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## Home Literacy Environment of Young Children in Xinjiang, China

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**Abstract:** This study used qualitative descriptive research methods in order to explore the home literacy environment (HLE) of young children within the Chinese sociocultural context, aiming to identify its key components. Thirty parents of children aged 3 to 6 residing in the capital city of Xinjiang, China, were purposefully sampled for this study. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore several key areas: the home physical literacy environment, parental beliefs and practices regarding literacy learning, specific parent-child literacy activities and interactions, and parental literacy habits. The results revealed that Chinese parents predominantly perceive literacy as the acquisition of reading and writing skills. They frequently engaged in informal activities that supported emergent literacy, often without fully recognising the benefits of these practices. Parents claimed a relatively rich resources that promoted language and literacy learning, and the quality of parent-child interactions was closely linked to family SES and adult's responsiveness. Technology plays a significant role in the Home Literacy Environment (HLE), but its optimal use for promoting literacy is still not well understood, highlighting the need to incorporate digital aspects of HLE into future research. The study also uncovered distinctive family structures in China, where extended family members and neighbourhood peers contribute to children's HLE. Additionally, parents often grapple with academic pressures and a lack of knowledge about child development, which leads them to reinforce school practices while simultaneously

questioning traditional methods. This study advocates for a broader framework of HLE in future research, particularly focusing on children under 6 years old.

**Keywords:** Home literacy environment, Chinese preschooler, sociocultural context, parental perception, home literacy practices.

## **Introduction**

Children's early language and literacy competencies are found to be vitally impacted by their home literacy environment (HLE), such as the sensitive and responsive interactions with adults, the family's socioeconomic status (SES), the complexity and frequency of language interactions with adults, and the amount of age-appropriate stimulating books, toys and activities at home (Liu et al., 2018; Melzi et al., 2020; Mol & Bus, 2011). Language and literacy learning in early years is especially critical since it impacts individual differences in knowledge base, literacy interest, skills, and performance (Birgisdottir et al., 2020; Lau & Richards, 2021; Simmons, 2023). These individual differences remain relatively stable, even after formal schooling begins (Incognito & Pinto, 2023; Mol & Bus, 2011).

## **Research Problem**

Past research suggests that Home Learning Environment (HLE) is a multifaceted and intricate concept. The definition of HLE spans a spectrum, ranging from a narrow focus on specific literacy activities to a broader approach that considers a combination of factors (Ip et al., 2016; Leung & Li, 2012; Li & Li, 2022). In turn, measures used to examine HLE vary widely based on researchers' different theoretical approaches (Lin et al., 2011). Although research on HLE is well documented, it is heavily studied in the western countries with children learning an alphabetic language system, consequently, the extent to which the components of HLE apply to children learning Mandarin in China, especially with preschool children is still understudied (Leung & Li, 2012; Li & Li, 2022; Liu et al., 2018).

The study of HLE among Chinese Preschool-aged children will provide insights into culturally distinctive practices that promote early language and literacy development. This can inform policy makers, educators, and parents about effective strategies to enhance children's literacy outcomes. In addition, this research could fill a significant gap in the existing literature by extending the understanding of HLE beyond Western contexts and the alphabetic language system. Moreover, the findings can lead to the development of new theoretical frameworks and measurement tools that consider diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

## **Research Aim and Research Questions**

The purpose of the current study was to explore components that constructed Chinese HLE among preschool-aged children as well as identify culturally distinctive components and practices that contribute to Chinese HLE. This study aimed to examine parents' attitudes, home routines, resources and context that influence children's listening, speaking, reading and writing development among parents of young children (age 3–6) in the Western region of China. Consequently, four research questions emerged:

1. How do parents view the importance of home language and literacy experience for their children?
2. How do parents describe their HLE?
3. What constitutes the parents' aspirations and pedagogical practices regarding their children's

learning on listening, speaking, reading and writing at home?

4. What components contribute to young children's HLE in China?

## **Literature Review**

Numerous studies have demonstrated that the Home Learning Environment (HLE) significantly influences children's language and literacy development in various languages, such as Mandarin Chinese (Liu et al., 2018; Melzi et al., 2020; Mol & Bus, 2011). The aim of this literature review was to examine recent shifts in family structure, educational expenditure, and educational policies in early childhood, and culturally distinctive beliefs and practices that reflect the evolving landscape of contemporary Chinese society. Consequently, there is an urgent need for a focused investigation into the current components that constitute the HLE in China.

