

Family Literacy Programs in Qatar: Teachers' and Parents' Perceptions and Practices

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Abstract

The importance of the role of the family in the development of children's early literacy has been widely recognized. Therefore, schools have frequently attempted to establish programs that help families promote their children's literacy learning. This study explored early childhood teachers' and parents' perceptions about family literacy programs in which they got involved. It also examined practices used by teachers and parents to promote children's literacy learning as well as to support the role of the family in the development of literacy. The sample included all teachers and parents who participated in the family literacy programs in two independent preschool settings in Qatar. A total of 16 teachers and 156 parents completed the self-reported questionnaires. Moreover, interviews with 10 teachers and 20 parents were conducted. Results indicated that teachers' and parents' perceptions and practices of family involvement programs were ranged from high to fairly moderate. A strong positive correlation was found between parents' perceptions of family literacy programs and their practices, while teachers' perceptions were not correlated with their practices. In light of the study findings, implications for expanding family literacy programs are described.

Keywords: family literacy, literacy development, teachers' perceptions, parental involvement, preschool education

1. Background

The State of Qatar is a small country located in a peninsula in the Arabian Gulf, and bordering only Saudi Arabia. Qatar occupies 11,437 square kilometers (4,416 square miles), including several islands (Ministry of Information and Culture, 1994). The current population of Qatar is approximately 2,659,000, as in March 2017 (Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics, 2017), the majority of whom (about 92 percent of the country's population) live in Doha, Qatar's capital city, which is located in the east on the Arabian Gulf.

Arabs and Muslims represent a large percentage of the population. Non-Qataris constitute the largest proportion of the country's labor force. Recently, Qatar is considered as one of the world's wealthiest countries since it has a high per capita income, derived from oil and liquid natural gas reserves (Al Attiyah & Lazarus, 2007). Like other Gulf countries, Qatar has a strong Arabic culture stemming from Islamic principles and long-practiced social norms and traditions (Al-Kaabi, 2010). Regarding the structure of the Qatari family, it is considered large compared with families in most Western countries. According Al-Kaabi (2010, p. 19), over three quarters of the parents have three or more children in their family; 78% and 21.9% have six children or more in the family.

Over the last decade, improving quality of education has been among the top priorities of the Qatari government's development agendas. In fact, the government of Qatar became alarmed that the educational system was "not producing high-quality outcomes and was rigid, outdated, and resistant to reform" (Brewer et al., 2007, p. iii). Consequently, Qatar initiated a systematic school reform strategy, known as *Education for a New Era (EFNE)*. In 2002, the State of Qatar established the Supreme Education Council (SEC) (converted currently to the Ministry of Education) to head the change. The development of government-funded independent schools took place; these were operated by individuals and fully supervised by the Supreme Education Council (SEC). In

2004, the SEC opened the first twelve independent schools with the goal of transforming Qatar's vision of developing a world-class education system into a reality (Romanowski & Nasser, 2012, p. 69). Currently, there are three types of schools in the Qatari educational system: governmental-funded schools (independent schools), private schools, and international schools. The education system in Qatar comprises a 6-year cycle of primary education, followed by a 3-year cycle of preparatory education, and then a 2-year cycle of secondary education. Primary, preparatory, and secondary cycles are compulsory for everyone and are free of charge at independent schools. In addition, there is a 2-year cycle of preschool education (kindergarten), which is considered as a non-compulsory cycle, serving children aged 4 to 6 before they enter primary school. This cycle includes two preschool educational levels: KG 1 (Level 1), serving children aged 4 to 5, and KG 2 (Level 2), serving children aged 5 to 6.

2. Introduction

Homes are the first social organization that children face from the very early years of childhood. Homes are considered as cultural environments which shape children's behaviors, attitudes, language, emotions, thinking, meanings and even dreams (Al-Momani, Ihmeideh, & Abu-Naba'h, 2010, p. 767). Homes are also deemed as the first place in which literacy emerges and they have a significant effect on children's success or failure in their journey towards how to read and write (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). The role of the home environment and family context in the development of early literacy has been a focus of scholarly interest for decades, and a substantial body of research has revealed that homes are central to developing children's early literacy skills (Buhs, Welch, Burt, & Knoche, 2011).

