

JORDANIAN EARLY PRIMARY STAGE TEACHERS' SELF-REPORTED PRACTICES TO DEVELOP THEIR PUPILS' READING IN ARABIC

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Abstract – *This study examines teachers' practices for developing early primary stage (6-9 year-old) pupils' reading in Arabic in the northern region of Jordan using a 25-item self-assessment checklist and a semi-structured interview. The subjects reported that their practices stem more from extrinsic motivation (e.g. responding to calls for enabling children to take part in literary competitions) than from intrinsic motivation (e.g. a personal interest in reading). The findings showed that 22 items of the Checklist scored moderate to little degrees of practice, which was further confirmed by the results of the interview. Besides, although there were no statistically significant differences among the subjects' reports of their practices which may be attributed to the effect of gender and academic qualification, statistically significant differences were found due to teaching experience, having studied literacy-related coursework in pre-service preparation, and having a personal interest in reading. The study concludes with relevant implications for reading instruction and teacher education.*

Introduction and background

Not only does the ability to read and write provide the foundation of education and the basis for all academic disciplines, it is paramount for success throughout life, from kindergarten to future employment of adults (Cassell, 2004; Jordan, Snow & Porsche, 2000). Parents, caregivers, and early childhood educators play an important role in children's literacy development (McGee & Richgels, 1996) and thus it is imperative that these make a concerted effort to ensure that children are exposed to literacy-rich environments to support their development.

Reading and writing are believed to develop in synchrony as young children engage in activities that promote verbal and written language (Burgess, Lundgren & Pianta, 2001; Sulzby & Teale, 1991). Teacher expertise is believed to be a catalyst and a major contributor to children's literacy success (Block, Oakar & Hurt, 2002; Duffy, 2001; Knipper, 2003; Willis & Harris, 2000). Children's literacy learning is believed to benefit considerably from teachers who make literacy an integral part of their daily classroom routines through modeling reading

and writing behaviors, engaging their pupils in responsive dialogues, and fostering their interest in learning to read and write (NAEYC, 1998; Slegers, 1996; Teale & Yokota, 2000).

There is evidence (Bissex, 1980; Cavazos-Kottke, 2006; Clay, 1979) that the sound development of children's literacy skills is partially dependent on teacher practices. In this context, Bissex (1980) and Clay (1979) confirm the value of teacher dictations of children's stories for developing word awareness, spelling, and the conventions of writing. Along the same lines, Cavazos-Kottke (2006) suggests that teacher practices within the regular curriculum improve their pupils' literacy skills, which can be achieved by allowing these pupils opportunities to choose what they want to read from available reading materials.

Syntheses of the literature on effective literacy instruction (Medwell, Wray, Poulson & Fox, 1998; Wray & Medwell, 1999; Wray, Medwell, Fox & Poulson, 1999) suggest that effective teachers often use pedagogical practices that seem to positively affect pupils' progress in reading and writing. Among these practices are: creating 'literate' classroom environments and encouraging pupils to use them to support their own practice of literacy skills; modeling reading in a variety of ways and providing pupils with a range of examples of effective use of reading and writing; embedding reading instruction into a wider context using whole texts for teaching vocabulary, word attack and recognition; providing pupils with age- and ability-appropriate tasks with engaging academic content and monitoring pupils' progress and using assessment to inform teaching and report on progress.

Problem, purpose, and significance of the study

The Jordanian government has shown unprecedented commitment to educational reform embodied in a series of initiatives which aim to transform the education system at the early childhood, basic, and secondary levels to produce graduates with the skills needed for knowledge economy. Educational indicators have improved consistently over the past two decades, with an illiteracy rate of 8.9%, the third lowest in the Arab world, and a 98% gross enrolment ratio at the primary level.

Most noted among these initiatives is a two-phase program called Education Reform for the Knowledge Economy Program (ERfKE). ERfKE I (2003-2009) aimed at aligning educational policies and programs with the needs of a knowledge-based economy, improving the physical learning environment in most schools, and promoting early childhood education. Similarly, ERfKE II (2009-2015) aims to institutionalize the reforms introduced under ERfKE I, with a particular focus on school level implementation and teacher quality, not to

mention fine tuning the curriculum and student assessment to ensure alignment with a knowledge-based economy.