### ***Family Structure and Education Expenditure***

Chinese sociocultural context may entail different constructs of HLE. In the late 1970s, the Chinese government issued the One-Child Policy to reduce the population growth rate. As a result, Chinese families demonstrated a unique 4-2-1 structure, including four grandparents (paternal and maternal), two parents, and one child. In 2021, a new amendment to the Population and Family Planning Law was adopted to respond to the continuous decline of birth rate in the past decade with a record low of 6.39 births per 1,000 people in 2023 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, n.d.). This revision stipulated that all couples, regardless of their ethnic background, are allowed to have a maximum of three children (Attané, 2022). In light of the unique family structure, children in China receive more attention from adults and family resources. Impact from parents and grandparents on children's language and literacy learning could be more influential than their counterparts in the Western countries.

Furthermore, Chinese parents frequently dedicate substantial energy and resources to their children's education (Hu et al., 2023; Wei, 2023). Hu et al. (2023) analysed data from the longitudinal China Family Panel Studies survey and found that, on average, Chinese households allocate 17.1% of their annual income and 7.9% of their overall yearly expenditures to education. This places China at the top globally for household education expenditures. Notably, lower-income households in China allocate 56.8% of their income towards their children's education, compared to 10.6% among higher-income households. It is reasonable to assume that young children in China would have access to more reading and writing materials and other enriching educational opportunities to support their language and literacy development.

Yet, the most recent report on the Current Status and Needs of Reading among Chinese Children and Youths, as cited by Cheng and Chu (2023), presents mixed findings. The report indicated that reading in early childhood gained increasing attention and popularity with nearly 70% of children starting reading before the age of six and approximately 30% starting before the age of three. However, the yearly reading volume of children is still low with a large individual difference. More than 70% of children read less than 10 books per year, 20% of children read 11-30 books per year, and nearly 10% of children read more than 30 books per year. For daily reading time, more than 70% of children read for less than 30 minutes on weekdays and over 60% of children read less than 30 minutes per day on weekends and during school breaks. There are 10% of children reported rarely reading after school. Majority of children (84.7%) reported struggling with overall reading with the top three reported challenges as not knowing how to choose books (50.7%), not knowing how to read (28.1%) and lack of books to read (22.9%). According to the study, parents were found to have the greatest influence on children's reading habits, accounting for 41.4%, followed by teachers at 24.8%, and classmates/friends at 14.9%. However, half of the parents themselves reported reading less than 5 books per year and

38.2% of parents read for 15-30 minutes daily with almost a quarter of parents hardly engaging in any daily reading. The quality of reading environment and number of reading activities available in schools in the central and western regions of China is also found to be lower than those in the eastern region.

### ***Major Educational Policy Changes that Impact HLE***

In the past decades, multiple educational policies have influenced the Chinese HLE. The current early childhood literacy curriculum is guided by the Early Learning and Development Guideline for Children Aged 3-6 (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2012) and Teaching Guideline for Kindergarten Education (Trial Version) (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2001). These guidelines are in the effort to promote play-based, child-centred and progressive methods of learning and especially curb the traditional practice of teacher-directed and push down curriculum in early education. Yet, in the updated language and literacy curriculum standards for compulsory education (Chinese Ministry of Education), the program requires intensive afterschool reading, with first and second grade students expected to learn to recognise 1,600 to 1,800 characters, write 800–1,000 characters, and read 50,000 Chinese characters per year as part of the afterschool reading curriculum. The policies indicate a significant disparity between early childhood and primary level literacy learning, potentially pressuring schools and families to seek alternative methods for literacy education, leaving many feeling uncertain.

The issue of the two guidelines also lead to a deep and critical transformation in early childhood curriculum which will take years to have parents on board and ultimately reflected in the classroom. In a study of Chinese kindergarten teachers' beliefs and practices on literacy learning through interviews and observations (Li et al., 2011), 19 out of 20 teachers articulated a preference of child-oriented instruction and/or a blend of teacher and child-initiated practice. However, the most prevailing teaching pattern observed in the classroom was whole-class and teacher-led direct instructions. Formal teaching on reading and writing started as early as when children were three years old. Almost all teachers assigned homework on Chinese literacy and the majority of it involved parents' participation. The majority of teachers favoured summative assessment, with 20% of teachers indicating that they use tests to assess literacy learning. Recitation and repeated tracing are still widely used in the classroom. Literacy learning in early childhood education has undergone great changes since the national curriculum reform, yet, the discrepancies between policies and practices, as well as beliefs of learning and daily practices are still not closed (Fleer & Li, 2023; Li & Chen, 2017).