An increased and a continuous family involvement during children's early years of schooling has been observed to correlate with higher levels of literacy achievement (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006; Harper, Platt, & Pelletier, 2011; Steiner, 2014). Thus, family involvement with young children is extremely vital in developing children's literacy skills. However, this could be difficult without building positive and effective relationships between home and school (Ihmeideh & Oliemat, 2015). Such relationships, as argued by Delgado-Gaitan (1993), require schools to develop comprehensive ways and strategies to support parents and/or family members in developing children's literacy skills.

In recent years, there has been a considerable number of family literacy programs globally. These programs (i.e., Barratt-Pugh & Allen, 2011; Bloome et al., 2000; Hannon, 1998; Morrow, 2011; St. Pierre, Ricciuti, & Rimdzius, 2005; Talan, 2001) were aimed at helping parents to support their children's literacy skills and focused on developing parental literacy skills to support their children's literacy development. The fundamental aim of family literacy programs is to help parents at home and school get involved in literacy practices in an effective way (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003).

This study explores early childhood teachers' and parents' perceptions and practices about family literacy programs after being involved in such programs in Qatar. The programs took place in two independent kindergartens in Doha, and lasted for one year. The programs included training workshops for teachers and parents to increase their awareness of early literacy development, and how to collaborate to build strong partnerships in terms of developing children's literacy skills. Programs also include developmentally appropriate literacy activities for children and parents to be undertaken at home as well as at kindergartens.

2.1 Literature Review

The term "Family Literacy" refers to the interrelated literacy practices used by parents and/or family members and children in homes (Hannon, 2000; Teale, 1986). This term emerged to stress the importance of a partnership between parents and/or family members and children in promoting literacy skills among children (Taylor, 1983). From Sowers' (2000) viewpoint, family literacy refers to beliefs and practices related to reading and writing which are inherent in the people of the child's daily environment. Wasik, Dobbins and Hermann (2001, p. 445) defined family literacy as "a concept that includes naturally occurring literacy practices within the home, family and community and as a formal activity, exemplified by organised instruction usually linked with educational settings". According to Morrow (2011), family literacy includes using drawing or writing to share ideas, composing notes or letters to communicate messages, keeping records, making lists, following written directions, or sharing stories and ideas through conversation, reading and writing.

The literature concerning family literacy reveals that numerous successful programs were initiated, focusing on bringing the family, school, and community together to support children's literacy development and learning (Barratt-Pugh & Allen, 2011; Bloome et al., 2000; Hannon, 1998; Morrow, 2011; St. Pierre et al., 2005; Talan,

2001). For instance, the United States Department of Education established a family program called the “Even Start Program” in 1989. In this program, parents of children were trained in literacy to help their children develop their learning. The target parents enrolled in this program were those who were aged 16 and above, with poor literacy skills (St. Pierre et al., 2005). Another family literacy program was the “Kenan Model Program”, which was initiated by the National Center for Family Literacy. This program provided family literacy instruction and extended training to program developers and instructors (Morrow, Tracey, & Maxwell, 1995).

In 2005, the “Better Beginnings Program” was developed by the State Library of Western Australia (Barratt-Pugh & Allen, 2011). This early intervention family literacy program was aimed at providing a large numbers of families across Australia with strategies to support book-sharing from birth, as this is considered vital to promote children’s early literacy development. California’s Families for Literacy Program was established in 1998/1999. This program included four fundamental family literacy elements: 1) literacy improvement and enrichment for the adult, as needed, 2) emerging literacy activities and opportunities for the child, with emphasis on, but not limited to, the preschool and primary child, 3) Interactive/intergenerational activities for the adult(s) and child(ren), and 4) parenting development and discussion opportunities (Talan, 2001, p. 13). Other family literacy programs were extended to include the community, like neighborhoods, religious settings, and public libraries (Bloome et al., 2000). These programs were offered to families with the aim of helping parents and/or family members to become involved in their children’s literacy development and learning.

Family literacy programs vary regarding the activities introduced to parents. Van Voorhis (2003) indicated that most family literacy programs should include interactive activities between parents and children, training and discussion for parents, and high-quality instruction and activities for children, with significant focus on developing the important elements of early literacy (print, phonological awareness, letter names and sounds, etc.).