However, even though the development of literacy skills in the primary stage tops the Jordanian Ministry of Education's agenda of priorities, the authors have been disheartened by the little attention it receives in practice. What the authors have observed in their regular school visits has been documented by Ihmeideh (2009), who reported that Jordanian primary grade children hardly ever receive any teacher encouragement to develop their literacy skills.

This mismatch between set goals and actual practice could be attributed to a host of factors, most important amongst which may be teachers' lack of ability or inclination to promote literacy as a paramount ingredient of the learning/teaching process. This study, therefore, set out to identify teacher self-reported practices for developing their pupils' reading. More specifically, it attempts to provide answers to the following questions:

1. Which practices do primary grade teachers perceive as instrumental in developing young children's reading
2. To what extent, if any, do such variables as gender, qualification, teaching experience, exposure to child-literacy courses during pre-service training, and personal interest in reading affect teacher reported practices to develop young children's reading.

The potential significance of this study lies in its scope. It explores an area that is, to the best of these researchers' knowledge, has largely been ignored in the Jordanian context, namely, primary grade teachers' practices for developing young children's reading. It is also hoped that the present findings have implications for teacher training and curriculum design by exploring pedagogical approaches and teaching and assessment practices that prepare young children for contemporary literacy practice.

Method, sample, instruments, and data collection and analysis

Two samples were drawn to achieve the purpose of the study: one randomly selected to respond to the self-assessment checklist and another to respond to the interview¹. The former consisted of 433 and the latter of 53 class teachers of the first three grades in the public schools of the northern region of Jordan which spans eight directorates of education (viz., Irbid first, second, and third directorates, Al-Ramtha, Al-Koura, Alaghwar, Bani-Kananah, and Jarash). Class teachers major in Elementary Education rather any one subject matter and, thus, teach all school subjects except English.

The authors used a combination of quantitative (self-assessment checklist) and qualitative (interview) approaches. These are dubbed ‘mixed methods’ by Tashakkori & Teddlie (2003), and are seen not as mutually exclusive but rather as approaches which have the potential to complement each other and present a more comprehensive view of the problem at hand.

Even though the study is reported in English, both instruments were written and administered in Arabic, the respondents’ mother tongue, to avoid inconveniencing them or affecting their ability to respond fully and freely. However, both instruments, as well as the responses to them, were translated into English to facilitate reporting the findings of the research. A fellow professor of linguistics checked samples of the translations against the original scripts and attested to their validity.

Prior to the design of the instruments, the authors conducted an exhaustive review of the literature and an initial survey of a sample of 23 teachers who were queried about whether or not they have any particular practices to develop their pupils’ reading skills inside and outside the school. Initially, a 5-Likert scale, 29-item self-assessment checklist was designed and checked for validity by a jury of six Jordanian professors of elementary education, teaching English to speakers of other languages, as well as courses in measurement and evaluation. In addition to minor changes to the wording and sequencing of the items, the Checklist was reduced to 25 items. For example, the two items *the teacher selects stories which relate to the science curriculum* and *the teacher selects stories to support reading lessons* were collapsed into the item *the teacher selects reading materials which relate to the school curriculum* to achieve economy and avoid redundancy.

Cronbach alpha coefficient was calculated to measure the internal consistency of the Checklist. It was established at 0.83, which was deemed appropriate for the purposes of this research.

A month before conducting the actual investigation, the Checklist was used twice on a sample of 27 teachers, who were excluded from the main sample, with two weeks in between. Pearson correlation coefficient of the test-retest of the instrument was found to be 0.88, which was considered appropriate for the purposes of this research.

The Checklist

The subjects were asked to respond to each of the twenty-five items of the Checklist on a 5-point Likert-type scale in which 1 = *never*, 2 = *seldom*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*, and 5 = *always*. To allow the respondents adequate time to respond to the Checklist, the authors took one month to personally collect the filled-in specimen from the respondents. Of the 433 copies of the Checklist

distributed, 357 (82.4%) were returned. The returned specimen only included 50 copies by male respondents (vs. 307 by female ones), which is due to a recent policy by which the Jordanian Ministry of Education has ceased training/recruiting male teachers for the first three primary grades which are becoming increasingly co-educational and taught almost exclusively by female teachers.

The data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for the items of the Checklist which were then ranked in descending order of occurrence to determine the most valued practices.

Five-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was also used to determine whether or not there were statistically significant differences which can be attributed to the variables of the study (viz., gender, teaching experience, previous coursework, and personal interest in reading), which allowed the authors to compare the relative weightings of the self-reported practices across the teacher subgroups.

