



FAMILY LITERACY PRACTICES AND ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG MIDDLE BASIC SCHOOL PUPILS IN GWAGWALADA AREA COUNCIL, ABUJA, NIGERIA

BY

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Abstract

Family literacy practices constitute a foundational pillar of children's academic development, yet their nature, prevalence, and impact in specific Nigerian contexts remain insufficiently documented. This study assessed family literacy practices among Middle Basic School pupils' academic engagement in Gwagwalada Area Council, Abuja, focusing on the level, types, and frequency of such practices and their perceived relationship with pupils' academic engagement. Adopting a quantitative descriptive survey design and guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the study employed two sets of questionnaires administered to a multi-stage stratified sample of 190 pupils and 190 parents/guardians drawn from ten public and private primary schools, out of the estimated population of 12,450 pupils and 7,600 households or parental units. To establish the instrument's reliability, a test-retest method was conducted over a two-week interval with 30 pupils and 30 parents in Kwali Area Council, yielding a highly dependable Pearson correlation coefficient score of 0.82. Four research questions were raised to guide the study. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. Findings revealed a high overall level of family literacy practice (cumulative mean = 2.90), with homework assistance (mean = 3.42) and discussion of school topics (mean = 3.15) as the most prevalent and frequently occurring activities. Library visits (mean = 1.85) and book purchases (mean = 2.41) were notably deficient. A significant positive correlation was established between the level of family literacy practice and pupils' academic engagement ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.05$). The study concludes that while parental engagement in home-based literacy is broadly high, it is predominantly academic-reactive rather than literacy-generative. Recommendations are advanced for parents, educators, and policymakers to broaden and deepen the quality of family literacy interactions in the FCT.

Keywords: *Family literacy practices, Home literacy environment, Middle basic education, Parental involvement and Academic engagement*

Introduction

Academic engagement describes a student's psychological and behavioral investment in the learning process, dynamically manifesting through sustained attention, active interest, and focused effort. Despite its foundational importance in driving academic success and fostering deep cognitive development, contemporary educational research consistently suggests that a significant number of students experience a critical deficit in this area, frequently exhibiting a lack of academic engagement that hinders their classroom performance and long-term institutional connection (Owolabi and Owolabi, 2024). In educational psychology and instructional design, academic engagement serves as a critical multidimensional dependent variable encompassing behavioral, cognitive, and affective dimensions of a student's learning process (Chen, Bian & Zhu, 2023). Rather than viewing learning as a passive byproduct of instruction, contemporary scholarship treats academic engagement as a malleable, environmental outcome that is highly sensitive to the quality of support structures within a student's immediate ecological system (Liang and Wu, 2025). Consequently, measuring academic engagement as a primary outcome variable provides a vital baseline for assessing how effectively structural or relational shifts in a student's environment translate into active learning behaviors (Chen et al., 2023).



Within the specific context of the current study, utilizing academic engagement as the dependent variable is essential for bridging the gap between home-based interventions and student development. As pupils navigate the Middle Basic Educational level, they face the cognitive challenge of transitioning from basic text decoding to autonomous, curriculum-based reading comprehension. Analyzing academic engagement as a dependent variable reveals the precise behavioral pathways through which parental interactions—such as shared reading, homework scaffolding, and verbal discussions—act as proximal drivers that spark a child's learning motivation (Loyola-Carrillo et al., 2025). Because academic engagement serves as a robust predictor against early school dropout, academic boredom, and institutional disaffection, evaluating it within this peri-urban location allows educational researchers to understand how home environments help cultivate resilient academic habits amidst material resource constraints (Chen et al., 2023). Literacy development is universally recognized as a cornerstone of educational attainment, economic mobility, and lifelong learning. However, its acquisition is a complex, multi-contextual process that extends considerably beyond the formal classroom environment. Contemporary educational research has firmly established that the family unit serves as the primary and most influential context for early and sustained literacy development (Walsh & Weiser, 2024). This home-based foundation, commonly referred to as family literacy, provides the initial and most enduring cognitive and linguistic scaffolding upon which formal school instruction builds.