### ***Culturally Distinctive Beliefs and Practices***

Culturally divergent beliefs and practices regarding education of young children may also define the quantity and quality of language and literacy learning among Chinese families. Chinese parents strongly believe that school is mainly responsible for children's education (Ng & Wei, 2020). They tended to rely heavily on school-initiated practices, for example homework policy, and see themselves as supporters of school practices (Li et al., 2011). It is found that Chinese parents and their children tend to choose different books and value different characteristics in books (Zou, 2023). Although children's book interests were sought, book selection is mainly made by parents with a clear set of goals favouring graded level books which are characterized by explicit educational intentions and tend to focus on reading skills. Parents' book purchase decisions are largely driven by retailer's marketing strategies (Zou, 2023). With the curriculum reform where preschools and kindergartens are gradually releasing their authority and moving towards the child-centred and whole-language approach, it is imperative to understand how HLE will be impacted.

Previous research has highlighted how various households involve children in literacy activities that hold social and cultural significance for their families (Guo et al., 2021; Melzi et al., 2020). Learning preferences and strategies employed by students in China were found to be distinctive from students

from Western culture including a preference for structured learning environments, the importance of memorisation, and a focus on achieving high academic performance (Rajaram, 2020). In a qualitative systematic review (Han, 2020) on literacy practices and roles of Chinese parents in children's literacy learning, the author reported parents are deeply involved in their children's home reading and writing activities, often employing various strategies to support literacy development. They assist with homework, prepare for spelling quizzes, and organise formal literacy learning activities such as journal writing and word copying. These practices are often inherited, reflecting the parents' own childhood experiences, which emphasise perseverance, one-on-one tutoring, direct instruction, and providing feedback. These activities support the organised learning atmosphere within the home. Furthermore, a recent empirical investigation by Lai et al. (2024) indicated the significant emphasis Chinese parents place on creating a structured HLE for early literacy learning, with a particular focus on systematic and disciplined approaches, especially in the development of word reading skills.

### ***Research Gaps in the Field***

Although there have been some studies exploring the uniqueness of HLE in the Chinese contexts, more studies are needed to examine the results and there are areas of limitations that need to be addressed.

Initially, HLE was primarily focused on one or a few clearly defined literacy activities, such as the number of books, the frequency of parent-child shared reading, explicit teaching of reading and writing, and specific teaching strategies (Liu et al., 2018; Liu and Chung, 2022; Ma et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2020). Because of such focused and narrower conceptualisation of HLE, measures used in these studies are tailored to the researchers' specific definition of HLE and research samples were primarily children of 5 years of age and above. The home support on language and emergent literacy skills among preschool-age children are a rarely explored territory (Li & Li, 2022). Emergent literacy skills, such as print and vocabulary knowledge, phonological sensitivity and oral language are all crucial to later conventional reading skills learned in primary school (Cabell et al., 2022; Suggate et al., 2018). Young children have already received formal and informal reading instructions (Liu et al., 2018). It becomes even more crucial to study preschool-aged children to understand their unique HLE, given the discrepancy between preschool and primary level literacy learning goals in China.

In addition, parents were solely considered as influential caregivers in children's HLE; it may undermine other social impacts under the general home context, given the unique family structure discussed earlier. Furthermore, previous studies were mainly carried out in the developed eastern regions of China, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Hong Kong (Chen et al., 2010; Ip et al., 2016; Li & Li, 2022). However, the economic gap between the eastern and western region in China was shown to be evident. Previous research indicates that family socioeconomic status significantly influences children's access to learning resources and their readiness for reading in the future (Cheng & Chu, 2023; Ip et al., 2016). Research on HLE in the developing western regions was rarely represented in the existing literature. Lastly, quantitative methods were commonly utilized in studies of HLE to test HLE in relation to specific reading and writing skills (Su et al., 2017; Yuan et al., 2024).

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to take abroad conceptualisation of HLE to explore possible components of HLE in China utilising qualitative inquiry. We define HLE as a multifaceted and complex interactive experience with prints between children and their social and physical environment within the home context. In addition, language skills (listening and speaking) are fundamental to the later emergent and conventional reading and writing development (Barratt-Pugh et al., 2021). Thus, the present study examined parents' attitudes, home routines, resources and context that influenced children's listening, speaking, reading and writing development among parents of young children (age

3–6) in the western region of China.