The Interview

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed by the researchers, based on their collective experience in basic and tertiary education and an extensive review of the literature. A sample of 53 class teachers was purposefully chosen for the interview, based on their willingness and cooperation, to elicit further information and, thus, gain deeper insights into their perceptions about and reported practices for promoting their pupils' reading. The content validity of the schedule was established by a jury of six Jordanian professors of elementary education, teaching English to speakers of other languages, and measurement and evaluation whose collective suggestions for rephrasing, deleting or adding items were taken into account, resulting in a seven-question schedule.

On the other hand, the reliability of the schedule was assured through conducting the interview twice, with a three-week interval, with five teachers who were excluded from the main sample of the study. The authors collectively analyzed these interviews prior to enlisting the help of a fellow professor in elementary education to analyze them on his own. The two analyses were almost identical, which was taken as evidence for the reliability of the schedule.

In conducting the interviews, the authors adhered to the procedures of qualitative research drawing on the work of Creswell (1998), Glaser and Strauss (1967), and Weiss (1994), as shown in the following:

- Explaining the problem and purpose of the study to the respondents who have agreed to take part and assuring them of the confidentiality of the

information they provide and its use exclusively for the purpose of academic research;

- Obtaining the respondents' prior consent to record the interviews;
- Setting the time and place for the interview according to the respondents' availability and preference;
- Attempting to establish a friendly rapport with the respondents prior to the interview to give it the feel of a conversation rather than a structured academic procedure;
- Identifying each respondent by a number, rather than his/her own name, to ensure anonymity and encourage respondents to divulge personal information;
- Posing the interview questions and then re-asking one or more of those in various forms as a means to give the respondents the opportunity to elaborate without having to interrupt the interview or badger them to answer the question more fully; and
- Showing each respondent the transcript of his/her recorded responses to ascertain that this is what he/she intended to say and, at same time, allowing them to add to and/or delete from its content.

Similarly, in analyzing the subjects' responses to the interview, the authors observed the procedures of qualitative analysis as outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Creswell (1998), and Oliver (2000), as follows:

- After transcribing each interview on a separate sheet of paper, the authors analyzed the script line by line to identify key points.
- The key points in each sentence were marked with a series of codes.
- The data were grouped into core categories, and similar ideas were put into a number of sub-categories within them.
- The reliability of the analysis was assured by enlisting the help of a fellow professor of elementary education to redo the analysis individually. A comparison between the two analyses revealed agreement along both the main and sub-categories, which were taken as evidence on the soundness and accuracy of the analysis.
- The frequencies and percentages of the responses along the sub-categories were calculated.

Findings and discussion

This section is organized according to the research questions: *the practices perceived by primary grade teachers as instrumental in developing young*

children's reading and the extent to which the variables of gender, qualification, teaching experience, having studied child-literacy courses during pre-service preparation, and having a personal interest in reading affect teacher practices to develop young children's reading.

The first research question

To answer this question, means and standard deviations were computed for each of the Checklist items. These data are presented in descending order of occurrence in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Means and Standard Deviations of the sample's responses to the Self-Assessment Checklist

| Rank | Item Number in Checklist | Item The teacher _____ | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|------|--------------------------|---|------|--------------------|
| 1 | 2 | talks with children about the importance of reading for developing an individual's personality | 3.56 | 1.44 |
| 2 | 13 | encourages children to participate in classroom literary competitions | 3.53 | 1.48 |
| 3 | 14 | encourages children to take part in regional/national literary competitions | 3.51 | 1.48 |
| 4 | 18 | selects reading materials which relate to the school curriculum | 3.46 | 1.42 |
| 5 | 4 | provides children with electronic reading materials such as CD-ROMs and DVDs | 3.46 | 1.42 |
| 6 | 5 | reinforces children, who show an interest in reading, with books, magazines, and other literacy artifacts | 3.24 | 1.30 |

