LITERACY AT SCHOOL ENTRY: FAMILY LITERACY AMONG PARENTS OF FIRST-GRADE PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the family literacy levels of parents of first-grade primary school children and to explore how these levels are reflected in home-based literacy practices. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed. In the quantitative phase, data were collected from 282 parents of first-grade students in the Altıeylül district of Balıkesir using the Family Literacy Scale and a Demographic Information Form. Based on total scale scores, parents were categorized into low, medium, and high family literacy levels. Quantitative findings revealed significant differences across these levels and indicated that child-focused literacy practices were reported more frequently than parents' own literacy behaviors.

In the qualitative phase, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with 12 parents selected according to their family literacy levels. Thematic analysis yielded six main themes: the structure of the home literacy environment, the quality of parent–child interaction, children's participation in literacy activities, engagement with written language in daily life, facilitating and constraining factors, and the role of the school. Qualitative findings indicated that parents with high family literacy levels implemented literacy practices in a more planned, interactive, and everyday-life-integrated manner, whereas parents with low and medium levels tended to rely on more situational and inconsistent practices. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that family literacy is a multidimensional construct shaped not only by the frequency of practices but also by the quality of interactions, parental awareness, and school support. The results contribute to educational practices aimed at supporting family literacy during the transition to primary school and strengthening school–family collaboration.

Keywords: *family literacy, first-grade primary school, parent–child interaction, home literacy environment, mixed-methods research.*

INTRODUCTION

Literacy development is not confined to the period in which formal reading and writing instruction begins; rather, it represents a developmental continuum grounded in early childhood and progressively structured during the early years of primary school. Within this continuum, the first grade constitutes a critical transition period in which children integrate early linguistic and cognitive experiences with academic learning and begin to use reading and writing systematically as tools for meaning-making, self-expression, and learning. Learning experiences provided during this stage influence not only children's technical literacy skills but also their attitudes toward learning, academic self-concept, and adaptation to school life [1], [2].

Research in developmental psychology and neuroscience demonstrates that the brain remains highly responsive to environmental input from early childhood through the early years of primary school, and that the quality of learning experiences plays a decisive role in cognitive organization. In particular, the intensity and quality of linguistic interactions are critical for the development of executive functions, attention regulation, and effective reading comprehension processes [3], [4]. From this perspective, the first year of primary school represents a pivotal stage in which early literacy precursors developed in early childhood are transformed into formal academic learning, thereby ensuring developmental continuity.

During the first year of primary school, literacy extends beyond basic skills such as letter recognition and phonological decoding to encompass multidimensional processes, including interaction with texts, meaning construction, verbal and written expression, and the integration of learned information into everyday life. UNESCO defines literacy as a fundamental competence that supports participation in social life and lifelong learning [5]. Similarly, the OECD reports that high-quality literacy experiences during this period play a decisive role in later academic achievement and the reproduction or reduction of educational inequalities [6], [7]. A substantial proportion of individual differences in children's early reading and writing skills has been shown to be associated with early linguistic and literacy-related experiences. Skills such as vocabulary, narrative abilities, print awareness, and language processing capacity are among the strongest predictors of reading comprehension, fluency, and written expression in first grade [8], [9]. These findings suggest that early academic differences cannot be explained solely by school-based instruction, underscoring the decisive role of preschool and home experiences.

Within this developmental continuum, the family environment remains one of the most influential contexts shaping literacy development during the early years of primary school. School entry does not signal a decline in family influence; rather, it marks a phase in which family and school influences operate concurrently. The richness of linguistic input in the home, parents' attitudes toward literacy, and the quality of parent–child interactions significantly affect children's motivation for reading and writing, academic adjustment, and perceived learning self-efficacy [10], [11]. International research emphasizes that not only the frequency but also the quality of literacy-related interactions is crucial. Shared reading practices characterized by open-ended questioning, opportunities for children to express ideas, and connections between texts and everyday experiences support higher-order language development and reading comprehension [12–14]. Studies conducted in Türkiye similarly demonstrate that the quality of the home literacy environment is significantly associated with children's early reading and writing skills [15–17]. Within this context, family literacy provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding literacy development from early childhood through the primary school years.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to examine parents' family literacy levels and to explain the underlying factors associated with the quantitative findings [18]. In this design, the research process begins with the collection and analysis of quantitative data, followed by qualitative data collection and analysis to provide a deeper and more contextualized understanding of the quantitative results. Quantitative findings guided the selection of participants and the focus of the qualitative phase, while qualitative data addressed the "why" and "how" questions that could not be fully explained through quantitative analyses alone [19], [20].

