rubin & Wooten 2007:336). This study will concern itself with a small group of SAHMs (at least five of whom have achieved undergraduate and postgraduate degrees) who have made such a conscious choice to stay at home with their children. These mothers include those who are at home exclusively without doing any work from home, those who do some work from home while their children are at preschool, as well as those who also work from home and outside of the home once or twice a week while their children are at preschool.

2.5.4 Community and culture

Children's literacy and life opportunities are strongly linked (Makin 2003:327). For example, disadvantage, and particularly poverty is a powerful predictor of problematic literacy (Evans 2007:142; Hill & Taylor 2007:38; Makin 2003:328). It has been said in the research literature, as well as in this dissertation, that in the study of early literacy development, the sociocultural aspect, largely inspired by the work and teachings of Vygotsky, and which highlights the important relationships between language, culture and development, is critical (Cole 1985:148; Pretorius & Machet 2004:131; Gillen & Hall 2003:4; Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003: 34,35; Cairney 2003:85; Ewing 2003:17; Machet 2002:1) (cf. 1.4.3, 2.2.2.3 and 2.2.2.4). In fact, culture and context are considered to be

fundamental to the development of literacy, as they are seen as taking on the principal roles in this development (Ewing 2003:17; Gillen & Hall 2003:4; Hall et al. 2003:xix; Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003: 34; Viruru 2003:14). One of Vygotsky's many goals as a psychologist, was to change the view of psychology which espoused the strict separation of individuals and their social environment. Vygotsky believed that the individual and the social were "mutually constitutive elements of a single, interacting system [where] cognitive development was treated as a process of acquiring culture" (Cole 1985:148; Moll 1990:1). Vygotsky suggested a close connection between the social plane and the psychological plane and suggested that "any new level in the child's generalisation signifies a new level in the possibility for social interaction" (Cole 1985:148). Vygotsky and his students observed how children came to adopt the role of adults in culturally organised activities thus proving the 'interactional nature' of development (Cole 1985:148). He believed that all higher psychological functions are initially social interactions between people, and particularly between adults and children (Moll 1990:2).

Culture is thus seen to mediate human activity. The mediational means which human beings employ to interact with one another and thus facilitate learning and development, can be called cultural tools or artefacts and symbols, which includes language, according to Vygotsky (Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003: 34). Language as a cultural tool is essential for socialising young members (or novice members) to the culture and the linguistic practices of a community (Baquedano-Lopez 2003:66). Therefore, according to this sociocultural view of literacy development, literacy learning cannot legitimately be abstracted from the cultural practices in which it is nested, but rather, there is an emphasis on the available tools and forms of assistance (Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003: 34). This view is in consonance with Vygotsky's, as he regarded cognitive development as a process of acquiring culture (Cole 1985:148; Moll 1990:1).

It becomes important then, when designing and implementing early literacy programmes, that the background of learners be considered and studied, since literacy experiences are embedded in the everyday lives and experiences of learners (Ewing 2003:17; Hall et al. 2003:xxi; Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003: 34). A learner's background is a crucial factor in his school performance (Bardige & Segal 2005:11,78; Singh et al. 2004:301; Cairney 2003:85;

Makin 2003:327). For example, learners who come from so-called 'high literacy' households (so-called 'lucky children'), which refers to households where young children are read to regularly, children's books are available, adults read and write regularly, and adults encourage children's early writing, tend to enter school with large vocabularies and reading readiness skills. An estimated 5% of children with such backgrounds can already read when they enter school. Such children tend to learn to read well regardless of the teaching approach used (Reyhner 2008; Chatry-Komarek 2003:169). At the other end of the spectrum, there are learners who come from 'low literacy' households, who do not enjoy the same exposure to reading in their homes and who arrive at school with little or no print awareness. Such so-called 'unlucky' children tend to have smaller vocabularies (Reyhner 2008; Chatry-Komarek 2003:5).

The literature further suggests that low-income children tend to experience greater multiple risks, since they are "disproportionately exposed to more adverse social and physical environmental conditions" (Evans 2007:142). These risk factors have adverse developmental consequences and it is these factors that place many African children at risk of low literacy. Today, many African children still leave school without acquiring 'essential learning tools'; that is, literacy, oral expression, numeracy and problem-solving skills (Unesco 2000 in Chatry-Komarek 2003:1).

In historically disadvantaged schools in South Africa, it has been found that most parents lack the required literacy levels of participation, with many of them being unemployed, which automatically reduces their role in "negotiating from a point of strength" (Singh et al. 2004:103). In a study conducted in such historically disadvantaged areas in South Africa, it was found that in many cases, the home conditions of many participants were not suitable for cognitive development. In fact, 70% of the children did not find themselves in a home environment where they were motivated academically at all. Ninety percent of the parents did not understand their role in their children's education and regarded the school as sufficiently competent to deal with their children's education. Many of these homes are in communities where there are no public libraries. Therefore, it was not surprising to find that the problems that children experienced in their homes had an impact on their performance in the classroom (Lemon 2004:303). Lemon (2004:290) emphasised the

point that while it was important for South Africa to produce an elite, those who found themselves on the lower economic scale should not be neglected, but that the larger part of its education system should be geared towards the needs of the urban and rural poor. This implies not simply off-loading inappropriate policies and programmes onto impoverished communities that lack the resources to implement them effectively. Makin (2003:328), highlighting the incongruence in practice between home and school literacies, agreed that support for those at risk of lower literacy should be encouraged in all their early educational settings. She attributes the problem of the same group's continuing to experience difficulties, to the fact that school literacy environments are not aligned with children's literacy interests and experiences (Makin 2003:328; Chatry-Komarek 2003:169). Others agree that the gap between school and community is a mitigating factor in low literacy levels amongst learners (Willenberg 2005: 170; Singh et al. 2004:306) and that literacy programmes tend to favour those literacy practices typically associated with middle-class families, which may convey the message to disadvantage families that they possess deficits which may hinder their children's progress (Willenberg 2005:170). However, despite research that suggests that school-like literacy practices may be negatively perceived and experienced, there are also findings which suggest that there are positive associations between these literacy practices and literacy achievements (Willenberg 2005:170).

While it has been acknowledged that it is important that teachers value local languages and traditions and actually incorporate these into their teaching (Chatry-Komarek 2003:183), the argument has also been posited that cultural practices should not be regarded as static and all-determining; that while sociocultural and political factors have certainly predisposed families to particular practices, with adequate and appropriate support, families can be encouraged to change or adapt some of these patterns (Willenberg 2005:171) where such a change will lead to improved lives and positive development for such families. Additionally, globalisation and technology may also serve to challenge families to perhaps change certain literacy practices and adopt new ones (Willenberg 2005:171). This issue is not a straightforward one, and it cannot be solved in this space. However, it may be appropriate to state that since the development of literacy takes place in various contexts (Cairney 2003:85; Ewing 2003:17), literacy should therefore be learned within a community (Ewing 2003), with respectful consideration of the

cultural models of childrearing and education held by parents (especially those whose voices have been absent from the discussion) (Holloway et al. 1995:470), and where care is taken not to blame parents for failing to provide typically middle-class literacy experiences for their children (Willenberg 2005:171). A literacy programme should therefore be more than a place where one learns the technical skills of literacy. It should enable learners to bring their communities into the programmes in order to facilitate learning and also to enable the communities within which learners find themselves, to support and to sustain these programmes (Ewing 2003:17). Some suggest that one way to reduce the gap between school and home literacies is to increase the “propinquity” between teachers and parents or community members (Singh et al. 2004:306), or to bring them closer to one another by means of increased positive contact, greater attempts at understanding one another’s needs, a willingness to provide support and meet those needs, as well as a willingness to compromise for the sake of the children’s needs.

As a final point in this discussion, Fox (2003:191) opines that “schools need to understand the literacy practices and narrative traditions of the communities they serve and adapt to the students.”

2.6 VYGOTSKIAN APPLICATION IN EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Lev Semenovich Vygotsky was born in Russia in 1896 and died at the age of 37. Known to some as a “revolutionary scientist,” this “educator turned psychologist” (Newman & Holzman 1993:198; Moll 1990:2), was a prolific writer, and was considered an expert in fields as various as literature, Russian, psychology, theatre, art, aesthetics and history (Newman & Holzman 1993: 6,156). It has been claimed that Vygotsky founded special education, or ‘defectology’ as it was known then (Newman & Holzman 1993: 6, 156), which refers to “the study of the handicapped and methods of their evaluation, education, and upbringing” (Gindis 1995). This term covered the visually impaired and blind, children with mental retardation, and speech or language impaired children (Gindis 1995). Although not everyone agrees that Vygotsky was the founder of special education, it is acknowledged that Vygotsky elevated it to the status of a science as he contributed to the

field coherent theory, a body of scientific data, relevant methods, organisational institutions, as well as a number of enthusiastic researchers and practitioners (Gindis 1995). Vygotsky and some of his contemporaries, influenced to some degree by Karl Marx, devoted their lives to reformulating psychology and education, and to making certain that the new socialist state would succeed (Newman & Holzman 1993:6,198; Moll 1990:1,2). Unfortunately, Stalin's regime ensured that the work of the Vygotskian school, deemed "reactionary bourgeois pseudo-science" was repressed for twenty years (Dolya & Palmer 2004). After Vygotsky's untimely death, it was forbidden to discuss, disseminate or reprint any of his writings. In the mid-1950s his major works reappeared in print, and their translations in the 1960s led to worldwide interest in Vygotsky (Dolya & Palmer 2004). Many modern-day educational theorists, including Jerome Bruner, have been strongly influenced by his teachings. However, it was not until another twenty years later that some of his other works, including the outstanding book, *Pedagogical Psychology* (1926), finally published in 1991, which has had a major impact on the contemporary reform of Russian education, were rediscovered (Dolya & Palmer 2004).

Vygotsky's work provides a sound theoretical basis for effective practice in teaching since he has identified key elements in teaching, learning and development (Dolya & Palmer 2004). He has made major contributions to fields such as mediation, internalisation, the 'zone of proximal development,' the relation between learning and human development, concept formation, the interrelation between language and thought development, play as a psychological phenomenon and the study of abnormal human development, as well as early literacy development (Newman & Holzman 1993:39; Van der Veer & Valsiner 1991: 301; Cole 1985:155). Some researchers suggest that Vygotsky's socio-historical approach to learning has made a profound impact on the understanding of teaching, learning, student cognitive development, and learner instruction (Presseisen & Kozulin 1992:5).

In this section, a few of the concepts derived from Vygotsky's work as introduced in chapter one will be discussed (cf. 1.4) The discussion will include suggestions as to how mothers, as important mediators of learning, can apply the concepts in their particular situations.

2.6.1 Creating zones of proximal development

Although Vygotsky is credited with the creation of this concept (Moll 1990:3; Cole 1985:155), according to Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991:331), Vygotsky himself indicated that the idea did not originate with him, but with American authors, although he seems to have coined the term 'zone of proximal development' (hereafter ZPD) (Van der Veer & Valsiner 1991: 331; Cole 1985:155).

The ZPD refers to the difference between the child's actual level of development which can be determined by the child's independent problem solving, and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem solving under the guidance of an adult or in collaboration with a more capable peer; the difference between a child's actual development and her proximal development (Van der Veer & Valsiner 1991:329; Moll 1990:3; Cole 1985:155). In this zone, children, with the help of more knowledgeable peers and adults, can learn new things that are a little above their current understanding. This new knowledge is then incorporated into their existing knowledge base (Reyhner 2008).

In the ZPD, the more capable participants (teachers, parents, older siblings or others) arrange interactions so that novices (children) can participate in activities which they cannot yet do on their own, but with repeated exposure and activity, they increase their ability and responsibility until they can manage the adult role (Cole 1985:155). This gradual process which Vygotsky refers to as 'internalisation' starts out with the adult or the more knowledgeable peer controlling and guiding the child's problem-solving activity. Gradually, the child and the adult come to share the problem-solving functions as the child takes more initiative and the adult corrects and guides the child where necessary. Finally, control is given to the child and the adult's role becomes more supportive and sympathetic and functions as a facilitator. The mother-child dyad is a good example of the development progression from "other-regulation to self-regulation" (Cole 1985:2; Brown & Ferrara 1985: 281, 282).

This Vygotskian idea of learning in community can be further extended with the idea that the novice, being the less knowledgeable and less powerful partner, is not a passive participant, but rather that the socialisation process is bidirectional since the novice may socialise the expert too (Baquedano-Lopez 2003:69; Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003:34).

Children should therefore be challenged to move beyond what they already know. When they are presented with problems which they are able to handle without help, this represents a failure to use the ZPD. In such a case the child is not led to go beyond what he knows and his development remains stunted. Vygotsky therefore encouraged parents and teachers to focus not on what was already 'ripe' but on what was in the process of 'ripening' (Vygotsky 1962:104; Van der Veer & Valsiner 1991: 330).

An important aspect of the ZPD is that novices should be helped to connect new knowledge to previously learned knowledge, since if they are not able to make this connection, they may resort to rote learning, which will interfere with their comprehension (Reyhner 2008). To assist children in making connections and thus learning, Vygotsky emphasised the importance of play. He believed that for the young child, play actually creates the ZPD (Dolya & Palmer 2004). He explained that when a child engages in pretend play, as in the case when he takes on the role of another in his play, he usually behaves beyond his age and above his usual, everyday behaviour. He therefore goes beyond himself in play, and in this way, he could potentially internalise important concepts and knowledge, and thus learn. In this kind of pretend play, children often exercise their early writing skills; for example, they may pretend to write traffic tickets, receipts, bills, and take telephone messages and orders from a menu. In doing so, they experiment with the visual features, formats and conventions of writing as they explore and play with the way language looks on a page. Many of their inventions of this kind will not look like conventional writing (Neuman 2007). For Vygotsky, the relationship of play to development could be compared to the relationship between instruction and development (Dolya & Palmer 2004).

Mothers can use this important medium of play very effectively. For example, after they

have identified something that they would like their child to learn, they can help their child to act out stories or situations based on what the child already knows, and thus extend the child's learning and experience. It is important that the mother approaches her child's learning in a playful, enthusiastic and encouraging manner; that no undue pressure is placed on the child, and learning is experienced by the child as enjoyable, as the mother is constantly aware of the child's ZPD. When a child is in the process of developing phonemic knowledge, the playing of educational games with the child can be very useful. Where possible, puzzles, card games, magnetic letters, letter cutters, snap-together letter cubes, and other resources should be provided (Palmer & Bayley 2005: 66,68). It is also a good idea to talk to children about the sound and structure of letters and words (Palmer & Bayley 2005:68) and to name objects and letters together. For example, the child can be shown how to relate the letter shape to certain objects or characters (as is done in the 'Letterland' learning series). The phonemes can be used in rhymes and songs and thus be applied in different ways. It is also important to provide plenty of opportunities for children to manipulate alphabet shapes made of dough, magnetic shapes, felt and other materials (Palmer & Bayley 2005:68). As a result of such exposure, when the letters are introduced formally later, the child will be able to connect the letters with what she already knows (Palmer & Bayley 2005:68). This connection can be created in fun ways by means of kinaesthetic learning at first, where the child is shown how to form the letters with her body. Sky writing can then be employed, and thereafter, sand writing (Palmer & Bayley 2005:66). In situations where finances and resources are limited (where young children do not have ready access to writing books), the aforementioned activities could be engaged in very easily.

Mothers can make good use of unplanned moments to engage in spontaneous language games such as memory games, singing, enthusiastic rhyming, riddles, tongue twisters, alliterative games, and clapping the number of syllables or beats in a word (Palmer & Bayley 2005:62,64,66; Lilly & Green 2004:19; Hirsch Jr. 1997:12). These games will all help a child to develop sound and phonemic awareness more naturally and will help the child to first understand the oral sounds well before symbols are introduced. Thus meaningful connections are made between what the child is exposed to (in the form of rhymes and stories, for example), and the phonemes and graphemes that she may be in the process of learning (Palmer & Bayley 2005:62,64,66; Lilly & Green 2004:19). It is

essential that the mother enables the child to form important links between what the child can relate to, and the new knowledge that she is to learn. This practice will enhance meaning, which is an essential condition to learning (Van der Veer & Valsiner 1991:17). Other family activities that can be engaged in to provide children with more exposure to literacy, are family conversations, watching educational television programmes and playing educational computer games (Aram & Levin 2005:203).

The examples described above are types of scaffolds which parents can use to support their children's learning. "Scaffolding", an important teaching strategy in the ZPD, and deemed essential to becoming literate (Ewing 2003:19; Van der Stuyf 2002:2), refers to the practice of a more knowledgeable other, providing individualised support which will help a learner to organise new information, to bridge the gap between what the learner already knows and what the learner does not yet know (Chatry-Komarek 2003:63). In this way, the learner is enabled to build on prior knowledge and to link it to new information, thus internalising this new information (Reyhner 2008; Van der Stuyf 2002:2). Scaffolds are provided temporarily so that the learner can accomplish, with assistance, tasks that she otherwise would not have been able to do on her own. As the learner's abilities increase, the scaffolding is progressively withdrawn until the learner can master the problem independently (Van der Stuyf 2002:2). Scaffolding may consist of a mother giving her child hints to find a solution to a problem, or drawing her child's attention to important aspects of the problem. For example, a mother can engage her child in joint reading (or shared reading) which refers to a parent (or more experienced other) reading *with* her child (Hirsch, Jr. 1997:11) as a way to support her child's reading. When the child is unfamiliar with a word for example, the mother can ask her child to sound out the word. The practice of shared reading and writing is a good way to make the transition to independent reading (Hirsch, Jr. 1997:11), and it also has important benefits for a child's early literacy development. In a study by Aram and Levin in 2002, where the quality of mother-child joint writing and storybook reading were compared as predictors of emergent literacy among low SES Israeli kindergartners, joint writing (as well as storybook reading) related strongly to basic literacy skills. The two main skills which improved as a result of maternal mediation in joint writing were word writing/recognition (41%) and phonological awareness (26%) (Aram & Levin 2002:219). Other studies confirm that children who participate in parent-child book reading tend to display better literacy skills (Willenberg 2005:171).

A mother can scaffold her child's early writing attempts by reading a story with her child and writing a new ending for it together, or after her child has written a 'story' (which may consist of pictures and marks), she can ask her child to tell her the story. The mother could write a sentence below her child's "driting" to help her child remember her story (Neuman 2006).

In the ZPD therefore, learning is *mediated* by a more experienced participant on behalf of the novice learner. Mediated learning, considered as essential to success and survival by Vygotsky (Presseisen & Kozulin 1992:1), could be described as the "subtle, social interaction between the teacher and the learner in the enrichment of the student's learning experience" (Presseisen & Kozulin 1992:5). In the following section, learning as mediated by positive learning environments will be discussed.

2.6.2 Learning as mediated by positive literacy learning environments

The learning environment refers to both the physical environment (layout, resources, use) in this case the home environment, and the psychosocial environment (interactions between children and adults or children with other children and between the setting and its wider contexts of homes and communities). Simply put, the environment refers to the space that children occupy and the people who make up that space (Department for children, schools & families (UK) 2007:1; Makin 2003:327).

According to the sociocultural view, the interaction of the child with the environment is never immediate, but that interaction is always mediated by meanings that originate outside of the child, usually as a result of socialisation (Presseisen & Kozulin 1992:8).

There is now extensive research literature concerning how early literacy learning settings can be made more effective by paying closer attention to the creation of print-rich environments, as well as to the mediation of literacy learning within these environments (Makin 2003:327). The role of the participants within these environments and the available

cultural tools or artefacts in the social ecology of individual's lives are the mediational means, and thus, key features of learning environments (Razfar & Gutiérrez 2003:34).

The mother as mediator in the learning environment, as well as the actual ideal physical environment will be considered in the following section.

2.6.2.1 The mother as a mediator of learning

Mothers can view themselves as mediators in the literacy development of their children, since they will act as experts who guide the novices (their young children) in solving problems and who explain, demonstrate and lend support (Aram & Levin 2002:207; Gifford 2005:16). In acting as mediators in their literacy development, parents will do more than expose their children to a literature-rich environment, important as this is. They will actually 'get between' their children and the concepts to be learned, as it were, and direct their children to what they still need to learn and help them to make important connections. Presseisen and Kozulin (1992:6) explain Vygotsky's view of mediation with the example of how young animals learn new things. Young animals will usually avoid something which has not been previously encountered in the presence of the mother. The young animal therefore learns not from direct exposure but from the indirect experience or the mediation provided by the presence (or absence) of the mother. With young children, the mother will generally teach her young children to avoid dangerous objects, not by exposing them directly to the objects, but by explaining to them how they can act appropriately.

Vygotsky believed that instruction is essential to learning (Vygotsky 1962:101,102) (cf. 1.4.1). For example, in learning about the rules of grammar, he showed that the child learns grammar long before he enters school, but that it is still unconscious. As a result of instruction in grammar and writing, children become aware of what they are doing and learn to use the new skills consciously. The adult therefore intentionally creates opportunities for certain cognitive processes to develop, without directly implanting them in the child (Vygotsky 1962:101,102; Van der Veer & Valsiner 1991:330). Mediation assumes that instruction goes beyond providing information, and is not merely concerned

with mastering bits of information here and now, but with connecting the present with the both the past and with anticipating the future (Presseisen & Kozulin 1992:11). For example, if the child points to an orange on a tree and the parent simply provides a label for the fruit, this would represent an “unmediated” response; but if the parent were to provide a broader definition by referring to smells and tastes and connect it with something that the child already knows, the child will more easily understand the concept (Presseisen & Kozulin 1992:18).

Another example of mediation could be the mother’s assisting the child in his early writing attempts. The mother can provide a special notebook for her child for writing. He can be encouraged to write down anything which he finds interesting; for example, a funny story or a few sentences about a favourite book. If the child needs help in getting started, the mother can talk to him about what he writes. Thus, the more he thinks aloud, the more he may be willing to write down his ideas. If he is unsure of a spelling, the mother can ask her child to “sound out” the word and try to write it the way it sounds. If this proves to be too frustrating for the child, his mother can step in. When he has completed the task, the mother should ask him to read his writing, and encourage, praise, and show great interest in the content of the writing (Hirsch Jr. 1997:12).

2.6.2.2 The home learning environment as a mediator of learning

The following can be done by the mother to provide an ideal home learning environment, which is conducive to learning:

- provide good-quality resources for teaching literacy;
- make sufficient time to instruct (teach, talk to, play with) their children (basic interaction); and
- provide a good example by showing that the practices of reading and writing are both enjoyable and useful (Bardige & Segal 2005:213; Willenberg 2005:170; Lilly & Green 2004:12,40; Machet 2002:3).

Providing good-quality resources for teaching literacy

In a sound early learning environment, children will notice that print is all around them. Ideally, there will be plenty of good quality books, interesting things to explore, paper supplies, writing and art materials, envelopes, paint and clay where possible. Additionally, magnetic letters, sandpaper letters, alphabet puzzles, alphabet blocks and alphabet cookie cutters where they are available, can be provided (Bardige & Segal 2005:9; Lilly & Green 2004:15; Jennings 2003:18). It must be noted that the aforementioned materials can be supplied where finances are not a problem, as is the case with the mothers in my study. However, in environments where these resources cannot be obtained, cheaper options can be as used, and they can be found to be just as effective.

High-quality books in many genres, and all kinds of print are in abundance in the homes of children who display good emergent literacy behaviours, and who eventually do well in reading and writing (Lily & Green 2004:41,43). In homes where children's books are not readily available, literacy materials may include calendars, recipes, newspapers and instruction manuals (Lilly & Green 2004:15).

Making sufficient time to interact

The time that is spent reading stories to preschool children and the degree of engagement with them are of critical importance to early literacy (Rodger 2003:127). Mothers can interact with their children in a myriad of ways and there are many skills that they can teach their children within this interaction or as a result thereof. In section 2.3.2., a few important skills that are essential for children to learn in order to develop their emergent literacy skills, were mentioned. The following skills and concepts will be discussed below: talking, learning about print, story-telling, storybook reading, music, and showing by example that reading matters.

Talking

In general, when children find in their learning environments things to discover and talk

about, and people who are interested in talking about those things, they will probably develop extensive vocabularies and will be more likely to use their language in different and in interesting ways. The parent-child verbal interaction is critical for early development and its practice will accelerate learning and provide even more opportunities for mastering new words and asking new questions, thus facilitating early language development and later reading comprehension (Bardige & Segal 2005:9; Willenberg 2005:170; Mendelsohn 2002:200). Not every parent has access to educational resources, but one thing that parents *can* do is talk to their children a lot (Bardige & Segal 2005:79). It has been found that the ability of a child to comprehend a written text is determined by how well that child comprehends the same text when spoken (Sousa 2005:46). Mothers should therefore create opportunities for much verbal interaction with their children, expose them to a variety of novel words, and teach them talking's counterpart skill, listening (Palmer & Bayley 2005:5; Willenberg 2005:170).

In helping children to develop their oral language, exposing a child to imaginative play is helpful and even extremely important for children's holistic development (Palmer & Bayley 2005:30). Where possible, prop boxes, dressing-up clothes so that children can act out their favourite stories, and a range of open-ended materials to stimulate the imagination should be provided so that children can use them in their own ways (Palmer & Bayley 2005:30).

Learning about print

In a literature-rich environment, both the quality and quantity of exposure to print is important (Willenberg 2005:168). Since being able to differentiate between text and pictures is an important first step in developing concepts about print, mothers need to help their children to recognise the difference between pictures, words, letters and numbers by extensive exposure to print (Palmer & Bayley 2005:51; Lilly & Green 2004:23). Children also need to know what reading and writing are used for, and how people do it. Parents can do the following activities with their children (Palmer & Bayley 2005:51,215,216):

- talk about a book before you begin to read it;
- show the children how you hold the book right side up;

- show the children the cover of the book and talk about the title of the book, the author and the illustrator;
- show the children how you read the book one page at a time and let them help you turn the pages;
- show them how to read from left to right and from top to bottom;
- as you read, underline the words with your fingers so children can learn that the printed words tell the story;
- point to important words in the book - this visual guidance will help children recognise that words are made up of letters and that the same word always has the same letters in the same order. After a while, they will be able to find familiar words;
- write children's names on their drawings as they watch and let them help if they want to;
- ask children to dictate a few words to go with a drawing or to tell a simple story;
- write down the words as they say them. Have the children read back the words with you or by themselves;
- draw their attention to all kinds of environmental print such as signs, billboards, labels, mail, recipes, directions, notes, lists, cards and e-mail; and
- let children see you read and write and talk to them about what you are doing.