## **Materials and Methods**

This study has undergone review and approval by an institutional review board (IRB). To investigate the components of Chinese Home Learning Environment (HLE), a qualitative descriptive method was employed as outlined by Doyle et al. (2020) and Turale (2020).

### ***Sample and Participants***

This study employed purposeful sampling to select 30 parents (3 fathers & 27 mothers) of children aged 3-5 from a public kindergarten in Xinjiang, China. Historically, western China has a slower developmental trajectory and a drastic gap to the prosperous eastern China. In late 1999, the Chinese government initiated a western development drive after pursuing coastal development for two decades (Warner, 2011). The shifting of economic reform aimed to increase the overall growth of western region and narrow the regional gap. The capital cities in the western region relatively have a sounder education system and more sufficient and up-to-date educational resources compared to second-tier cities and rural areas. Since then, evident growths in education were documented; however, the gap between the western and eastern regions still exists, especially marking early childhood education as one of the underdeveloped areas (Guo et al., 2020; Peng et al., 2020).

Established in 1978, the school hosted this research has six sites scattered around the city. Participants of this study were recruited from the main site which is also the oldest site serving children from 3-5 years old. This site has a 2.1-acre land in the heart of the central business district housing 24 classrooms and other spaces for bilingual learning, dance, music, arts/crafts, gymnastics, outdoor play and other learning activities. This school also offers practical experience opportunities for pre-service teachers in early childhood education programs from local institutions. It has been known for its reliable education for young children by the parents and peers.

Of the thirty participants, twenty-eight reported having only one child and another two families reported having two children. Nearly all families (29) reported being currently married. The average age of participants is 35.9 years. Education levels range from high school graduates to those with graduate degrees, with the majority (12 out of 27) holding a bachelor's degree). The yearly income distribution among the families reveals a diverse range of economic standings with a concentration (18 families) in the ¥100,000 to ¥200,000 range. Two families earn below ¥100,000, four families are between ¥200,001 and ¥300,000, and three are between ¥300,001 and ¥400,000. Two families earned above ¥600,000 and three did not disclose their income.

### ***Instrument and Procedure***

The researchers first reached out to the preschool director to obtain permission to conduct the study. Participant recruitment was then carried out through a variety of methods. Fliers were distributed in classrooms and through class Wechat groups (a social media group). A representative from the preschool was assigned to advertise the study and coordinate potential participants. Interested participants were purposefully selected for three different age groups: 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old to further examine the HLE patterns and trends as children grow. In total, 30 parents, 10 in each age group, take part in the study. Participants were then scheduled for interviews.

Semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted with individual parents in a private conference room at the preschool. Interview questions were designed to explore parental perceptions on early language and literacy learning and both physical (e.g. materials and resources) and social environment (e.g. adult-child interactions and parents' literacy habits) at home that support learning in

speaking, listening, reading and writing domains. Each parent was scheduled for a 1.5-hour interview at their best convenience.

### ***Data Analysis***

All interviews were conducted in Chinese and were audio recorded and member checked. The audio records were further transcribed for analysis. All transcriptions were carefully read repeatedly and coded for the first time. Reflective notes, analytic memos and summaries of interviews were documented. Initially, a set of 48 codes were developed. Then, a focused coding was applied to eliminate, combine, or subdivide the initial codes to 31. The third coding process was applied using the new coding scheme. Four themes emerged. This research applied a peer review for alternative interpretations, and member checking.

### **Results**

#### ***Parental Beliefs and Attitudes towards Language and Literacy Learning***

Parents often believed that "following children's interests" was the most effective approach for language and literacy learning. Reading and writing should not be taught without children showing interest in words and developing adequate fine motor skills. Besides considering general child development principles, parents recognise a set of content and pedagogical knowledge and skills required to teach reading and writing to young children. Thus, parents are concerned that initiating the teaching at home without such knowledge may complicate children's future learning.

Further, parents had a strong belief that schools should be held accountable for learning to read and write. Parents were responsible for encouraging good behaviours and learning habits in their children, as well as participating in and completing school-related activities, such as completing homework and attending school events. A couple of parents articulated an opposite view. They noted that it was not realistic to fully rely on schools to meet individual learning needs due to the large class size (45 children in a typical classroom) and high teacher-child ratio (1:15). Additionally, the pressure of early academic curricula compelled parents to begin teaching reading and writing skills at home at a younger age.