Family literacy practices are broadly defined as the constellation of activities within the home environment where adults and children engage dynamically with written and spoken language for functional and recreational purposes (Minor, 2023; Eze & Okoro, 2024). These practices range from formal, intentional interactions such as shared book reading, homework assistance, and educational gaming, to organic, spontaneous exchanges including storytelling, singing rhymes, writing shopping lists, discussing news, and engaging with environmental print. The quality and frequency of these interactions are critical in shaping a child's metalinguistic awareness, vocabulary breadth, and intrinsic motivation to read (Ali et al., 2024). This domestic foundation serves as the primary stage for educational socialization, where parental exposure to print and active academic involvement crucially shape long-term learning trajectories (Amosun & Ogunyebi, 2022). Furthermore, cross-national research in Sub-Saharan Africa demonstrates that parents possess rich, culturally rooted oral traditions and narrative knowledge that significantly bolster foundational literacy when institutional frameworks moving past narrow, deficit-centered definitions actively validate them (Ebubedike et al., 2024; Millora, 2023). Empirically, the strength of this home microsystem relies heavily on specific core components, including structural access to physical reading materials, regular parent-child literacy interactions, consistent homework assistance, educational outings, and managed digital engagement (Akinrinmade et al., 2021). The profound impact of these resources is underscored by national data from the Federal Ministry of Education, which statistically affirmed that pupils who enjoy consistent access to home libraries and receive structured support with their schoolwork significantly outperform their less-supported peers on standardized learning outcomes (Federal Ministry of Education, 2022).

In the Nigerian context, the imperative for robust family literacy support is amplified by systemic educational challenges, including overcrowded classrooms, inadequate instructional materials, and resource-constrained school environments. The Middle Basic Education level (Primary 4 to 6) within Nigeria's 9-3-4 educational system represents a particularly pivotal stage, during which pupils are expected to undergo the crucial transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn" (Spires, 2025). Proficiency at this juncture fundamentally determines future academic trajectories. The 2022 National Assessment of Learning Outcomes (NALO) revealed that a significant proportion of Basic 6 pupils in Nigeria failed to meet the minimum proficiency level in reading comprehension. Similarly, the 2023 McKenzie-Pulse Report on Foundational Literacy in Northern Nigeria indicated that learning poverty—the inability to read and understand a simple text by age 10—remains acutely high, with deficits often linked to insufficient learning support outside school hours (McKenzie-Pulse, 2023).

While higher parental educational attainment significantly enhances the capacity, confidence, and resource access needed to support children's literacy (Arikpo, 2025), parents with limited formal schooling still possess culturally



valuable oral language skills capable of fostering literacy development when properly recognized (Ebubedike et al., 2024). However, these home practices are heavily constrained by household socio-economic status, which directly dictates a family's capacity to purchase books, access educational technology, and maintain a stable learning environment (Akinrinmade et al., 2021). Consequently, escalating household economic pressures in peri-urban Nigerian communities frequently force families to prioritize immediate subsistence over book purchases, severely limiting children's print access (Tariq et al., 2025)—a structural challenge further compounded by parental cultural beliefs, awareness of effective literacy strategies, and severe time constraints arising from employment and household responsibilities (Millora, 2023). Research shows that regular family literacy practices heavily improve child outcomes like vocabulary, reading, writing, and academic attitudes; a cross-cultural meta-analysis by Ali et al. (2024) found that frequent home interactions result in larger vocabularies, superior reading comprehension, and more positive academic self-concepts. This direct relationship is revealed studies in Nigeria, where Amosun and Ogunyebi (2022) established a significant correlation ($r = 0.30$; $p < 0.05$) between home environments and reading skills in Ibadan, while Akinwamide and Oshin (2023) demonstrated that structured parental shared reading strongly predicts reading comprehension in Ekiti State regardless of income. Furthermore, Eze and Okoro (2024) showed that these practices extend beyond formal mechanics, finding that intergenerational storytelling and oral history serve as vital, culturally rooted literacy events that bolster narrative skills and cultural identity within the family structure.