Accordingly, the quantitative component described parents' family literacy levels, whereas the qualitative component explored how these levels were reflected in home-based literacy practices. The sequential and integrative use of quantitative and qualitative data enabled family literacy to be examined not only in terms of level but also with respect to its contextual and functional dimensions.

Participants

The quantitative sample consisted of 282 parents whose children were attending the first grade of primary school in the Altıeylül district of Balıkesir, Türkiye, and who voluntarily participated in the study. Of the participants, 70.9% were mothers and 29.1% were fathers. Most parents were

between 32 and 43 years of age, and 93.3% were married. In terms of educational attainment, 43.6% of the participants were university graduates, while 31.9% had completed high school. The majority of parents (87.9%) were classified as belonging to the middle-income group.

Regarding home environment characteristics, 65.2% of the participants reported having a home library, and 84.8% reported having internet access. These characteristics indicate that the sample reflected a socio-demographically diverse group in terms of educational background and access to learning resources. The qualitative component included 12 parents purposefully selected from the quantitative sample following quantitative data analysis. Participants were chosen to represent low, medium, and high family literacy levels based on their scores on the Family Literacy Scale. This purposive sampling strategy aimed to provide an in-depth explanation of the quantitative findings by capturing diverse family literacy profiles.

Data Collection Instruments

Demographic Information Form

A Demographic Information Form developed by the researcher was used to collect data on participants' socio-demographic characteristics. The form included items related to parental role (mother or father), age, marital status, educational level, employment status, income level, number of children, number of school-aged children, the presence of a home library, internet access, and the use of technological devices in the home. These data provided a contextual framework for interpreting the quantitative findings and informed the development of the qualitative interview protocol.

Family Literacy Scale

Quantitative data were collected using the Family Literacy Scale developed to assess parents' literacy-related behaviors and practices [21]. The scale is a 5-point Likert-type instrument designed to measure parents' own literacy behaviors, literacy practices directed toward their children, and activities supporting early literacy development.It consists of 32 items across three subdimensions: Parent Literacy, Child Literacy, and Early Literacy.

Within the scope of the present study, the internal consistency of the scale was reexamined. The results indicated high internal consistency for both the total scale and its subdimensions. Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega coefficients were .94 for the Parent Literacy subscale, .94 for the Child Literacy subscale, and .94 for the Early Literacy subscale. The total scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .94 and a McDonald's omega of .94, indicating that the scale provided reliable measurements within the current sample.

Qualitative Data Collection Instrument

Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured individual interviews. The interview protocol was developed based on the theoretical framework of the study and the findings obtained during the quantitative phase. It included open-ended questions designed to elicit parents' perspectives on the home literacy environment, parent–child interaction, children's participation in literacy activities, engagement with written language in daily life, facilitating and constraining factors, and the role of the school.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, established qualitative research strategies were employed. These included purposive sampling, the use of rich and detailed descriptions, and the constant comparison of quantitative and qualitative data [22], [23].

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was carried out during the 2024–2025 academic year following approval from the relevant ethics committee and official permission from the Balıkesir Provincial Directorate of National Education. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

In the quantitative phase, parents completed the Demographic Information Form and the Family Literacy Scale. After quantitative data analysis, the qualitative phase was initiated in line with the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with parents selected based on quantitative findings, and qualitative data were used to explain and contextualize the quantitative results.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for demographic variables, while means and standard deviations were computed for the Family Literacy Scale. Given the relatively large sample size, parametric statistical methods were employed [24], [25].

Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were examined systematically to identify recurring patterns and themes reflecting parents' home-based literacy practices. The integration of quantitative and qualitative analyses enabled a comprehensive interpretation of family literacy levels and their manifestations in everyday contexts.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings obtained from the quantitative phase of the study. Descriptive statistics are reported to illustrate the distribution of parents' family literacy levels and to provide a quantitative framework for interpreting the qualitative findings.

Quantitative Findings

Distribution of Parents' Family Literacy Levels

Parents' family literacy levels were assessed using the Family Literacy Scale, which consists of 32 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Total scores range from 32 to 160. Based on percentile cutoffs, participants were classified into three categories: low, medium, and high family literacy. Parents in the lowest 20% of the score distribution were classified as having low family literacy, those in the middle 30% as having medium family literacy, and those in the highest 50% as having high family literacy. Table 1 presents the distribution of parents according to family literacy levels.