Although parents stated that it was "too early to learn reading and writing" at a young age, they recognised the need to teach reading and writing skills for school readiness. When asked about aspiration in children's listening, speaking, reading and writing areas, parents preponderantly mentioned reading and writing related skills before primary education, they wanted children to "recognise words" and "be able to read simple books independently" and "write one's name". With prompts from the researcher, listening and speaking skills were expressed around being able to "comprehend daily conversations and stories", to "orally communicate", to "tell stories based on visuals". The relationship between listening/speaking and reading/writing did not emerge from parents' responses. Many parents raised important questions about the content taught in preschool, the appropriate level of language and literacy learning for young children, the role parents should play in the learning process, and whether parents should be responsible for teaching language and literacy skills.

All participants indicated that technology was used in their lives for language and literacy purposes. A variety of devices and applications were used as supplements to create a rich language and literacy environment, for example, using internet-based portable devices to play music, stories, and literacy games for children. Certain parents were more open to incorporating technology into their children's learning experiences and acknowledged its specific advantages in enhancing vocabulary,

fostering word recognition, and providing greater access to listening opportunities. One parent indicated:

*"Technology offers the opportunity to acquire valuable knowledge and skills." It [technology] is flexible. For example, in regards to reading, young children are not sensitive [to word/written symbol], since they are so young, it (program) has the play/game component. It (program) presents word by word first for recognition, then those words are embedded into a game where children learn all the words through playing the game. [Children] remember them fast.*

On the one hand, parents recognised the positive impact of technology on children's language and literacy learning, and were active consumers of technologies themselves. A few parents expressed that overuse of cell phones among family members set an unhealthy example for children. On the other hand, with the fast-paced and ever-changing technology rushed into the world of young children and markets of education, parents expressed ignorance, anxiety and fears to tackle critical questions regarding raising children in the technology era. Specifically, parents were concerned that intensive screen time has a negative effect on children's vision, self-regulation, and attention span, and children may become addicted to video games. The majority of parents set time limits and screen the content on young children's technology use. Parents struggle between increased dependence on technology in supporting children's language and literacy learning and shielding them from it.

### **Physical HLE**

All parents reported sufficient reading materials, toys, learning and technological products which were used in various ways to support language and literacy learning. Twenty-six parents (87%) indicated the range of reading materials available for children, including picture books, magazines, work/activity books, and flashcards, varied from a dozen to hundreds. The majority of parents (16) reported having more than a hundred reading materials, with the 100-200 categories having the most votes (11). Of the 10 parents reported having less than 100 reading materials, 7 indicated 50 or less. Children had some input on what to read. Book choices were mainly decided from parents' view on what children should read and would benefit from. The book purchase decision was driven by considering children's stage of development and interest, but parents placed heavy emphasis on books that provide moral lessons, and life and academic skills than the overall enjoyment from children. Chinese classic literature was also a popular category parents purchased books from. Those included Tang Poetry (*Tang Shi*), Analects of Confucius (*Lun Yu*) and The Book of Songs (*Shi Jing*). To parents, books were a rich source of knowledge and best ideas around wisdom and emotional intelligence for children to understand the world, problem-solving, ways of thinking, and gain life-long happiness, satisfaction and self-fulfilment. Regarding the language and literacy benefits of books, parents indicated word recognition, expression building and transition to elementary schools.

Learning materials and toys at home included building blocks and Legos, puzzles, plush toys, writing utensils, sport and outdoor toys, dramatic play toys, other manipulative, board games, instruments, and arts/crafts supplies. These items were used to facilitate play and educational games between parents and children at home. Through play and shared experiences, language and literacy skills were naturally enhanced.

Moreover, technology made up an important part of children's physical HLE including internet-based hand-held devices, touch-and-talk stylus, storytelling machine, computer, and television and radio machines. Those products were utilized to engage children in a variety of activities, including taking photographs, streaming videos, listening to stories and music, learning English and Chinese literacy, and playing games when parents were temporarily unavailable. Twenty three out of thirty

parents (77%) reported they limit the time on children's daily use of technology, from none technology exposure on weekdays (8 parents) to 2-hour screen time daily (1 parent). The rest of parents reported from 30-minute daily screen time to a few times a week mostly on weekends.