Once children have begun to develop phonological awareness, parents can point out initial letter sounds; for example, 'S' for stop, 'H' and 'C' on hot and cold taps, and so on (Palmer & Bayley 2005:52). Children's attention should be drawn to all kinds of print; for example, when driving in your car draw attention to traffic signs. Children soon learn to read signs such as 'STOP.' Once children become familiar with signs, they seem to take pleasure in spotting them (Palmer & Bayley 2005:52). They can learn to recognise their name and the letter with which it begins (Bardige & Segal 2005:215).

Story-telling

Oral storytelling has received much attention from research on literacy development (Fox 2003:189). It is a powerful way to develop children's listening and speaking skills. Another benefit of storytelling is that when an adult is unhampered by a book, she can

make eye contact with children and they can see and imitate her facial expressions and gestures. In this way, it will be easier to maintain children's attention (Palmer & Bayley 2005:42). The best stories are those that an adult makes up himself, and he can make up stories to suit the situation (Palmer & Bayley 2005:42).

After the parent has modelled storytelling, children should be encouraged to tell stories too. These can be well-loved stories that they know well, or they can also make up their own stories. This will enhance their vocabulary, sentence structure, creativity and confidence (Palmer & Bayley 2005:44). Before they actually learn to read, children can be encouraged to memorise stories too (Palmer & Bayley 2005:44).

Storybook reading

A substantial finding from Gordon Well's research (1986) into language at home and school was that "one common factor correlating with success later in school was the child's experience of having stories read, discussing and recalling the story on a parent-to-child basis as a normal and natural part of the family experience" (Rodger 2003:117). Storybook reading or story telling is regarded as probably the most appealing initial activity for teacher (or parent) and learner (or young child) (Yola Center 2005:21).

Although there are differences amongst educationists regarding the importance of reading aloud to children in terms of their emergent literacy skills and future academic success, storybook reading appears to be essential (Willis et al. 2007:630; Palmer & Bayley 2005:5; Yola Center 2005:21; Aram & Levin 2002:203), with some regarding it as the single most important activity relating to reading success (Aram & Levin 2002:203; Hirsch Jr. 1997:11). According to Willis and others (2007:630), children who were told stories, taught letters, words or numbers three or more times in the previous week, or who visited the library in the previous month were more likely than other children to show signs of emerging literacy. Moreover, children who are read to frequently are almost twice as likely as other children to show two or three emergent literacy skills (Willis et al. 2007:630).

Daily reading can be used as a predictor for a child's language and cognition level at 36 months (Willis et al. 2007:630), as it supports language development, helps children learn book-handling skills and concepts of print, develops concentration and listening skills, and fosters a love of books and learning. When children learn to love books, they will want to learn how to read, and when they become good readers, it will probably impact greatly on their success both in school and in life in general (Bardige & Segal 2005:324,330,352).

Further benefits of reading aloud to children include the fact that children will know about tense consistency without being able to explain it; will internalise the various language forms of print which help to extend a child's vocabulary, strengthen the bond between parent and child, provide hours of enjoyment, develop the imagination and creative spirit, and help children to learn about themselves and their world (Bardige & Segal 2005:330; Lilly & Green 2004:40; Jennings 2003:21,22; Mendelsohn 2002:193). Reading and storytelling also introduce children to components of stories, such as character, plot, action and sequence, reinforce basic concepts, extend concrete experiences, and help children to recognise objects in books (Willis et al. 2007:629; Lily & Green 2004:45).

Reading aloud to your children gives them an incredibly strong message. Without words you are saying 'I am not washing the car or reading the paper or watching news. I am sitting here with you, reading a story about a little dog whose family don't recognise him when he gets dirty. I am enjoying sitting in bed with you, sharing the fun, the fears and the fellowship of this magic moment. You are the centre of my world.' And when you look down at the sparkling eyes you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are the centre of theirs. This act of love forms an association between the child and books. The word book brings pleasure. The feel, look and smell of books is forever linked to feelings of warmth, security and love. You have started a lifelong love affair between a child and reading (Jennings 2003:17).

Music

Music provides a playful, emotionally satisfying context for learning. Music is also a good way to develop listening skills, social skills such as taking turns, collaboration and singing in time with the rest of the group. Musical activities can help to develop gross and fine motor skills, hand-eye coordination and physical competence, which are all necessary skills for handwriting. The appreciation of rhythm, auditory discrimination and memory are

also benefits which can be derived from musical activities; and these assist in the development of phonemic awareness which underpins phonics (Palmer & Bayley 2005:31). It is also possible that the child having experienced enjoyable rhythm-based activities in the early years, will be aided in the understanding of punctuation and the ability to read with expression in the later years (Palmer & Bayley 2005: 32).

Palmer and Bayley make an interesting connection between music and physical activity in the context of early literacy development. In order to read with understanding, a child should be able to combine:

- phonic decoding (the analytical processing task which involves small, sequential tasks associated with the left brain); and
- overall comprehensions of the text (the type of holistic understanding associated with the right brain) (Palmer & Bayley 2005: 68).

A child should therefore, be able to develop connections between the two hemispheres of the brain in order to carry out the balanced mental activity required for reading. In order to facilitate this development, physical activity that involves integrated movement of both sides of the body is required.

It is recommended that parents expose their children to a wide range of musical experiences, including listening to all kinds of music, dancing around the home, attending local musical performances, and especially singing songs to them (Hirsch Jr. 1997:201). Playing games such as the 'Hokey Pokey', marching games, action songs, skipping and dancing provide musical exposure and enjoyment, and could also help children to develop motor control and hand-eye coordination in preparation for the physical skills of handwriting (Palmer & Bayley 2005:38).

Modelling good literacy-related behaviour

In developing print awareness, it is important to let children see adults' involvement with print. When they see adults engaging with all forms of print they quickly learn about this concept (Bardige & Segal 2005:213). As parents do their shopping, they can help their child read labels on the products. When having a meal, parents can ask their child to identify the food containers. Another simple but effective way for parents to draw attention to print is to take a walk around the neighbourhood and see what signs their child recognises. Parents can talk about the letters, colour and shapes of the words they see (Lilly & Green 2004:12).

Socialisation into reading can occur directly, when family members arrange activities such as reading to a child, or indirectly when the child observes family members using reading and writing in everyday activities (Machet 2002:3).

In some homes, parents check e-mail, read newspapers, magazines, write cheques, sort through mail and answer letters, read the Bible, tell stories, and read books to their children. This kind of exposure to literary activities is important. Literacy events also take place in everyday activities such as when a family takes a walk, drives, shops, goes to church and has a meal. In all these activities, parents serve as models to their children, demonstrating reading and writing in meaningful ways, such as when a mother helps her young son/daughter write his/her name or reads a label on a can (Lilly & Green 2004:90).

In other families, there may be a limited amount of print and print-related experiences available to children, but often such parents possess practical knowledge and culturally acquired skills; thus children, by their active participation in work that requires specialised knowledge such as cooking, sewing, agriculture, and building, can also benefit in terms of their literacy development (Lilly & Green 2004:90).

Children who grow up in homes where parents read and write for pleasure have a distinct advantage in becoming literate. Children who see their parents reading and writing for a variety of purposes are likely to imitate their actions. Contrary to this, if they see their parents watching television all the time, parents cannot blame their children for doing the same. Parents who read and write easily and extensively probably need very little support to develop in their children a love for and an interest in reading and writing. For those for whom reading and writing are not a regular part of their lives, the following suggestions may prove to be helpful:

- read signs and labels aloud when you go places with your child;
- when you are making a grocery list, following a recipe, checking the dosage for medication on a bottle, or reading the instructions for assembling a new purchase, explain to your child what you are doing. You can also let your child help by finding ingredients;
- talk to your child about something that you have read in a newspaper or magazine that would interest her. Show her the pictures and read aloud some of the words;
- when you receive cards and letters that are appropriate to share, read them aloud to your child. Help him to compose a reply or draw a picture that you can include with your response;
- turn off the television when you are reading to yourself or to your child; and
- share with your child the pleasure you get from reading or the kinds of information you acquire (Bardige & Segal 2005:343,344).

Parents who do not read can still give their children the benefits of participation in a culture of literacy and access to its tools. They can: take their young children to public events that involve reading; for example, church services, library story hours, and school plays; take their children to the library to borrow books, the pictures of which the parent or child can 'read'; tell children stories, sing songs, and listen to story tapes together; join a family literacy programme and let their children see them enjoying learning (Bardige & Segal 2005:343,344).

Parents can model writing for their children each day; for instance, a mother can allow her child to see meaningful written language as it is being constructed, by writing a special morning message at the breakfast table. She can also leave her child a note on her bedroom door about a special event that is to take place on that day. Such messages allow children to associate writing with warmth, support and meaning (Neuman 2006).

2.7 WHEN LEARNING IS NOT EASY: CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

It is important to point to the fact that this study is based on the assumption that if provided with the right kind of learning environment and with a caregiver who is interested in, and actively involved in the literacy development of the child, and who is aware of what the child needs to know, that this child will most likely develop the necessary skills for learning to read. It must be remembered however, that this is the ideal situation, and that there are children who, despite a multitude of resources, time and attention, will not develop as expected. Such is the case with children who have special cognitive, physical, or other needs. In the introductory paragraphs of section 2.6 it was mentioned that Lev Vygotsky made important contributions to the field of abnormal human development. In fact, it has been claimed that Vygotsky's major concepts "were conceived, formulated and elaborated upon within the special education framework and terminology" (Gindis, 1999 in Dixon & Verenikina 2007:197). Vygotsky was instrumental in positing that disability is a sociocultural phenomenon and that a differentiation could be made between a primary disability or "organic impairment", and a secondary disability, which he saw as "distortions of higher psychological functions due to social factors" (Dixon & Verenikina 2007:198,199).

Vygotsky believed that the principles of child development are the same for all children, including those with disabilities, who also learn as a result of social and cultural mediation. It was Vygotsky's belief that while a primary disability may limit a child's acquisition of some social skills and thus cause the child to gain knowledge at a slower rate, it is the social milieu within which the child finds herself that could limit development and lead to secondary disabilities and behavioural characteristics such as dependence, passivity, a lack of problem-solving ability, and a lack of social skills. This, Vygotsky believed, could

happen when such a child's development is allowed to diverge from the path of "normal social development," resulting in social deprivation and secondary handicaps. It was Vygotsky's belief that in order to prevent or remediate this situation, that the first goal of special education teachers should be to challenge and change social attitudes about people with disabilities (Dixon & Verenikina 2007:199)

Children with special needs therefore, need to be supported according to their needs. Such children also need a dynamic, supportive social environment which will encourage them and challenge them to move beyond what they know, towards what is possible for them to attain.

2.8 CONCLUSION

As has been shown in this chapter, there is much that the mother can do to encourage the early literacy development of her young child. The mother who is at home (or at home mostly), will potentially have the time and opportunity to expose her child to many experiences to develop emergent literacy skills, ideally providing the necessary instruction and support that her child needs. Mothers need to be made aware that one of their most important tasks will be to help their children to come to a point where literacy is "embedded" in their "social lives," thus providing a solid foundation for further literacy development (Machet 2002:2). Ultimately, parents and children need to know that literacy "serves to mediate a variety of cultural activities in their everyday lives" (Machet 2002:2), and is not something "out there" beyond their reach.

In the next chapter, the focus will be on the research methodology that guides this research project. The research design, along with issues such as sampling, data collection and data management strategies will be discussed. Plans for data analysis and interpretation will also be explained and finally, methodological safeguards will be considered.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the research methodology which was employed to answer the research question, namely, 'What are the perspectives and practices of stay-at-home mothers in relation to the early literacy development of their children?' It begins with a discussion of the research design, namely qualitative research, and the particular approach that was used, namely a multiple-case study approach. Next, the selection of participants is considered and thereafter, specific strategies that were used to collect data. The management of these data, as well as data analysis is then discussed. Finally, important methodological safeguards which include ethical considerations and issues concerning the trustworthiness of the data and data-gathering methods are dealt with.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

The qualitative, multiple-case study design was employed for this study.

3.2.1 Qualitative Research

In qualitative research, the characteristics, qualities or properties of a particular phenomenon are examined in order to achieve enhanced understanding and explanation, and hopefully, also a measure of social change (Henning 2004c:3,5). To achieve this, a clear and detailed account of actions and the representations of actions as far as possible is presented (in speech, music, visual art, artefacts, and in the spoken and written text) (Henning 2004c:3) as a result of the data obtained by means of detailed observations, field notes, reports and interviews (Hodgskiss 2007:30).

Since this dissertation is concerned with answering questions regarding perspectives, experiences and practices, none of which is easy to quantify or standardise, they are best described in words. The qualitative method is thus more appropriate for evaluating such outcomes (Wolfman 2001:60), since “knowledge is constructed not only by observable phenomena, but also by descriptions of people’s intentions, beliefs, values and reasons, meaning making and self-understanding” (Van Rensburg 2004:20).

Creating meaning is an important goal of this research project. As has been stated previously (cf. 2.2.2.1), the Russian educationist, Vygotsky, considered making meaning essential to true learning (Van der Veer & Valsiner 1991:17). Important components of this research therefore, include participants’ description of their realities and their attempts to make sense of those realities. As the researcher, I endeavoured to interpret or reconstruct my interaction with them according to the meanings that participants attached to their realities (Bridgemohan 2002:79). Qualitative inquiries provide for this capacity to learn from others, which is, according to Halcolm's Evaluation Laws, “the most useful of all human capacities” (Wolfman 2001:60).

Furthermore, Henning (2004c:3) states that in qualitative research, the aim is not only to look at people’s actions such as their speech and writing, but also to find out *how* they represent their feelings and thoughts in these actions, and that it is through the use of the qualitative research design that we are able to capture “rich data regarding people’s conceptual frameworks, [or] their *lived experience*” (Henning 2004c:9).

Such qualitative research thus involves social interaction (Bridgemohan 2002:79), which is in consonance with Vygotsky’s sociocultural perspective. This research project therefore aimed to meet people in their unique sociocultural contexts. I sought to discover their realities as they described their experiences, practices and perspectives, stated their opinions, and expressed their understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

3.2.2 Multiple-case study approach

Although the research category called ‘case studies’ is rather difficult to explain with a simple definition (McBurney 2001:2233), a case study can be seen as “the study of a single example of something for its own sake (e.g. the study of the life of a famous sportsperson) or as an exemplar or paradigm of a general phenomenon” (Oxford Dictionary of Sports Science 2007), or as a “detailed study of a single social unit” (Oosthuizen & Bouwer 2007:69).

According to Stake (1988 as cited in Henning 2004d:32), in a case study the main assumption is that a phenomenon is studied as a ‘bounded system.’ Such a system may be a group of people or it may even be a set of documents or a television series. A case study can then be seen as “any social entity that can be bounded by parameters and that shows a specific dynamic and relevance, revealing information that can be captured within these [identifiable] boundaries” (Henning 2004d:32,41).

A case study may be a practical problem which needs to be solved as soon as possible, or it may even be an event or a phenomenon that intrigues the researcher (McBurney 2001:214). Case studies are anchored in real-life situations, and they can help readers gain insights and illuminate understanding which can serve to expand their experiences and also to help structure future research (Hodgskiss 2007:33).

The process that is followed during a case study is an essential part of the study’s outcome which means that a careful description of *how*, *where*, *when* and *why* things happen in the case are taken note of and are an essential part thereof. The process itself then becomes part of the outcome and the context of the study; therefore, is not merely part of the case but it *is* the case (Henning 2004d:41).

Case study research can consist of single or multiple-case studies. I employed the multiple-case study method. The single entity, or ‘bounded system’ that was investigated

was the mother and her child in the real-life context of their home. According to the Vygotskian perspective, when conducting experiments, it is important to meet participants in their everyday, authentic (not contrived) contexts (Newman & Holzman 1993:21,22).

Multiple data-gathering methods such as individual interviews, a focus-group interview and observations were conducted to provide an intensive, in-depth study, which is typical of the case study.

3.3 SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

In qualitative research, the usual way of selecting research contexts and participants is by means of *purposeful selection* or *purposeful sampling* (Patton 1990, in Maxwell 2005: 88) or *criterion-based selection* (Maxwell 2005:88). Maxwell (2005:88) defines purposeful selection as a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected intentionally so that information is provided that cannot be gotten as well from other choices.

These persons and settings can be referred to as 'information-rich cases' which one would study in depth, and from which one can learn much about the central issues involved in the research. It is exactly these information-rich cases which provide for the power and logic behind purposeful sampling (Patton, in Hodgskiss 2007:34).

It must be remembered that with certain types of sampling methods such as convenience sampling, along with snowball, theoretical sampling and purposive sampling, the sample chosen cannot be assumed to be representative of a population, and the findings should not therefore, be generalised to the rest of a population. Generalisation is not the aim of qualitative research, but if the report is credible and lucid, there will be specific elements of

the findings that would be transferable and can therefore be extended to other settings (Henning 2004a:71).

Before a researcher begins such purposive sampling, he should first determine what 'selection criteria' will be used in selecting the subjects to be studied (Hodgskiss 2007:34).

The selection criteria that were used for this study were as follows:

- mothers who are mostly at home, and who are primarily responsible for the care of their children;
- mothers whose child or children are between the ages of 3 and 5 years and do not attend a learning centre on a full-time basis; and.
- mothers who have *chosen* to stay home with their children.

In order to find the desired participants, I undertook the following:

- I approached the churches (eight) in the suburb of Universitas which is in the south-western part of Bloemfontein;
- I requested a list of children in the 3-5 age group who attend Sabbath schools and Sunday schools, along with the telephone numbers of their parents;
- I contacted parents telephonically in order to ascertain which of those families matched the selection criteria;
- I requested that every mother who fitted the selection criteria be part of the study;
- parents who acquiesced became participants.

After I had used the purposive sampling method described above to find research participants, I also made use of snowball sampling, which basically involves a researcher contacting a small number of members of the target population (obtained by means of purposive sampling), and requesting them to introduce her to other potential subjects (Walliman 2005:279). Some of the mothers who fitted the criteria, referred me to other mothers as possible participants in the study. I followed up these suggestions until I was able to find ten participants. Those who eventually agreed to be part of the study were

provided with information about the study. Appointments were made to begin the fieldwork process.

3.4 DATA COLLECTION

3.4.1 Data collection strategies

A multi-method strategy was used to investigate the research problem since this strategy, in contrast to a single strategy, enhances credibility and can serve to clarify or challenge the data, expand on them and thus provide a clearer picture (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:340; Henning 2004c:7,8). Multi-method means that “multiple strategies are used to collect and corroborate the data obtained from any single data collection strategy and/or to confirm data within a single strategy” (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:340), where ‘strategies’ would refer to the sampling and data collection techniques that are continually refined throughout the data collection process (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:340).

McMillan and Schumacher (2006:340) suggest that it is best to use one primary data collection strategy along with other strategies to verify the data obtained. The primary strategy used in this study was interviewing, while further strategies such as observations with field notes, a focus group interview, as well as a reflective notes were kept. The reflective notes (or journal) serve as a form of quality control, and usually records the main decisions and events during the fieldwork process which can be returned to at any time when necessary (Mouton 2001:107), and also contain the researcher’s general reflections.

I made use of the method of description to record the data. Description provides detailed information about the setting (Corbin & Strauss 2008:53) as people are interviewed, detailed information is recorded, visual records are made, nonverbal behaviour is taken note of, and even sounds and smells are recorded. Rich, descriptive data are thus written down so that they can be analysed later (Walliman 2005:115).

3.4.1.1 Semi-structured interviews

Interviews were conducted with participants in their homes, which allowed for increased opportunities to observe the home learning environment at the same time. Before an interview was conducted, the interviewee was informed about my intentions, and assured of the protection of her rights to privacy and confidentiality.

In an interview situation, the interviewer acts as a neutral facilitator who elicits the relevant information from the interviewee who provides responses with the help of questions and prompts. This is done ideally in an atmosphere of trust and accountability (Henning 2004a:54). Interviews can be used to gain information about “the *hows* of people’s lives (the constructive work involved in producing order in everyday life) as well as the traditional *whats* (the activities of everyday life)” (Denzin & Lincoln 2000:646). It consists of verbatim accounts of what happens in interview sessions (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:355).

An interview schedule was used for these semi-structured interviews. Different types of questions were included in the interview schedule. Questions were asked to elicit data on experience and behaviour in order to obtain opinions, values and feelings, factual information (or what the participant considered factual) and to provide background or demographic information (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:353). The schedule consisted of basic core questions with appropriate variations. Ample time and opportunity were given interviewees to elaborate on certain issues or to add any information which they considered relevant. As the interview progressed, prompts were used to elicit necessary information, depending on the circumstances and the unique situation of each interviewee. This type of interviewing as opposed to the more formal, structured interviewing method is used in qualitative investigations because it is more “open-ended and flexible, allowing one to probe in order to obtain in-depth data” (Merriam, 2001 in Hodgskiss 2007:38).

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006:353), in order to ensure valid data and to enhance the reliability of the research instrument, the interview schedule should be field

tested before the final research is done. I followed this suggestion in 2007 whilst still resident in Cape Town, where I interviewed four mothers. Since that time, the questions have been revised and improved upon after those initial interviews and feedback from participants in the pilot study.

As far as the actual interviews were concerned, with the permission of participants, interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Tape-recording the interview ensures “completeness of the verbal interaction and provides material for reliability checks” (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:355). Notes were also taken as the interview progressed. Henning (2004a:73) refers to what she calls ‘meta-notes’ which harness some of the contextual factors that are not in the talk, such as tone of voice, changes in tempo of speech and general body language including gestures and facial expressions. Meta-notes could also include notes and reminders for the interviewer to return to certain questions (Henning 2004a:73).

3.4.1.2 Focus group interview

Data were also collected by means of one focus group interview, which was conducted near the end of the field work period. Due to time constraints and a lack of availability on the part of some of the research participants, four participants comprised this focus group. The interview took place at the home of one the participants who offered her home as a venue since it was centrally located.

A focus group interview is a variation of an interview which is used to obtain a clearer understanding of an idea, problem, or concern and is basically a purposely sampled group of people who are systematically interviewed, instead of individual persons in either a formal or informal setting (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:360; Denzin & Lincoln 2000:651). Potentially, the focus group situation creates a social environment where members are stimulated by each other’s thoughts, ideas and perceptions. It can be used as a ‘confirmation technique,’ the use of which can increase not only the trustworthiness of the

initial findings but can also enhance the credibility of the entire study” (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:360; Denzin & Lincoln 2000:651).

The focus group interview was video-taped and audio-taped and was later transcribed. In the interview, I played the role of facilitator and asked specific initial and periodic questions, all the while assisting in making meaning clear. The video-tape proved to be a primary information source and was, “to some extent phenomenologically neutral” since the video recorder “does not think while it records” (Erickson 2006:177,178). However, a videotape cannot be completely neutral since the cameraperson does have a point of view, which will be reflected on the video-tape (Erickson 2006:177,178). The video-tape provided an ongoing and relatively comprehensive record of the social interaction that took place in the interview (Erickson 2006:177).

3.4.1.3 Observations

Field observations were conducted in the homes of the families who chose to participate in the study. Observational research involves “recording ongoing behaviour without attempting to influence it” (McBurney 2001:215). It has been described as the “fundamental base of all research methods” (Denzin & Lincoln 2000:673) since it allows for a firsthand account of the situation under study (Merriam 2001, in Hodgskiss 2007:37) and occurs in a natural setting. Even studies that are based on interviews employ observational techniques to lend meaning to the context being investigated (Denzin & Lincoln 2000:673). The use of observations when combined with other data analysis methods, allows for a more holistic interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated (Hodgskiss 2007:37). Observations in natural settings can take place in the form of descriptions either through ‘open-ended narrative’ or through the use of checklists or field guides (Denzin & Lincoln 2000:674). In this study, the open-ended narrative approach was used as well as an observation schedule. Field notes were taken during the observations and reflective notes were written after the observations.

I assumed the role of 'participant observer' during the observations. McBurney (2001:220) states that in this kind of research, investigators participate in "naturally occurring groups and record their observations." He (2001:220) says furthermore, that participant observation is characterised by the attempt to see some behavioural activity from the point of view of an insider to a situation, but that the observer need not take the role of a central participant, but may stay largely on the periphery. While I did not get involved with the activities that the participants engaged in during the observations, I listened and observed intensely and tried to see the participant's world through her eyes (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:347). Since it is the aim of qualitative studies to provide 'in-depth descriptions' of the experiences of the participants, the (participant observer) researcher assumes the role of an 'insider' and therefore aims to gain an "insider-perspective of the actors and their practices" (Mouton 2001:148), "presenting the view of participants and taking the role of the other through immersion in data" (Corbin & Strauss 2008:32).

Observations were conducted during the interview visit, and in most cases, also included one or two more sessions dedicated to observations as the need arose. While interviewing is a valid and efficient way of understanding someone's perspective, observation has the potential of allowing you to draw inferences, which you may not have been able to do by relying exclusively on interview data (Maxwell 2005:94). This is particularly important in order to get clear understandings of 'theory-in-use,' and also in coming to understand certain aspects which a participant may be reluctant to share directly during the interview (Maxwell 2005:94). However, as Corbin and Strauss (2008:30) caution, a drawback of doing observations is that the researcher may give meaning to action or interaction based on an observation without confirming that meaning with the participant. One way to overcome this would be to combine interviewing and observations so that meaning can be checked and confirmed (Corbin & Strauss 2008:30). It is therefore a good idea for the researcher, when she appears to have discovered significant nonverbal behaviour, to follow this up by finding out from participants if the inferred meaning is correct (Corbin & Strauss 2008:30). In one case, I employed this strategy. After the focus group interview, I had a follow-up session with one of the participants in order to confirm my analysis of her responses. It proved to be a useful session and helped to make the data clearer.

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006:359), field observation relies on “careful observation, searching for patterns of behaviour and relationships” including verbal and non-verbal communication. I took note of non-verbal communication in order to establish whether it was congruent with the verbal data (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:359), since in qualitative research the aim is to find out, in a particular setting, what the actions of people are, what the setting looks like, what the significance is of signs, symbols and artefacts, what the participants think, what they feel, and what kind of language they use (Henning 2004c:6).