In the UK, Hannon (1995, 1998) introduced a theoretical framework describing the activities used in family literacy programs. In his ORIM framework model, Hannon emphasized that parents and/or family members might provide children’s literacy development in four steps: 1) opportunities, which include providing literacy materials for children, encouraging their play-based literacy activities, sharing storybooks and other written materials, etc., 2) recognition, which includes recognizing children’s early literacy achievements, supporting children’s early attempts at literacy, 3) interaction, which includes interaction around literacy activities introduced by parents to enable children to move a step further, and 3) Model, which includes the models that children notice in their home environment when they see parents or the members of the family around them using literacy. Within each step of this ORIM model, several activities are provided to help children achieve success in their literacy skills.

Another form of family literacy activities has been illustrated in the work of Morrow (2011) who offered guidelines for family literacy activities. Morrow’s model comprised four elements that are considered crucial in helping parents promote their children’s literacy activities. These are, 1) materials as provided by parents and other family members to help promote children’s literacy skills, 2) literacy activities as practiced by parents and family members, 3) positive attitudes hold by parents and family members towards children’s attempts at early reading and writing, and 4) visits made by parents and other family members to schools to work with teachers and provide help in children’s literacy learning.

Anderson (1995) indicated that family literacy researchers also studied parents’ and teachers’ perceptions of literacy learning and development. In their study, Piotrkowski, Botsko, and Matthews (2000) investigated parents’ and early childhood teachers’ beliefs concerning skills that children should acquire before they enter school. Results showed that early childhood teachers and parents of children hold positive beliefs regarding the importance of children being healthy and socially competent, and are able to comply with teachers’ authority. However, parents placed more emphasis on the academically oriented skills as being more important than did teachers.

Parents and/or family members need to be guided by teachers in order to develop their children’s literacy. Young (1998) completed a study to compare what parents know about emergent literacy to what is known in the field of children’s reading and writing abilities prior to formal schooling. Parents of preschoolers were surveyed to identify relevant areas in which parents could be guided to help children’s emergent literacy development. Results indicated that many parents do know generally what they should be doing to promote their children’s early literacy skills but are less clear specifically on how to help them. This study advocated that parents need to be guided to interact more effectively with their children in the context of literacy and should routinely employ

written language activities as a part of their daily life routine. Morrow (2011) argued that teachers need to give the parents the opportunity to present their views on what they would like their child to be learning, to express how they feel about what happens in school and to offer suggestions for changes. This is important because these procedures can make parents of children aware of what they are expected to do, so that their work is explained by the teacher. As indicated by Hirst (1998), teachers, in order to work and interact with parents in a successful way, should be aware of the type of literacy experiences which are already occurring at home, and should also have some knowledge of the socio-cultural context in which parents live. This knowledge, however, is beneficial in developing parents' practices at home and building upon those that are already implemented. In the same context, Brady (1999) specified that to improve home-school relationships, teachers should also be aware of parental practices that are already employed at home. A study conducted by Hannon, Morgan, and Nutbrown (2006) assessed a family literacy program from the perspectives of the parents involved in it. Results revealed that parents expressed extremely positive perceptions about the child-focused component of the family literacy program. They felt also that the program had benefited the children.

Despite the interest in relationships between literacy practices implemented at home and school, we have to acknowledge that some parents may be rarely engaged with their children in school-based literacy practices in the home, because of the lack of parents' knowledge on how children learn to read and write (Rodriguez-Brown, 2010). Hence, early childhood teachers have responsibility for raising parents' attention to the importance of their role, bearing in mind that many children come from diverse sociocultural backgrounds where literacy is practiced in different ways, and may come to school with rich experience in books and stories and live in an environment filled with books and other printed materials, while others start their schooling with very little or without any exposure to such literacy experiences (Ihmeideh, 2006).

In Qatar, only the basic and low-level family involvement is observed. Research studies conducted in the Qatari educational context reveal that parents are rarely involved in their children's learning both at home (Al-Maadadi, 2000) and school (Romanowski, Cherif, Al Ammari, & Al Attiyah, 2013). Moreover, schools lack comprehensive plans for partnership with families. Most Qatari independent schools still place the onus on individual parents to discover how to get involved in their children's learning. Likewise, little is known about whether educators and parents are aware of the impact that family literacy programs can have on their children's literacy learning. Little is also known about whether early childhood teachers are prepared to help parents get involved in school and accept them as partners, and whether they have the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to encourage participation. Therefore, a major aim of this exploratory study is to investigate the perspectives of those involved in family literacy programs concerning the effectiveness of these programs after being implemented.