Focusing on the Federal Capital Territory, Gwagwalada Area Council presents a distinctive and instructive socio-educational microcosm. Characterized by a rapid blend of urban, peri-urban, and rural communities, it hosts a population with diverse socio-economic standings, ethnic affiliations, and cultural backgrounds. This heterogeneity directly influences the home literacy landscape. The nature and frequency of literacy practices within households in Gwagwalada are shaped by a complex matrix of variables including parental educational attainment, household economic pressures, deep-seated cultural attitudes, access to libraries, and the pervasive influence of digital media (Tariq et al., 2025). Despite the well-established global importance of family literacy, a specific, nuanced, and empirically driven assessment of family literacy practices within the socio-economically diverse households of Gwagwalada Area Council is conspicuously absent from both scholarly and policy literature pertaining to the FCT. This study is anchored on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which posits that human development is shaped by the complex interplay between an individual and multiple environmental systems. The theory conceptualizes the environment as nested structures: the Microsystem (the child's immediate home environment and direct interactions with parents); the Mesosystem (interconnections between home and school); the Exosystem (indirect influences such as parents' work environments and community resources); the Macrosystem (broader cultural values and societal norms); and the Chronosystem (temporal changes, including digital media infiltration into family life).

This framework is particularly appropriate for studying family literacy practices in Gwagwalada, as it provides a comprehensive lens for understanding how the microsystem—with parents as central agents—directly shapes children's literacy development, while acknowledging that this microsystem is embedded in and influenced by broader ecological systems (McLemore, 2024). The theory's emphasis on contextual influences is especially relevant in Nigeria's diverse socio-cultural landscape, where parental attitudes and literacy practices are shaped by cultural norms, economic realities, and educational policies operating at multiple ecological levels. This study therefore seeks to systematically assess the prevailing state of family literacy practices among Middle Basic School pupils in Gwagwalada Area Council, Abuja, with a view to generating precise, context-specific empirical evidence that can inform targeted, culturally sensitive, and pragmatic interventions. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the level of family literacy practice among Middle Basic School pupils in Gwagwalada Area Council, Abuja?



2. What are the types of family literacy practices prevalent in the homes of Middle Basic pupils in Gwagwalada Area Council?
3. What is the frequency of family literacy practice among Middle Basic pupils in Gwagwalada Area Council?
4. Is there a perceived relationship between the level of family literacy practice and pupils' academic engagement?

Methodology

A quantitative descriptive survey design was adopted for this study. This design enabled the systematic collection of data from a large number of respondents regarding family literacy practices, allowing the researcher to describe the level, types, frequency, and perceived relationship of these practices as they naturally exist in the home environment. The population comprised all Middle Basic pupils (Primary 4, 5, and 6) and their parents/guardians in public and private primary schools within Gwagwalada Area Council, Abuja. According to data from the FCT Universal Basic Education Board (UBEB, 2024), approximately 12,450 Middle Basic pupils, from the projected 7,600 households or parental units, are enrolled across both school types in the Area Council. A multi-stage sampling procedure was adopted. Stage 1 employed stratified sampling to categorize schools into public and private strata. Stage 2 used simple random sampling (balloting method) to select five public schools and five private schools, yielding ten schools in total. Stage 3 employed purposive sampling to select 19 pupils from each school across Primary 4, 5, and 6, ensuring equal representation across classes. Their parents/guardians were automatically included, creating 190 pupil-parent pairs. This procedure ensured adequate representation of the diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds present in Gwagwalada Area Council.