It is important for the observer to know exactly what she is looking for, and to concentrate on these variables (Walliman 2005:288). The researcher should thus devise a simple and efficient method of recording information accurately, and should make use of the methods of ticking boxes or circling numbers as much as possible, recording observations as they happen. For this research study, I developed an observation schedule which allowed for ease of recording observations. After each observation session, these categories were re-examined for relevant concepts which helped me to shape and drive future data collection and analysis (Corbin & Strauss 2008:288; Walliman 2005:288). Such concepts can be derived from the analysis of initial observations or interviews, which become the basis for subsequent observations (Corbin & Strauss 2008:30).

During my observations I looked for artefacts in the home, which served to either confirm or refute data obtained during interviews and observations. Artefact collections are “tangible manifestations that describe people’s experiences, knowledge, actions and values” (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:356). Artefacts that were of interest to me included books, magazines and other literature, as well as documents including notes, recipes, shopping lists, family paperwork, children’s art, diaries, journals, writing and art implements, writing paper and educational and other toys. I also observed the general interaction between mother and child, and looked for evidence of what the mother did to create a suitable learning environment. I also took special note of how the mother’s revealed perspectives of her role in the development of the child impacted on her practice.

Descriptive field notes were also made during observations. Reflective notes which consisted of my observations, thoughts and ideas were made during and directly after the observation period. These reflective notes served to “synthesize the main interactions and scenes observed and, more important, assess the quality of the data, and suggest questions and tentative interpretations” (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:350). Hamberg and Johansson (1999 in Corbin & Strauss 2008:11) emphasise the importance of being self-reflective about how we as researchers, influence the research process and how it, in turn, influences us. It is therefore suggested that researchers write memoranda to record their instant reactions during, and after interviews (and observations) and that they recall these memoranda later and compare them with their coding (Corbin & Strauss 2008:11).

3.5 DATA MANAGEMENT

It is vital that every researcher has a plan for recording and handling data even before the study begins, since all the care and time that may be expended on designing and conducting a study could be compromised if the researcher is not careful about the way he records, handles and even guards the data (McBurney 2001:229).

For this study, notes were kept to record data about observations, dates and other relevant information. Interview and observation schedules or protocols were used in the collection of the data, and they also served to organise data in a coherent way. Computerised files which contained demographic information, transcribed interviews, analytical notes and observation notes and schedules were kept for each participant.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed as soon as possible after the interview had taken place (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:356); while the information, thoughts and impressions were still fresh. The initial draft was edited and put into its final form. The final form contained accurate, verbatim data, as well as the notes that I had taken during the interview. These notes included non-verbal interaction, interesting observations,

questions, comments and notes that I felt were important to consider. This is done, according to McMillan and Schumacher (2006:356), to “enhance the search for meaning.” The transcribed notes in their final form also included the date and informant identity (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:356).

McMillan and Schumacher (2006:356) suggest that an “interview elaboration” be written of each interview session, which will include self-reflection on the interviewer’s role and rapport, the interviewee’s reaction and the extensions of interview meanings. I tried to follow this counsel and wrote as many memoranda as I could in order to develop each participant’s story. This process of reflection and elaboration could potentially serve as an excellent and necessary control for valid data (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:356).

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

After the data had been collected, reflected on, and controlled for validity, the data were analysed and interpreted. Data analysis is an essential part of the research design and data analysis decisions should inform, and be informed by the rest of the design (Maxwell 2005:95). A plan for analysis is thus vital. The next chapter of this dissertation, Chapter 4, provides a detailed record of the process of analysis and of the outcomes thereof. This particular section consists of a brief discussion of the analysis and the interpretation of data.

Data analysis in qualitative research, says Henning (2004b:127) is not an “iterative” or linear process, but rather, it is an “ongoing, emerging” process which allows the data to unfold as the analysis proceeds. In qualitative research, the goal of coding is not to count things, but to “fracture” the data and “rearrange them into categories that facilitate comparison between things in the same category and that aid in the development of theoretical concepts” (Maxwell 2005:96). Data analysis can be seen as a process which literally means “to take apart words, sentences and paragraphs, which is an important act

in the research project in order to make sense of, interpret and theorise that data” (Henning 2004b:127). In this type of categorisation analysis, questions are therefore asked about similarities and differences across settings or individuals in order to make sense of the data (Maxwell 2005:99).

All the data obtained by means of in-depth interviewing, focus group interviewing and participant observation were analysed in a similar way. Therefore, the main plan for analysis is discussed under the sub-section, ‘Semi-structured Interviews’. Variations and additional strategies are both discussed under the appropriate sub-headings.

3.6.1 Semi-structured interviews

The analysis of interviews generally began by listening to the interview either prior to, or during the transcription of the interview. The process of listening to the interview again and transcribing it, usually presents a further opportunity for analysis. During this listening process, notes and memoranda (memos) which were written down thus assisted me in developing tentative ideas about categories and relationships (Maxwell 2005:96).

The analysis process usually involves breaking the transcribed data up into smaller units of meaning and then looking for broader categories and themes (Henning 2004a:54). This was done as follows: after the first interview had been transcribed, each data set (transcribed interview) was analysed by breaking it up into small units, separated by natural breaks in thought or direction. Each section was then coded, or given a concept. These codes consisted of words, phrases or sentences. Each coded section was then analysed at a time. During this process, I read and thought about, brainstormed and wrote whatever came to mind in the form of a memorandum as each particular data section was examined in depth and explored for ideas (Corbin & Strauss 2008:163). Reading and thinking about interview transcripts and observations notes, is as much a part of data analysis as are developing coding categories and applying these categories to data and analysing narrative structure and contextual relationships (Maxwell 2005:96).

As is recommended, I wrote memoranda (memos) regularly throughout the data analysis process (Maxwell 2005:96). Memoranda may be seen as the “running logs of analytic thinking,” “short analytical descriptions,” or as “storehouses of ideas” which are generated through interaction with the data (Corbin & Strauss 2008:108; Walliman 2005:313). Compiling memoranda are a useful way of exploring links between data and for recording and developing one’s impressions and ideas. This then leads to an understanding about the issues concerned as one gains greater insight into important relationships (Walliman 2005:313). A memorandum is therefore a tool which records the ‘evolving’ ideas of the researcher as he reacts to the data and to the development of codes and pattern codes, thus stimulating analytical thinking and insights (Walliman 2005:313; Maxwell 2005:96).

The initial memoranda were quite simple since they dealt with only one concept, but as the research process unfolded, they become more complex, “summary-like, abstract and integrative.” Later memoranda therefore often provided clues necessary for integration (where relationships between concepts are explored; which is the ultimate goal of the analysis process) (Corbin & Strauss 2008:108).

The concepts chosen for each memorandum were always subject to change and review as the analysis progressed (Corbin & Strauss 2008:163; Walliman 2005:94). An “interpretive conceptual label” is usually arrived at only after the analyst has examined the text very carefully and has considered all possible meanings. The practice of conceptualising data reduces the amount of data and provides a language for talking about the data (Corbin & Strauss 2008:160).

Corbin and Strauss (2008:160) differentiate between researcher-denoted concepts and “in-vivo” codes, which represent the participant’s own words. They state further that it is important when creating codes that the researcher is prepared to give it very careful and creative thought and that “thinking outside the box” (Wicker 1985 in Corbin & Strauss 2008:160) is essential. They further differentiate between lower level concepts, which would be explanatory or minor concepts, and higher-level concepts, which would be categories or themes which tell us what a group of lower-level concepts are pointing to

(Corbin & Strauss 2008:160,165). The conceptual labels which I created reflect different kinds of concepts, as have been described above.

As well as a conceptual label and a date, each memorandum contained the actual text followed by the analysis of the text (Corbin & Strauss 2008:164). After the first text had been analysed, the following text in the data set was analysed in the same way, and a new concept or code was created. This process was followed until the entire document (first data set) had been analysed. Such detailed handling and analysis in the beginning of the analysis process made analysis easier in the later stages and provided for a “rich and dense description,” as well as well-developed theory (Corbin & Strauss 2008:163).

The initial memoranda consisted of my impressions and interpretations of the various segments of the entire interview. They reveal how I asked questions, made comparisons and brainstormed. This process, which some may regard as tedious, according to Corbin and Strauss (2008:169,170), helps the analyst to “get inside the data, to start to feel them at a gut level”. Once this had been done, I then wrote a summary memorandum in which important themes or categories were highlighted. Concepts can usually become categories or themes if they run through the entire interview, as well as if they pull together some of the lower level concepts. At this stage, categories are not in their final state, but are verified as the analysis proceeds (Corbin & Strauss 2008:187,188,193). I also made use of tables and diagrams (cf. appendix 6A & appendix 6B); the latter are particularly useful in representing visually, the relationship between concepts and they also “stimulate and document the analytic thought processes and provide direction for theoretical sampling” (Corbin & Strauss 2008:140).

Once the first data set had been transcribed, codes or concepts, as well as categories were developed which allowed for further development of thought. At this stage, I became more aware of the issues involved and what to be vigilant for in future interviews and observations. Corbin and Strauss (2008:57) advocate a sequential approach to data collection and analysis, which, in their opinion, allows a researcher to identify relevant

concepts, follow through on subsequent questions, listen for, and observe clues in more sensitive ways.

I analysed the second data set in much the same way as the first set, but at this stage, concepts had been established already and these were built upon as further concepts were looked for (Corbin & Strauss 2008:185). The provisional concepts and categories were scrutinised against further data; they were added to, modified, or discarded as was appropriate (Corbin & Strauss 2008:187). Therefore, the first set of concepts obtained from the first data set was compared for similarities and differences against the next set of data. These concepts were then either expanded by adding new properties and dimensions, or new concepts were added to the list, or previous concepts were revised when another term would have been more suitable (Corbin & Strauss 2008:57).

After many months of gathering data and writing memoranda, I had obtained a good idea, or so-called 'inner sense' of what the data were trying to say (Corbin & Strauss 2008:139), and it was an appropriate time to start making connections. This 'inner sense,' according to Corbin and Strauss (2008:138,140), can only be arrived at when:

The story of our participants becomes part of us ... Not that we have a chronic illness, or are drug addicts ... or new mothers. Rather it is that we've listened to their words, observed their actions, felt their emotions, taken on their burdens, and so understand what it is like for them ... The story or theory ... is a construction, but a construction grounded in data.

Making connections between categories is important to the analysis process. Maxwell (2005:99) emphasises the importance of using both categorising (such as coding) and connecting strategies for data analysis, since this will help to produce a "well-rounded account," and will have other important implications for one's overall research. As Henning (2004b:106-108) states, it is the researcher's task to "see the whole", to discover the relationships between the categories. In attempting to explain connecting strategies, Maxwell (2005:98) states that unlike with categories, where one would break up the data and re-sort them into categories, connecting analysis seeks to understand the data in context, by using various methods to identify the relationships among the different

elements, and thus to “connect statements and events into a coherent whole.” In order to achieve this goal, specific “integrated primary themes” are extracted and constructed from the categories. Themes are then argued and discussed in order to make a point. This is done with the purpose of answering the research question(s). The processed and organised data are used along with evidence from literature to produce valid findings and to develop theory (Henning 2004b:106-108; Henning 2004c:5).

Building theory is, according to Maxwell (2005:98), a primary goal of analysis. Corbin and Strauss (2008:53) do not agree that building theory is always the goal of the researcher. They state that a researcher could have one of three aims, namely, description, conceptual ordering or theorising (Corbin & Strauss 2008:53). Description is needed to tell us what is going on, what the setting looks like, what the people involved in the setting are doing and so on (Corbin & Strauss 2008:53-54). Description is basic to both conceptual ordering, which involves the “organisation of data into discrete categories according to their properties and dimensions” and theory building (Corbin & Strauss 2008:53-55). In descriptive research, people can be interviewed, questionnaires can be distributed, visual records can be made and even sounds and smells can be recorded. What is important in descriptive research is that the data are recorded or written down so that they can be analysed later (Walliman 2005:115) and that a rich description of data is provided. In this study, I made use of descriptive research to describe the experiences and perspectives of participating mothers.

Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007:29) contend that with multiple-cases the most effective method of data representation is by making use of tables and diagrams. In this study, I represented the data by means of both narrative stories and a few tables and diagrams (cf. appendix 6A & appendix 6B). These tables and diagrams help to organise and manage data, provide ease of access and analysis of data and also give clear evidence of how conclusions have been reached; thus enabling the study itself to be more trustworthy.

I used the categories as contained in the tables, diagrams and descriptive memoranda to compare the data and to discover recurring themes or trends. In this way, I discovered

relationships between the categories in my attempts to integrate or connect data into a coherent whole. Thereafter, the theory was defined as I looked for gaps and expanded the theory, bringing in variation, and validating the outcomes. Thus, the descriptive stories, along with the categories and themes that had been developed over time translated into an 'analytic story' which serves to reflect the researcher's "construction grounded in data." The analytic story shows how all the other major categories and sub-categories have been linked to form a well-rounded account of the data (Corbin & Strauss 2008:140,266,267). The exact process is described in more detail in the following chapter.

3.6.2 Focus group interview

Data obtained by means of the focus group interview were transcribed and analysed in the same way that the individual interviews were done, but since this interview was also video-taped, additional clues, especially non-verbal data, were provided.

The following method of analysing data from videotape, drawn partially from Erickson (2006:183-186), was used:

Step 1. I reviewed the entire recorded interview in real time without stopping the playback. During this playback, I made notes of observed verbal and nonverbal phenomena. I also wrote a memorandum about my impressions of the interview and other issues concerning the interview. I then listed major concepts that I had derived from the first viewing.

Step 2. I reviewed the interview again, and divided the interview into major sections according to major shifts of "sustained postural and interpersonal distance configurations, and of major topics and/or speaking/listening activities."

Step 3. Next, I transcribed each section. I transcribed both the verbal and nonverbal behaviour of the speakers in that section. I also transcribed the verbal and nonverbal listening reactions of the listeners. At times, I focused mainly on speech or on nonverbal behaviour, and then shifted my attention to another channel for that same individual (from verbal to nonverbal or vice versa). At times, I replayed short strips of tape and watched

without sound a few times and then replayed the same piece and listened without looking at the video screen.

Step 4. I then proceeded to transcribe the rest of the segments of the video. After I had completed the entire transcription, I coded the data. I took note of certain kinds of utterances and gestures which signalled different kinds of emotional or rhetorical meanings (such as irony, humour, or seriousness).

Step 5. I reviewed the relevant parts of the video with one participant in an attempt to gather from her what she was thinking, or what she meant at certain points.

Step 6. Finally, I considered the issue of the representativeness of the focus-group interview in relation to other information sources such as field notes derived from observation and interview data. This is a crucial step in the analysis process, according to Erickson (2006:185). He (2006:185) further states that “the analyst’s task is not only to show what is happening in key instances, but to explain to the reader how and why those instances are of key importance analytically; that is, where those instances presented and discussed in detail fit with the overall patterns of variation that are found within an event as a whole, or across a number of examples of such events.”

3.6.3 Observations

An observation schedule, as well as descriptive notes, was used to collect observation data. These data were analysed in much the same way as the data obtained by means of the interviews. Analysis in this case therefore, consisted of coding, categorising, recognising patterns and relationships and building theory.

Data obtained by means of the observation schedule provided more information about specific practices and literary events observed, as well as the frequency and nature of these practices. Data obtained by means of observations were compared with data obtained via the interviews in order to produce as accurate a picture as possible.

Preliminary codes obtained by data were continuously tested in successive data sets to see whether they fitted, and new codes were developed as the field work progressed (Walliman 2001:263). More details about the actual process of the analysis of data obtained from the observation process are explained in the following chapter.

3.7 METHODOLOGICAL SAFEGUARDS

3.7.1 Ethical considerations

Ethics can be seen to refer to “discussions around what is considered acceptable or justified behaviour in the practice of social science” and is therefore concerned with a discussion of the “fair” practices which researchers can employ in their investigations (Romm 2006:28).

Walliman (2001:213,217) suggests that there are two perspectives from which one can draw ethical issues in research. The first perspective concerns specific values that the researcher should display in the research process such as honesty, frankness, transparency and personal integrity. The other concerns the personal relationships often involved in research and refer to the researcher’s responsibility to participants, such as courtesy, privacy and confidentiality. Honesty is an essential characteristic in both areas, not only to ensure good, straightforward communication between researcher and research subject, but also to enable a level of credibility and trust, and to promote debate and the advancement of knowledge and ideas (Walliman 2001:213).

It is important that the researcher remembers that what is written will be regarded as his or her own unless it is otherwise stated. Giving credit therefore, for the ideas, thoughts and words of others is essential. Not doing so would be unethical. Honesty is also essential in the substance of what the researcher writes. It is required that the researcher gives accurate descriptions of what she has done, how she has done it, the knowledge that has been obtained, the techniques and methods of analyses used, as well as honest results of

experiments. The researcher needs to be careful not to be too selective in the data used and not to reject or ignore evidence which may be contrary to her beliefs, since to do so would be a “serious breach of integrity” (Walliman 2001:214,215).

As concerns the issue of bias, some maintain that it is impossible to be entirely free of it. However, to intentionally set out to distort data or results would be dishonest. The researcher should therefore aim at all times to maintain (or attain to, as far as possible) scientific objectivity and if there is any possibility of bias, the researcher ought to acknowledge it and explain it. It is always a good idea to admit to limitations of competence and resources (Walliman 2001:216).

The second perspective of ethical issues which concerns the relationships involved in the research, is also important. It concerns the researcher’s responsibility to the participant. McBurney (2001:55) suggests that conducting research often presents a conflict between (1) the commitment of the psychologist (or researcher) to expanding knowledge and thus to benefiting society and (2) the cost of the research to the participant. The nature of research is such that it often impinges on the desires and rights of others; therefore, researchers need to be aware of what is expected of them so that no harm is caused to participants (Walliman 2001:217). On the other hand, to refrain from doing important research because of its highly sensitive nature, also constitutes a failure on the part of the researcher to keeping a commitment to advance important knowledge (McBurney 2001:55). Furthermore, people do have the right to have their voice heard and participants generally do want their stories to be told (Corbin & Strauss 2008:29), as long as it is done ethically. It is the researcher’s responsibility to ensure that he is familiar with ethical standards and to take the utmost care in following these principles (McBurney 2001:55).

With regard to the issue of confidentiality and practicality, participants should be ensured that their real names and the places where they stay will not be mentioned in the research report, or that these will be substituted with pseudonyms (Corbin & Strauss 2008:31).

There are also forms of behaviour and desirable etiquette which the researcher needs to keep in mind. It is important that she remembers that she is dependent on the responsiveness of potential participants and that she should therefore treat them in a considerate and courteous manner. In order to ensure that this is adhered to, it is a good idea for the researcher to devise a strategy to gain access to research participants (Walliman 2001:218). Access, which is closely related to ethics, is concerned with the manner in which researchers enter into the lives of the people they wish to study and refers broadly to the way in which entry or access is obtained or negotiated (Romm 2006:28). Walliman (2001:218) suggests that the plan for gaining access and for establishing and maintaining rapport with participants, should include specific methods for making requests for information, interviews, visits, letters of thanks and where appropriate, follow-up and feedback letters.

Throughout the interviewing process and even thereafter, I checked with participants to ensure clarity of meaning and the accurate representation of the facts. In this way, participants probably felt more 'ownership' of the process and hopefully, it allowed them to realise that their unique experiences were vital in the search for knowledge.

After the participant had completed her part of the interview, she was debriefed (informed about the exact nature of the study) and invited to ask questions, and told about the purpose and expected results of the experiment, so that she felt that her experience as a research participant had as much educational and personal value for her as possible (McBurney 2001:62). This debriefing process also provided an opportunity to clear up possible misconceptions (McBurney 2001:62).

The following useful guidelines regarding ethical principles, as formulated by the British Psychological Society were taken note of:

- investigations should always be conducted from the standpoint of participants, and therefore, any foreseeable threats to their persons should be eliminated;

- where possible, the researcher should inform participants about the objectives of the study. No pressure should be placed on anybody to take part or to continue to take part in a study;
- it is always unacceptable to mislead subjects or to withhold information which may cause discomfort or objection when the participant is debriefed. Participants have the right to, at any time during the study, choose to withdraw, or have the information which they supplied, withdrawn. Researchers need to respect this right;
- information received from participants is confidential, unless otherwise agreed to in advance. If confidentiality and/or anonymity cannot be guaranteed, the participants should be warned about this before they agree to participate. In this study, where photographs were used, permission was obtained first; and
- in the case of observations, those who are to be observed should expect to be observed by strangers, unless they give their consent to being observed (Walliman 2001:217,218).

According to Corbin and Strauss (2008:30), where it concerns ethical considerations, a good rule of thumb would be “if you think you wouldn’t like it, the participants probably wouldn’t like it either.”

3.7.2 Rigour and trustworthiness of the study

Rigour and trustworthiness are essential attributes since they contribute greatly to the quality of a study (Henning 2004c:19). These attributes are considered below, not from a positivistic perspective, but from a qualitative perspective, since it is this latter perspective which drives this research.

Maxwell (2005:106) describes the concept of validity as the “correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account.” He states further that validity is an important component of a research design and that it consists of strategies that one would use to identify and rule out *threats* to the design, with threats referring to ways in which you, as a researcher, could be wrong in your conclusions

(Maxwell 2005:106). Validating data, according to Corbin and Strauss (2008:48) refers to verifying possible interpretations with participants as the research moves along. Although Maxwell's use of the term validity is more commonly associated with quantitative research, the principles which he describes are equally true for ensuring rigour and trustworthiness in qualitative research.

Two broad categories of validity threats discussed by Maxwell (2005:108) are *researcher bias* and *reactivity*, which refer to the effect of the researcher on the research participants and the research situation. Although in qualitative research, one cannot aim to remove the subjective involvement of the researcher, bias can be understood to be the subjectivity of the researcher in terms of his selecting data that fits with his pre-existing ideas, or data that 'stand out' for him. It is not the purpose of qualitative research to eliminate a researcher's theories, beliefs or perceptual 'lens', but to understand how the researcher's values and theories influence his practice and his final conclusions (Maxwell 2005:108). Henning (2004c:7) concurs with this idea that the qualitative researcher "is unequivocally the main instrument of research and makes meaning from her engagement in the project" and that the role of the researcher in the qualitative analysis refers especially to her awareness of bias, preconceived ideas, and assumptions that may hide the evidence of the data. Significantly, as Dey (1993 in Henning 2004b:129) argues, "the danger lies not in having assumptions but in not being aware of them". Corbin and Strauss (2008:33) express a similar idea when they state that forcing the researcher's ideas on data is more likely to happen when the researcher ignores the importance of self in the research process and erroneously assumes that it is only the data talking, when it is actually data talking "through the eyes of the researcher." Therefore, the more we are honest about, and aware of the subjectivity involved in data analysis, the more likely we are to see how exactly we are influencing the interpretations we make. Smith (2006:473) states that "human perceptions, conceptual and pattern-recognising abilities" may be fallible, but they are still "capable of constructing truthful knowledge; knowledge that maps [the] real world well enough to take action and solve problems."

The second validity check, namely, reactivity or *reflexivity* (Maxwell 2005:109) refers to the fact that the qualitative researcher is part of the world that he studies. Maxwell (2005:109)

calls this influence a “powerful and inescapable” one since what the informant says is always influenced by the interviewer and the interview situation (Maxwell 2005:109; Corbin & Strauss 2008:31). Corbin and Strauss (2008:31) state that it is common knowledge that researchers feel a range of emotions when collecting and analysing data, and that “there is no doubt” that these emotions are conveyed to participants, and that they, in turn, unconsciously react to a researcher’s responses by continually adjusting their stances as the interview or observation proceeds. Therefore, in a sense, researcher and participant can be seen to “co-construct the research,” or at least the data collection together (Corbin & Strauss 2008:31).

Since reflexivity is now considered ‘essential’ to the research process, each individual researcher must decide on the degree of meaning that he or she gives to reflexivity since, although there is agreement about the necessity of reflexivity, there are still some differences to its “feasibility” (Corbin & Strauss 2008:31). Cutcliffe (in Corbin & Strauss 2008:31), questions whether we can completely account for ourselves in research as so much of what takes place happens “within the deeper levels of consciousness”. However, reflexivity remains a valuable tool to:

- examine the impact of the position, perspective, and presence of the researcher;
- promote rich insight through examining personal responses and interpersonal dynamics;
- empower others by opening up a more radical consciousness;
- evaluate the research process, method, and outcomes; and
- enable public scrutiny of the integrity of the research through offering a methodological log of research decisions (Corbin & Strauss 2008:31).

The above have been consciously utilised in this study in order to improve the quality thereof.

In addition to using reflexivity as a tool as described above, researchers can do specific things to reduce reactivity such as avoiding leading questions, or making use of an

interview elaboration, which will allow for self-reflection on the interviewer's role and rapport, and the interviewee's reaction (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:356; Maxwell 2005:19). However, it may be more important that researchers are aware of how they impact on the research situation and how this affects the validity of the conclusions drawn (Maxwell 2005:109).

Keeping the two threats to trustworthiness in mind, I tested the trustworthiness of my findings by looking for evidence that could either challenge the conclusions drawn or show that potential threats were improbable (Maxwell 2005:109). To enhance the trustworthiness of the data therefore, I did not ignore, but sought to evaluate discrepant and negative evidence that could modify or refute a pattern (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:374). Furthermore, I remained aware of the following tests as modified from Maxwell's checklist (Maxwell 2005:110-114):

Triangulation of methods

Various data collection and data analysis strategies were used in order to ensure that as each method was used, there was constant and consistent corroboration with other methods so that the credibility of the data was increased. Some researchers refer to this method as 'triangulation' which can be defined as "the cross-validation among data sources, data collection strategies, time periods, and theoretical schemes," or as a "process of collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods" (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:374; Maxwell 2005:112). In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, it is the researcher's goal to find regularities in the data and in order to effect this, the researcher will compare different sources, situations, and methods to ascertain whether the same pattern keeps recurring (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:374). It must be remembered that although the strategy of triangulation does tend to reduce the risk of chance associations and systematic biases due to the use of one specific method, it is important to constantly be aware of error and bias and to look for specific ways to deal with these problems, instead of assuming that the use of a variety of methods will automatically do this work for you, since, "validity threats are ruled out by evidence, not methods" (Maxwell 2005:112).