continues

| Rank | Item Number in Checklist | Item The teacher _____ | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|------|--------------------------|--|------|--------------------|
| 7 | 9 | allows children opportunities to talk about what they read | 3.22 | 1.41 |
| 8 | 12 | engages children with discussions of what they read | 3.19 | 1.33 |
| 9 | 7 | engages children with discussions of their literacy-related hobbies | 3.18 | 1.41 |
| 10 | 1 | chooses a wide range of reading materials to meet children's diverse interests | 3.14 | 1.35 |
| 11 | 6 | designs certain reading activities to encourage children to read | 3.13 | 1.25 |
| 12 | 10 | encourages children to have a home library/personal book corner | 3.10 | 1.35 |
| 13 | 11 | urges children to use the school library | 3.08 | 1.30 |
| 14 | 16 | accompanies children to the school/local library | 3.07 | 1.36 |
| 15 | 3 | communicates with parents about worthwhile reading materials available in local book shops | 2.48 | 1.37 |
| 16 | 19 | involves parents in assessing their children's literacy | 2.47 | 1.32 |

| Rank | Item Number in Checklist | Item The teacher _____ | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|------|--------------------------|--|------|--------------------|
| 17 | 25 | designs literacy-related activities for children to do at home | 2.45 | 1.23 |
| 18 | 24 | communicates with parents about their children's reading needs and interests | 2.39 | 0.98 |
| 19 | 17 | provides children with stories, magazines and other literacy-related materials to quench their natural curiosity | 2.35 | 1.23 |
| 20 | 20 | communicates with parents regarding the criteria for selecting children's reading materials | 2.32 | 0.99 |
| 21 | 23 | communicates with parents to urge them to take their children to the local library | 2.25 | 1.26 |
| 22 | 21 | provides parents with models to assess their children's literacy skills | 2.15 | 1.35 |
| 23 | 8 | encourages children to read voluntarily | 2.11 | 0.90 |
| 24 | 15 | allocates a once-a-week lesson for voluntary reading | 2.11 | 0.91 |
| 25 | 22 | meets with parents to familiarize them with effective ways for developing their children's literacy skills | 2.08 | 1.39 |

Table 1 shows that Checklist items number 2, 13, and 14 topped the list of teacher self-reported practices, with means of 3.56, 3.53, and 3.51, respectively. This suggests that teachers' classroom practices focus on *involving children in reading for self-growth* (item 2) and for *participation in literary competitions in- and outside the school* (items 13 and 14).

Similarly, the vast majority of the interviewees reported similar practices, albeit more for participation in literary competitions than for *personal growth and development*, as shown in excerpts 1-3, below:

I encourage all children to read and urge them to represent our school in the literary competitions held by the Ministry of Education [1].

I especially encourage gifted pupils to read more to be able to take part and win in the Ministry's annual literary competitions [2].

We have to encourage children to read literature so that they can take part in the educational competitions organized by the Ministry. At the beginning of each semester, all schools are formally asked to nominate candidates for participation in these competitions [3].

Nevertheless, as important as this result is, it does not necessarily reflect a genuinely effective practice, partially because taking part in literary competitions should stem more from the pupils themselves than from the teacher or MoE regulations, not to mention that this practice is only directed at a select group of pupils (i.e. the gifted or literary-inclined) rather than the general pupil population who should be targeted with teacher literacy-related practices. Besides, although the teachers reportedly encourage their pupils' participation in literary competitions, other reported classroom practices do not reflect that these pupils are necessarily encouraged to do so.

These practices were reported in either moderate (items 18, 4, 5, 9, 12, 7, 1, 6, 10, 11, and 16) or low (items 3, 19, 25, 24, 17, 20, 23, 21, 8, 15, and 22) frequency. The discussion below is a synthesis of these practices.

Making use of supplementary materials/activities

The selection of reading topics which correlate with the topics of the school curriculum (item 18) scored a mean of 3.46, which may suggest that teachers do not necessarily pay much attention to *using reading materials to support/ supplement teaching and learning the curriculum*. More specifically, this is evident by the teachers' responses to items 1, 6, and 25, which reveal that they *choose/design reading activities for the children to carry out in school or at home* at moderate levels.

Similarly, the data show that teachers do not often *design class and home reading activities to engage children in reading* and only moderately *provide them with print and electronic reading matter to encourage them to read* and to reinforce their reading efforts (items 4 and 5) as is the case with *engaging children in discussions about their literacy-related hobbies* to determine the types of reading materials that would develop their literacy skills (items 7 and 1) with means of 3.18 and 3.14, respectively.