2.2 Aims of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of family literacy programs implemented in Qatari preschool setting from teachers' and parents' perceptions. Therefore, the study aims to: (1) investigate the perceptions of early childhood teachers and parents of children concerning family literacy programs; (2) explore the practices used by teachers in supporting family' role in the development of children's literacy and the practices used by parents in developing their children's literacy skills; and (3) examine the relationship between teachers' and parents' perceptions of family literacy programs, and their practices in supporting literacy learning.

3. Method

3.1 Participant

The participants comprised all early childhood teachers and parents of children who participated in the family literacy programs that occurred in two independent kindergartens in the Qatari capital, Doha. The sample distribution (teachers and parents) was all female, and included 16 early childhood teachers and 156 parents. Later, follow-up interviews were conducted with a subsample of the selected teachers (N=10) and parents (N=15) who had responded to the questionnaire earlier.

3.2 Research Instruments

The researchers developed self-report questionnaires for both teachers and parents after a thorough review of the related literature (Hannon, 1998; Morrow, 2011; Sowers, 2000; Teale, 1986). The final draft of the questionnaires consisted of three sections. The parents' questionnaire comprised: 1) demographic information, 2) perceptions of family literacy programs, and 3) practices used to promote children's literacy learning. The teachers' questionnaire included: 1) demographic information, 2) perceptions of family literacy programs, and 3)

practices used to support the role of the family in developing children's literacy learning. The second section of both questionnaires' items was rated on a five-point Likert-type scale (5=strongly agree and 1=strongly disagree) while the third section was rated with 5 indicating always and 1 indicating never. For the purpose of the study, both scales were analyzed using three categories as follows: high category (between 3.50 and 5), moderate category (between 2.50 and 3.49), and low category (between 1 and 2.49).

3.3 Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

The study instruments were written first in English and then translated into Arabic because all participants in the study were native speakers of the Arabic language. Then, the Arabic version was sent out to seven referees specializing in early childhood education. These referees were asked to give their comments, thoughts and suggestions regarding the questionnaires. The role of the referees was to determine whether the items of the questionnaire were precise, appropriately worded, and adequate to elicit appropriate responses from the participants. The referees' feedback and comments were noted in designing the final version of the questionnaire. Thus, some items were added, others were deleted, and others were refined.

To determine the scales' internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's alpha for the pilot sample was calculated and reliability analysis revealed that the parents' perceptions scale was reliable at ∞ 0.92 while the parents' practices scale was reliable at ∞ 0.82. Similarly, teachers' perceptions scale was reliable at ∞ 0.90 while the teachers' practices scale was reliable at ∞ 0.97. These results indicate that the reliability coefficients were satisfactory for the purpose of the study.

3.4 Data Collection

This study was based on a project aimed at establishing family literacy programs in preschool settings in Qatar. Following implementation of the family literacy programs in two kindergartens in Doha, the researchers conducted several visits to kindergartens and met with teachers and parents involved in these programs. During these visits, teachers and parents were acquainted with the aim of the study, were encouraged to participate in the study, and were ensured confidentiality and anonymity. In the first semester of the academic year 2016-2017, the researchers hand-delivered the questionnaires to those who had participated in the family literacy programs in these kindergartens. Furthermore, data from the interviews were collected during the second semester of the 2016-2017 academic year. The interviews were individually conducted with both teachers and parents in teachers' rooms at the kindergartens, and were administrated in the Arabic language. These took about 10-15 minutes. In order to protect the participants' anonymity, the researcher did not ask teachers and parents for their actual names as the participants interviewed were given pseudonyms. Moreover, the participants were given the right to withdraw at any time in this research or not to complete particular items in the questionnaire or not to answer a particular question at interview (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000).

3.5 Data Analysis

The self-reported questionnaire was analyzed quantitatively utilizing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The data collected were analyzed and then expressed through means and standard deviations. To examine whether there is a relationship between the overall score of participants' perceptions of family literacy program and their practices in literacy learning development, Spearman correlation coefficient analysis was performed. The data collected from interviews were constructed after reading the data line by line, to separate and categorize the data related to the study's aims.