### ***Social HLE and Pedagogical Practices***

Due to the lasting effect of the Chinese "One-Child Policy", most children in this study were the only child at home. Peer socialization mainly came from organised play dates with other families through parents' networking, school/extracurricular groups and children in the neighbourhood. Together, children and their peers constructed play through conversations, facilitated reading and writing activities and served as language and literacy models for each other. These experiences had a positive impact on children's language and literacy development in a genuine way.

The schedule between preschool and parents' work places appeared to be incompatible, resulting in many children spending after-school time, for some cases during weekends, with grandparents and/or at parents' work. Grandparents (in more than half of the families) were highly involved in children's care and education, for instance, providing primary care before preschool enrolment, living with the family to provide long-term child care, dropping off and/or picking up children from preschool, and regular time sharing with children. Parents recognised the positive influence from grandparents particularly on language and literacy development through chanting, using nursery rhymes, and conversing with children and encouraging word recognition. It is worth noting that parents who relied more on grandparents for child care also expressed concerns about their child-rearing practices. Parents indicated that grandparents mainly provided daily care and non-educational opportunities. They tended to interact with children using traditional methods passed down from generations, and did not know educational practices to support children's learning. For example, one parent reported that the grandparents did not think children were necessary conversation partners, thus, the communication was minimal and mostly giving orders and directions on daily routines (e.g. come and wash your hands). Other parents stated disagreements on parenting topics, such as agency of children, developmentally appropriate teaching practices and how lenient and/or strict one should be on child discipline.

Parents themselves adopted a variety of pedagogical practices to support language and literacy development at home. Listening to pre-recorded stories became a regular part of the daily routine. These activities served as shared experiences between parent and child, as well as independent pastimes for children when their parents were unavailable. It usually happens when getting ready in the morning and before bedtime, and during daily commute time. Listening to pre-recorded stories enables children to initiate conversations with parents for example: ask for explanations on new vocabularies and concepts.

Conversing between parents and children as an authentic activity within families covered a wide range of topics including how to go about daily life (e.g., food choice), recapture of school learning and events, past and present observation and experience (e.g., family travel experience), problem solving (e.g., brainstorm peer-conflict at school), and play-related matters. Parents reported they follow the lead of children during conversations, intentionally relate topics to shared experiences, encourage children's monologue and conversations with others, designate family conversation time, respond to children's request for story reading and limit use of baby talk and dialect around children. A small portion of parents reported more structured and intentional practices to enhance children's oral language, for instance, asking children to recite poems and stories, and enrol children in after-school enrichment programs on hosting for better oral expressiveness.

Twenty-two families (73%) reported having daily shared reading with their child. Over half of the families (16) indicated they intentionally teach words that are significant, for instance, words from

children's favourite books/songs and words taught in school. Almost all families used repeated memorization (e.g., flashcards). Additionally, some families included word recognition activities such as focusing on words in book titles, researching word origins and evolution, teaching pinyin (Chinese phonetic alphabet), and playing word-related games like word hopscotch. Compared to families of 3-4 years old, parents of 5 years old put more effort on teaching reading. They labelled home objects, pointed out environmental prints for children, set up child-friendly library areas and rotated books periodically, asked children to recite Tang poems and assisted children's reading homework assigned by school.

Twenty-five families (83%) reported using some reading strategies with children. The widely used strategies included reading with expressions, actions and sound effects, picture walk, words tracking, and questioning. The number of families using different reading strategies by age group is outlined in Table 1. Parents of younger children have a strong preference on taking a picture walk as a flexible way of reading in order to generate interest and familiarise children with the content of the book. In comparison, picture walk and questioning are less favourable among parents of 5 years old. Parents of 4 years old have a balanced preference for all strategies. Across all age groups, parents predominantly used factual questions to reinforce reading comprehension. A few parents questioned children on word recognition and inferential information. Other reading strategies reported by parents include: shared reading, read aloud, explain unknown words, parent modelling, and read wrong on purpose and let children correct them.