Table 1. Distribution of Parents' Family Literacy Levels

Family Literacy Level	n	%
Low	57	20.2
Medium	85	30.1
High	140	49.6
Total	282	100

As shown in Table 1, nearly half of the parents (49.6%) were classified as having a high level of family literacy, approximately one-third (30.1%) as having a medium level, and one-fifth (20.2%)

as having a low level. This distribution indicates substantial variability in family literacy levels within the sample and suggests that parents differ considerably in the extent to which they engage in literacy-related practices. These quantitative classifications served as the basis for selecting participants representing diverse family literacy profiles in the qualitative phase.

Descriptive Statistics for Family Literacy Scale Subdimensions

Parents' family literacy practices were further examined through the subdimensions of the Family Literacy Scale. Descriptive statistics for the Parent Literacy (PL), Child Literacy (CL), and Early Literacy (EL) subdimensions are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Family Literacy Scale Subdimensions

Subdimension	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Parent Literacy (PL)	2.85	0.97	−0.11	−0.95
Child Literacy (CL)	4.37	0.79	−2.48	7.15
Early Literacy (EL)	3.90	1.00	−0.83	0.23

As shown in Table 2, parents reported relatively high mean scores on the Child Literacy and Early Literacy subdimensions. The pronounced concentration of scores toward the upper end of the scale in the Child Literacy subdimension suggests that parents frequently engaged in literacy practices directed toward their children. In contrast, the lower mean score observed for the Parent Literacy subdimension indicates that practices related to parents' own literacy behaviors and modeling were comparatively limited.

Overall, the quantitative findings demonstrate that family literacy practices varied across subdimensions. Parents reported engaging more frequently in child-focused literacy activities than in practices reflecting their own literacy behaviors. In addition, the distribution of parents across low, medium, and high family literacy levels indicates that family literacy within the sample was not homogeneous. These findings highlight the need to examine more closely how family literacy practices are embedded in home contexts, how parent–child interactions are structured, and how daily routines facilitate or constrain literacy development. Accordingly, the following section presents the qualitative findings.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

The qualitative phase aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of parents' home-based literacy practices, their manifestations in daily life, and the individual and contextual factors shaping these practices. Probing questions were used during the interviews to clarify and elaborate participants' responses. Based on thematic analysis, the findings were organized under six main themes. Participants were coded according to their family literacy levels identified in the quantitative phase as high (H), medium (M), or low (L).

Theme 1. Home Literacy Environment and Daily Routines

Parents' narratives indicated that the home literacy environment was closely intertwined with families' daily routines. For some parents, literacy activities were embedded within planned and consistent routines, whereas for others they were largely shaped by situational factors. Parents with low and medium family literacy levels often reported that reading and related activities were carried out opportunistically, depending on available time and daily circumstances. These practices were rarely associated with a regular schedule, with parental fatigue, work demands, and household responsibilities frequently cited as determining factors.
One low-level parent (L2) noted, "We don't have a strict plan to do it every day; we do it when it's convenient." Similarly, a medium-level parent (M3) stated, "We have books, but sometimes

they just stay on the shelf," suggesting that the presence of materials alone did not ensure a sustained literacy environment. Another parent (M2) explained, "In the evenings, I'm sometimes too tired, so we skip reading that day," highlighting how continuity was disrupted by daily constraints. These accounts suggest that literacy activities were often perceived as spontaneous practices rather than as part of a structured learning process.

In contrast, parents with high family literacy levels described literacy activities as an integral component of daily life. For these parents, shared reading was embedded within established routines and gradually became an expected and valued activity for the child. One parent (H1) stated, "Reading before bedtime is a routine for us," reflecting the stability of this practice. Moreover, high-level parents reported transforming everyday contexts into literacy opportunities. For example, one parent (H3) described reading product labels together while shopping, whereas another (H2) referred to discussing words and numbers while following recipes during cooking. These narratives illustrate that literacy practices extended beyond books and were meaningfully integrated into everyday experiences.

Theme 2. Quality of Parent–Child Interaction in Literacy Activities

Interview findings revealed differences not only in how frequently literacy activities occurred but also in how they were conducted. Some parents described reading as a parent-directed activity in which the child assumed a largely passive listener role. In such cases, interaction during reading was limited, and children were rarely encouraged to express their interpretations or reflections.