Intensive long-term involvement

Long-term involvement will allow for more data, different kinds of data, and will help the researcher to rule out any incorrect inferences or premature conclusions drawn as a result of limited time spent in the field (Maxwell 2005: 110). For the purposes of this study, data were gathered over a period of approximately seven months. This data gathering amounted to at least two or more visits (where possible) and up to five visits (in one case), to the home of each participant. A focus-group interview was also conducted close to the end of the seven-month period.

'Rich' data

By means of intensive interviews and long-term involvement, 'rich' data were collected. Such rich data are detailed and varied enough so that they provide a complete picture of what is going on (Maxwell 2005:110). To provide for such data, interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed to provide for verbatim transcripts of the interviews. In a further effort to provide for rich data, the focus group interview was also video-taped.

Respondent validation

Respondent validation refers to the practice of systematically soliciting feedback about your data and drawing conclusions from your research participants (Maxwell 2005:111). By means of such validation, the researcher can ensure that the participant's meaning is clear and that the facts are not misinterpreted in any way, together with helping to identify any misunderstandings and biases on the part of the researcher (Maxwell 2005:111). During the interviews, I made every effort to understand the participants' responses by asking them for feedback, or by checking my understanding with them where necessary. I also viewed a few segments of the video tape with one participant in order to test my interpretations and thus enhance meaning and understanding.

Searching for discrepant data and negative cases

It is important to remember, as McMillan and Schumacher (2006:330-333) suggest, that researchers are in the business of searching for negative evidence and discrepant data in order to challenge, change or modify emerging patterns and that it is only when alternative patterns cannot offer reasonable explanations to the research problem, that major patterns become explanations. It is therefore important to examine rigorously, both supporting and

discrepant data in order to assess whether it is more plausible to retain or modify the conclusions drawn and to be constantly aware of pressures to ignore data that do not fit the conclusions (Maxwell 2005:112). Asking for feedback from others may be a good method of checking for one's own biases and assumptions (Maxwell 2005:112). As mentioned in the previous paragraph, I tested some of my own interpretations with one of the participants. Additionally, as I examined the evidence during data analysis, I took special note of possible negative evidence and discrepant data.

3.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter began with a discussion of the particular research design employed by this study, namely, a qualitative design. The characteristics of this design were considered, as well as the rationale for choosing this particular design. Next, the multiple-case study approach was discussed. Thereafter, consideration was given to aspects of participant selection, as well as the selection criteria. Data collection strategies used in this study were discussed thereafter. Next, data management techniques were considered, and thereafter, plans for data analysis. Finally, methodological safeguards such as ethical considerations and rigour and trustworthiness were discussed.

The following chapter consists of a detailed account of how the data were analysed and interpreted. The final chapter, Chapter 5, contains the implications of the findings, as well as recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter presented a discussion of the research methodology. This chapter seeks to answer the research questions which are:

- What are the perspectives of a group of SAHMs in relation to the early literacy development of their children; and
- What kinds of literacy experiences do they provide for their children on a day-to-day basis?

This chapter begins with an introduction to the research participants, and proceeds with the presentation of the data obtained by means of individual and group interviews, as well as observations. It includes a discussion of the findings, recommendations for further research and a short discussion of the limitations of the study.

The following table presents the biographical information of participants. In order to ensure confidentiality (cf. 3.7.1), pseudonyms are used throughout the chapter.

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4.2 BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

TABLE 1: Biographical information of the participants

NAME OF PARTICIPANT	CHILDREN – (NUMBER, AGES AND GENDER	WORKING STA-TUS & NATURE OF WORKING HOURS WHERE APPLICABLE	NAME, AGE & GENDER OF CHILD	CHILD AT PRE-/ PLAY SCHOOL ?	GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF CHILD’S CURRENT EDUCATION	MOTHER’S PREVIOUS / CURRENT CAREER
Michelle	8 children: 5 boys & 4 girls aged 1 to 14 years.	SAHM	Gail 5 ½ years	No	Gail is homeschooled by Michelle, who practises ‘unschooling’ with no set curriculum	Graphic and web designer
Debbie	2 children: 1 girl aged 1 ½ 1 boy aged 3 ½	SAHM	Michael 3 ½ years old	No	Michael is homeschooled by Debbie. She uses a variety of materials and is currently trying to select a suitable curriculum	Primary school teacher
Anthea	3 children: 3 girls aged 5 ½; 9 & 11.	SAHM	Tanya 5 ½ years old	No	Tanya is homeschooled by Anthea, who uses an approved homeschooling curriculum.	Social worker
Jackie	2 children: 2 girls aged 2 & 4	Practises as an architect - mornings only during the school-term; works mostly from home, occasionally at the office.	May 4 years old	Yes. 5 mornings a week.	May attends preschool in the mornings. Jackie extends her child’s education by making use of everyday activities	Architect
Carmen	2 children: 2 boys aged 4 ½ & 8	Sells health products from home – mornings only during the school term	Stephan 4 ½ years old	Yes. 5 mornings a week	Stephan attends preschool in the mornings. His mother extends her child’s education making use of everyday activities	Investigating account at a financial institution

Hannah	4 children: 1 boy aged 14; 3 girls aged 4, 13 & 18	SAHM	Venetia 4 years old	Yes. 2 mornings a week.	Venetia is currently being taught by her mother who makes use of a variety of materials.	High school teacher
Maria	2 children: 1 boy aged 1 ½ ; 1 girl aged 3 ½	SAHM	Jada 3 ½ years old	No.	Jada currently learns informally at home with her mother.	Preschool teacher (trained in Slovakia, her country of origin)
Tessa	2 children: 1 boy aged 4 1 girl aged 6	SAHM	Allan 4 years old	Yes. 5 mornings a week.	Allan attends in preschool (mornings). Tessa extends his education by making use of everyday activities	High school teacher.
Shelley	2 children: 2 boys aged 1 ½ and 3 ½	SAHM	Justin 3 ½ years old	No.	Justin currently learns informally at home with his mother	Professional make-up artist and preschool teacher
Sophia	2 children: 2 boys aged 2 and 4	Works 1 or 2 mornings a week	Riaan 4 years old	Yes. 5 mornings a week.	Riaan attends preschool. Sophia further facilitates Riaan's learning when she is with him.	Doctor

4.3 PRESENTATION OF DATA

In the following sections, findings from the individual interviews, a focus group interview, as well as a viewing session undertaken with one participating mother are integrated, reported on and discussed. In some cases, references to the literature serve to contextualise the findings. Direct quotations from interviews are also used where applicable, by way of illustration.

The method used in this section is one that combines reporting as well as a discussion of research findings. The researcher is well aware that it is customary, especially in quantitative studies, to separate the reporting and discussion of findings. It is believed however, that by presenting the data along with a discussion thereof, that a more holistic, clearer picture of the qualitative findings is effected. It is important therefore, that this discussion should not be evaluated according to a positivistic or quantitative frame of reference.

There is, of course, some overlap between the various themes. For example, the important issue of the mother who sets an example to the child in her own reading habits is addressed in the context of the literacy activities that take place in the children's literacy environments (cf. 4.3.2.2). This issue is also addressed briefly later in a section that deals with a discussion about how the mother perceives and executes her role in the early literacy development of her child (cf. 4.3.3.3).

The theoretical constructs that emerged as a result of data collection and analysis are as follows:

- participants' commitment concerning their role in the development of their children (including their early literacy development);
- the home literacy environment;
- participants' role as critical resources in the home literacy environment; and

- participants' attitude towards their role as expressed in their perceived rewards and challenges.

4.3.1 Participants' commitment concerning their role in the development of their children

In this section, the research question (cf. 4.1) will be addressed by exploring the commitment of participants to their children's development, which has led them to give up their careers (either partially or completely) in order to play a major role in their children's total development. It will also be revealed how that commitment plays itself out in the practices of participating mothers with regard specifically to their involvement in the early literacy development of their children.

4.3.1.1 Intellectual stimulation

Various authors emphasise the importance of the early years in terms of development, including rapid brain development (Kuzma 2005:422; Bardige & Segal 2005:72; Hadeed 2005:1; Department of Education 2001:11) (cf. 1.1). In the current study, most of the participants expressed a strong desire to take care of all their children's needs, including their needs regarding their intellectual growth and development.

It was interesting to note that Michelle, Debbie, Anthea and Hannah are convinced that they can provide for all their children's intellectual and other needs and that they do not plan to have anybody else assuming this role. In contrast, Maria and Shelley, whose children do not currently attend preschool, seem more uncertain, and report that they have not finally decided what they will do regarding their children's schooling. A third perspective was expressed by Tessa, who had decided to send her children to preschool when they reached the age of three. In this regard, Tessa's perspective was supported by Carmen, Jackie and Sophia, whose children also attend preschool. It was clear, however, that participating mothers, whose children attend preschool, still ensure that they (mothers)

are involved with, and are available to their children in the afternoons and during school holidays. Carmen (mother of two boys aged four and eight) stated in this regard:

There is [the] cognitive ... emotional and ... intellectual. There are all kinds of different areas, but in every one of them you play a role.

Carmen further stated that she tries, “in all facets, [to] keep [her children] on the right track.” Tessa and Debbie agree that they can provide the intellectual stimulation that their children need. Tessa actually sees it as her role to help her four-year-old son “develop [his] intellect.” Carmen used a preschool learning programme with both her children and she finds that for the older boy, school is “a breeze,” largely because of the intellectual preparation that she had provided for him. She stated furthermore, that she was following the same system with her younger son, and that that was the reason why she had decided to “drop” her work and “to be with them in every way – emotional, and educational, everything!”

Participants emphasised the opportunity that their being at home affords their engaging their children in playful learning by using everyday situations such as baking, gardening, painting and playing games. Jackie and Tessa related how their children find opportunities to learn with them in the kitchen for example, or in many other informal contexts. Jackie (mother of four-year-old May) explained:

We play and do fun things together ... Just ordinary things that you do at home – and say, cooking in the kitchen – they learn with you; they learn to water the garden; they learn to plant things and watch them grow ... If [I have] ... a cake in the oven and it starts rising ... then I will try to show her what happens ... or with the seeds that we plant, I will very often go and show her what’s happening, and [say] “look, they’re coming up and there the leaves are coming out.

Tessa (mother of four-year-old Allan) stated:

In a playful manner ... you can help them develop their intellect ... Say for instance, when they help me in the kitchen, if we bake cookies or cook food

... and everything that I do, I talk while I am doing it. And so they learn in a playful manner ... Or when we play in the sand ... just in a playful manner one can teach them a lot, expand their vocabulary, emotional vocabulary ... We will read playfully by looking at the pictures. But not ... formally.

Michelle and Jackie also spoke about making learning fun for their children. The literature supports the use of creative humour and children's playfulness in teaching them (Gifford 2005:24-26,28) (cf. 2.5.1). Vygotsky emphasised particularly the importance of play in learning, maintaining that for a child, play creates the ZPD (c.f. 2.6.1). Moreover, he contended that with regard to preparing children for formal, written language, that "drawing and play should be preparatory stages in the development of children's written language" (Vygotsky 1978 in Newman & Holzman 1993:103) (cf. 2.4.2). The process of learning to read for example, involves lots of playful practice with sounds, symbols, words, stories, and books (Willis et al. 2007:625; Bardige & Segal 2005:2,3; Ewing 2003:19; Palmer & Bayley 2005:72,86; Lancaster 2003:152; Mendelsohn 2002:193) (cf. 2.2.1). Michelle (mother of eight children aged one to fourteen) had the following to say:

Making up rhymes about them. That's what we do sometimes ... I have limericks for ALL my children - different, individual rhymes and stuff.

Jackie said:

Sometimes you can create silly situations. You can, for instance ... say, what would it be like if cats were as big as cars – or whatever. Or silly stuff like that ... Teaching them nursery rhymes, nonsense songs and things like that. Messing around with words you know. Just playing.

Hannah, in describing how much her four-year-old foster daughter has learnt, also emphasised informal, incidental learning in the following:

It's amazing how much she's learnt without me actually trying to teach her the alphabet ... The best therapy is just giving her a home, and ... loving her, you know and see her coming out of herself and, and I think ... if she [were] ... at school all day, she wouldn't have that.

Furthermore, participants organise and participate in different kinds of playful activities with their children as they actively help to stimulate and develop the intellects of their children.

Participants also reported being actively engaged in drawing their children's attention to environmental print; the literature supports this practice (Palmer & Bayley 2005:51,215,216) (cf. 2.6.2.2). Debbie, Jackie, Anthea, Carmen, Maria, Tessa, Sophia and Shelley spoke about how their children notice road signs and other signs while they are driving. For example, Shelley said:

If we ride in the car, and there's a 'bakkie' in front of us with signage at the back, he'll say, "Hey look Mommy, there's a 'W'" and there'll actually be a 'W.'

Jackie said:

When we drive somewhere and there's a shop with a big 'M' or I'll say, "there's your letter ... there's Daddy's letter!"

Furthermore, participating mothers help their children to develop phonemic knowledge, which is essential in the process of learning to read (cf. 2.3.1). Even though they did not specifically mention that they help their children to develop their phonemic awareness, they seem to know that focusing on sound awareness and recognition and phonemic awareness is important. As mentioned above, Michelle and Jackie reported using rhymes and limericks and just playing around with words in this regard. Sophia also reported:

We do all those 'thingies' and rhymes and songs and all those things in the evening just before bed time with both of them.

The literature advises that the teaching of phonemic awareness skills should be interwoven into everyday activities (cf. 2.3.1). Participating mothers engage their children in a multitude of literacy activities (cf. 4.3.2.2), which include the use of puzzles and other educational games, drawing their children's attention to letters and shapes, associating the

shapes with objects with which children are already familiar and having fun with words and music – all of which enhance a child’s phonemic awareness (cf. 2.6.1).

Another interesting motivation that emerged from the focus group interview was that some of the mothers said that when their children spend more time at home, their children have the opportunity to “learn naturally,” to explore for themselves and to make their own discoveries. Michelle stated in this regard:

I think ... they're born with the love of learning. I think it's natural; they just ... LEARN! You can't stop them. They read, they experiment, they build stuff ... They're constantly setting up mini-experiments, throughout the day to see what happens. And every one that they do, they absorb.

It is interesting to note that Michelle’s contention that children are interesting in learning and that they are active learners is consistent with what the literature says (cf. 2.2.1). This perspective advocated by Michelle is an excellent example of the so-called ‘unschooling’ approach. According to this perspective, the focus is on the individual child’s needs, interests and choices and children are allowed to learn ‘naturally’ without a dependence on prepared curricular (Unschooling.com). Maria seemed to share the same beliefs when she stated:

Let them explore; let them learn. I provide them [with] ... lot[s] of opportunities ... for learning. And give them lots of ... options ... Like I ask her, “Do you want to read, or do you want to play? Let's go outside in the garden and do, gardening,” ... and things like that.

Michelle said furthermore remarked, during one of the observation sessions when she was hosting a birthday party for one of her children, that she was having “just another unschooling day!” She added:

They've got all these hours. They ... have chores. They help with the house and ... the one makes the breakfast and they babysit and they make the supper. I don't even cook anymore – they do! They mow the lawn, they weed the garden – although we do have a servant and a gardener, they

also do a lot. They know how to do laundry; they know how to iron, sort and fold and clean and all that stuff. But apart from that, they just ... LEARN! You can't stop them. They read, they experiment, they build stuff. My husband works for 'Cash 'n Carry' stores and he [has] just bought a whole stack of old, returned appliances and put them in the garage. And the boys for three days, they just sat there and fixed everything. They fixed it all! I can't do it! ... To me, it's more practical. They know how to live!

Michelle is clearly very enthusiastic about her children's activities, and according to her, what they do constitutes true learning – learning “how to live!” Michelle's approach to learning is similar to some of Vygotsky's beliefs. For example, in Vygotsky's ZPD, he encourages parents to look out for what is “ripening” in the child and to ‘scaffold’ or support that learning (cf. 2.6.1), which is something that Michelle reported doing (cf. 4.3.2.2). Vygotsky also emphasised the importance of helping children to connect what they already know to what is new to them. Michelle's children seem to get a lot of exposure to different things, and potentially, everything that they learn in practical ways can be linked to, or can help to facilitate the higher intellectual processes. Michelle's approach seems to be working at least as far as her children's literacy development is concerned. Whether her children cope well in other learning areas is unknown and beyond the scope of this study.

During the focus group interview it was clear that some of the mothers were absolutely intrigued by Michelle's so-called ‘unschooling’ approach. They perceived her as very “relaxed.” They admitted to “wishing” that they could be as easy-going as Michelle was but added that they could “never” be that way. In fact, Sophia said, “it would freak me out!” In contrast to her ‘unschooling’ method, Jackie and Sophia referred to themselves as more “organised” in their teaching/parenting approach. Anthea similarly prefers to be organised in her teaching and follows a strict homeschooling curriculum.

From the preceding discussion, it is clear that the participants differ in their teaching/mothering approach, but they do have in common a commitment to being at home to assist their children in their development. They all share the conviction that their

being at home is, as Anthea put, it “the right thing to do” as far as their children’s intellectual stimulation is concerned.

4.3.1.2 Dissatisfaction with the school system

Four participants expressed dissatisfaction with the current school system as reasons for their decision to assume more responsibility for their children’s development. For example, Debbie said that the preschools in her area do not “meet her standards,” while Anthea feels that the current school system is “very unsure.” Anthea also believes that children at school are treated almost as “guinea pigs.” She has opted for an alternative homeschooling curriculum and feels that by using such a programme,

You know where you are going to with your child; you know the requirements – they don’t change every second year and come with a new curriculum which may not work. So it gives a person a measure of security.

Michelle stated quite emphatically that sending her children to a regular school would never be an option for her. She stated, in answer to the question whether she planned to send five-year-old Gail to school:

No! Unless I DIE and Gary can’t find somebody to look after them. But even, I think if ... I die, I don’t think he’ll send them. I think he’ll just get Pauline (her twelve-year-old daughter) to teach her [Gail].

The attitudes and perspectives of the aforementioned mothers is interesting in light of the fact that they live in fairly prosperous, middle to higher class areas, where schools are well financed and well equipped. Additionally, the schools in the previously white areas in Bloemfontein are reputed to be of a high standard academically. These four mothers are certainly not reluctant to send their children to school because of a lack of well-trained teachers, or a lack of resources, but because of their own perceptions of what would benefit their children most.

The above finding is clarified by Hannah, who said that she did not want her children to learn negative habits or practices from children at school. Anthea similarly stated that she does not want her five-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Tanya, to learn “from other five-year-olds.” In contrast, the four mothers whose children are in preschool perceive definite benefits from sending their children to school. Tessa, Jackie and Sophia regard the socialisation process at school as a positive experience in the lives of their children. Jackie likes to chat with her child after she has been to school and help her solve any problems that she may have encountered. She also added that at preschool her four-year-old daughter is exposed to children who are different from her and that she must “learn to deal with it.” Jackie and Tessa also regard as important the learning that takes place in the school environment, with Tessa adding that the school provides for more structure in her four-year-old son’s life, which she seems to regard as something positive.

It is clear that participant mothers who generally view the current school system in a negative light, have been led to devise alternative methods of educating their children as a result of their perceptions.

The literature states that a child’s literacy exposure and their success in this realm, as well as their later school achievement, are related directly to parental characteristics, including a parent’s personal early literacy experiences (cf. 2.5.2). Michelle’s own experience with school has certainly impacted on her perspective of learning in general. She “hated school” despite the fact that she did well at school; she said that a lot of what she learnt was what she learnt outside of school. She stated further:

Ultimately when I got my job, everything that was on my CV was stuff that I taught myself and the work that I did in the end was all self-taught. Even the work that I did at the Tech when I was doing fine arts, most of what I learnt, I was teaching myself. I was working on my own anyway. So afterwards, I realised, my children must teach themselves too, or else they are not gonna’ actually learn that much.

4.3.1.3 A worthwhile investment of time

Another important contributing factor to the participants' choice to stay at home and thus to be responsible for most, or all of their children's development, is their view that it is vital to spend as much time with their children as is possible during the critical years of early childhood. According to the literature, a quality home environment is one in which parents take the time to instruct their children, which includes teaching, talking to and playing with their children (cf. 2.6.2.2). In fact, Vygotsky considered this essential to learning (cf. 2.6.2.1). The time that is spent reading stories to preschool children and the degree of engagement with them are of critical importance to early literacy (Rodger 2003:127) (cf. 2.6.2.2). Indeed, it has been stated in the literature that the family is the most important resource in a child's early literacy development (cf. 2.2.2.2).

Participating mothers appear to perceive the importance of the ingredient of time in the success of their children's early literacy development. The data have revealed that participating mothers spend much time with their children. Sophia remarked emphatically regarding the early years with her children, *"I don't want to miss it!"*

Tessa described her beliefs as follows:

And I think these are crucial years ... that I have chosen to be with them, and I KNOW, I KNOW it's the right thing.

Carmen expressed similarly the importance of her making a sound investment in the early years:

I won't have it ANY other way! ... I don't want to go back to the work that I did. This is precious because it's (clicked her fingers) – and it's finished. So they always say, until seven – that's the window, and then it's CLOSED.

Other participating mothers emphasised the importance they attached to “being there” for and with their children. Sophia said:

I want to be available, no matter what, I want to be there!

Jackie added:

I think it is important to me ... that I am there for them to teach them ... The fact that one is there and that there’s someone who is there for you unconditionally ... is already a big thing for a child ... Even if I am busy with something else, one is still there and you talk to them.

Participants described some of the benefits of this investment of time as being able to experience important events in their children’s lives, building security and confidence in their children, teaching them values and morals, building strong relationships with their children and getting to know them very well. Anthea, for example, said:

One is with them the whole time ... you learn to know your child very well. So you KNOW her strong points, you KNOW ... [her] weak points. I can see there [are] a lot of questions ... going on in her head and I’m glad I’m there [to] ... answer them.

Shelley echoed the abovementioned sentiments when she said:

Other mummies only fetch their children at five, six o’clock at night; they get home ... feed them and bath them and they go to bed. So what do you know about your child? I mean, I know EVERYTHING about these little tigers and what they like and what they don’t like.

Hannah emphasised the importance of having a relationship with her children in the following:

I think the best thing is that you grow up with your kids ... You build a good relationship with them ... It's wonderful to have them around and for your relationship with them to grow.

Children's success in this area is also related to parental warmth (cf. 2.5.2). Furthermore, according to the Vygotskian perspective, learning is socially constructed and a child's development will occur in the context of warm, loving relationships (cf. 2.5.1). It has been said that the mother-child dyad (and thus the time that is spent in this situation), is a good example of an expert facilitating a novice's learning and helping the novice to become an independent learner (cf. 2.6.1).

It is interesting to note that in a recent study which considered the commitment and conflict experienced by highly educated SAHMs, it was found that the word most commonly used to describe the benefits of staying at home with their children was the word "time" (Rubin & Wooten 2007:342). The mothers in this current study also strongly believe that the time that they are able to spend at home with their children has important benefits for their children and they generally feel that mothers who work full-time cannot offer their children what they are able to offer them. They repeatedly emphasised that mothers who work full time "miss out a lot on their (children's) growth" and on their "milestones."

As has been stated previously (cf. 2.5.3.1), there are studies which tend to refute the beliefs of mothers as described above, since it has been found that maternal employment does not have "many direct, negative effects" on children (Bianchi 2005:401). In fact, there are studies which show that maternal employment can actually have positive effects on family educational involvement (Weiss et al. 2003:881) (cf. 2.5.3.1). Significantly, it has also been found that the rise in the last century of the number of women in the workplace market has *not* significantly diminished the time that mothers spend with their children (Bianchi 2005:401). The results of a study by Gottfried and his colleagues even reveal the rather surprising result that employed mothers participated in more educational activities with their children than non-working mothers (Weiss et al. 2003:881,882) (cf. 2.5.3.1).

Recent research in the U.S. has shown that mothers tend to “protect time with their children even as they increase their rates of labor force participation” (Bianchi 2005:406). This finding seems to be true in the case of the three mothers in the study who work part time. They do seem to ‘protect’ and maximise the time they spend with their children, as Carmen stated:

I try to be there the WHOLE afternoon for THEM. Because I’ve got my time in the morning, [the] afternoon is their time.

It is also true that some of the mothers in the study who have young children and who do not have full-time household help (such as Shelley and Maria), have reported spending a lot of time fulfilling their domestic role, and even, as in Shelley’s case, being overwhelmed by the many responsibilities that they have to fulfil. Shelley said further:

And you just think you’ve just packed away ... EVERYTHING’S on the floor again ... and just sometimes you just [need] that bit of help ... I just wish someone could fix the house for me [or] I could just leave the kids with someone ... To be involved in your child’s education and to be involved in their lives, so closely, hands on, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, 30 days a month, and 365 days a year – GETS HECTIC! ... I am ‘O solo mio’ with my boys and it drives me up the wall sometimes!

That said, there are however, studies which confirm the belief that mothers who do not work full time have many positive effects on their child and that full-time work or studying on the part of mothers is negatively associated with school involvement (Weiss et. al 2003:881,888) (cf. 2.5.3.1).

It is clear that the findings regarding the effects of maternal employment are varied. However, for the mothers involved in this study, it is the belief that their children will benefit greatly from their being at home, that guides the attitudes and decisions of participants with regard to their children. What seems to be important to participating mothers is that they are available and are ‘there’ for their children. They spoke about often doing chores while their children were around, or about how their children spent a lot of time on their

own playing, exploring and learning and that their children came to them when they had a question to ask (as in the case of Michelle).

It was interesting to note that during the four observation sessions that I had in the home of Michelle, who is a mother of eight children, I did not notice much interaction between Michelle and five-year-old Gail (except for one particular session). Michelle also mentioned a few times (and I also witnessed) that the older children tend to take care of the younger ones at times. It must be remembered however, that Michelle's household situation is unique since she has eight children. With the exception of Hannah, who has four children, and Anthea, who has three children, all the other participant mothers have only two children. It is therefore not surprising that Michelle's children do not spend as much time with her individually as some of the other mothers are able to spend with their children. It is true that in Vygotsky's ZPD, more knowledgeable peers or siblings can also act as 'experts' who help to scaffold the learning of younger peers or siblings (cf. 2.6.1).