**Table 1**

*Number of Families and Reading Strategies Utilized by Age Groups*

Reading Strategies	3-year-olds	4-year-olds	5-year-olds
Reading with expressions, actions & sound effects	3	5	5
Picture Walk	7	4	3
Word Tracking	2	4	5
Questioning	5	4	2

Regarding writing, about one third of families (11) reported tracing, copying and writing activities at home. Among them, 6 were from the 5-year-old group. Such activities were initiated by a voluntary program preparing school readiness skills for 5-year-olds. The program assigned writing homework each day mainly focusing on tracing and copying Arabic numbers, Pinyin alphabets and strokes of Chinese characters. The time spent on such homework ranged from less than 5 minutes to 30 minutes daily. While parents believed that teaching conventional writing in preschool is premature, they felt compelled to do so due to the pressure of their child transitioning to elementary school. Six out of the 10 5-year-old families enrolled in the program. Parents supervised the completion of the writing homework and emphasized on writing posture, correctness of stroke orders, and neatness of writing. Among 3- to 4-year-olds, 80% (16) parents reported children doing some kind of emergent writing (mark making and naming) at home. However, only one family indicated a strong encouragement toward such behaviours. The rest of the parents did not seem to recognize those behaviours and their relation to conventional writing. Unexpectedly, one family strongly discouraged the child from drawing and mark-making for the tidiness of home.

## ***Parents and Their Literacy Habits***

Parents in this study aged from 29 to 50 ( $M=35.9$ ) and 29 out of 30 families are currently heterosexually married with their original spouses. The education level of parents ranged from high school to doctoral degree with more than half of parents having a bachelor degree and above. Family yearly income ranged from 70,000 to 1,000,000 Yuan. Overall, parents claim themselves not enjoying reading/have any time for reading, and rarely practicing writing at home. Daily reading includes reading news and posts via cell phone. Some reported paper-based reading activities after children went to bed. Parents appeared to lack a full understanding of the significant impact that their own reading and writing habits can have on their children's literacy development.

From the interviews, we also discovered that in the majority of the families, fathers had very low levels of involvement in children's lives. In some instances, fathers did not reside in the same household as their children and only had occasional visits with them during the week. Fathers were mainly responsible for entertainment such as physical activities, games, and watching movies where mothers were primarily in charge of daily routines, language and literacy learning and education in general.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of the study was to explore what constitutes HLE of pre-schooling children in China. The results outlined a series of interactive experiences between children and their complex social and physical environment which promote their language and literacy development.

Firstly, the results of the paper indicated that parents' perceptions of literacy aligned with the conventional view of literacy as primarily reading and writing skills. Although parents do participate in a range of activities that enhance their children's listening, speaking, and emerging reading and writing skills, these practices are primarily informal and are frequently not acknowledged by parents as beneficial or intentional. This finding underscores the need for a broader conceptual framework of HLE for Chinese children aged 0-6, prior to elementary education. The framework should incorporate literacy activities that are grounded in real-world experiences and informal learning that are part of children's daily lives. Additionally, the relationships between later literacy skills and reading abilities and children's informal and formal HLE remains unclear, suggesting a weaker contribution from the informal HLE (Ciping et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2020). One possible explanation is that most studies measured conventional literacy abilities, such as Pinyin knowledge, vocabulary, and word reading, as outcomes. For children under 6, studies should also measure emergent literacy skills (e.g. listening and speaking abilities, print awareness) when examining literacy outcomes in relation to both informal and formal HLE.

Furthermore, the findings also indicate that the Home Literacy Environment (HLE) for Chinese young children is dynamic, evolving as children mature. This evolution is reflected in changes to home resources, parental expectations, and parent-child interactions centred on language and literacy (Li et al., 2024). For future research, longitudinal studies that track changes in home literacy environments over time are needed. The dynamic nature of the HLE for Chinese young children implies that literacy support and parental education programs should be tailored to family needs in conjunction with developmental needs of young children which can help maximize the impact of these programs.

Additionally, previous studies have recognized that having access to resources that support literacy is a critical component of the Home Literacy Environment (HLE) (Li & Li, 2022; Liu et al., 2018). The results of this study support these findings, emphasising that Chinese young Children generally have a relatively rich HLE, with books being the primary resource through which they interact with print at home. Other toys and arts and crafts supplies also play a crucial role in engaging children in authentic

language and literacy activities, often requiring experienced and intentional caregivers to facilitate their use. Hence, the availability of these resources is intricately connected to the quality of interactions between children and adults as they engage with them. This finding not only supporting previous research showing a positive relationship between family SES and children's future literacy outcomes (Ip et al., 2016; Li & Li, 2022; Ma et al, 2023), but also indicates that the quality of parent-child interactions to language and literacy largely depends on adults' responsiveness and their ability to seize and capitalise the learning opportunities.