The teachers' self-reported practices seem to suggest a fairly moderate commitment to encouraging children to read, as shown by their responses to items 9, 12, and 1 (see Table 1) which relate to *allowing children opportunities to talk about what they read amongst themselves or with the teacher* and *choosing a wide range of reading materials to meet these children's diverse interests*. In the same vein, the interview indicates that *allowing children the opportunity to talk about what they read* is not an established teacher practice, for only less than one third of the interviewees reported that even when they discuss what is being read with the children, the goal is not fostering these children's literacy but rather making sure instructional objectives are achieved, as shown in excerpts 4-6 below:

I discuss the stories in the textbook with my pupils to assure effective instruction and attainment [4].

I have some stories in my classroom book corner. I have not bought them but rather collected them from the Directorate. However, to be honest with you, I have never discussed any of these stories with the children, because I am sure these children are unable to comprehend them but just look at the pictures in them [5].

I never allow my pupils to talk about their reading materials, but only because I have too many things to worry about. I do not have time to do that. I am overloaded and the children's timetable is overflowing, add to that that the regulations stipulate that I teach the whole curriculum before year-end [6].

These excerpts seem to suggest that the focus is not on developing children's literacy but rather on teaching the school curriculum, which is not uncommon in the Jordanian educational system which seems to attribute a particular sanctity to school textbooks. The literature (Al-Barakat, 2001; Skierso, 1991; Tulley & Farr, 1990) provides evidence that if the textbook is sanctified as the main teaching/learning resource, it is bound to dominate and steer classroom practice, as it identifies what and how teachers teach and pupils learn. As teachers feel compelled to cover the entire curriculum, they are bound to teach the content only briefly and often superficially and, thus, children go over the topics in each grade rather than really mastering them before moving on.

According to NAEYC (2009, p.4), practices of concern include ‘excessive lecturing to the whole group, fragmented teaching of discrete objectives, and insistence that teachers follow rigid, tightly paced schedules [...] curtailing valuable experiences such as problem solving, rich play, collaboration with peers, opportunities for emotional and social development, outdoor/physical activity, and the arts [not to mention that] children are less likely to develop a love of learning and a sense of their own competence and ability to make choices.’

These findings are further supported with data derived from the interview, which seems to suggest that teachers do not give much attention to supplementing the curriculum, probably because they believe that the textbook is adequate and because educational authorities do not require them to do so, as shown in excerpts 7-12 below:

I restrict all reading activities to those in the school textbook [7].

The Ministry of Education does not require that we design reading activities to develop our pupils’ literacy. I believe the textbooks include adequate reading texts to develop their literacy [8].

I do not believe there is much point in my purchasing any reading materials. Last year alone, Irbid Directorate of Education provided forty stories. No matter what their reading interests are, the children have to read these stories—just stories, no other literature [9].

My school does not allocate a budget to purchase books to cater for all the children’s reading needs and interests [10].

Once or twice a year, we reward bright students with some magazines and stories in appreciation for their academic achievement [11].

To be blunt and totally honest with you, we do not give them books to quench their curiosity. We have other priorities in the budget [12].

This seems in contrast with the teachers’ self-reported efforts to encourage pupils to take part in school, regional, and national literary competitions. In addition, they seem to believe that reading materials should be given to certain children (more often than not, as a reward to avid readers or high achievers) without placing much value on these reading materials potential to quench these children’s natural curiosity.

However, these findings are quite consistent with the quantitative analysis (see Table 1) which reveals that practices such as *providing children with stories, magazines, and other literacy-related materials to quench their natural curiosity* (item 17) were low among those reported by the teachers, with a mean of 2.35.

This may suggest that these teachers lack for any deliberate practices to develop their pupils' reading even though they report more progressive practices such as *providing children with electronic reading materials*, which is in line with recent evidence on the potential of ICT to increase children's interest in reading (Elkind, 2006).

This apparent contradiction may be resolved if one attributed the teachers' negative assessment of their practices for developing their pupils' reading to their misunderstanding of how interest can be developed in young children. This is inconsistent with current educational perspectives that emphasize exposing children to a plethora of literacy-related artifacts to allow them the opportunity to read according to their needs and interests.

Rajeb (1996), for example, suggests that children be exposed to literature to enable them to develop their personalities and experience, which is possible, if not inevitable, given the current technological advances and the accelerated transfer of information. Electronic literature, often with multimedia effects which enables children to interact with the textual display on the computer screen (Jong & Bus, 2004), is currently readily abundant with special attention to children's unique needs, interests, and backgrounds that impact their respective choice to engage in literacy-related activities (Swartz & Hendricks, 2000).