One low-level parent (L1) summarized this approach by stating, "I read, and my child listens." A medium-level parent (M2) remarked, "I answer if my child asks, but I don't usually ask questions," indicating that interaction often depended on the child's initiative. Some parents perceived questioning during reading as potentially disruptive. For instance, one parent (M1) explained, "I think it might interrupt understanding if we stop too often while reading."

By contrast, parents with high family literacy levels emphasized interactive reading practices and actively supported children's participation. These parents described pausing during reading to ask questions, discussing illustrations, and jointly reflecting on characters' emotions and behaviors. One parent (H3) noted, "I stop and ask, 'Why do you think the character did that?'" Another parent (H2) stated, "We look at the pictures and talk about how the characters might be feeling." A further example—"What would you do if this happened to you?" (H3)—illustrates how texts were connected to children's personal experiences. Collectively, these narratives indicate that reading was transformed into a shared meaning-making process rather than a one-directional activity.

Theme 3. Children's Participation in the Literacy Process

Parents reported that children's engagement in literacy activities was variable rather than constant and was influenced by factors such as mood, fatigue, sleep routines, and environmental distractions. Digital screens were frequently identified as a factor that reduced children's interest in books. One low-level parent (L3) stated, "If my child has been using the tablet, they're not interested in books," while another (L2) remarked, "After screen time, books seem boring."

Several parents also described fluctuations in children's interest across days. One medium-level parent (M1) explained, "Sometimes my child picks up a book, sometimes they don't want to look at it at all." These accounts highlight the dynamic nature of children's participation in literacy activities.

Notably, parents who maintained consistent literacy routines observed increased engagement over time. One high-level parent (H2) stated, "At first, my child just looked at the pictures; now they ask me to read the story again." High-level parents further reported that children began turning pages independently, retelling stories, and recognizing familiar words. As one parent (H3) noted, "Now my child asks if we can buy a book," indicating the emergence of intrinsic motivation toward literacy activities.

Theme 4. Engagement With Written Language in Daily Life

Parents' narratives indicated that although written language was frequently present in children's environments, it was not always transformed into a conscious learning experience. For some parents, written language was viewed primarily as a functional aspect of adult life—such as shopping lists, bills, or messages—and was not actively shared with children. One low-level parent (L2) stated, "I write shopping lists, but I never thought about doing it together with my child." A medium-level parent (M3) added, "My child asks sometimes, but I tend to brush it off," suggesting that children's curiosity about written language was not consistently supported.

In contrast, parents with high family literacy levels reported intentionally incorporating written language into daily interactions. One parent (H1) explained, "We read signs on the road together." Another (H3) described examining product labels at the market and asking questions such as, "What do you think this word says?" One parent (H2) noted that their child contributed drawings or symbols to household to-do lists. These examples demonstrate that written language became more meaningful and functional for children when embedded in everyday contexts.

Theme 5. Facilitating and Constraining Factors in Literacy Practices

Parents frequently identified time constraints, work-related fatigue, and the appeal of digital screens as factors that hindered home literacy practices. Low-level parents, in particular, emphasized fatigue as a major barrier. One parent (L2) stated, "When I come home from work, I feel completely exhausted."

Despite facing similar challenges, some parents reported adapting rather than abandoning literacy activities by shortening sessions or modifying their format. Among facilitating factors, guidance and recommendations provided by teachers and schools emerged as particularly influential. One medium-level parent (M3) remarked, "When the teacher recommends a book, I become more conscious about what we do at home." High-level parents indicated that such guidance tended to enrich and diversify existing practices rather than initiate them.

Theme 6. The Role of the School and Parents' Support Needs

Parents across family literacy levels described school-based literacy support as important but often insufficiently concrete. Low-level parents frequently expressed uncertainty about how to implement literacy activities at home. One parent (L1) stated, "Sometimes I don't know what I'm supposed to do." Medium-level parents reported feeling more confident when they had direct and ongoing communication with teachers, emphasizing the importance of continuity in support.

High-level parents acknowledged that school-provided materials and suggestions strengthened their practices but emphasized the need for these supports to be more accessible and practical. As one parent (H3) suggested, "Short videos or sample activities would be very helpful." Overall, the qualitative findings indicate that family literacy practices varied systematically across family literacy levels. Differences were particularly evident in the continuity of home practices, the quality of parent–child interaction, the integration of written language into daily life, and perceptions of school support. These patterns provide rich, contextualized insights into how the

family literacy levels identified in the quantitative phase were enacted in everyday family practices.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

Discussion

This study examined the family literacy levels of parents of first-grade primary school children and explored how these levels were reflected in home-based literacy practices through an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrated that family literacy is not merely a function of the frequency of literacy-related activities, but rather a multidimensional process shaped by the quality of parent–child interactions, the organization of daily routines, and the nature of school support.