Two researcher-developed questionnaires were used: one for pupils and one for parents/guardians. The Pupils' Questionnaire comprised demographic items and five items assessing the types of family literacy practices they experience at home (shared reading, homework assistance, storytelling, book purchase, discussion of school topics, and library visits), using a four-point scale of Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). The Parents'/Guardians' Questionnaire comprised five sections capturing: (A) demographic data; (B) level of family literacy practice (five items); (D) frequency of practices (five items) and (E) perceived pupils' academic engagement (five items). Both instruments used four-point Likert scales for consistency and ease of quantitative analysis. Item development was guided by the conceptual framework and aligned with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Face and content validity were established through review by the project supervisor and two subject matter experts in the Department of Arts Education, University of Abuja, whose feedback was used to refine ambiguous items and ensure adequate content coverage. Reliability was established using a test-retest method with a two-week interval, administered to 30 pupils and 30 parents in Kwali Area Council, a comparable neighbouring area not included in the main study. Analysis using Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.82, indicating high reliability.

Pupils' questionnaires were administered in classrooms under researcher supervision; parents' questionnaires were sent home with pupils with clear completion instructions. Of the 380 copies of the questionnaires distributed, 365 were retrieved, representing a 96% retrieval rate. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequency counts, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations) to answer Research Questions 1–3, and Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient for Research Question 4 and the hypothesis, tested at the 0.05 level of significance. Likert-scale mean scores were interpreted using the following benchmarks: 3.26–4.00 = High/Always; 2.51–3.25 = Moderate/Often; 1.76–2.50 = Low/Sometimes; 1.00–1.75 = Very Low/Never. A benchmark mean of 2.50 was used as the cutoff for Research Question 1, with scores below 2.50 indicating a low level and scores of 2.50 and above indicating a high level.



Results

Research Question 1: What is the level of family literacy practice among Middle Basic School pupils in Gwagwalada Area Council, Abuja?

Parents/guardians were presented with five statements assessing their engagement in family literacy activities. Results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Level of Family Literacy Practice (Parents/Guardians)

S/N	STATEMENTS	SA	A	D	SD	MEAN	REMARK
1	I read storybooks with my child at home	35	98	42	15	2.85	High
2	I help my child with homework and assignments	68	102	15	5	3.42	High
3	I tell stories or folktales to my child	28	85	55	22	2.68	High
4	I buy books or educational materials for my child	18	62	72	38	2.41	Low
5	I discuss school topics with my child	52	88	35	15	3.15	High
Cumulative mean						2.9	High

Source: Field Survey, 2026. SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree

Table 1 shows that the cumulative mean score of 2.90 indicates a high overall level of family literacy practice among Middle Basic pupils in Gwagwalada Area Council. Homework assistance recorded the highest mean (3.42), followed by discussion of school topics (3.15), shared reading (2.85), and storytelling (2.68). Book purchasing recorded the lowest mean (2.41), falling below the 2.50 benchmark and indicating a low level of practice.

Research Question 2: What are the types of family literacy practices prevalent in the homes of Middle Basic pupils in Gwagwalada Area Council?

Pupils were asked to indicate their experience of six types of literacy practices in the home. Results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Types of Family Literacy Practices (Pupils)

S/N	STATEMENTS	SA	A	D	SD	MEAN	REMARK
1	My parents read storybooks with me at home	32	88	48	22	2.78	Agree
2	My parents help me with my homework	68	95	18	9	3.38	Agree
3	My parents tell me stories or folktales	25	78	58	29	2.62	Agree
4	My parents buy books and reading materials for me	15	58	72	45	2.35	Disagree
5	My parents discuss school topics with me	48	82	35	25	3.08	Agree
6	My parents take me to the library	8	22	68	92	1.85	Disagree
Cumulative mean						2.68	Agree

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 2 reveals that homework assistance (mean = 3.38) and discussion of school topics (mean = 3.08) were the most prevalent family literacy practices as reported by pupils, followed by shared reading (2.78) and storytelling (2.62). Notably, library visits recorded the lowest mean (1.85), falling below both the 2.50 benchmark and the “Low” interpretation range, indicating this practice is virtually absent from the family literacy repertoire. The purchase of books also fell below the benchmark (mean = 2.35).

Research Question 3: What is the frequency of family literacy practice among Middle Basic pupils in Gwagwalada Area Council?