The respondents' religious commitment to the curriculum can be attributed, as also gleaned from their responses to the interview, to the following reasons:

- school principals' overzealous commitment to teaching the entire textbook by the end of the year, and
- children's inability to comprehend reading materials.

Nevertheless, this should not discourage teachers from trying to make the best out of a bad situation. They can still encourage their pupils to read and develop a love for reading through allowing them opportunities to practice ready-made or self-designed electronic and print materials in- and outside the classroom. They can also be inventive in allocating some time, no matter how little, to having their pupils talk about their reading experiences, for depriving them from doing so will negatively affect not only their literacy but also their cognitive (Palinscar, 1998), emotional, and social development (Williams & Lawson, 2005).

Making use of the library and independent literacy-related activities

Teacher practices relating to developing positive attitudes towards the library, as an environment for developing a vested interest in reading, scored relatively moderate means, as shown in items 10, 11, and 16 relating to *encouraging children*

to have a personal library at home, to visit local/public libraries, and to accompany these children to libraries, with means of 3.10, 3.08, and 3.07, respectively.

Only a couple of respondents reported that they would give attention to the library as a source for developing children's reading, as shown in excerpt 13 below:

I encourage children to visit the library to get acquainted with the latest books [13].

However, the vast majority of the respondents expressed unwillingness to benefit from the library, for a number of reasons, as shown in excerpts 14-16 below:

I would like to visit the library with my pupils, but, unfortunately, our school does not have one [14].

I have not taken my class to the library because some of my pupils still have difficulties in reading and comprehension [15].

There is no point in taking my pupils to the library; instead, I give them books, stories and magazines [16].

The authors are taken aback by these responses. Frequenting the library is an effective practice for determining pupils' real reading interests which could be capitalized on to guide them to reading materials that respond to these interests (Elkind, 2006). However, excerpts 14-16 above point out the teachers' neglect of the role of the library in developing children's literacy, which may further point out these teachers' traditional tendency for absolute authority and denying children any opportunities for independent learning. These teachers apparently see themselves as the source of knowledge or the center of the teaching/learning process.

Nevertheless, having children read what they are required to read without having a say in the matter may reflect negatively on their learning. Instead, the teacher may train his/her pupils to use the library and give them the choice to visit it either with their parents or on their own. The importance of the library is established by a plethora of research findings and, thus, it is imperative for teachers to create situations in which pupils can choose and respond to reading materials, analyze their choices, and identify their reading interests which can be used as a catalyst for fostering a life-long love for reading. Wendelin & Zinck (1983), for example, claim that for pupils to be independent readers, they have to be allowed opportunities to respond and select literature by themselves.

Similarly, Ramos & Krashen (1998) report that children who are exposed to books through library visits achieve higher levels of enjoyment in – and enthusiasm for – reading.

Furthermore, a closer look at Table 1 reveals that the responses to items 25, 17, 8, and 15, which relate to *designing literacy-related activities for children to do at home, providing children with stories, magazines, and other literacy-related materials to quench their natural curiosity, encouraging children to read voluntarily, and allocating a once-a-week lesson for voluntary reading*, point out little practice for developing children’s literacy. This was further confirmed by the interview in which most of the respondents reported that they do not give much attention to voluntary reading, as shown in excerpts 17 and 18 below:

We encourage children to read on their own, but, in most cases, they do not have enough time to do so [17].

My pupils like to read voluntarily, but we do not have enough time to do so. They have plenty of school assignments to do, which makes it very difficult to allocate specific time for voluntary reading [18].

Excerpts 17 and 18 demonstrate that time pressure is not necessarily the reason for not having children engage in voluntary reading. Instead, there seems to be a misconception among teachers that voluntary reading has to be done in the classroom and in conjunction with school work. These teachers seem quite unaware of the importance of increased exposure to literacy-related artifacts in- and outside the classroom for developing children’s inclinations towards voluntary/independent reading, which is consistent with Ramos & Krashen (1998) and Swartz & Hendricks’s (2000) claims that the more exposed children are to reading in the classroom, the more they are inclined to read at their leisure.