Quantitative findings revealed clear differentiation among parents in terms of low, medium, and high family literacy levels. Qualitative findings provided deeper insight into how these differences were manifested in everyday practices. Parents with high family literacy levels tended to structure literacy activities within consistent routines, implement interactive reading practices, and integrate written language into daily life in meaningful ways. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that regular and interactive home literacy experiences support children's language development and early reading skills [26], [27].

In contrast, parents with low and medium family literacy levels described literacy practices that were largely situational, unplanned, and shaped by daily constraints such as fatigue and time limitations. Even when books and written materials were available in the home, literacy activities were not always sustained or framed as intentional learning experiences. This finding reinforces the view that the mere presence of literacy materials is insufficient to support literacy development; rather, parental awareness and the quality of interaction play a decisive role [28], [29].

A particularly important contribution of the study concerns the nature of parent–child interaction during literacy activities. Parents with lower family literacy levels often described reading as a predominantly parent-centered and one-directional activity, whereas parents with higher levels positioned children as active participants in the process. Interactive reading practices characterized by questioning, discussion, and connections to children's lived experiences were prominent among parents with high family literacy levels. This distinction aligns with a robust body of literature emphasizing the role of dialogic and interactive reading in fostering children's expressive language, narrative skills, and reading comprehension [30], [31].

The qualitative findings further indicated that children's engagement in literacy activities was dynamic and context-dependent rather than linear or uniform. Factors such as emotional state, fatigue, and environmental distractions influenced participation, with digital screens emerging as a competing factor in some households. Parents with lower family literacy levels reported greater difficulty regulating screen use, whereas parents with higher levels described more intentional mediation and balance between digital media and literacy activities. These findings suggest that the influence of digital technologies on literacy development is mediated by parental guidance rather than by technology exposure alone.

Another salient finding relates to the role of the school in supporting family literacy. Across family literacy levels, parents emphasized the importance of guidance from teachers; however, low- and medium-level parents often perceived school-based support as general and insufficiently concrete. In contrast, example-based and practical recommendations were described as facilitating greater parental confidence and awareness. This finding underscores the importance of structured and sustained school–family partnerships in supporting effective home literacy practices [32], [33].

Conclusion

Taken together, the findings of this study indicate that family literacy is a dynamic and multifaceted construct shaped by the interaction of home practices, parental awareness, daily routines, digital environments, and school support. Family literacy should not be conceptualized solely as a collection of discrete activities conducted in the home but rather as an ongoing process embedded within parent–child relationships and everyday life contexts.

Parents with high family literacy levels demonstrated practices characterized by continuity, intentionality, and interactional depth, whereas parents with low and medium levels tended to engage in more episodic and context-dependent practices. These differences suggest that efforts to enhance family literacy should move beyond increasing the number of literacy activities and instead prioritize strengthening the quality of parent–child interactions and parents' pedagogical understanding of literacy development.

Importantly, the findings highlight that the transition to primary school does not diminish the role of the family in children's literacy development. On the contrary, the first year of primary school represents a critical period during which coordinated efforts between families and schools can substantially influence children's literacy trajectories. Supporting family literacy during this transition may contribute to children's academic adjustment, motivation for learning, and long-term literacy outcomes.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study yield several implications for educational practice, policy, and future research. For practitioners, particularly primary school teachers, there is a clear need to design family-oriented literacy support that is structured, concrete, and sustainable. Short, practical, and example-based guidance—such as brief instructional videos, sample activities, and take-home literacy prompts—may help parents integrate literacy practices more effectively into their daily routines.

From a policy perspective, family literacy initiatives should extend beyond the preschool years to encompass the early years of primary education. Programs that emphasize interactive reading strategies, parental awareness, and the meaningful use of written language in everyday contexts may be especially beneficial during the transition to formal schooling.

For researchers, the findings underscore the need for longitudinal studies examining the long-term effects of family literacy practices on children's academic, linguistic, and socio-emotional outcomes. In addition, experimental and quasi-experimental studies evaluating the effectiveness of school-based family literacy intervention programs would contribute valuable evidence to the field.

In conclusion, strengthening family literacy during the early years of primary school requires a holistic approach that recognizes parents as active partners in children's literacy development and supports them through informed guidance, collaboration, and sustained school–family engagement.

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