Parents/guardians reported on the frequency of their engagement in family literacy activities. Results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Frequency of Family Literacy Practices (Parents/Guardians)

S/N	STATEMENTS	SA	A	D	SD	MEAN	REMARK
1	I read with my child frequently at home	28	82	55	25	2.62	Moderate
2	I help my child with homework regularly	65	98	18	9	3.35	High
3	I tell stories to my child often	22	68	62	38	2.48	Low



4	I buy books for my child regularly	15	52	75	48	2.25	Low
5	I discuss school topics with my child frequently	45	85	38	22	3.02	Moderate
Cumulative mean						2.74	Moderate

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 3 demonstrates a moderate overall frequency of family literacy practices (cumulative mean = 2.74). Homework assistance occurred with the highest frequency (mean = 3.35), while storytelling (mean = 2.48) and book purchases (mean = 2.25) occurred infrequently. Shared reading (mean = 2.62) and discussion of school topics (mean = 3.02) occurred with moderate frequency.

Research Question 4: Is there a perceived relationship between the level of family literacy practice and pupils' academic engagement?

Parents/guardians reported on their children perceived academic engagement (Table 4), and a correlation analysis was conducted to test the hypothesis corresponding to the research question.

Table 4: Correlation between Level of Family Literacy Practice and Pupils' Academic Engagement

Group	N	Mean	SD	r-cal.	p-value	Decision
Level of Family Literacy Practice	190	2.90	0.85	0.68	0.000	Rejected
Pupils' Interest and Engagement	190	2.92	0.82			

Significance Level: $p < 0.05$. Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 5 reveals a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.68$, $p = 0.000$) between the level of family literacy practice and pupils' interest in reading and overall academic engagement. Since $p < 0.05$, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that as the level of family literacy practice increases, pupils' interest in reading and academic engagement also increases.

Discussion of the Findings

The study established a high overall level of family literacy practice across the surveyed households, evidenced by a cumulative mean score of 2.90. This high baseline is characterized by strong parental engagement in proximal home activities, including active homework assistance, direct school-related discussions, shared reading sessions, and traditional storytelling routines. Within the architectural framework of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, these rich home-based interactions represent direct, critical proximal processes operating actively within the child's immediate microsystem. As posited by Wilburn (2024), parents serve as the primary, central developmental agents within this foundational environmental layer, and their daily verbal exchanges and deliberate educational interactions directly shape early language acquisition, vocabulary expansion, and cognitive-linguistic trajectories. Furthermore, the high prevalence of daily homework assistance and regular school-related discussions observed in Gwagwalada reflects a strong, active home-school alignment. This structural synchrony aligns with the national baseline metrics established in the 2022 National Assessment of Learning Outcomes (NALO) report, which statistically affirmed that primary school pupils who receive systematic, home-based academic monitoring significantly outperform their isolated peers. These active microsystem routines also directly mirror the empirical findings of Arikpo (2025) in Port Harcourt, where interactive domestic tasks—such as studying together, reviewing school records, and supervising assignments—were consistently identified as the primary, most reliably executed functions performed by Nigerian families to bolster child literacy profiles.

A paradox emerges when analyzing the specific types of literacy practices prevalent within these households, yielding an overall prevalence mean score of 2.68. While relational and interactive engagement types scored remarkably high, material and capital-intensive investments—specifically the direct purchasing of books (Mean = 2.41) and organizing structured library visits—were found to be exceptionally low. This operational disconnect



highlights a critical tension: parents in Gwagwalada demonstrate a high relational willingness to engage in literacy activities, yet they are severely constrained by structural resource limitations. This finding highlights the profound influence of broader exosystemic and macrosystemic pressures on the immediate home environment. As noted by Tariq et al. (2025), severe economic pressures and high inflation within peri-urban Nigerian communities frequently force families to prioritize immediate household subsistence over educational expenditures, effectively rendering home libraries and supplemental book purchases an unaffordable luxury. This material deficit is further exacerbated by community-level infrastructure gaps; Gwagwalada's positioning within the Federal Capital Territory features localized disparities in public library infrastructure, making physical library visits logistically and financially challenging for many households. Consequently, while oral and interactive types of literacy thrive, print-centric and resource-dependent practices remain heavily constrained by these external economic factors.