Table 1 also reveals that the items related to teachers’ practices for involving parents in developing their children’s literacy scored the lowest means, which points out that teachers do not usually take the initiative to involve parents in developing their children’s literacy. More specifically, the data analysis shows that items 3, 24, 20, and 23 which relate to *communicating with parents about worthwhile reading materials available in local bookshops, their children’s reading needs and interests, the criteria for selecting children’s reading materials, and taking their children to the local library* scored low among the teachers’ self-reported practices. Similarly, items 19 and 21 which relate to *involving parents in assessing their children’s literacy and providing parents with models to assess their children’s literacy* scored similar means to those relating to *communication with parents* (compare 2.48, 2.47, 2.32, and 2.25 to 2.39 and 2.15, respectively).

The findings above point out a deficiency in teacher practices for involving parents in developing their children's literacy, which is further confirmed by the analysis of the majority of the teachers' responses to the interview. However, few pointed out certain measures to involve parents in their children's literacy, as shown in excerpts 19–21 below:

Every year just before the school annual fair, I send parents a list of the products that would be on sale including the titles of some of the books or electronic media (e.g. CD ROMs). The parents' financial position often determines whether or not their children get enough money to buy any of these products [19].

I always write to parents in the school fair season that stories and magazines will be available for their children to buy, but, from past experience, seldom do these parents show any interest, possibly because they are not aware of the value of children's literature in children's learning and development [20].

To tell you the truth, I never try to direct parents to any bookshops, or even the library, to help them develop their children's literacy [21].

Interview excerpts 19–21 and the teachers' responses to items 3, 19, 24, 20, 23, and 21 of the Checklist (in Table 1) seem to support the notion that teachers may hold certain misconceptions about the importance of parents' involvement in developing their children's literacy in conjunction with the teachers' efforts in the classroom. This is highlighted by item 25, *meeting with parents to familiarize them with effective ways for developing their children's literacy*, which scored the lowest mean of 2.08.

Additionally, despite a good body of research findings (cf., for example, Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman & Hemphill, 1991; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Teale, 1986) which suggests that how parents raise their children plays a key role in their development of a life-long interest in and love for reading, the interviewees pointed out, quite candidly, that their practices do not specifically involve increasing parents' involvement in the matter. For instance, *corresponding with parents about the books in school annual fairs* was not accompanied with efforts to *raise these parents' awareness of the value of books for developing their children's social personality and attitudes towards reading*, which may detract from these parents' inclination to support and get involved in these fairs. Parents may not think of making their homes book-rich environments because they are unaware of their role in doing so, which may, in turn, be a result of the teachers' lack of awareness of or inclination to capitalize on the parents' role in the process of building their pupils' literacy.

At the end of the day, the lack of deliberate teacher practices to involve parents may be seen to indicate that these teachers are unaware of what is involved in developing young children’s literacy, especially if one kept in mind the importance of abundant exposure and access to reading materials in engaging children and building their attitudes toward literacy (cf. Krashen, 1993; Ramos & Krashen, 1998).

The second research question

To examine the potential effect of the variables of *gender, academic qualifications, teaching experience, having studied child-literacy courses during pre-service preparation, and having a personal interest in reading* on teachers’ practices to develop young children’s literacy, means and standard deviations of the participants’ responses were computed, as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2: Effect of gender, pre-service course work, having a personal interest in reading, academic qualifications, and teaching experience on teachers' self-reported practices

| Variable | Levels | N | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---------------------------|---|----------|-------------|---------------------------|
| Gender | Male | 50 | 3.25 | 1.001 |
| | Female | 307 | 3.03 | 1.050 |
| Pre-service Courses | Yes | 203 | 3.37 | 0.824 |
| | No | 154 | 2.64 | 1.155 |
| Personal Reading Interest | Yes | 281 | 3.34 | 0.876 |
| | No | 76 | 1.99 | 0.929 |
| Academic Qualifications | Two-Year College Diploma (after secondary school) | 126 | 3.18 | 1.029 |
| | Bachelor Degree | 206 | 3.00 | 1.052 |
| | Post graduate schooling | 25 | 2.95 | 1.057 |
| Teaching Experience | Short experience (1-5 years) | 158 | 3.23 | 0.839 |
| | Moderate experience (6-10 years) | 100 | 3.15 | 1.178 |
| | long experience (over 10 years) | 99 | 2.69 | 1.119 |