4. Results

4.1 Teachers' Perceptions about Family Literacy Programs

To examine teachers' perceptions about family literacy programs which were implemented in their kindergartens, descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used. As shown in Table 1, the mean values of the teachers' perceptions of family literacy programs ranged from 4.37 to 3.00, indicating a high to moderate level of satisfaction of the family literacy programs that they attended and participated in. The highest rated items were "Increasing the involvement of literacy activities in homes", "Developing children's reading skills", and "Developing children's writing skills" (4.37, 4.31, and 4.31, respectively). Furthermore, "Helping parents get appropriate literacy expectation", and "Helping children learn to love books and stories" also received high mean values of 4.18. However, the only items categorized as moderate was "Helping in strengthen the relationship with families" which had a mean value of 3.00.

Table 1. Means and standard divisions for teachers' perceptions of family literacy programs

No	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
	The family literacy program contributed to:		
1	Developing children's reading skills.	4.31	0.70
2	Developing children's writing skills.	4.31	0.70
3	Supporting my role in the development of children's literacy.	4.06	1.06
4	Increasing family involvement in literacy activities in homes.	4.37	0.88
5	Identifying different types of children's writing.	3.68	0.70
6	Increasing family involvement in literacy activities in kindergarten.	3.56	0.89
7	Helping children learn to love books and stories.	4.18	0.83
8	Improving the relationship with my child.	3.81	0.65
9	Helping me to strengthen the relationship with families.	3.00	1.31
10	Helping parents receive appropriate expectation regarding children's literacy development.	4.18	0.83
	Total	3.97	0.64

Interview results confirmed the results obtained from the questionnaires. The majority of the early childhood teachers interviewed agreed that family literacy programs contributed to developing their children's literacy skills. Almost all teachers indicated that the family literacy programs increased their knowledge and understandings of the role of the family in the development of children's literacy skills. One teacher commented thus:

"The family literacy program implemented in our kindergarten was successful and it helped children to develop their literacy skills, especially reading skills. This happened particularly when we encouraged parents to create 'reading time' for their children at home."

Most of the early childhood teachers interviewed (8 out of 10) agreed that children family literacy programs solve some problems they previously faced before the implementation of family literacy programs; these were lack of parents' interest in reading books and stories to children, parents' inappropriate literacy expectations, and poor relationships with families. As one teacher explained:

"Many parents used to complain about their children's level of literacy from the first weeks of the year. After providing parents with the goals of literacy at the beginning of the year, parents' expectations of their children's literacy level become more appropriate."

Another teacher made the following statement:

"Family literacy programs strengthened our relationships with families. Indeed parents start asking us about many issues related to literacy development, and they appreciated our role very much."

4.2 Parents' Perceptions of Family Literacy Programs

To explore the perceptions of parents concerning family literacy programs, descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were utilized. The data presented in Table 2 indicate that the mean values of the parents' perceptions of family involvement ranged from 4.39 to 3.67, giving an indication that parents' perceptions of family literacy program were high as the values for all the means are high. The highest rated items were "Developing children's reading skills", "Developing children's writing skills", and "Increasing parents' knowledge in literacy teaching and learning" (4.39, 4.21, and 4.02, respectively).

Table 2. Means and standard divisions for parents' perceptions of family literacy programs

No	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
The family literacy program contributed to:			
1	Developing my child's reading skills.	4.39	0.79
2	Developing my child's writing skills.	4.21	0.79
3	Supporting my role in the development of children's literacy.	3.94	0.76
4	Helping me read books and/or stories to my child.	3.75	0.82
5	Increasing my knowledge regarding my child's early writing.	4.00	0.80
6	Increasing my knowledge in literacy teaching and learning.	4.02	0.76
7	Helping me identify literacy activities as practiced in kindergarten.	3.97	0.83
8	Improving the relationship with my child.	3.88	0.86
9	Helping me to strengthen the relationship with teachers.	3.93	0.89
10	Sharing and exchanging experiences with other families regarding children's literacy development.	3.67	0.94
Total		3.97	0.64

Interviews with parents revealed that the vast majority of parents 19 out of 20, were satisfied with the family literacy programs since they increased their awareness of literacy development, developed their teaching literacy skills, and most importantly improved their children's literacy skills. One mother explained:

"My participation in the program was an amazing experience as we learned very important information about how children learn to read and write. I did not have such information before participating in the program. I implement what I learned with my child and it did work very well."