The operational frequency of family literacy practices executed within the home environment achieved a moderate cumulative mean score of 2.74, revealing a distinct imbalance between reactive and proactive home routines. Active homework assistance registered the highest and most consistent operational frequency (Mean = 3.35), whereas book purchases and cultural storytelling (Mean = 2.48) occurred with a significantly lower frequency. This striking imbalance indicates that home literacy routines in Gwagwalada maintain a highly reactive orientation tailored to immediate schoolwork demands, rather than a proactive, self-determined cultivation of independent reading habits. This pattern is deeply embedded in the realities of parental "time poverty" within peri-urban environments. As observed by Akinrinmade et al. (2021), heavy occupational demands and long commuting times common in the FCT exhaust parental energy, leaving sufficient time for mandatory school-directed tasks like homework monitoring but squeezing out discretionary, open-ended literacy activities such as storytelling. This finding strongly aligns with the core insights of the Power of Parents research framework (Ebubedike et al., 2024), which emphasizes the urgent need for flexible, socio-economically sensitive educational programming that accommodates the practical constraints, diverse schedules, and unique daily realities facing contemporary African families.

The inferential analysis revealed a strong, statistically significant positive correlation ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.05$) between the level of family literacy practice and pupils overall academic engagement, resulting in the decisive rejection of the null hypothesis. This robust correlation provides powerful empirical validation for the practical application of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to basic education in Nigeria. The finding definitively confirms that the home microsystem—with parents acting as intentional, central scaffolding agents—directly dictates and enhances children's observable literacy dispositions and academic behaviors. This result strongly aligns with Ali et al.'s (2024) comprehensive cross-cultural meta-analysis, which demonstrated that children raised in literacy-dense home environments exhibit superior reading comprehension parameters, advanced writing skills, and markedly elevated academic self-concepts. Furthermore, this strong relationship aligns with the regression models developed by Akinwamide and Oshin (2023), which proved that structured parental involvement during shared reading sessions serves as a powerful positive predictor of English language reading comprehension scores among Nigerian primary school pupils, even when controlling for socioeconomic status. Finally, the documentation by Eze and Okoro (2024) regarding how intergenerational oral storytelling in indigenous languages successfully bolsters narrative skills and cultural identity provides an essential, culturally responsive framework for broadening our understanding of literacy-enriching practices, proving that academic engagement is deeply optimized when formal school expectations are harmonized with culturally rich, home-based traditions.

Conclusion

This study provides the first comprehensive empirical assessment of family literacy practices among Middle Basic School pupils in Gwagwalada Area Council, Abuja. The findings confirm that family literacy engagement is broadly high but predominantly academic-reactive in character, with homework assistance and school topic discussions dominating while recreational reading, storytelling, book purchasing, and library visits remain



underdeveloped. The significant positive correlation between family literacy practice and pupils' reading interest and academic engagement confirms the centrality of the home environment as a site of literacy development, consistent with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

Recommendations

Based on the implications of these findings for multiple educational stakeholders, the following actions are recommended:

1. Parents should intentionally expand literacy interactions beyond mandatory homework assistance to include shared recreational reading and cultural storytelling.
2. Educators should design targeted engagement programmes, utilising this empirical data to formulate structured parental involvement programs and develop student reading take-home initiatives.
3. Curriculum Developers should integrate interactive, home-school collaborative learning activities and user-friendly parent guides directly into standard instructional materials.
4. Future Researchers should investigate how digital media dynamically shapes family literacy practices within peri-urban Nigerian communities, and examine comparative differences in home literacy practices across public and private school contexts, as well as across urban, peri-urban, and rural settlements within Gwagwalada Area Council.

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