Other mothers such as Jackie, Hannah and Tessa also emphasised that the time spent with their children was not necessarily spent in direct teaching or play surrounding early literacy development, but that many of their activities were informal and often amounted to simply 'talking'. The literature tends to make a distinction between mothers spending time in direct interaction with children and generally being available to their children; it seems that what may make a difference is the child's expectations about the mother 'being there' (Bianchi 2005:405). Perhaps it starts with the mother's beliefs about what constitutes quality care and what the essential requirements are for optimal development, as well as the mother's commitment to that belief. It is the mother (and/or father) who will transfer their value of time and availability to their children and it is the mother (and/or father) who will set the trend as far as her (or his) availability is concerned. Furthermore, factors such as parental socioeconomic status, education, ethnicity, cultural background, domestic situation, personal parental characteristics, parental experiences, as well as parental beliefs, practices, interactive styles and abilities will all have an effect on parental involvement in children's education, which will then impact directly on their children's early literacy development (cf. 2.5.2).

From the above presentation of data and discussion, it seems evident that the SAHMs in the study are committed to their responsibility with regard to their children's development, which includes their early literacy development. The data reveal that there is a strong sense of efficacy on the part of participating mothers regarding their ability to provide for their children's developmental needs, and in some cases, to assume primary responsibility for their children's development. They expressed that their role in the total development of their children was a very important one, which they did not want to leave for somebody else to do.

4.3.2 The home literacy environment

This second theme or construct that has emerged from the data is concerned with the home literacy environment within which the children involved in the study find themselves.

It has been said that the main component of the ideal home learning environment consists of a mediator who provides good-quality resources for teaching literacy, makes sufficient time to instruct (teach, talk to, play with) their children (basic interaction), and provides a good example by showing that the practices of reading and writing are both enjoyable and useful (Bardige & Segal 2005:213; Willenberg 2005:170; Lilly & Green 2004:12,40; Machet 2002:3) (cf. 2.6.2.2). The ideal home literacy environment is one which is rich in books, in interesting things to explore, discover and talk about, and in people interested in talking about these things (Bardige & Segal 2005:9) (cf. 2.6.2.2).

The second research question is therefore stated as follows:

What kinds of literacy experiences do SAHMs provide for their children on a day-to-day basis?' (c.f. 1.5)

In order to answer this question, I explored the home literacy environment of participants' children, as well as the practices of mothers within this environment. In this section, the answer to the above-mentioned question is presented as three categories that were identified during the data analysis, namely:

- Educational and other resources
- Literacy activities in the home
- The mother as a critical literacy resource

4.3.2.1 Educational and other resources

The home learning environments of the children whose mothers participated in the study appear to be very well-resourced generally. In most of the homes, books could be seen on tables, on the floor, or on book shelves. Other resources included puzzles, word games, memory games, art supplies, building and toy blocks, dolls, cars and other toys. Audio-visual equipment such as television sets, educational DVDs, DVD players and computers were also generally available.

Computers

Many participants reported the use of specific computer programmes for the stimulation and literacy development of their children. Debbie, for example, mentioned that her son Michael, aged three-and-a-half, has learnt the alphabet, and is learning to read on the computer (cf. appendix 8C). She has purchased specific computer software for this purpose. Shelley (mother of three-year-old Justin) also reported that she uses an online educational programme with her children.

Michelle was the only participant who mentioned that she set limits on their children's use of the computer. One could assume though, that since the other participants limit their children's DVD or TV viewing, they probably also limit their computer usage. Michelle said:

They [are] not allowed a lot of time on the computer, but a couple of them are trying to learn 'photoshop' ... They're not allowed to just sit and play computer games. And even if they do something constructive ... it's in twenty minute time segments because I don't like them just sitting all day.

Anthea, Michelle and Carmen also said that they use the computer as an educational resource. "It's only educational," stated Carmen regarding her children's use of the computer. The fact that participating mothers tend to use computers as an educational resource indicates that they are willing to spend money on resources that will benefit the intellectual development of their children.

It is interesting to note that the two mothers, namely Michelle and Shelley, who indicated that they found preschool fees too expensive, both have computers in their homes. Despite the costs involved in computers and computer software, it is apparent that many of the participating mothers regard computers as a useful investment, for which they are willing to allocate funds.

The television

In many of the participants' homes, the television does not have a prominent place. In fact, most participants stated that they limit their children's viewing time to specific times such as weekends, or to segments of time, such as half-hour sessions. Mostly videos or DVDs as selected by their mothers were deemed acceptable viewing. Carmen (mother of four-year-old Stephan), explained:

They don't watch T.V. during the day. IF there is time, they can watch half an hour – max! Then it's finished. And ... weekends ... they can watch a movie, a DVD, but ... I decide what they can ... watch. I usually sit with them and watch to ask them questions about what they see. I saw that the little one learns a lot of English. But that's why I sit here – so then when they say "yellow," I say, "what's yellow in Afrikaans?" then he says "geel." So I don't leave them to watch alone. Usually I'll be there doing the food or something [when] ... they watch. But they know they're not allowed to watch T.V. a lot. I don't like that. They can rather play outside, or play with toys or colour ... than ... watch ... T.V.

Michelle (mother of eight children aged one to fourteen years), said:

We don't use the T.V. At the very most, if I need to go to like a doctor's appointment and I want to leave them here, I'll let them watch a video. But as for public broadcasting, they don't watch anything at all.

Hannah and Anthea stated similarly that as a family, they watch very little television. Anthea said that during the week they try not to switch the television on in the evenings but usually watch "a nice movie" during weekends. Hannah stated, "We don't watch much T.V. at all, even though we do have [a] T.V." She also said that if her four-year-old foster daughter, Venetia, does watch anything, she prefers that it is a suitable, pre-viewed video tape. However, she mentioned that Venetia does not enjoy watching any television, not even for "two minutes."

In contrast, Debbie's three-and-a-half year old son, Michael, enjoys watching television at various times during the day, and it appears that at times, it is not easy for Debbie to limit Michael's viewing. She put it this way once, "if I can get him AWAY from the T.V. ...". She did mention however, that they let Michael watch mostly taped programmes. Both Debbie and Shelley mentioned that they often let their children watch something on T.V. so that they had time to get themselves ready for the day. Shelley said:

I usually put on a little Barney DVD or something in the early morning just to get them occupied just so I can just get my hair brushed, brush my teeth, just quickly sort out the worst of the house.

Jackie, who experiences similar problems in attempting to limit her children's viewing time, mentioned that her children may be "watching too much" currently. She put it this way:

Some late afternoons I will let them watch videos ... I have a lot of Walt Disney videos and such things and they quite love it. But it is actually quite a bone of contention. I know it's not a good thing ... so I think at the moment, they may be watching too much, but it has developed this way. It is perhaps too easy to give it to them sometimes. So they quite enjoy it. She (four-year-old May) especially loves watching videos.

It is clear that Jackie experiences some conflict regarding how much TV viewing is acceptable for her children. Michelle, on the other hand, expounded the benefits of limited TV time when she said:

Because they don't have that (unlimited television viewing, or computer use), they've got all these hours. ... They just ... LEARN!

The public library

Public libraries also serve as a resource for participants. Five of them visit public libraries. The following trends were apparent as far as library enrolment is concerned:

- most participating mothers who are at home full time use the library when children are of the appropriate age, and where accessibility of the library is not a challenge; and
- those whose children go to preschool use the library less (only one mother out four makes use of the library).

The fact that the library does not play a greater role in the lives of participants may be surprising to some. However, when one considers what the technological world offers in terms of educational computer programmes, online educational resources (including story books), as well as audio-visual resources, perhaps it is not that unusual that the library does not play a more prominent role. Especially in cases where finances are not a problem, so many resources can be accessed right in the home of SAHMs. Additionally, participants reported that they buy a lot of books for their children. As has been stated, children at preschool have not been enrolled as library members (except in one case) also possibly because they have access to sufficient books at school.

Other resources

Educational resources appeared to be fairly accessible in most of the homes. Debbie, an ex-teacher, clearly regards it as an important practice to provide a multitude of resources

for her children. In her son Michael's (aged three-and-a-half) play room, I observed an abundance of educational games and other aids, educational books, story books, posters, charts, and many toys. I observed some of the resources that Debbie had created herself and placed on the walls of the play room (cf. appendix 8A). Similarly, Jackie (mother of four-year-old May), has also collected a multitude of resources for her children's use. In just about every room of the house I observed some educational resources. She had a number of shelves and cupboards lined with such resources.

In Carmen's lounge, I observed that her four-and-a-half-year-old son Stephan, had access to musical items. Carmen also reported that she had educational resources including a computer, books, toys, play dough, colouring books and other educational resources in almost every room of her house.

Similarly, I observed many accessible resources in the homes of Michelle and Maria (cf. appendix 8B). It is also clear from the mothers' reports and from what I observed that the other participants prefer to keep the educational resources in children's bedrooms or play rooms.

In Shelley's living room, there were also fewer resources than in the homes of some of the other participants. Shelley has made the choice to stay at home full time even though her family has to pay the price in financial terms. She described that as a family, they were not able to have some of the "lovely things" or "go away as much" as some of her friends from double-income families do.

From the preceding discussion it can be seen that the homes of most participants were very well supplied with all sorts of literacy resources. This should contribute to the early literacy development of all the children involved, because researchers have reported that when children are engaged in family conversations, play educational computer games, watch educational television programmes, have plenty of easy-to-access, high quality

books and other literacy materials all around them, paper supplies, art and writing materials and educational games, these will assist them in their early literacy acquisition (Aram & Levin 2005:203; Bardige & Segal 2005:9; Lilly & Green 2004:15; Jennings 2003:18) (cf. 2.6.2.2).

It is therefore clear that the participating mothers are generally able and willing to invest in resources that they consider necessary for the cognitive development of their children. Although participants differ in the amount and type of resources that they have, they seem to have sufficient for their children's needs. However, at this point, the question remains whether these resources are actually utilised effectively by the children and the mothers for the children's stimulation. It has been said that even though many parents provide so many things for their children, it sometimes happens that "parents are so deeply concerned with providing the best for their children that they neglect to join them" (Dreikurs & Soltz 1964:241). This is the concern that will be explored in the following sections.

4.3.2.2 Literacy activities in the home

Reading to their children

Amongst the participants in general, reading is the strongest component and the most consistent activity in relation to the early literacy development of the children.

Maria, Michelle and Debbie, in whose homes I observed an abundance of children's books, reported that they read to their children very often. Maria (mother of three-and-a-half-year-old Jada) said that they read books to their children in the morning and in the evening. Michelle remarked:

After supper ... I read to them for a couple of hours. I read to them at different times during the day – especially the little ones, but in the evenings, almost every night then we'll sit and read.

Debbie stated that she reads to her son, Michael, who is aged three-and-a-half, regularly, “normally one or two books and then I tell him a story ... So from [the time he was] little we started. We read to him every night. He won’t go to sleep without a story.”

Anthea stated that they try to read to five-and-half-year-old Tanya and her sisters, a Bible story or any other story that they like; at least every second evening. Carmen also tries to read to her four-year-old son before he goes to sleep. She explained:

He LIKES books, so I usually put a lot of books on the table; so he will bring a book and we’ll read it to him. In the afternoon when we’re not at home, the car is FULL of ... books.

Hannah and Sophia said that their children (both four years old) love stories and that they read to them every evening before bed time and at other times. Sophia stated that their story time was rather long and that she included rhymes and songs during this time.

Tessa and Jackie also remarked that their children (both aged four) love books and that they also had regular reading times with them. Tessa said, “I read to them a lot. This is very important to me.” Both Jackie and Tessa allow their children to choose the books that they want to have read to them and Tessa further stated that she normally reads a Bible story to them too, since she regards this as important.

Finally, Shelley stated,

His Daddy reads [a story to him] every night. But we read every day, EVERY SINGLE DAY! To me it’s very important. I’ve got a mother-in-law who is a vice-principal at a school and she just said right from the start, “Whatever you do, just read, read, read!” So we’re reading, reading, reading!

The participants share the belief that reading to children is “very important,” and each of them puts this belief into practice in their homes on a daily (or almost daily) basis. The literature supports this idea that reading to children is essential in the early years (cf. 2.1). Reading is considered as critical with regard to early literacy development, and there are strong links between children becoming good readers and their later success in both school and life (Willis et al. 2007:630; Palmer & Bayley 2005:5,324 330,352; Yola Center 2005:21; Aram & Levin 2002:203; Hirsch Jr. 1997:11) (cf. 2.1).

Children’s reading behaviour

As far as the reading behaviour of their children is concerned, participating mothers seemed satisfied with their children’s interest in, and love for reading. Generally, the participants commented that their children loved to ‘read’ (imitate reading behaviour) and that they enjoy books. When I asked Debbie whether Michael (aged three-and-a-half) was reading on his own at this stage, Debbie immediately replied that he was reading. She qualified her answer though, by stating that he does not read as such, but that he reads by “looking at books.” She recognises though, that this is where literacy begins and that at this stage, what he does with his books can be considered to be ‘reading.’ Michelle also referred to this kind of reading behaviour as ‘reading,’ as did some of the other mothers. They seem to regard their children’s pre-literacy reading behaviour as important. Even though their children do not yet read in the conventional sense, mothers seem to understand that early pre-literacy reading behaviour is an important precursor to achieving full literacy (cf. 2.2.2). Michelle commented:

When you ... [read] like a beautiful picturebook with a story ... and you read it again and again. They LOVE that ... They love the stories that they know. And then they start reading the stories themselves even though they're not really reading ... They KNOW the story so well. So they go over ... the stories they know and tell them in their own words.

Debbie, Shelley and Anthea described their children’s reading behaviour as looking at books, looking at pictures and going to the bookshelf, choosing a book and paging through books. Anthea remarked that her five-and-a-half-year-old Tanya reads “quite a lot, and look[s] at pictures and books.” Sophia added that at times, her four-year-old son ‘reads’ to

her by telling the story by looking at the pictures. She remarked that he liked to have her listen to him 'read.'

Michelle spoke about having to "limit" her children's (aged 7 and older) reading of novels to one hour a day, or else they would read novels all day. They also "read other books – history books, science, geography or whatever." She spoke about how the older ones (aged 12 to 14) read to the little ones, and how the "little ones (aged between 5 and 7) 'read' to the littler ones (aged 1 and 3)." It was interesting to notice the development of Gail's reading. During an individual interview in May 2008, Michelle reported, when Gail had just turned five, that Gail was very interested in letters and reading and just noticed print all around her, and that she, Michelle, had been waiting and watching for that interest. The following is what she said about Gail's early literacy development at that point:

...I can see she (Gail) is more and more interested. And she keeps on asking ... "What is this letter?" When SHE tickles my back, she draws letters ... And she'll draw a 'P' and I have to guess what she's drawing ... It's everywhere to her ... But I don't think my role is ... teaching, telling sort of thing. It's more just waiting, watching and helping when she asks.

Five months later, during another interview, Michelle said the following:

(Gail's reading) is changing every day. By Christmas time she'll be reading to herself. I'm pretty sure. She's that far. I mean she can read ... When she was reading with me today, she read "See that [shack?] there. It's full of sand" or something, "we will run to that shack; we will play in it." ... That's the kind of level she's at. And she'll sit and READ a book to herself as in looking at pictures.

Finally, almost two months later, in December, during the focus group interview, Michelle reported on Gail's reading:

She CAN read now. She can read well and she's five-and-a-half. She's actually doing very, very well. I think it depends on the child. But I WOULD say, yes, I was her teacher. I did teach her to read, like step-by-step, this is what this says, this is what that says. But I think, with my experience with the

other one (Tina), she would have learnt to anyway, maybe a bit later. And I think that some children prefer to find their own way and other children like you to take them and show them.

Initially she waited for Gail to develop an interest in learning to read and write. She facilitated that interest by answering questions, by reading to her, by helping her read and by surrounding her with words. She felt that she was more “organised” and more involved with Gail’s learning to read than she was with seven-year-old Tina’s and felt that Gail would have learnt to read anyway, but that she had decided to take a “short cut” by helping her. Michelle reported that Tina, her seven-year-old daughter started reading at the age of five-and-a-half, with very little help from her. Furthermore, she said about Tina:

I did do some sight words with her, but not a lot - maybe 40, 45 words and she knew her basic phonics because we used Letterland - just the stories. But she taught herself to read. I didn’t do it. She just started to figure it out ... [Now Tina] reads the same books that my twelve and thirteen year-old[s] are reading. She is reading way above her age level according to the schools and I didn’t teach her to read. She taught herself ... She would just say, “What does this say?” And from one word, she would then apply that information to other words ... Once I would tell her that “night” says “night”; then she would get that combination that it says “igh”. Then she would say all the other words, “light” and “fight” and whatever. She figured ALL of that out by herself from just having that little bit ... She would read a sentence and test out the context. We do that as adults. If we come across a word we don’t know then we look at the context.

Michelle’s approach is reminiscent of the whole language approach. Whole language proponents believe that when a child encounters an unfamiliar word, they can search for semantic, syntactic, and phonetic cues in the text to establish its meaning (Sousa 2005:65) (cf. 2.3.2), as Tina seems to have done when she learnt to read.

Children in the households of the participants are interested in, and enjoy reading, and as was reported earlier (cf. 4.3.2.2), books are easily accessible and available to children in their households. It is clear that the participants are aware of the importance of their

children having positive feelings about reading and positive experiences with reading from an early age.

The reading behaviour of participating mothers

An important reason why a love for reading is emphasised by participating mothers, is that many of them enjoy reading themselves. Jackie stated in this regard:

“I will ... waste away if I don't read. So I read A LOT, A LOT ... It's something that's important for me to do.”

Anthea, Sophia and Michelle similarly reported that they loved to read and that they felt that this influenced their children's love for reading. For example, Anthea said about her five-and-half-year-old daughter, Tanya, “Her mom LOVES to read, so she read[s] quite a lot.”

Tessa, whose children are aged four and six, reported that she had not read much up until about a year ago since she did not have time to read when her children were younger. However, she reported that she now reads “a lot.” “I believe strongly in books,” she added. She also said that at times when her children play outside, she sits out in the sun with them and reads. Hannah stated that she reads during her ‘quiet time’ in the morning and that while she does so, her four-year-old daughter, Venetia also has her own ‘quiet time’ alongside her. Some of them reported that they did not have time to read when their children were awake or that their children did not “allow” them to read their own books. Michelle, who has eight children, three of whom are five-and-half years old and younger, said that she reads during her ‘quiet time’ in the morning and in the evenings when her children have gone to bed. Jackie, Shelley and Maria said that they enjoy reading but that their children do not like it when they try to read on their own. Shelley said:

I do [read]. They never see me, however, because I do it when they sleep. But I read when I get the time. So I'm busy with two books that always lie on my dining-room table 'cause when they sleep in the afternoon I can ...

read a few pages in the one, read a few pages in the other one (laughingly).
I read about two, three pages if I'm allowed to, you know!

Debbie, mother of three-and-a-half-year-old Michael, who also loves to read, stated similarly that her children do not see her reading for herself often and that she feels "guilty" at times about reading on her own while they are around. She did state though, that she has decided to make an effort to read for half an hour every day during the day. Maria, Shelley and Jackie, whose children are aged three, three and four years respectively, and who all have younger children, said that their children do not like them to read their own books. Maria however, stated during the focus group interview:

I think also ... [the] mistake [I make] is what I don't do in front of them. I don't read so much in front of them. So I think it's also ... good when they see us reading ... I read only when they go to sleep. They don't let me, actually. They're not used to it ... They grab books from me. And so I think they need to get used to it that I also have [a] reading 'quiet time' and then they can have their own reading.

In response to Maria's remark as quoted above, both Sophia and Jackie nodded their heads in agreement, and Jackie responded, "They grow up to view it as a positive thing [when] they see you reading."

The literature states that children who grow up in 'high-literacy' households, where amongst other things, parents read and write regularly, have larger vocabularies and increased reading readiness skills (cf. 2.5.4), and that children do better with regard to their literacy and other skills in households where parents demonstrate that the practice of reading and writing is both useful and enjoyable (cf. 2.6.2.2).

While participating mothers recognise the importance of setting a good example in terms of their own literacy activities, at times it is physically impossible for some of them, especially those with younger children to do so. However, they seem to try hard to do the best they can with the time that they have.

Further on in this chapter (cf. 4.3.3.3), participating mothers' literacy-related behaviour will be further explored in terms the example that they set in this area. In this regard it is also important to study the role of the participants' own perceptions and beliefs of how their own role impacts on their children's behaviour. This is the focus of the next section.

How mothers perceive their roles in the reading acquisition of their children

Participating mothers generally see it as their task to instil in their children a love of reading. As stated by Debbie:

It's my duty maybe to instil a love of books. He must enjoy reading or listening to stories ... I think that I must get him to enjoy it and expose him to things, like ... he's got lots of books and when ... I realise there's an interest in something then I will try to find a book like that, like dinosaurs, or cars.

Michelle and Tessa shared this practice of either buying or borrowing books about topics in which their children were interested. Tessa, as a result of what she had been taught during her tertiary studies stated:

You have to give your child a love for words and for books and pictures and that you do through physically having the child close to you – it must always be a nice experience. If there is a book, and you and your child, it must always be nice. So, I try to always make it a positive, positive experience ... One can never read enough; so one can do it more and more. I buy lots of books. I am quite a sucker for buying books!

Similarly, Jackie stated:

At this stage when they're small, when they can't read for themselves yet, it's important for them to have access ... to books; to see the books; to be able to see them in their own home, in their own rooms ... to be able to do the action of taking out books and paging through them, without being scared of tearing them or whatever. They shouldn't be scared of damaging them. They should feel safe ... with the books ... [and have] access. Even though they can't read it, they get to know it ... And then of course, reading to them ... Sitting with them and read[ing] to

them, so they grow to love books, and the IDEA of books, and the PRESENCE of books and see that it's important from a very, very young age.

Michelle, who homeschools her eight children, and who intends to continue homeschooling them, held the following, rather interesting perspective:

I think that I have to read to them, and they need to see me reading, and they need to be surrounded by words. And, I need to be there to answer their questions WHEN they ask them, but not necessarily to prescribe a course of learning to read. As they become more interested and they start to ask, 'what is this saying, and what does that say?' I think that's when you can get more involved.

Even though Michelle is her five-year-old daughter's primary caregiver and educator, she seems to believe that in terms of early literacy development, what her child needs most is not direct, formal instruction in reading, but more exposure to the world of literacy. The idea of providing children with as much exposure to literacy as possible, is in consonance with the literature (cf. 2.5.4), as well as with the whole language perspective (cf. 2.3.2). Michelle makes good use of Vygotsky's theory of guided participation of a novice by a more experienced or knowledgeable expert (cf. 2.6.1).

Research has revealed that extensive literacy exposure, where children are read to regularly; where children see parents reading and parents encourage their children's early writing, have a distinct advantage in terms of their becoming fully literate (cf. 2.5.4). Michelle revealed that she chooses to follow her daughter's lead and will help her with her reading once her daughter shows an interest. Michelle's informal approach may seem strange or even unwise to some educators. However, her approach seems to be successful so far, at least in terms of reading, for her children.

The trend described above was also reported by Sophia, Tessa, Maria and Carmen who all commented that when it comes to their children's learning/ playing, they often let their

children lead. I observed this to be true in the case of Tessa and her four-year-old son. Throughout their interaction (when they played with blocks and toy people together), Tessa followed her son's lead. She was there to make suggestions and add comments and encouragement, but she allowed him the freedom to choose the next step. A similar way of operating was also observed in the interaction between Sophia and her four-year-old son.

Jackie, mother of four-year-old May, commented during the focus group interview that she feels it is her duty to establish a knowledge of, and a love of books and music and other important areas. She tries to do these things rather than “teaching them or telling them it HAS to be this way, or it HAS to be that way; just a feeling for it.”

The approach to learning as described above, can be linked to two of Vygotsky's ideas, namely:

- In the ZPD, mothers stimulate and encourage their children to be involved in literacy activities at a level that is appropriate to young preschoolers. Vygotsky felt it important to wait until a child is cognitively mature enough, and most sensitive to what he is to learn (cf. 2.4.2).
- The idea of ‘scaffolding’ in the ZPD, where a more knowledgeable adult exposes a young learner to potential learning situations and guides the learner to develop the desired knowledge or skills (cf. 2.6.1).

Other literacy-related activities

Jackie, Carmen and Debbie reported that their children aged four, four and three-and-a-half respectively, attend a music-related programme called ‘Kindermusik’ once a week. Such involvement in music, song and dance has direct benefits for early literacy development (Palmer & Bayley 2005:79; Hirsch Jr. 1997:201) (cf. 2.6.2.2). Half of the participants reported involvement in such activities. Sophia mentioned she does singing and rhymes with her children before bed time. Michelle said, in relation to the early

literacy activities, that she occasionally engages with her children in making up “nonsense songs.” Jackie also exposes her children to music and other important things. As for the other five participants, either they do not recognise the importance of music with regard to early literacy development, or perhaps some of them feel that the school can help in this area, or it could be that they do not have much of an interest in music themselves.

Many of the participants stated that they use literacy-related games and aids such as memory games, puzzles, flashcards, alphabet books, and also spend time drawing, painting and doing crafts with their children. Michelle spoke about a phonics game that her children play together, where the older ones help the younger ones to play (her children’s ages range from one to fourteen years).

Writing

Participants were positive about their children’s writing behaviour and generally seemed to allow their children’s writing to develop as their children became interested. Where they noticed an interest, they encouraged that interest. Anthea stated that she encouraged her five-and-a-half-year-old daughter to help her to compose a letter or card to her grandmother, but stated that she is not currently teaching her daughter to write, since the curriculum that she is using does not involve formal writing at this stage. Carmen said that her four-year-old son, encouraged by the example of his older brother, had developed an interest in writing. She stated that “He wants to start writing. I rather let him lead.” Sophia stated, in agreement with the belief that children should not be specifically taught to write (cf. 2.4.2) too soon, said of her four-year-old son:

I think he is a little bit too small right now still for ... writing. We do read a lot ... He’s starting to form the letters and everything. But I asked at school and she (the teacher) told me I musn’t [teach] him yet; he’s too young still. So I leave him, but if he asks me “How do I write that?” or whatever, I’ll show him and then leave him and he will do that.