More than half of parents interviewed 12 out of 20, agreed that they became more confident with their role in supporting their children's literacy skills. Several indicated that they became aware of their role at home as well as the literacy instruction implemented at kindergartens. The following interview responses express the views of two parents on this:

"I now know methods of teaching reading for beginners. I found the whole language approach (top-to-bottom) method is the best for children as it allows them to understand the meaning of what they read."

"Because of the family literacy program I was able to teach literacy not only to my kindergarten-aged child, but also for my baby girl aged 18 months as I often expose her to early literacy experience, such as reading to her and point out to here print as well as singing with her."

4.3 Teachers' Practices in Supporting the Family's Role

To determine the practices used by teachers in supporting the family's role in the development of children's literacy, means and standard deviations were obtained. As shown in Table 3, the mean values of the items ranged from high to fairly moderate, ranging from 3.93 to 2.50, giving an indication of a high to fairly moderate perceptions of teachers' practices in supporting the family's role in the development of children's literacy. It is notable that 2 of the 14 items had high perceptions, while the rest were ranked moderate. The highest rated items were "Notifying parents about their children's achievement in literacy" and "Explaining to parents their role in the development of children's literacy skills" (3.93, and 3.87, respectively).

Table 3. Means and standard divisions for teachers' practices used to in supporting the family's role in the development of children's literacy

No.	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	I explain to parents their role in the development of children's literacy skills.	3.87	0.95
2	I invite parents to the classroom to observe literacy activities in which their children participate in them.	3.00	1.50
3	I send home notes, brochures, and newsletters to inform parents of topics related to the development of children's literacy.	3.12	0.95
4	I invite parents to kindergarten for informational workshops/meeting about literacy development.	2.62	1.58
5	I invite parents to kindergarten I to help with literacy-related activities in the classroom.	2.50	1.67
6	I invite parents to kindergarten to participate in reading aloud to children.	2.62	1.58
7	I inform parents about the goals to be achieved for children regarding literacy development.	2.93	1.65
8	I send home literacy activities to be completed by children and their parents.	3.18	1.51
9	I invite parents to the classroom to talk about their literacy experiences.	2.50	1.67
10	I include parents in helping to assess their child's progress in literacy learning.	3.13	1.35
11	I encourage parents to read to their children at home, in public libraries and/or at events.	3.37	1.20
12	I notify parents about their children's achievement in literacy.	3.93	0.92
13	I provide lists of literature for parents to share with children.	3.00	1.03
14	I arrange parent and child meetings in which both parties come to kindergarten to work together on projects.	2.62	1.66
Total		3.01	1.25

The result of the teachers' interviews confirmed the questionnaires' results. Most teachers interviewed, 6 out of 10, indicated that they began offering some family literacy activities in their program after the implementation of a family literacy program in their kindergarten. These activities include inviting parents to literacy events in the classrooms (i.e., reading stories to children, writing with children), communicating with parents through social media regarding literacy development, and informing parents about literacy activities that their children learned at kindergartens, etc. One teacher said in her interview:

"In my classroom, parents of children were scheduled in reading time. I invited those who volunteered in my program to participate in reading aloud to children. Parents loved this activity and as did the children."

Another teacher was keen to talk about her experience in this context:

"I created, through What's Up application, a group of parents of children in my class. We share thoughts and ideas about literacy development. I provided them with many useful posts and YouTube videos that could help them develop their children's literacy skills."

The vast majority of teachers interviewed, 8 out of 10, revealed that they send home literacy activities to be undertaken by children and their parents. As a consequence of the family literacy program, some of them send these activities with a guideline for parents to help them complete the activities with their children. One of the teachers stated:

"Before participating in the family literacy program, I did not send home any literacy activities as children do all these activities in the classroom. However, after the implementation of the family literacy program, we found that it is useful to send with the children literacy activities to be done at home with the help of their parents."

4.4 Parents' Practices of Developing Children's Literacy Development

To examine the practices used by parents in promoting their children's literacy development, descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations were utilized. Table 4 reveals that the mean values of the parents' perceptions of their practices ranged from 4.17 to 2.35. It is notable that most of the items were ranked high and moderate, with the exception of one item, which ranked low. The highest rated items were "Providing materials for writing, such as crayons, markers, etc.", and "Helping my child with literacy activities at home" (4.17 and 4.14, respectively) while the lowest item was "Writing with my child and talking about what we write", with a mean value of 2.35.