Moreover, it is important to highlight that technology plays a significant role in the daily routines of parents and children, serving as a source of entertainment as well as supporting language and literacy development. However, how best to use technology for promoting children's language and literacy development remains unanswered. A recent study by Yuan et al. (2024) found that digital HLE plays a particularly distinct role in Chinese families with young children. Our study concludes that the digital HLE has become an essential component of the Chinese HLE and should be integrated into its conceptual framework.

In addition, while previous research on HLE has primarily focused on parents as the main influence on children's language and literacy development (Cheng & Chu, 2023), our study highlights the unique family structures and routines specific to Chinese families. These findings suggest that future HLE studies should consider the broader immediate social network of young Chinese children, including extended family members like grandparents and siblings as the Chinese government relaxed its policies on birth restriction in the past decade. Additionally, the current study found that parents themselves were often not engaged with printed materials, especially paper-based ones, at home. This raises questions about how parental literacy habits, or the lack thereof, might affect children's language and literacy development.

Last, we found that parents play an important role in children's language and literacy development which is consistent with past research (Li et al., 2024). Parents frequently find themselves torn between their beliefs and their actions when it comes to supporting their children's language and literacy development. Those struggles were impacted by the current academic oriented education system and parents' lack of knowledge on child development. Parents widely recognized that teaching reading and writing to young children requires specialized knowledge and skills and granted schools the responsibility for such learning in young children. Parents often see themselves as supporters of school practices. However, they may have reservations about certain aspects of traditional school methods, such as rote memorization, recitation, and copying or tracing characters. Parents indicated in the interview that they do not want to teach reading and writing too early to children and parents should follow children's interests. Yet, unlike professionals in child development and education, parents often were not able to identify emergent interests in language and literacy and provide support accordingly. Furthermore, in the face of societal pressures to prepare children for school, parents grapple with the decision of succumbing to these pressures or staying informed about current trends in child development. They often choose to delay such pressure by compromising practices that are the norms in the existing education system. For example, parents emphasised on the properness of pen holding and the stroke orders in a character, rather than focusing on the expression and communication purpose of writing.

## **Limitation**

This study provided a comprehensive examination of components that constructed the HLE of Chinese preschool-aged children by taking into account the physical resources, social interactions within families, technology use, parents' own literacy habits and the role of grandparents which are

unique to the Chinese family context. However, this study was based on parental perceptions of their children's HLE. Collecting artefacts, conducting home visits, documenting parent-child interactions during home activities, and including children's own impute in future studies could further enhance research in this field. Although limited by its data source, the in-depth interview with participants provides a rich and relevant data that can inform the complex issues on the construct of HLE of Chinese young children.

## **Conclusion**

The HLE for young Chinese children is a multifaceted concept comprising culturally unique components and practices. This study outlined various interactive experiences between children and their complex social and physical environments that promote language and literacy development, offering a robust framework for future research on younger children. It is crucial to adopt a broader framework for HLE that accounts for both informal and formal activities supporting listening, speaking and emergent literacy for younger children. Additionally, digital HLE, influenced from grandparents and peers, afterschool enrichment opportunities, children's own interests, and parental literacy habits should be considered to gain a holistic view of HLE for children before elementary education in China. Longitudinal studies should continue to explore both informal and formal language and literacy activities in order to understand their relationships with children's future language and literacy abilities and their evolving needs.

Furthermore, parents often struggled between their beliefs and practices due to the academic-oriented education system and their lack of knowledge on child development, positioning themselves as supporters of school practices while challenging conventional methods such as rote memorization. Future studies should examine not only parental perceptions but also practices of language and literacy learning. Schools and educational professions should guide parents in recognising the importance of authentic home activities for language and literacy development and facilitate evidence-based, developmentally appropriate learning opportunities at home.

## ***Suggestions for Future Research***

The current study highlights the complexity of the Home Literacy Environment (HLE) for Chinese preschool-aged children, shaped by the dynamic interplay of evolving family structures, birth and education policies, and cultural contexts. Future research on HLE among preschool-aged children should adopt a comprehensive conceptual framework that includes opportunities for developing emergent literacy skills, particularly those facilitated by digital technology, as well as the literacy interests and habits of both caregivers and children. It is also crucial to assess the quality of language and literacy interactions between caregivers and children. Moreover, research on children before primary schooling should disaggregate findings by age to better capture their rapidly evolving language and literacy needs. Incorporating multiple data sources beyond parental perceptions would further enhance the accuracy of the findings, addressing the belief-practice gap identified in this study and improving the overall reliability and validity of future research.

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## **Conflict of Interest**

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