Jackie said that she sometimes writes down things that her four-year-old daughter likes to

copy, but that at this moment, her daughter is more interested in colouring and drawing. I observed during the interview, how her daughter wrote down her name, and that the mother praised her daughter's efforts. Maria enthusiastically told me about how her three-and-a-half-year-old daughter's writing is slowly becoming more legible and how she clearly distinguished an 'F' in her daughter's writing recently (cf. appendix 7A). She also spoke about how her daughter makes up her own shopping lists. During the interview, her daughter 'showed off' her writing skills and her mom applauded her work. Participating mothers seem to recognise that children's early 'writing' is an important precursor to formal writing (cf. 2.4). Vygotsky recognised that preschoolers can 'write' *before* they know how to write properly in the conventional sense (Newman & Holzman 1993:104) (cf.2.4.2) (cf. appendix 7A and appendix 7B).

Most mothers with younger children are aware that children should not be taught to write formally too early, and they preferred to let their children lead at this stage. It was interesting to note however, that Shelley seemed to have a different approach. I observed how Shelley and her son, aged three-and-a-half at the time of the interview, had a bit of a power struggle over his writing. He wanted to write his own name, but his mom did not want him to do so on his own, without her having first provided an example. Despite his protests, she insisted that she write his name down first so he could copy it, which he did eventually. When his mother commented that he had made an 'H,' he disagreed and said that it was a "rugby pole." Shelley indicated that it made her happy when her children got "something right." This desire on her part seems to include her child's early writing activities.

It is not clear whether Shelley's method at this time represented the way she normally handled issues of reading and writing, or if she acted this way because I was there observing. Her desire seems to be to help her children do things the right way, as she admitted and she is certainly very enthusiastic about having her children learn new things. Nevertheless, however well-meaning she is, such perfectionist tendencies may hinder her child's enjoyment of the experience of literacy development.

As has been mentioned above, some of the literature suggests that a child should not be specifically taught to write before they reach kindergarten (Grade R). This corroborates Vygotsky's theory that the school years are the best time to teach children to write formally (cf. 2.4.2). However, other authors state that early reading and writing should be allowed to evolve simultaneously (c.f. 2.4). Vygotsky stated further that "drawing and play should be preparatory stages in the development of children's written language" (Vygotsky 1978 in Newman & Holzman 1993: 103) (cf. 2.4.2).

It is clear that contradictory perspectives are presented by researchers and that this was also noted in the perspectives and practices of the participants in this study. Most participants followed an informal approach with regard to their children's writing, and often let the children, or their teachers lead without placing too much pressure on them. Others such as Shelley however, seems to want her child to get it 'right' at an early stage. As has been said above, if this is a general practice on the part of the mother, it may have negative consequences for the child concerning his literacy-related experiences.

Development of speaking and listening skills

Participating mothers were generally also aware that it is important to spend much time talking to young children. Early literacy experts advise caregivers to create many opportunities for verbal interaction with children, as this will have benefits for children's early literacy skills (Palmer & Bayley 2005:5; Willenberg 2005:170) (cf. 2.6.2.2) Furthermore,, according to the Vygotskian socio-cultural learning model, learning takes place as children interact with others in social situations (cf. 2.2.2.3). Participants reported that they strive to have meaningful conversations with their children around the meal table, in the kitchen during meal preparation, during play with their children and when they are engaged in gardening or other activities. This I found to be true during the observations. It was particularly interesting how two mothers, Tessa and Sophia used play time to engage their children in meaningful conversation, whilst using the opportunity to share, teach and guide their children. Tessa stated, "[in] everything that I do, I talk while I am doing it. And so they learn in a playful manner."

Participating mothers also reported providing stimulation for their children to talk by encouraging them to tell their own stories. Sophia stated during the focus group interview that just that morning they had engaged in that practice by using a book to stimulate her four-year-old son, Riaan's thoughts and imagination. She felt that it is important that her son understands how stories work; that they have a beginning, a body and an ending and that he practises storytelling himself. Maria and Jackie seemed to agree that this was a good idea. Jackie further emphasised the importance of helping children to use their imagination by not using pictures at times, but by asking them to imagine certain situations as in the following explanation:

Sometimes you can create silly situations. You can, for instance ... say, what would it be like if cats were as big as cars – or whatever. Or silly stuff like that. Or what if trees were purple instead of ... Like would they like it, or would they not like it. Or, sometimes asking them ... what would they like best to be? And they would say ... mermaid or they would [like to] be able to fly ... In that way it's also ... not just restricting them to reality.

Both Jackie and Maria contended that they often draw their children's attention to the clouds and try to get their children to see pictures in the clouds and then talk about what they see.

From the discussion above, it seems apparent that the mothers in the study specifically encourage their children to participate in literacy-related activities such as reading, writing, music and talking, as well as playing literacy-related games, or other activities. Not only do they encourage their children to participate and make resources available, but they also generally join their children in these activities.

4.3.2.3 The mother as a critical literacy resource

The human instrument is an essential component of the home literacy environment (cf. 2.6.2). According to the Vygotskian perspective, mothers can serve as mediators in the literacy development of their children since they can act as experts who guide and support

their children (Gifford 2005:16; Aram & Levin 2002:207) (cf. 2.6.2.1). The nature of this involvement by participating mothers will be explored further in the next section (cf. 4.3.3).

4.3.2.4 Concluding perspectives on Theme 3

It is clear from the discussion above that the learning environments of the participating mothers are not always perfect, and that there are challenges and difficulties which they, as mothers, encounter. However, they seem to believe firmly that for their children, they are currently their best resource. Participants perceive that they can be a good resource by engaging their children in play or in specific literacy activities, they can set a good example by using literacy in meaningful and practical ways, thereby influencing their children to having a positive attitude towards learning. They also believe that they can offer their children their time. It is clear that the participating mothers have made a conscious decision to be important learning resources for their children, being generally aware of what this role entails. They may not be with their children every moment of the day, or be engaged in instructing them all the time, but they are available to their children and seem to make a concerted effort to provide for their early literacy needs.

Mothers can act as critical resources in their children's learning environment by setting a good example in terms of their involvement with literacy and literacy resources; through their positive attitude regarding their children's early literacy development and by mediating and scaffolding their children's learning. The mother as a critical resource in her young child's literacy learning environment will be elaborated upon in the following theme. The final theme in this chapter will deal briefly with the mother's attitude regarding her role in her child's development as expressed in her perceived challenges and rewards.

4.3.3 Participants' perceived roles as critical resources in the home literacy environment

The previous section dealt with the home learning environment in which the children of the participants find themselves (cf. 4.3.2). It was found that these environments are fairly

busy places where the mothers act as mediators of learning (cf. 2.6.2.1). Moreover, participants provide educational resources (cf. appendix 8A & appendix 8B) as well as time to enhance the early literacy development of their children and it is clear that participants in general, perceive their own roles within this learning environment as critical. In light of the fact that Willenberg (2002:3) (cf. 2.5.2) reports that the mother's beliefs regarding her role in her children's development in general, directly influence her practical involvement in this area, the aforementioned beliefs of participants are of vital interest. The findings of Willenberg are supported by numerous other researchers, who state similarly that the mother's perception of her role as teacher will have a direct influence on the child and that her own literacy practices and beliefs actually tend to predict her child's print-related knowledge (Skibbe et al. 2008:68; Oosthuizen & Bouwer 2007:68; Grolnick et al. 1997:538) (cf. 2.5.2). This then, is the focus of the discussion that follows in this section.

From an analysis of the data, it is clear that there are many similarities regarding participants' perspectives of their roles. However, specific differences have also been identified in the way they execute their roles with regard to the literacy development of their young children. From the data, the following roles have been identified:

- Facilitator-supporter
- Companion-teacher
- Role model

The data also show clearly that most participating mothers fulfil a combination of the roles listed above. However, each of them appeared to be strongest in one specific area.

4.3.3.1 Facilitator-supporter

The facilitator-supporter role is one which involves the mother exposing her child to learning situations, guiding and supporting the child within the situations. Michelle (mother of eight children aged one to fourteen years) by her own admission, sees herself as a

“facilitator” in her children’s learning. During the interview, she seemed reluctant to refer to herself as a teacher in the traditional sense, probably as a result of her own experiences in school, and the roles that she typically ascribes to conventional teaching (cf. 4.3.1.2). She also spoke from past experience with her own children and her perceptions of that experience, when she used a specific curriculum and was “trying to do school with them and trying to force them to do things that they weren’t ready for.” She felt that it had “cost” them their “relationship ... ‘cause then I was their enemy in a way.” Michelle seems to associate doing formal schooling with her children with “forcing” them to do things that they may not be ready for and consequently experienced negative results with her children in the past. Michelle also spoke about her own experience with school (cf. 4.3.1.2) and this rather negative experience seems to have impacted on her decision regarding the education of her own children. The literature states that a mother’s own school experiences may influence her approach to her child’s education (Hill & Taylor 2007:38) (cf. 2.5.2). Furthermore, Michelle believes that since she did not learn much in school that her own children are not going to learn that much either. She perceives structured, formal teaching as ineffective and has thus chosen a different method of education for her children. She stated:

I facilitate their learning but they ... choose what they wanna’ learn and what they’re interested in and then I just help them find the materials, or whatever they need ... I don’t have all the knowledge, but I have access to knowledge and I can help them get it. That’s what I see myself as. So, if that’s a teacher, then ... I want them to learn how to learn [and] ... to learn how to find out what they need to know, WHEN they need to know it, at the TIME that it’s relevant to them ... or to find somebody who knows. So that, even if they don’t have all the knowledge in the world, they’ve got all the skills to get the knowledge they need.

It was interesting to note that a few months later, during the focus group interview, that Michelle seemed more willing to use the term ‘teach’ to describe what she does with her children. She said, without being prompted, “I DO teach my children,” but qualified that admission with the following:

... but at the same time, they teach themselves – a lot! And I don’t think you can underestimate how much they will teach themselves if left to their own devices, and how much they teach themselves on top of what you teach them.

Earlier Michelle explained how her two children aged five-and-a-half and seven had learnt to read, as well as the somewhat different approach that she used in helping them learn to read (cf. 4.3.2.2). It is clear that Michelle believes in approaching each child as an individual and facilitating the interest and the development of that child, depending on the felt needs of the child.

Some of the other mothers in the study also described their roles in the early literacy development of their children in terms of the kind of facilitation and support described above. Sophia (mother of four-year-old Riaan, and two-year-old Richard) also felt strongly that she should facilitate her children's learning, even though Riaan does attend preschool. She described how she recognises and creates learning opportunities for her children. When she plays a game with them, she teaches them new words or simply has a conversation with them in order to increase their knowledge in general or to increase their vocabulary. As a facilitator, she sees the value of teaching her children lessons from the 'simple' things in life, such as going to the post office, teaching them about the value of money, or how to care for puppies. She said that she is always looking for ways and means to teach them, "in everything we try to learn and see." She stated further:

[Riaan] will ask me, "Can we do a story, or can we do something?" I'll do that for him. I'll read [to] him and he likes to take the book himself and read the story himself; then he just tells the story with the pictures and, but he wants to read [to] me, and he wants me to hear him and so we do that quite a lot. If he asks me "How do I write that?" or whatever, I'll show him ... [At] the post office I tell them everything that they do there ... And maybe, when we go to the shops, I'll give them ... fifty cents ... and show them what to do and how to pay and how to get [their] change.

Shelley (mother of two children aged one and three-and-a-half), Jackie (mother of two children aged two and four) and Anthea (mother of a five-and-a-half-year old), similarly reported finding things to teach her children when they go shopping, when they play, when they cook, bake or do gardening and in other activities, in order to facilitate and support their children's learning. Shelley also stated that often when three-and-a-half-year-old Justin struggles to do something, that she will suggest trying it a different way, watch his progress and realise that by the following week, he would be doing it all by himself.

Jackie, who has also provided a great number of literacy resources for her children, said, “I try to provide exposure to more – so that she can choose for herself in the end, what she wants.” Jackie, like Michelle, believes that children’s learning should be facilitated by providing them with as much exposure as possible, rather than forcing them into a specific direction. She wants four-year-old May to be free to make her own choices, and teaches May values which she regards as important, without trying to make her “a clone”.

A general trend that I have observed is that the participants intuitively implement Vygotsky’s suggestion that all new learning should be supported through scaffolding by an adult or more knowledgeable peers to guide the child’s problem-solving activity, until she increasingly takes more initiative, while the adult or peer continues to support the child and functions as a facilitator (cf. 2.6.1). Michelle, for instance, tends to scaffold (cf. 2.6.1) Gail’s learning in terms of her reading (cf. 4.3.2.2). As discussed previously, Tessa and Sophia similarly scaffold their children’s play and learning (cf. 4.3.2.2).

Carmen also felt it very important to support her children in all their endeavours and derived distinct pleasure in “being there” to support them. She stated:

You’re there, and you can watch them grow ... Sharing every moment with them. It’s only ... you! They have to do it on their own, but I’ll be there for their ... encouragement.

Most participants act as facilitators to their children’s learning – at least some of the time. They tend to provide opportunities and exposure and often allow their children to direct their own learning, while they are there to guide and support.

4.3.3.2 Companion-teacher

Another role which emerged from the data is the companion-teacher role which can be described as the mother spending a lot of time alongside her children, just living with them

and teaching them. For Shelley, a full-time mother of two children aged one and three-and-a-half, it may amount to being involved in their education “closely, hands on ... 365 days a year.” For other mothers such as Sophia, for example, it may amount to spending quality time with their children after preschool hours. However, the participant mothers find many opportunities to help their children develop their early literacy development, often by simply being with their children in their daily activities. The participant mothers generally see themselves as teachers to their children, although their individual perspectives of what the ‘teacher’ role entails plays out differently in the lives and experiences of the different mothers. Regarding the basic approach of the participating mothers to their children’s learning, two basic methods may be identified; namely, a somewhat unstructured approach to learning, and the more traditional, organised, structured approach.

Michelle, whose approach is unstructured, was somewhat reluctant initially to even refer to herself as a teacher although she later admitted to teaching her children (cf. 4.3.3.1). Hannah is also an SAHM. Her four-year-old foster child, Venetia, attends play school two mornings a week. Hannah enjoys teaching her ‘new’ daughter many things which she feels Venetia should have known a long time ago. She enjoys being an integral part of Venetia’s progress and reported that Venetia is very attached to her. Hannah, like Michelle, seemed to be reluctant to refer to what she does with Venetia as akin to the methods of conventional schooling. She reported:

We don’t do a formal thing with her, but we do a little bit of what we call school ... Our days change, also depending what’s on ... my schedule ... I don’t have a Monday to Friday type of thing.

She described her teacher-companion role activities with Venetia as follows:

Every night I read her a story before she goes to bed, and other times as well ... We play a lot ... We have tea parties on a regular basis (laugh). I think I spend a lot of time one-on-one with her. But then, they’re not so much like structured times. There are a lot ... just sort of ‘happen times’ type of thing, whether it’s outside playing or inside – doing things together. But I don’t usually sit and think well ... it sort of just naturally happens during the day. I think those sit-down times like, that I am not spontaneous ... [we]

tend to do ... sort of school – if you wanna' call it school things ... We do quite a bit of painting ... crafts ... and baking and [making] dough.

Hannah's decision not to follow a formal, structured approach in her teaching role ties in with Venetia's age, as well as the fact that her foster child has to adapt to her new life situation. The particular perspective on learning that she holds, as indicated by the term that she used, "sort of school", similar to Michelle's approach, probably impacts on her approach too.

The unstructured approach described above is also reported by Sophia, who has two young children aged two and four. This she uses partly because four-year-old Riaan attends preschool. She described how she spends time with her children, using everyday opportunities to teach them. She stated that she spent time teaching them rhymes and stories. I watched how, when she did a puzzle with them, she taught them new words, and also showed her younger son how to complete the puzzle when he struggled to do so. When Riaan experienced difficulty with something and he exclaimed that he could not do what he had been asked to do, she promptly responded that there was no such thing as "can't" and she showed him how he could fulfil the task more easily and encouraged him to do it himself, which he did. She seems to spend time with her children as teacher-companion, and uses opportunities to teach them in everything that they do.

Tessa, who is not employed outside of the home, and whose four-year-old son, Allan, also attends preschool every morning, seems to enjoy spending time with her children, listening to their stories, and chatting to them. She described how they usually have their meals around the table and added the following:

I will ask them, "How was your day, who did you play with, what happened?" ... at their interest level – ask them things, and then tell them things about myself too - so that they know what is going on in my world too ... We chat!

Tessa continued:

When they help me in the kitchen, if we bake cookies or cook food ... and [in] everything that I do, I talk while I am doing it. And so they learn in a playful manner ... Or when we play in the sand, or ... just in a playful manner, one can teach them a lot – expand their vocabulary, emotional vocabulary ...

Maria, whose children are also still young (one year and three-and-a-half years) is at home full-time with her children. She too, spends a lot of time taking care of her children and cannot “imagine somebody else” looking after them; regarding it as a “calling” to be with her children and taking care of their developmental needs. Similar to Hannah, as described above, Maria spends a lot of time just “bonding” with and interacting with her children. She regards it as important to allow her children to be free to learn and to explore (cf. 4.3.1.1).

The unstructured approach described above, is in contrast to Anthea’s more organised, consistent approach. Anthea, who homeschools her three children, seems very comfortable in her teacher role, and her five-and-a-half-year-old daughter Tanya, appears to be equally happy to have her mom performing that role and to accept her role as learner. In contrast to the participants discussed above, Anthea has adopted the traditional, didactic approach to teaching as she helps her daughters with the formal curriculum that they are currently completing. She reported spending a few hours every morning helping Tanya to complete her Grade R work. Anthea regards predictability and security in education as very important and views the time that she can spend teaching her children as of great value, since she can “see [that] there’s lots of questions going on in [Tanya’s] head,” and she is glad that she is “there ... [to] answer them.”

Debbie, a full-time mother and former school teacher, spends all her time with her children (aged one and three-and-a-half) every day. She rarely makes use of a babysitter and does not have a nanny to take care of her children. She described three-and-a-half-year-old Michael’s rather interesting response to her attempts to teach him, in the following way:

I definitely see myself as a teacher. He doesn't. He says I'm the mommy and not the teacher when I tried to teach him the other day.

Five months later, during a second interview session, it appeared as if Michael was more accepting of his mother's teaching endeavours, with Debbie reporting rapid progress in Michael's early literacy development. Although Debbie allows her children much freedom, she has a tendency to be more organised in her teaching approach and in her use and creation of early literacy resources.

From the above discussion, it seems clear that most of the participating mothers follow a more unstructured approach partly because some of their children attend preschool and they feel that the school has "taken over" part of their education role, and the fact that the children directly involved in the study are all under the age of six. It may be that as children grow older, some of their mothers will either send their children to school or decide to follow a more structured approach. Michelle is an exception in this area. She uses the same unstructured approach with all her children and has stated emphatically that she will never send her children to school. While it is true that parental beliefs, practices and interactive styles impact on children's literacy exposure and success (Willis et al. 2007:626,628; Bardige & Segal 2005:11,78; Hannon 2003:99; Cairney 2003:85) (cf. 2.5.2), for now, while their children are still young, participating mothers are providing their children with what they deem necessary exposure, experience and/or teaching with regard to their early literacy development, and many of them seem to do this quite effectively as teacher-companions to their children.

The companion-teacher role that participating mothers have adopted also correlates with Vygotsky's sociocultural model of learning where learning is seen to always take place in a social setting (cf. 1.4.3). It is also interesting to remember that for Vygotsky, development cannot take place independent of instruction. He believed that "learning leads development" in the sense that they are both necessary conditions for the other to occur. According to the Vygotskian perspective therefore, the teacher, who may also be the mother, essentially creates the conditions for certain cognitive processes to develop,

without directly implanting them in the child (Vygotsky 1962:101,102; Van der Veer & Valsiner 1991: 330) (cf. 2.6.2.1). For Vygotsky then, intentional educational instruction (which does not necessarily amount to direct 'implantation' but which includes teaching, exposing, leading (essentially mediating)) is necessary for children to experience in order to gain important literacy skills (cf.1.4.1 & 2.6.2.1).

4.3.3.3 Role model

Research has revealed that the literacy-related behaviour of parents, and thus the example that they set, impacts directly on the literacy behaviour, as well as the early literacy development of their children (cf. 2.6.2.2). Regarding reading for example, while socialisation into reading can occur directly, when family members arrange activities such as reading to a child, they can also occur indirectly when the child observes family members using reading and writing in everyday activities (Machet 2002:3) (cf.2.6.2.2). It is true that children who see their parents reading and writing for a variety of purposes are likely to imitate their actions (cf.2.6.2.2).

Some of the participants, for example, Maria, Michelle, Anthea and Sophia specifically spoke about the importance of setting a good example in general terms or in terms of their own literacy-related behaviour. Maria (a former preschool teacher and mother of two children, aged one and three-and-a-half) stated that she would like to be an example to them. She seems to be a strong believer in the concept of parents modelling the behaviours, attitude and skills that they want their children to learn. She said during the focus group interview that what you say "[is not] as important as what you do ... because [your children are] watching."

Michelle believes that one does not have to "get" a child "to love learning" since children are "born with the love of learning," she believes, unless it has been "taken away from them." Therefore, she went on to say, that what is most important for the mother is that she is an "example" since, according to her, children will copy what they see – good or bad. She explained:

If you spend more time focusing on what you do, and on how you behave ...
It's easier to set an example than to MAKE them do something you don't do.

The role-model perspective is closely related to the other two roles identified in this study, namely, facilitator-support (cf. 4.3.3.1) and companion-teacher (cf. 4.3.3.2), and it is clear that as mothers fulfil their role in the early literacy development of their children, they all attempt to set good examples for children in terms of their own reading and other involvement with literacy.

Anthea said that when her children participate with her in everyday activities, she functions as a role model. Many of the other participating mothers such as Maria, Tessa, Jackie, Sophia and Hannah described how they involve their children in their activities and their work, often explaining to their children what they are doing, or even just talking to them about various things. In agreement with the method just described, the literature states that literacy events take place in everyday activities such as when a family takes a walk, drives, shops, goes to church and has a meal. Furthermore, in these activities parents serve as role models, as it is here where they demonstrate reading and writing in meaningful ways (Lilly & Green 2004:90) (cf. 2.6.2.2).

Anthea mentioned that she sets an example to her five-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Tanya, in terms of her speech. Research has revealed that having conversations with young children is vital to their early literacy acquisition (cf. 2.6.2.2). In fact, the parent-child verbal interaction is critical for early development and its practice will accelerate learning and provide even more opportunities for mastering new words and asking new questions, thus facilitating early language development and later reading comprehension (Bardige & Segal 2005:9; Willenberg 2005:170; Mendelsohn 2002:200) (cf. 2.6.2.2).

As has been discussed in more detail earlier (cf. 4.3.2.2), another important facet of being a role model in a child's development of literacy skills is the example set by the mother who enjoys reading, and who reads easily and extensively. In this regard, mothers can

provide a good example by showing that the practices of reading and writing are both enjoyable and useful (Bardige & Segal 2005:213; Willenberg 2005:170; Lilly & Green 2004:12,40; Machet 2002:3) (2.6.2.2). Generally, the mothers who participated in the current study seem to know the importance of having their children seeing them reading and writing (cf. 4.3.2.2) and they understand that this practice has important implications for a child's enjoyment of books and the child's early literacy development (cf. 2.6.2.2).

In this regard, Sophia spoke about the fact that her four-year-old son, Riaan likes books, and attributed this to the fact that she "was like that," and that like Riaan, she "always wanted to learn." She further commented:

I'm a learner; I like to do things and I like books. I like ... to read. So I think if you like it, you do it with your kids ... and I do that quite a lot.

Participating mothers not only described being a role model for reading, but also for writing, although some of them admitted that they wrote "very little." Tessa said that she loves writing but does not do it often at the moment. Maria explained how she models writing behaviour for her three-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Jada, and how Jada is now copying her behaviour. In fact, she said that in so many ways, "Just by being with her (Jada)... practically, she is copying ... what she sees." Anthea mentioned that she often writes shopping lists and gets Tanya to be involved with this. She also reported involving Tanya in writing a letter to her grandmother.

It was also reported by participating mothers that setting an example in and modelling problem solving is necessary. Shelley explained how her role involves showing three-and-a-half-year-old Justin what to do and how things work, so that he will copy her actions and eventually do things on his own, thus becoming independent. She added:

You show by your own experience and they learn from it. I mean, 'cause he gets frustrated in doing something and irritated and I say, "No, no, no, try it again," you know, or "try it this way, round rather than that way" and then they

learn through that. And you check them out; then next week they're doing it all by themselves.”

Anthea showed a similar perspective by saying:

If you are at home – when you bake cookies, your child learns with you to measure quantities, and he learns with you how to do things. And ... he sees how you handle situations ...

The roles described above are by no means mutually exclusive and it was found that the participating mothers operate within more than one of these roles or models at different times. Furthermore, it is not assumed that the three roles that have been identified above encompass everything that participants do, or that the participants' perceived roles are limited to the three that were chosen. However, the discussion has served to answer the research question by highlighting three important roles which the participating mothers have adopted in assisting their children in their early literacy acquisition.

The next section will deal with how mothers experience their roles in terms of the challenges and rewards, as well as, how they negotiate these challenges on a daily basis.

4.3.4 Participants' attitudes towards their role as expressed in their perceived challenges and rewards

The mother's attitude towards her child's early literacy development will influence how she relates to her child in terms of this development, and will influence what she does with her child in terms of her child's early literacy development (Hall et al. 2003:xxi) (cf. 2.5).

4.3.4.1 Perceived Rewards

Generally, the participating mothers are positive and even enthusiastic about their involvement with their children. Both Debbie and Michelle “love” being at home; Debbie and Anthea both stated regarded their roles, “[I] wouldn’t change it!” Anthea added, “I think that it’s wonderful, because one is with them the whole time”. Tessa regards it as “an ABSOLUTE PRIVILEGE,” and “want[s] to do NOTHING else!” Carmen similarly stated, “I enjoy it very much!! I will not exchange it for any other way!” Jackie said that there are times when she “absolutely would not want to be in another place” than with her children, just enjoying their company.

Participants are generally pleased about their involvement in their children’s early literacy development, and about the opportunity they have to observe, first-hand their children’s daily learning and development. Carmen, for instance said, “You’re THERE, and you can watch them grow,” and Shelley felt that she could “see the difference EVERY SINGLE DAY!” Michelle remarked with obvious joy and satisfaction:

And they do things like gardening as well, and stuff like that. They just go, and they find insects and they look up stuff. And it’s just wonderful when you hear them ... see what they do ... they just do the most wonderful things. Their drawings ... it’s amazing!