Table 4. Means and standard divisions for parents' practices used to in promoting their children's literacy development

No.	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	I provide stories, books, and magazines for my child.	3.10	1.11
2	I provide materials for writing, such as crayons, markers, pencils and paper in different sizes.	4.17	1.05
3	I read at books, magazines or newspapers with my child and talk about what we read.	2.87	1.15
4	I use the print to talk to my child such as making lists to do things (food lists, lists of errands or lists for shopping).	3.20	1.42
5	I write with my child and talk about what we write.	2.35	1.08
6	I answer my child's questions about reading and writing.	3.49	1.29
7	I help my child with his/her literacy activities at home.	4.14	1.11
8	I point out the print in my home such as words on food boxes or recipes, directions on medicine, etc.	3.51	1.19
9	I visit my child's classroom to observe how my child learns to read and write.	3.32	1.35
10	I visit kindergarten to attend workshops/meetings that are related to the development of children's literacy.	3.43	1.09
11	I visit school to volunteer help in any way (reading to children, etc.).	2.68	1.16
12	I visit kindergarten to learn about how I can help my child at home.	2.89	1.28
13	I visit kindergarten to learn about my child' progress in literacy.	2.97	1.11
14	I visit the public library and take out books and magazine to read at home.	3.00	1.22
Total		3.22	0.66

The interviews with parents indicated that although the majority of parents are aware of their role regarding supporting their children's literacy skills, their practices were not as high as their knowledge of understanding of literacy. In other words, the majority of parents interviewed indicated that they occasionally read books to their children at home, rarely write with their children or allow them to write, and never use print to communicate with their children. One parent commented on this:

"I work with my children on the activities that the kindergartens sends. We do what makes our children's learning better. However, we did not find much time in our house to read stories to children or teach them how to read and write."

Although all parents interviewed indicated they help their children complete literacy activities sent home, half of them, 10 out of 20, mentioned that that they did not write with their children nor did they encourage early writing behaviors (scribbling, drawings, letter-like forms, etc.). One parent said:

"Writing is more difficult than reading and our child has a problem in his fine motor skills so I do not expect him to write better at this stage."

Most of the parents, 16 out of 20, indicated that they are willing to visit the kindergarten and participate in their children's literacy activities if they were invited. As one parent stated:

"I attend teacher-parent meetings and educational workshops related to literacy activities. I can also come to kindergarten to participate with the children if I have this opportunity in the future."

4.5 The Relationship between the Participants' Perceptions and Practices

To determine whether teachers' and parents' perceptions of family literacy programs correlate with their practices, the overall mean score of the participants' perceptions and practices were summed up separately, after which the Spearman correlation was utilized. The data presented in Table 5 shows that there was a strong positive correlation between parents' perceptions and their practices of learning literacy development ($r=.492$), while teachers' practices was insignificantly correlated with their perceptions ($r=.964$).

Table 5. Results of correlation analysis between participants' perceptions of family literacy programs and their practices

Scale	Practices	
	Spearman Correlation	Sig.
Teachers' Perceptions	.012	.964
Parents' Perceptions	.492	.000*

* $p < .01$.

5. Discussion

A growing body of research has documented that establishing family literacy programs is significantly related to the development of children's literacy skills (Buhs et al., 2011; Hannon, 2000; Harper et al., 2011; Morrow, 2011; Steiner, 2014). The success of these programs depends mainly on the partnerships between parents and teachers. Therefore, exploring the perceptions and practices of teachers and parents regarding family literacy programs was the main aim of the current study. Sixteen teachers and 165 parents who participated in family literacy programs completed self-administrated questionnaires. Ten teachers and 20 parents were interviewed after analyzing the questionnaire.