According to the literature, SAHMs are rewarded by being “first-hand observer[s]” of their children’s “big milestones” and “lots of small and meaningful moments.” They are also pleased about the fact that they are able to have “direct and intimate involvement” in their children’s lives (Rosenberg 2004:235).

The mothers in this study are also rewarded by their children’s achievement and the role which they feel they play in this. For example, Hannah said of Venetia (four years old), who at the time of the interview had been in their family for six months:

Just to know we’re making a positive input in another child’s life ... that’s been good ... Intellectually, Venetia didn’t know anything when she arrived. She

didn't even know how old [she was] ... She looked up in the sky and saw the moon and said, "What's that round ball up there?" So she had no clue ... I've seen a HUGE change in her. She hadn't seen a puzzle; I don't think they had ever read to her. She knows most of the alphabet ... She LOVES it!

Carmen, Maria, Sophia, Jackie, Tessa, Shelley and Anthea similarly expressed joy and satisfaction about their children's development.

Participating mothers also tend to enjoy the feeling of being significant in their children's lives. Tessa spoke about being that "significant other" in her four-year-old son's life. She referred to a time when her children were younger and when she felt almost like their "hero"; there to help them with every need. Carmen said in this regard:

He do[es] something right, he ... looks at YOU! And he wants to see your expression on your face - that's special! Because you're there and you can watch them grow. It's not somebody else ... that's sharing every moment with them. It's only ... you!

Sophia said similarly:

I know first! I hear the first words, I see the first step. I hear all the first things.... I don't hear it from someone else.

Participating mothers clearly derive much personal satisfaction from the "sacrifice" that they have made in deciding to stay home with their children. It is clear that they can relate to Anthea's sentiments as described below:

I just think that if I had to choose again, I would make the same choice!

4.3.4.2 Perceived challenges

Despite the positive feelings and experiences that all the participating mothers reported concerning their role in their children's development, all of them, without exception also report experiencing challenges. Sophia (mother of two boys aged two and four), probably most succinctly described the general experience of all the participating mothers when she explained that there are some "bad day[s]" when her children "will fight" or when they will "not [be] happy," while other days will be "just a dream." As Tessa (mother of two children aged four and six) stated, challenges associated with parenting make it difficult at times to be "the best you (person)." Similarly, a few other participating mothers felt at times, that they were not the best mothers for their children and feel guilty as a result. Maria for instance, seems surprised that she is not as patient as she thought she would be before she had children. Jackie's sentiments were similar (and somewhat sad):

One always had this idea about, about a mother, about this amazing mom and you are going to do these things ... and in the end ... it becomes almost like a chore, like work, because you have so many other things that you ALSO need to do. So it isn't in the end like you thought it would be, which is actually sad because it is your own child and you would have wanted to do all these things with them and in the end you are impatient, or you are tired, or you think "Not this puzzle again!" (laughs) ... also with like baking cookies. It is SUCH a big mess, so you often don't do it because you are not ready for the mess ... I spoke to a friend ... last week specifically about that. She said she waits till her daughter is asleep ... then she bakes quickly then afterwards ... she feels so guilty, but she says she just didn't want to face the mess and her little girl who cries if she can't do everything by herself. So at the end, the reality is different to the way one thought it would be.

Jackie was careful not to simply paint an "idyllic" picture, as she put it, but to be honest about her challenges.

The participating mothers described a range of other challenges including challenges relating to children's behaviour, discipline issues, and trying to be calm and patient in the midst of such challenges. They spoke about challenges concerning not having enough time due to household and other duties. It has been said that "any stay at home mom will

admit life with kids 24-7 is draining!” (Paulson 2009) and that many mothers, even though they enjoy being at home also feel trapped at times, and “at the mercy of very demanding small people” (Rosenberg 2004:234). Hannah feels challenged at times when her four-year-old foster daughter follows her around like a “little shadow” and does not allow her much time for herself. Shelley, a full-time mother of two young boys pleaded laughingly numerous times during the interview: “give me a break!” Interestingly, recent research has revealed that many SAHMs tend to spend less time with their children than is expected, partly due to the fact that they spend most of their time cooking and doing other household duties (cf. 4.3.1.3). Such a situation, that is, if SAHMs are so busy that they do not have enough time to spend with their children, could possibly have negative effects on their children’s literacy acquisition, due to the fact that time spent interacting with children meaningfully, is so important (cf. 2.6.2.2). In this regard, Sophia, who works two mornings a week made the following comment:

It’s a challenge for me to balance everything and to make sure there’s enough time with them ... There’s enough time to play with them, or enough time to spend with them and enough time for them to play alone. And ... there must be a balance between playing together and playing with someone else ... At the end of every day I just want ... to try to balance it out. I don’t want to be OVER-involved, but I want to be involved enough and I want to ... have a good relationship with them and be there. And that’s the thing. So I think that that’s quite a challenge.

The literature states that while many SAHM’s feel fortunate to be able to be at home and experience its many benefits, they also “often feel lonely, bored, unappreciated and isolated” (Paulson 2009; Rosenberg 2004:234). The participating mothers reported experiencing many challenges such as misunderstandings and a lack of appreciation from other adults regarding their roles as SAHMs; a lack of appreciation from their children; a lack of immediate, visible rewards; loneliness and isolation; a loss of their identity and a feeling of being torn between two worlds, amongst other unique challenges. It is not uncommon for SAHMs (or mostly SAHMs) to feel “unacknowledged and unrewarded” despite their conviction that they are doing the most important work they could ever do (Rosenberg 2004:236). It was interesting how most of the participating mothers spoke rather freely and honestly about their challenges; almost as if in some cases, they found it therapeutic to talk at length about their struggles. Maria for example, said,

Just being honest ... I try to be honest ... Trying not to make it nicer than it is.

The feeling of loss was also quite apparent in the case of some of the participating mothers. It is not uncommon for mothers who have made the transition from being working mothers to becoming SAHMs to experience a sense of loss and even anger and regret at times (Paulson 2009). Tessa elaborated further:

I think the mother who takes care of her children herself is the one who sacrifices because one did have certain dreams – ... career dreams and so on that you in effect, give up ... It is a big challenge to raise them yourself. I am being perfectly honest with you.

Mothers also spoke about losing their careers, their time, their identity, their self-esteem, external validation and even their 'brains.' The literature speaks about the (mis)perception that SAHMs are "wasting their brains or their advanced degrees" by being at home with their children (Rosenberg 2004:234). Tessa, who has a Master's degree and is an ex-teacher, stated laughingly, that "One feels sometimes as if one is becoming a little stupid." Jackie misses her "me time" – time to do her hobbies or pursue other interests she had in the past.

According to research, SAHMs tend to feel guilty "if they don't enjoy every minute" of being with their children (Rosenberg 2004:236), and many feel ambivalent about their being at home. The results of a fairly recent study, in which ten SAHMs and mothers who work part time were interviewed, revealed that guilt (as a result of feeling that they were not doing enough for their children or because they were not working), was a constant feeling in their lives (Rubin & Wooten 2007:341). The feeling of ambivalence and even uncertainty that they experience at times, seems often to be aggravated or created when SAHMs compare themselves to working moms and vice versa (Rosenberg 2004:237). It seems that even though the 'mommy wars' (cf. 2.5.3.2) have lessened in their intensity, there are still minor battles being fought, and it seems as if both Jackie and Shelley have experienced being a part of these battles..

Could this guilt and other negative feelings cause SAHMs to be less effective in their role in the early literacy development of their children? Could it be that when mothers feel that they would rather be somewhere else; or feel that they are “just at home” as opposed to other working mothers who are ‘out there’ achieving, that this could impact negatively on their involvement with their children? The literature states that SAHMs have to work harder (than working mothers) to feel good about their choice as a result and that they receive very little respect (Rubin & Wooten 2007:349; Rosenberg 2004:234). Many of them, when asked what they do, respond with, “I am *just* at home.” (Rosenburg 2004:234). Could such feelings and experiences impact on the mother’s sense of efficacy in her role? The literature reveals that a mother’s emotional state could affect her level of involvement. Parents who suffer from clinical depression, for example, are less likely to be involved in preparing their children for school than those who are not depressed. They also tend to continue to be less involved during the child’s school years. (Hill & Taylor 2007:38) (cf. 2.5.2). When parents have negative feelings about themselves or about their abilities, it is manifested in their level of involvement with their children’s schooling (Hill & Taylor 2007:38) (cf. 2.5.2). Conversely, when parents believe that they can make an important difference, they will do so. Personal efficacy is thus seminally important (Hill & Taylor 2007:38,39; Grolnick et al. 1997:539) (cf. 2.5.2). Parents’ personal experiences, psychological states, parental self-perceptions and beliefs regarding education also affect their involvement with their children (Skibbe et al. 2008:68; Oosthuizen & Bouwer 2007:68; Hill & Taylor 2007:38; Willenberg 2002:3; Grolnick et al. 1997:539) (cf. 2.5.2).

It is thus important that mothers accept and know how to negotiate the inevitable challenges with regard to their roles as mothers and teachers in their children’s lives in order to be the best they can be in terms of their children’s total development.

It is clear though, that the mothers in this study choose to remain committed to their roles despite the many challenges, and tend to try to alleviate the challenges so that their children are not affected negatively. Carmen, who also reported a number of challenges including “feeling tired” at times, stated with much enthusiasm:

You are a mother! That comes first. That's how I feel. That comes first. And if those children are grown up and out of the house, then you can resume your career if you want. But I ... made the decision to have children and I am not going to neglect them. So that is ... very important to me ... I feel you are there for your children! ... Others may not agree with me. I know that some women say they CANNOT stay at home all day – they will go mad! But I enjoy it very much!! I will not exchange it for any other way.

The mothers in this study have deliberately chosen to be with their children and to participate in their development. Some of them are surprised by the extent or the type of challenges that they experience. However, they remain committed to their decision and try their best to put their problems into perspective. What helps them to persevere is when they consider the benefits which their children derive from their involvement, as well as the personal satisfaction which they also enjoy as a result of this involvement.

4.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter dealt at length with what the data revealed about maternal perspectives in reference to their roles in the early literacy development of their children. It was found that the participating mothers are committed to their roles in this regard and do what they can to provide for, and enhance this development in their children. They are rewarded by their direct involvement in this development and enjoy witnessing the fruits of their investment. They experience challenges which are common to many other SAHMs, but they choose to try to remember that the investment that they are making will yield beneficial results.

The following, and final chapter provides a summary of the research findings, as well as recommendations for further action or research.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, the data were presented, analysed and discussed in relation to the research questions namely, 'What are the perspectives of a group of SAHMs in relation to the early literacy development of their children, and what kinds of literacy experiences do they provide for their children on a day-to-day basis?' (cf. 1.5).

As discussed in the previous chapter, four major themes emerged from an analysis of the data, namely:

- participants' commitment concerning their role in the development (early literacy development in particular) of their children;
- the home literacy environment;
- participants' role as a critical resource in the home literacy environment; and
- participants' attitude towards their role as expressed in their rewards and challenges.

This chapter will serve firstly, to highlight the main research findings, the recommendations based on the findings, as well as a short discussion regarding the limitations of the study.

5.2 RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.2.1 The commitment of participating mothers

The mothers in this study have committed themselves to playing a critical role in their

children's development, particularly as this relates to their early literacy development. The main reasons cited for this decision are, their children's intellectual stimulation, participants' dissatisfaction with the school system and their perception that the time which they have chosen to invest in their children's education and development is a worthy investment. The most important findings in these three areas will be summarised below.

5.2.1.1 Intellectual stimulation

The participating mothers view their children's intellectual development as very important. They perceive that, as mothers, they have an important role to play in that development; a role which they would not want to leave to somebody else to fulfil. For the mothers who have decided to homeschool their children, this means that they have assumed full responsibility for this development. This responsibility is perceived and executed by these homeschooling mothers in different ways. For some, it means investing in prepared curricular or other educational aids; for others, it means providing exposure, encouragement and guidance as they allow their children's development and interests to unfold naturally. The participating mothers whose children attend preschool also perceive a sense of responsibility for their children's intellectual stimulation, in the same way that they are involved in the other areas of their children's development. This is so despite the fact that they feel that the school has assumed part of their responsibility in the arena of their children's intellectual development. For these mothers, the intellectual stimulation that facilitate in their children, consists mainly of playful activities and incidental learning situations.

The data reveal that there is generally a strong sense of efficacy on the part of the mothers regarding their ability to provide for their children's developmental needs – either completely (as in the case of the children who do not attend preschool) or partially (for children who attend preschool).

5.2.1.2 Dissatisfaction with the school system

Another reason why some of the mothers in the study have chosen to give up their careers completely is that they are not satisfied with the current school system. They feel that they can offer their children more and can provide for all their children's needs in a way that the school cannot. Their perceptions of what their children really need at this stage in terms of their development, and their estimation of what can be provided for them by the school, have clearly influenced their decision and commitment to be more involved in their children's literacy and other development. For example, opportunities for individual attention was emphasised by the mothers; something that they feel the school cannot provide. Some participating mothers feel that their children's socialisation with other children at school may have negative effects on their development.

One of the mothers referred to her own experiences at school and felt that the system was not adequate for her needs. She contends that she did not really need to go to school since, according to her perspective, everything that she learnt was "self-taught." She seems to believe that her children will probably have the same negative experience at school, and as a result, decided to keep her eight children at home.

The four mothers who have enrolled their children in preschool on the other hand, see clear benefits for their children attending school, such as the opportunities for the development of cognitive and social skills which they feel the school affords their children. They seem to view their children's socialising with other children their age as a positive and necessary experience.

It is clear that the participating mothers have conflicting perspectives regarding the advantages and disadvantages of schooling for young children. It is interesting that despite the fact that the mothers who have positive attitudes about exposing their children to school, still feel they need to and want to play a major role in their children's literacy development.

5.2.1.3 Worthwhile investment of time

The participating mothers have decided to commit themselves fully to their young children's literacy development by their investment of time. They are aware that the early years are crucial in terms of a child's development and have therefore made the decision to be closely involved in their development, especially during this critical or "crucial" time as one of them put it. Many of them expressed that they feel that the period of early childhood is one which passes very quickly, and is thus like a 'window' that closes after the first seven years, a period that they do not want to miss in their children's development.

The participating mothers named many benefits for their children's development as a result of their investment of time for reasons such as building security and confidence in their children, teaching them values and morals, as well as building strong relationships with their children. Getting to know their children very well and being able to answer their children's questions and thus teach them in the process, were also cited as important results of their investment of time.

It was evident from the data that even though the participating mothers regard time spent with their children as important, they do not spend every minute with their children and feel it is also necessary for their children to spend time playing on their own. Generally, they regard their availability to their children as very important. The mothers of the children who attend preschool in the mornings seem to "protect" their time with their children and tend to devote their afternoons to them since, as one participating mother stated, she has her "time in the mornings." Some of the mothers with younger children who do not attend preschool, reported feeling overwhelmed at times by the time that their children sometimes require or demand. However, even these mothers regard their investment as "worthwhile."

5.2.2 The home literacy environment

In the previous chapter, the home early literacy environment was considered in an attempt to answer the second research question, which concerns what the participating mothers

actually do on a daily basis to enhance and encourage their children's early literacy development. This was discussed in terms of:

- the educational and other resources that mothers provide for their children;
- literacy activities that take place in the home; and
- the mother as a critical resource in the home learning environment.

5.2.2.1 Educational and other resources

In most of the homes, resources were clearly plentiful. For most of the participating mothers, financial resources are not a barrier in procuring educational aids and they seem to view these resources as a good investment in terms of their children's cognitive development.

Resources which were observed included puzzles, word games, memory games, art supplies, building and toy blocks, dolls, cars and other toys. Audio-visual equipment such as television sets, educational DVDs, DVD players and computers were available. Resources were accessible to the children and generally used competently.

Although the participants differ in the amount and type of resources they have, they seem to provide sufficiently (and more than sufficiently in some cases) for their children's perceived needs.

5.2.2.2 Literacy activities that take place in the home

Reading

Without exception, the literacy activity that the mothers engage in most and in which they feel that they can make the greatest contribution is in the area of reading. This they do through:

- reading to their children;
- reading with their children;
- encouraging their children to ‘read’ themselves;
- setting a good example by reading themselves; and
- instilling in their children a love for and an interest in reading.

Without exception, all the participating mothers reported that they read to their children on a daily or almost daily basis. They clearly regard this as a “very important” or even an essential activity that should take place between parent and child, especially during the early development of literacy. Many of the participating mothers reported having regular reading times with their children.

As far as their children’s reading behaviour is concerned, the participating mothers all reported that their children “enjoy” or “love” reading, and that at this stage, their children ‘read’ by paging through books, looking at pictures and telling stories from the pictures that they see in books. The mothers perceive that this reading behaviour is very important and essential to their becoming fully literate and they generally ensure that books are accessible to their children so that they can also ‘read’ independently at times.

Most of the mothers reported that at this stage, their children were not reading yet in the conventional sense of the word. However, one participant whose daughter is homeschooled (or ‘unschooled’ as she sometimes puts it) by her mother, spoke at length about the development of her daughter’s reading skills over a period of about seven months. She was pleased that her daughter was eventually able to read well and reported that she had “taught” her to read and went on to compare it with how her older daughter had learnt to read “by herself” without much help from her as a mother.

The participants recognised the importance of the parent’s role in not only providing literacy-related experiences for their children, but also in setting a good example for their

children by showing that reading and writing are useful, meaningful and enjoyable. The participating mothers reported that they generally enjoy reading and some of them mentioned that their love for reading has impacted positively on their children's enjoyment of reading. Some of the mothers reported challenges as far as their setting a good example in this area is concerned, however, as time does not always allow for them to read as much as they want to, or as much as they think they should be reading. One mother also stated that she feels guilty about reading when her children are awake, and a few mothers with younger children feel that their children do not "allow" them to read.

It is interesting to note that even though the participating mothers have sacrificed their careers and other things to become involved with their children's development, that there still seems to be an element of guilt and the perception that they are not doing enough. As stated previously, it is not uncommon for SAHMs to experience guilt about not being a good enough mother.

The participating mothers believe that it is important that their children find enjoyment in their reading and they feel that it is part of their role to instil in their children "a love for books." As one participant stated, reading must become a "positive, positive experience" for a child and children should be taught to feel comfortable with books and have the freedom to explore them.

The participating mothers generally believe that by exposing their children to books, they can help them in becoming more familiar and comfortable with the world of books. This seemed especially to be the case with mothers whose children attend preschool. One of the homeschooling mothers also specifically stated that her role is not necessarily to "prescribe" a course of reading to her children; instead, she described how she feels it is her duty to expose her children to books, to surround them with words, to "watch" and "wait" for when her children appear ready and to be there to answer questions and provide guidance.

The participating mothers provide many high-quality books of different genres for their children and when mothers discover that their children have an interest in a particular topic, they will either buy or borrow a book which deals with that topic.

Other literacy-related activities

The participating mothers take part in literacy-related activities with their children, or expose their children to activities such as music-related activities, all of which serve to enhance their phonological and phonemic skills. The participants' children also play games, do puzzles, draw, paint and write, watch educational TV programmes or DVDs and play educational computer games, amongst other things.

Writing

As far as writing is concerned, there seems to be less of an emphasis on this activity than there is on reading. The mothers whose children are at preschool do not actively try to teach their children to write since they believe that at the right time, their children will learn to do it properly at school. One of the homeschooling mothers similarly is awaiting the appropriate time to teach her child to write, according to the guidelines of the homeschooling curriculum which she uses.

Where there *is* an interest in writing however, the mothers encourage the interest and applaud their children's efforts. The participating mothers with younger children who are not in preschool expressed delight over their children's early writing attempts. One such mother, whose son was three-and-a-half-years-old at the time of the interview, seemed rather keen for her son to learn how to write in "the right way." If such perfectionist tendencies become the norm, this may have negative effects on their children's early literacy development.

Speaking and listening skills

The participating mothers perceive that two important related skills that they can help their children develop without much planning, preparation or money, are the skills of speaking and listening. They reported that they spend a lot of time talking to their children and that they also create special times for that activity such as before bed-time, around the meal table, or after the children who attend preschool have been picked up by them. Some of the participating mothers are particularly creative in their attempts to get their children to talk while stimulating their imagination. Some of the mothers reported using or making up rhymes and limericks; asking their children to imagine and talk about unusual situations, seeing pictures in the clouds and so on. One mother emphasised the importance of getting children to tell their own stories, which is something that she reported doing with her four-year-old son regularly. The participants also reported that they find opportunities to talk to (and thus also teach) their children while they work around the house, work in the garden, while they cook or bake and drive around.

Since it is well known that the development of oral language contributes greatly to successful early literacy development, the participating mothers seem on the right track in this area.

5.2.2.3 The mother as a critical resource

The participating mothers recognise that they, as mothers, are the most important component of their children's early literacy environment. They see it as their role therefore, to:

- provide useful literacy resources for their children;
- interact with their children in meaningful literacy-related activities;
- expose their children to the world of literacy;
- set a good example for their children by showing that literacy is useful, meaningful and enjoyable to them; and

- make sufficient time to spend with their children in direct teaching/facilitating activities or to just be available to their children and thus facilitate their learning in playful and/or indirect ways.

5.2.3 Participating mothers' perspectives of their roles

In answer to the first research question, of what the perspectives of ten SAHM (and mostly SAHM) mothers are regarding their role in the early literacy development of their young children, three general roles or models emerged. These were namely the:

- facilitator-supporter
- teacher-companion
- role model

These three models are interrelated, and it is evident from the data that mothers approach their task using elements from all three models; although in most cases, one particular model is predominant in each participant's approach.

5.2.3.1 Facilitator-supporter

The participants who have adopted this basic approach generally are concerned with their children having sufficient freedom and time to explore, and to construct their own learning while they are guided and supported by their facilitator-mothers. One mother, whose four-year-old daughter attends preschool in the mornings does not see it as her role to "force" her child into a specific way of thinking, but prefers to provide exposure to her child, and guide her into making good choices, thus avoiding making a "clone" of herself in her daughter. Another mother, who homeschools her children specifically stated that her role is to "facilitate" her children's learning, rather than "teach" them, or try to "do school" with them in the conventional sense. Intuitively following the Vygotskian perspective, many participating mothers reported using, as the starting point for their children's learning, what their children already know or what they are interested in and using this opportunity to

introduce new lessons to be learnt. Some mothers reported using the “simple” things in life to facilitate their children’s learning.

5.2.3.2 Companion-teacher

The participant mothers reported spending a lot of time with their children acting as their companions, as they are with their children in their work, their play, their learning and in some cases, with them for just about every part of the day. Participants generally believe that they are there to teach their children many things regarding their development, including where it concerns their early literacy development.

The participant mothers seem to enjoy teaching their children in the context of the warm, trusting, loving relationship that potentially exists between mother and child. However, mothers have different perceptions of what the term ‘teacher’ means. In fact, at least two of the participants were reluctant to refer to themselves as teachers probably because, in at least one of these two cases, the participant had negative experiences with the formal school system. It was found that most participating mothers are more unstructured in their teaching approach. All mothers whose children attend preschool reported not having a formal teaching structure with their children because they feel that as their children attend school they have sufficient structured learning there. However, they find time to ‘teach’ their children in everyday activities.

Two of the mothers who currently homeschool their children, emphasised the freedom that their children have to engage in different activities and to explore and not be restricted by strict, formal learning hours. One homeschooling mother who has children aged five-and-a-half and older, feels that it is important to have structure, fixed learning hours and a prepared curriculum to guide her in her teaching. Another homeschooling mother whose oldest son was almost four at the time of the interview, while allowing her children a great deal of freedom, is fairly organised in her use and preparation of learning material and learning aids and feels a strong desire to be her child’s ‘teacher.’ However, she reported that her son did not accept this role at first, but later seemed to be more accepting of it.

Although most mothers (including working mothers) generally believe that it is their duty to play a role in facilitating their children's language development, the mothers who participated in this study seem to believe very strongly that the role that they play is actually critical to the successful development of their children's early literacy. Not only do they allow for incidental learning, consciously creating opportunities for instruction in formal and informal ways, but they also recognise that it is by their modelling good habits and behaviour that children also learn. This issue is considered and summarised briefly in the next section.

5.2.3.3 Role model

All the participating mothers perceive the importance of their role of modelling the behaviour and practices which they desire their children to adopt. Some mothers stated explicitly that they see themselves as role models to their children and that as a result of their good example in reading, for instance, their children have also adopted the practice of reading. Some of them stated that children learn best from the example of parents and significant others. Other ways in which the participant mothers feel that their children learn from their example is by their modelling writing behaviour, by their conversations and through their problem-solving methods.

5.2.4 Participants' attitudes towards their role as expressed in their perceived challenges and rewards

Many of those participating in the study stated emphatically that they really enjoy the experience of being at home with their children. Other participating mothers stated that they find it enjoyable and rewarding most of the time. The participants were generally positive and hopeful regarding their children's development, and the role that they play in that development.

The participants reported enjoying many benefits as a direct result of their decision to stay at home in order to be more involved in their children's development. They reported

rewards include being intimately involved with all, or most aspects of their children's lives and experiencing first-hand their children's daily learning and development. These two rewards were valued highly by all the mothers in the study. They did not want to "hear" about their children's milestones from others, but they wanted to be the ones to "hear the first word," and "see the first step" being taken. The participating mothers seem to experience a sense of their own significance and a sense of pride when they recognise the role that they play on a daily basis in their children's literacy (and other development). They experience obvious pride, for example, when their children get something "right," when they do "wonderful things," or when they experience intellectual growth (especially as a result of their mothers' involvement).

However, despite the many rewards that participating mothers experience, they all experience challenges on a daily basis with their children, and were willing to openly express some of these challenges. Some of these challenges tend to leave participants feeling tired at times, feeling disappointed in themselves as mothers occasionally, questioning their own abilities and efficacy as teacher-mothers and wondering whether they should put their children in school full-time, so that somebody else can deal with all the challenges. Some mothers, as a result of their being at home, experience challenges regarding the estimation of their own worth. A few mothers expressed feeling conflict at times, between their role as a SAHM and their former role as a working woman. Other participants expressed challenges including loneliness and isolation, misunderstanding and apparent non-acceptance of their roles as SAHMs by other mothers. The ability to balance their lives in terms of time spent with their children and time spent apart from their children was also perceived as a challenge. Some mothers, particularly those with younger children, reported feeling overwhelmed at times by the needs and demands of their children.

It was interesting to note however, that whilst freely expressing some of their challenges, participating mothers (in the same breath at times) stated that the "huge sacrifice" that they have made for the sake of the children is one which is worthwhile and definitely something that they would do again. Some of the mothers, (almost as if reminding themselves), referred to the choice that they had made to give up their careers to stay at home with their

children, as a vital element in their situation. One mother, who seemed almost sad when she spoke about her struggles as a (mostly) SAHM, tried to put her challenges into perspective when she stated that it “remains [her] choice every day,” to stay at home with her children. Even this mother stated that there *are* times when she is with her children that she realises that at that particular point in time, there is no other place in the world where she would rather be than with her children.

5.2.5 Conclusion

The most salient findings that were revealed by the data in answer to the research questions were:

- Participating mothers are committed to their perceived role in the early literacy development of their children. They feel that they are currently their children’s most important literacy resource. They generally see themselves as mediators in their children’s early literacy development.
- In terms of their children’s early literacy development, participants feel that it is important to provide their children with as much exposure as possible to the world of literacy and thus provide sufficient resources for their children.
- Participants expose their children to literacy-related experiences and also participate with their children in many of these experiences. They actively guide, support and encourage their children’s early literacy development in this way.
- Participating mothers differ in their particular approach to their children’s learning. This is due partly to their own philosophy of learning, the time that they have available to them, the age of their children, and the participating mothers’ personal

beliefs and experiences. The level of structure that participants employ in their 'teaching' varies from the didactic traditional or organised approach, to a more relaxed or unstructured approach, to the radical position of 'unschooling.'

- There are real challenges that participating mothers experience, but they generally endeavour to put these challenges into perspective by their realisation that the time that they have with their children is brief and that they have to make good use of the opportunities for growth and learning. Through the tough times, they also tend to remind themselves that they have made a choice to stay at home with their children, that there are definite rewards to enjoy and that their investment is worthwhile and will prove to be so, later.

5.3 GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study as stated above, have highlighted the perspectives, practices and experiences of a group of ten 'stay-at-home' and mostly 'at-home' mothers with specific reference to the role that they believe that they play in the early literacy development of their young children.

In light of the findings, I wish to make the following recommendations.

5.3.1 Recognition of mothers as educators

This study has shown that there *are* mothers who specifically choose to be either completely or partially responsible for their children's education and development. While it is true that this number is small compared to the majority of the population, for whom schooling is considered a natural course of action, this (albeit) small group of educator-mothers does exist, and must therefore be recognised and accepted. Since

homeschooling has found legal acceptance by the South African government, a greater emphasis should be placed by policy makers and the popular media, on families who choose to homeschool and an awareness regarding this alternative method (including more discussions regarding the advantages and the disadvantages) should be increased.

5.3.2 Training for mothers as educators

It stands to reason that since teachers at school cannot teach children to read and write without being trained in the technical aspects thereof, that it may be fitting to provide mothers with some training in these areas as well. This study has shown that although participating mothers generally do well in their role as mothers and teachers, it is also clear that they often rely on their own intuition or on what they have read or heard from others. Training for such mothers, especially in the critical learning areas should be provided. Furthermore, educator-mothers (and all other mothers) can also benefit from training in areas such as time-management, self-management and problem solving. The aforementioned types of training could be provided by means of government-directed community projects and also by homeschooling organisations and support groups.

5.3.3 Support for educator-mothers

As has been discussed above, the existence of mothers as primary educators of their children should be acknowledged and accepted. Training should be made available to such mothers and an ongoing support system should be established by mothers themselves or by homeschooling and other informal support groups. This support system could include raising awareness of educator-mothers so that positive attitudes could be increased both on the part of the mothers themselves, as well as on the part of society as a whole. This ongoing support could also serve to help decrease the loneliness and isolation that is often experienced by SAHMs or homeschooling mothers. Furthermore, this support could assist mothers to ease the tension that is often experienced by those who work part time and who continue to spend a lot of time with their children and thus fulfil what often seems to be conflicting roles.

5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The research findings have highlighted the dearth of knowledge on the role and practices of SAHMs in South Africa. The recommendations that follow highlight specific areas that would benefit from further scientific exploration. The following recommendations for further research are thus presented:

- The prevalence of educator-mothers in South Africa as opposed to mothers who are unemployed but who still choose not to be formally involved in their children's intellectual development.
- The practices of SAHMs from varying socioeconomic levels and life situations with regard to the literacy development of their young children.
- The experiences and practices of SAHMs with undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications, particularly in the South African context.
- Parental training in topics such as establishing boundaries, time management and other parenting issues which could impact on the effectiveness of a parent's involvement in the child's development.
- The practical implementation of the recommended training (as described above) for mothers (and fathers).
- The literacy development of participants' children in the medium and long term. In a follow-up study, they should be formally tested by means of standardised tests to determine how their reading compares with that of learners of the same age in mainstream education.
- The social and emotional development of participants' children in the medium and long term. In a follow-up study, it should be ascertained whether this development is appropriate when compared with children of their age who have attended mainstream schooling.
- The phenomenon of 'unschooling.' The prevalence thereof in South Africa could be investigated, as well as its impact on children's literacy development in the long term.

- The impact of an SAHM's psychological state on her involvement in her children's education, since it is clear from this study that SAHMs experience challenges of a psychological nature.

5.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

My starting point for this study was my own experience as a 'stay-at-home' mother. In the beginning of my research, it was especially challenging to remain unbiased, since I came to the research with my own set of perspectives. I had to be careful not to steer participants' responses in a certain direction, and thus not influence the research results in any way. It has been stated before in this dissertation, that it is important for the researcher not to minimise the potential effects that he can have on the research results as a human instrument, and thus not deny the impact of the researcher's position, perspective and presence.

It has not been easy to find appropriate literature which is directly related to my research topic; especially from a South African perspective. Therefore, it has been problematic having to compare, or to build on previous research, given the dearth of literature concerning SAHMs in South Africa. Consequently, I found this situation limiting to my investigation.

The last possible limitation regards the group of participants that I had chosen. Initially, I wanted to use mothers from varying socioeconomic levels and varying life situations in order to present a wider spectrum of responses. I did not prove successful in my attempts. Furthermore, while qualitative studies never claim to be representative of the population, it may have been helpful to include more mothers in order to have presented a broader view. Despite the fact that the research participants cannot be considered representative of the entire population, the results may be extended to other similar situations.

5.6 CONCLUSION

To conclude this study, it is evident that despite challenges, problems and limitations experienced by the participating mothers, their commitment to be involved in their children's literacy development, which is based on the perspective that they have a vitally important role to play, remains intact. I wish to quote the words of two of the participating mothers, which I think summarise and encapsulate some of the heartfelt experiences of the mothers involved in this study.

If he's got play-ball, or ... music and you sit and watch and he do[es] something right, he, [immediately] ... looks at you!! And he wants to see your expression on your face - that's special! Because you're there, and you can watch them grow. It's not somebody else [who's] ... sharing every moment with them; it's only ... you! ... You are a mother! That comes first. That's how I feel. That comes first. And if those children are grown up and out of the house, then you can resume your career if you want. But I just feel, I made the decision to have children and I am not going to neglect them ... That is very important to me. And there is so much emphasis on the woman ... But I feel, you are there for your children! That is my feeling! (laughs!) Others may not agree with me. I know that some women say they CANNOT stay at home all day – they will go mad! But I, I enjoy [it] very much!! I will not exchange it for any other way.

There are many times when I am lying ... in bed and the two of them sit there [and also read something?] and they sit close to me and we read books together ... such moments when we are doing things together ... I watch how ... their father plays with them ... Yes ... there are certain times ... when you feel you absolutely would not want to be in any other place or time than where you are right now.

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APPENDIX 1

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE STUDY

I remember reading somewhere that when choosing one's research topic, that there are various options including topics that have been inspired by one's personal experiences. I was very happy to discover this as an option, since when I began this study, my most immediate teaching experiences amounted to making and playing with playdough, making up and singing silly songs, playing with letter shapes and so on; basically playing and being with a preschooler every day; being available for duty day and night. I thus considered the mother's role in the early literacy development of their young children as a good starting point for my study. Judging from the somewhat negative reactions at times from some people to my decision to stay home and play a major role in my daughter's education, and the narrow view they many people have of a mother's role and responsibilities, I recognised that there are people who would benefit from some enlightenment! I knew from my own experience and from the experience of other mothers that the decision to be a SAHM is motivated by much more than factors such as a disinterest in the academics, the inability to find a suitable job, or just common 'laziness.' I was thus motivated by a two-fold quest to discover how other SAHMs actually support the intellectual development of their children and to dispel the myth that mothers do not contribute much to the intellectual development of their children.

I lived in Cape Town when I started this study and I was acquainted with a few 'stay-at-home' moms as a result of play schools, 'Kindermusiek' and 'Moms and Tots' classes. I associated with them, asked them questions, spoke about my daughter and her development and my experiences as a 'stay-at-home mom'; which is a practice not uncommon to mothers like me. I gathered a lot of information informally which assisted me in my search. I conducted a few pilot interviews with mothers in Cape Town. Those interviews helped me to recognise a few things: that I was not objective, that I asked many leading questions, that I needed more structure in my research and that mothers who spend a lot of time with their children love to talk about their experiences with their children. I found that it is not always easy for these mothers; in fact some days it is downright difficult and unpleasant. Strangely enough, they still enjoy it and feel that it is important for them to keep doing it.

When I eventually settled back in Bloemfontein, I began the actual study. Whilst resident in Cape Town, I tried to mothers who specifically stay home for the sake of caring for their children (and

thus not because they are unable to find work or have lost their jobs) from all income groups. Mothers from middle to high-income groups were not too difficult to find. However, I could not find such mothers amongst the low income groups. In Bloemfontein I had the same experience. Initially I had hoped that my study would include mothers from varying income groups, but this was not to be. The desired ten participants were eventually found mostly as a result of mothers at home referring me to other mothers.

Before I began my study I decided to focus on early literacy development since this is such an important area of a young child's development. I recognised that important emotional, perceptual and cognitive development takes place before a child is ready for formal instruction.

I was thrilled to discover, during my literature review, that my intuitive assumption concerning the importance of the mother as a child's first and most important teacher, was supported by many international and local researchers. However, in my extended search through the more popular media, I seldom found this message. The current focus in South Africa on family literacy underscores the fact that increasingly, researchers and policy makers are becoming aware of the importance of making use of the important resource of the family in a child's literacy development. However, this is often (or mostly?) when the need for intervention becomes apparent. For some children, this may come too late. Their mothers may not have known that they could make a huge difference in their children's development; they may not have been told that their contribution is important; the critical period in their children's lives may have passed by. Why not start all children off in the correct way? Why not encourage parents and provide training in all economic contexts? Why not utilise the immense resources of creativity and knowledge readily available in all mothers and even grandmothers in this country?

Another point of interest as derived from the literature review was something which really confirmed another intuitive assumption. I was glad to note that the mother's perspective of her role is indeed significant, and that her attitude towards her role in the literacy development of her young child will have implications for her child's literacy development.

Conducting the individual interviews was an interesting experience. The selected mothers were very willing to participate in the study and to talk about their perspectives, experiences, joys and challenges with regard to their children's development. The experience seemed almost

therapeutic for some of them. I had to be careful to be as objective as possible and not to lead the participants in any way. It was a challenge for me because I could relate to just about everything that they said and it was encouraging for me to know that I was not alone in my struggles and imperfections.

The writing itself was my biggest challenge since I was not accustomed to and did not initially enjoy the restrictions and discipline of scientific writing. It was difficult to be 'reigned' in constantly and to have to repeatedly rewrite the same thing constantly until it was acceptable. However, I am grateful for the experience and I know that I have learnt a lot. I have been challenged by my supervisors (and rightfully so), to write and think critically, to write in a coherent way and not merely to report the thoughts of others. I have certainly also benefited from the self-discipline demanded by academic research and writing.

A friend, after having shared with her yet another setback in my study, used a word which encapsulates my own experience with this research project and which also perhaps, provides the participants of this study their success and their 'staying power.' That word is 'perseverance'! Without this essential element, I would not have reached this point.

I hope, that as a result of the personal enrichment I have experienced as a result of this study, that I can make a contribution in enlightening and encouraging mothers as they perform the incredibly vital task of teaching their children – whether it be teaching them to dress themselves, teaching them to count or teaching them to read. I would be honoured if, at some point I could also make a positive contribution to the lives of mothers who find themselves in disadvantaged contexts, to their role in being teachers to their children.

Aside from the benefit of personal and academic growth that I have attained as a result of having completed this study, it is my hope that this study will add value to the scientific body of knowledge and that someone, somewhere will benefit as a result.

APPENDIX 2

LETTER OF CONSENT

REQUEST FOR AN INTERVIEW SESSION AT YOUR HOME

Dear Parent

I am a Master of Education (M Ed) student undertaking empirical research as a prerequisite for my studies. My area of research is child development, in particular, early literacy.

I am required to undertake research at different homes in order to complete my studies. I therefore humbly request to be granted permission to visit your home in order to collect the data that is required for this research.

The interview will not be more than one hour and will be conducted at a time which will be convenient to you. Please note that it may be necessary to conduct a second interview/observation session, but only as will be convenient for you. I will require your contact details so I can notify you of my arrival should you agree to my request.

I promise to be ethical in my approach to this research. The results will be reported anonymously and your personal details will be kept confidential. Neither you nor your child nor your residential area will be named in this investigation. In addition, participation in this research will be voluntary and no mother will be coerced into saying what she is uncomfortable with.

I will appreciate it if my request can receive a favourable answer from you and I wish to thank you in advance.

Yours Sincerely

Mrs Belinda Solomon

CONSENT FORM

I hereby agree to assist Belinda Solomon in her research. I understand that she will be:

- observing the learning environment in my home, including the interaction between my child and me, making field notes, and keeping samples or photocopies of his/her work if necessary.
- interviewing me about my perspectives about my child's development and tape-recording the interview for later transcription and use in the research report.

Signed: Date:

APPENDIX 3
OBSERVATION SCHEDULE

	#	Type	Description	Comments
Literary artefacts observed Children's story books Other books (magazines, recipe books) Writing implements (writing paper, pens, etc.) Other educational resources (games, maps, posters, etc)				
General Interaction between mother and child				
Literacy events between mother and child				
Activities engaged in by child				

APPENDIX 4

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Why have you decided to stay home and not to send your child to preschool (or not to send your child to preschool full time)?
2. Does anybody else help you take care of your child (eg. a nanny)?
3. Describe to me a typical day at home with your child.
4. What role do you see yourself playing in your child's overall development?
5. What role do you see yourself playing in your child's early literacy development? Do you feel equipped in this role?
6. What types of literacy activities do you engage in with your child and what types of literacy activities does your child engage in?
7. Describe the importance of reading in your home. Does your child enjoy reading? Do you enjoy reading and does your child see you reading?
8. Are you able to go out on outings/excursions? When you go out, does your child take notice of environmental print?
9. What are your challenges and rewards with regard to your staying at home with your children and your extensive involvement in their development?

APPENDIX 5

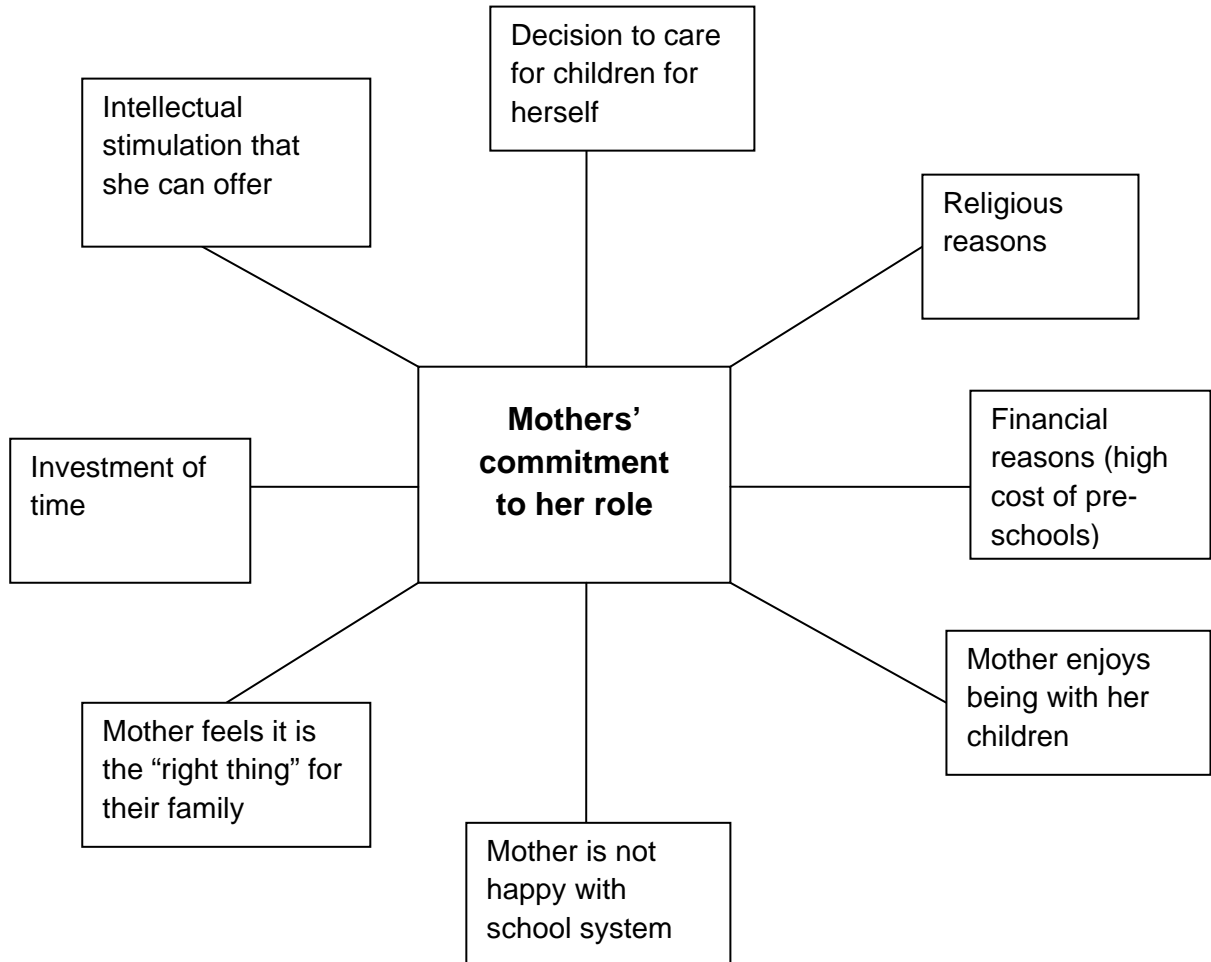
FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Please explain what you understand by early literacy.
2. Please explain how you understand your role in helping your child to become literate.
3. What are the challenges that you experience in being so closely involved with your child's overall development?

APPENDIX 6A

EXAMPLE OF AN ANALYTICAL DIAGRAM

MOTHERS' COMMITMENT TO HER ROLE



APPENDIX 6B

TABLE 2: EXAMPLE OF AN ANALYTICAL TABLE

MOTHERS' COMMITMENT TO HER ROLE

Mothers' motivation for assuming responsibility (in various degrees) of their children's general development

Michelle	Debbie	Anthea	Carmen	Hannah
<p>1. Wanted to take care of her baby herself.</p> <p>2. Religious reasons.</p> <p>3. Financial reasons: pre-schools expensive</p> <p>4. Enjoys homeschooling her children: "<i>I love it!</i>"; has become "<i>better and better.</i>"</p> <p>5. It is the "<i>right thing</i>" for them. 6. "<i>Disagree[s]</i>" with the way things are taught at school.</p> <p>7. She "<i>hated school</i>" herself.</p>	<p>1. "<i>I don't want anyone else to raise him.</i>"</p> <p>2. None of the preschools in the area "<i>meet [her] standards.</i>"</p> <p>3. Feels she can provide adequate stimulation.</p> <p>4. Can provide individual attention – which she feels he can't get at school.</p> <p>5. Makes provision for her children's social stimulation.</p>	<p>1. "<i>The right thing to do.</i>"</p> <p>2. Dissatisfaction with the school system: "<i>children are almost made guinea pigs.</i>"</p> <p>3. Provides a curriculum which allows for more "<i>security.</i>"</p> <p>4. Feels home is a "<i>safe environ-ment</i>" for optimal "<i>personal development</i>".</p> <p>5. Can be a good "<i>role model</i>"; her children learn from her instead of "<i>from other five-year olds.</i>"</p> <p>6. Her children learn alongside her as they engage in every day activities.</p> <p>7. She is avail-able; uses her "time" to teach her children values and to "<i>build... a rela-tionship</i>" with them.</p>	<p>1. The positive example of her own mother who was at home with her when she was growing up.</p> <p>2. To "<i>be with</i>" her children and assist them in every way.</p> <p>3. Enjoys being able to "<i>watch them grow</i>"; "<i>...there is cognitive,... emotional ... intellectual,... all kinds of different areas, but in every one of them you play a role</i>"</p> <p>4. Enjoys being the significant one in children's lives – "<i>It's not somebody else that's sharing every moment with them.... 'It's only you!'</i>"</p>	<p>1. Believes it is the mother who "<i>gives her morals and values and needs to spend time with her.</i>"</p> <p>2. Feels "<i>it is important for kids to spend time with you as a parent, and learn from you and just being part of the family.</i>"</p> <p>3. Believes if a mother works she cannot spend as much time with her children as she should.</p> <p>4. Thinks that if children attend school full-time, they may bring home "<i>other things that THEY have picked up from school.</i>"</p> <p>5. "<i>I enjoy children ... [I enjoy] being at home.</i>"</p>

Maria	Jackie	Tessa	Shelley	Sophia
<p>1. She is trained in preschool teaching so feels she can teach her children.</p> <p>2. Investment of time – to “bond” with children.</p> <p>3. “Teach them values” and “not leave that for other people.”</p> <p>4. Her children are still young – she wants to build a good foundation for their future development</p>	<p>1. “It’s better for my children.”</p> <p>2. First few years are “important” and they pass quickly.</p> <p>3. Children need “a lot of attention” – especially “one-on-one attention.”</p> <p>4. When a mother works full-time, she “miss[es] out a lot on their growth, their ... milestones.”</p> <p>5. Wants to “be there for them (“unconditionally”) and ... teach them.”</p> <p>6. Does not want somebody else raising them – “telling them how they should think.”</p>	<p>1. Made decision to raise children till they were at least 3; after the age of 3 to be with them for the greater part of the day.</p> <p>2. To experience special, “golden” moments with them and not “miss out” on these.</p> <p>3. Since the time is brief, she “know[s] it is the right thing.”</p> <p>4. In every day activities and in a “playful” manner she believes she can help her children “develop their intellect.”</p> <p>5. Help children develop “self-confidence” and be “secure.”</p>	<p>1. Financially it is more beneficial for them.</p> <p>2. Wants to give her children “the best start.”</p> <p>3. Was always her ‘dream’ to be at home with her children –her own mother worked when she was growing up and she longed for “more attention.”</p> <p>4. For their family, she believes it is “the best way to go.”</p>	<p>1. “Difficult to be 100% doctor, a 100% wife, and a 100% mother.”</p> <p>2. “I just want to care for them [my]self.”</p> <p>3. Her husband is away a lot; she wants to be there to provide “stability” in the home.</p> <p>4. Regards being at home as a temporary experience: “One day ... they will be in school and I [will] have free mornings”; “time is flying.”</p> <p>5. Important to her to provide positive “input” into their lives; to know that she is “there for them.” “I want to be available.”</p> <p>7. She wants to be involved in every aspect of her children’s lives: “I don’t want to miss it!”</p>

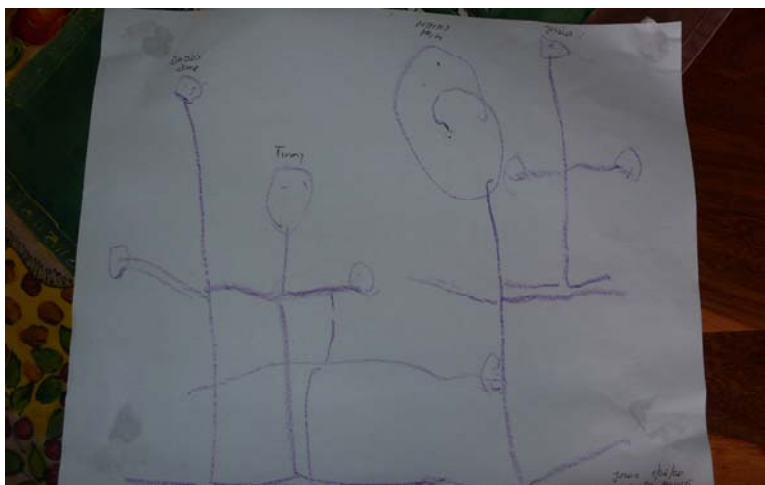
APPENDIX 7A

EXAMPLES OF CHILDREN'S DRAWING AND WRITING

Progression of Jada's early writing (from age two-and-half to four-and-a-half)



“fish”



Jada's “family”



APPENDIX 7B

EXAMPLES OF CHILDREN'S DRAWING AND WRITING

Michael's drawings (as at age four-and-a-half)



APPENDIX 8A
PHOTOGRAPHS OF EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES AND TOYS
DEBBIE'S HOME



Michael's play/school room



'Reading corner' in Michael's play/school room



Michael's play/school room



Michael's play/school room



Michael's play/school room



Michael's play/school room

APPENDIX 8B

PHOTOGRAPHS OF EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES AND TOYS

MARIA'S HOME



Book-case in lounge area



Educational resources in lounge area



Jada's play/school area



Jada's play area

APPENDIX 8C

PHOTOGRAPH OF DEBBIE'S SON, MICHAEL, USING THE COMPUTER



APPENDIX 9

LETTER FROM LANGUAGE EDITOR

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This is to certify that the dissertation submitted by Ms B Solomon (student no: 2008141265) has been duly proofread by me to comply with the language requirements of academic discourse.

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23 November 2009.