The results indicated that teachers and parents hold moderate to high perceptions of family literacy programs implemented in their kindergarten. This specifies that they are satisfied with the outcomes of these programs in terms of developing their children's literacy skills and supporting their role in literacy development, as well as building a partnership between home and school. This is because the programs comprised the necessary literacy components required for children to develop their literacy skills (i.e., print awareness, phonological awareness, knowing letters and words, and early writing), and were built on the needs of both teachers and parents. This was obvious in the interviews' results because teachers indicated that the program was helpful in supporting school-family relations as it solved the problems related to the lack of parents' interest in reading books to children, and parents' inappropriate literacy expectations. This result is supported by the work of Hannon et al. (2006) who indicated that parents of children expressed positive views about the effect of family literacy programs as they found these programs beneficial for young children. In the same context, Huss-Keeler (1997) established that parents have positive perceptions of being involved in the school. Indeed, success in family literacy programs often depends upon the perceptions of teachers and parents and/or family members.

Furthermore, the results indicated that the practices used by teachers in supporting the family's role in the development of children's literacy ranged from high to fairly moderate. This result could be attributed to the fact that the family literacy programs provided the teachers with skills that are needed to support the family's role in this field. These skills included, but were not limited to, inviting parents to literacy activities events, providing parents with a list of suggested literature to be read to children at home, and encouraging them to participate in children's literacy activities at home. This result is consistent with the views of Levine (2002) who found that teachers provided parents with appropriate strategies to be implemented with their children at home. This is important as parents need support and encouragement from teachers to participate in their children's literacy development (Hannon, 1998).

In addition, the results indicated that parents' practices of supporting their children's literacy development were satisfactory. This is perhaps because family literacy programs were useful for parents in supporting their role as

the programs provide parents with ideas and thoughts that could help promote their children's literacy skills. This finding is consistent with the results obtained from a number of research studies that determined that family literacy programs improves parents' literacy practices at home (Hannon, 1998). Leichter (1984) proposed that families can promote children's emergent literacy skills when they provide a large quantity of literacy material in the home, increase the number of interpersonal interactions during literacy activities, and integrate literacy materials in a social environment within the home. These literacy activities were suggested in the family literacy program in which the participants in the current study were involved.

The results revealed that the teachers' perceptions of family literacy programs were not correlated with their practices. This could be due to the fact that teachers' role in helping family become involved in their children's literacy development, in most independent kindergartens, is still limited. This explanation is supported by teachers' interviews in which they indicated that they do not usually contact parents directly, and if they wanted to do so, it should be done through school counselors. Therefore, teachers may find it difficult to practice what they believe it. Consequently, according to Caplan (2000), lack of communication between teachers and parents may influence teaching practices.

Against this background, parents' perceptions were aligned with their actual practices in the development of children's literacy skills. This implies that the perceptions that parents develop after the implementation of family literacy programs in Qatari preschool settings were beneficial in reflecting these perceptions into practice. That is to say, this result might be attributed to the fact that parents who participated in the family literacy programs found the development of children's literacy skills to be as an important issue requiring each partner to work cooperatively to develop a strong and positive partnership. Participants' perceptions of early literacy programs not only influence their practices but also form young children's perceptions and understandings on early literacy development (Fang, 1996).

6. Conclusion and Implications

In light of the above discussion, it can be concluded that both teachers and parents were satisfied with the family literacy programs implemented in their kindergarten. They found these programs beneficial in developing the children's literacy skills as well as supporting their role and improving home-school relationships. Moreover, a strong correlation was noted between parents' perceptions of family literacy programs and their practices, while teachers' perceptions were not correlated to their practices. Based on these conclusions, several practical and theoretical recommendations are provided. From a practical standpoint, family literacy programs should be expanded in most Qatari kindergartens because they have numerous benefits not only for the child but also for the parents, family, school and community. As the family literacy programs were viewed by teachers and parents as a successful experience, the Ministry of Education should provide professional development programs for other early childhood teachers working in independent kindergartens and schools with the aim of establishing family literacy programs in their settings. This is vital, as parents need to be encouraged, supported, and empowered by teachers in order to involve them in such programs. Finally, it is recommended that teachers are in a direct contact with parents and family members as this could build mature and trustful relationships between them.

Further studies should be undertaken to investigate the effect of family literacy programs on the development of children's literacy skills. Moreover, conducting follow-up studies to investigate the perceptions of parents and teachers in different components of the family literacy programs is also recommended. Another fruitful avenue of research could be to examine the effect of other family programs in different areas (i.e., numeracy, play, technology). Finally, it is anticipated that the current study might pave the way for more research in this particular field.

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