Table 2 shows that there are differences in the respondents' means according to the variables of study. To determine whether or not these variables have any statistically significant effects on teachers' self-reported practices to develop young children's reading, a five-way analysis of variance was conducted, as shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3: Five-way analysis of variance of the participants responses according to the variables of the study

| Source of Variation | Sum of Squares | Degrees of Freedom | Mean of Squares | Value of F | Significance |
|------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|-----------------|------------|--------------|
| Gender | 0.27 | 1 | 0.27 | 0.03 | 0.846 |
| Academic Qualifications | 2.15 | 2 | 1.07 | 1.49 | 0.227 |
| Personal Interest in Reading | 34.06 | 1 | 34.06 | 47.23 | 0.000* |
| Teaching Experience | 1.10 | 2 | 0.55 | 0.76 | 0.003* |
| Pre-service Course Work | 6.80 | 1 | 6.80 | 9.43 | 0.002* |

* Significant at p.0.05

Table 3 shows no statistically significant effect for gender or academic qualifications on teachers' self-reported practices for developing young children's reading. This may be understandable if one kept in mind how male and female teachers are all under the supervision of the MoE which, despite its serious commitment to educational reform, does not seem to exert any special efforts to raise teachers' awareness or inform their practices with respect to their pupils' reading development (cf., for example, Bataineh & Al-Barakat, 2005). On the other hand, Table 3 reveals that having studied child-literacy courses during pre-service preparation and having a personal interest in reading have statistically significant effects on teacher practices to develop young children's reading, in favour of teachers who had studied pre-service literacy-related courses and those who have a personal interest in reading.

Moreover, Table 3 shows that teaching experience does make a statistically significant difference in the teachers' practices to develop children's reading. To identify the source of variance, Tukey's post-hoc test was conducted, as shown in Table 4 below:

TABLE 4: Tukey's Post-hoc test of the effect of teaching experience on teachers' self-reported practices to develop children's reading

| Teaching experience | Means | 1-5 years | 6-10 years | over 11 years |
|---------------------|-------|-----------|------------|---------------|
| 1-5 years | 3.23 | | | * |
| 6-10 years | 3.15 | | | * |
| over 11 years | 2.69 | | | |

Table 4 shows statistically significant differences in teachers' practices to develop children's reading between teachers with short (1-5 years) and longer experience (6-10 years), in favour of those with shorter experience. In other words, longer teaching experience seems to reflect negatively on teachers' literacy-related practices.

It is imperative to interpret these findings in the context of those which pointed out little deliberate practice to develop children's reading. The authors believe that none of these findings exists in a vacuum and that a certain degree of overlap exists among the mediating factors. The interview revealed that the Jordanian MoE and teacher education programs are most influential in providing teachers with the means and know-how to develop young children's reading, as shown in excerpts 22-25 below:

I am trying to develop my pupils' literacy out of my own interest and belief that reading is vital for the children's development and future role as good citizens of the society. However, I am alone in all this. My school administration does not encourage me one bit as evident in the principal's repeated refusal to buy books for my classroom library [22].

I would love to make children love books and appreciate the library, who wouldn't? But the textbooks are bulky and crowded and prevent any possibility for holding voluntary reading sessions, not to mention the principal's insistence that textbook content be covered before doing anything else [23].

I find your question a bit strange. I did study a course in children's literature as an undergraduate. It was an elective and I got an excellent grade, but the problem is there was nothing in the course on how to develop children's literacy or an introduction of good practices for doing so. We read a lot and memorized a lot, but, to be brutally honest with you, nothing came out of either [24].

Personally, I believe in the value of voluntary reading, but I have no idea how children's literacy can be developed. In fact, my colleagues and I would be grateful if you could make certain specific recommendations for us and our school administration about some good practices that we could use to improve our pupils' literacy [25].

Interview excerpts 22-25 point out a near consensus amongst the respondents that educational authorities, both in- and pre-service, offer little to empower teachers to develop young children's reading, which could be attributed to two reasons:

- Schools and school administrations still prescribe to traditional views which focus on the academic domain rather than other aspects of the child's personality.
- Children literature courses, when present, are structured and taught, often building on the misconception that a student's mind is a tabula rasa, expecting him/her to memorize knowledge rather than learn by relevance or understanding.

This is consistent with previous research findings (Al-Barakat, 2003; Al-Karasneh, 2007; Jawarneh & El-Hersh, 2005) which seem to suggest that traditional teacher education programs do not always prepare Jordanian pre-service teachers, as others around the world do (Goodlad, 1990; Korthagen, 2001), for the realities of the classroom. There are reports that student-teachers often feel powerless to change the *status quo* in the classroom and, thus, develop a sense of compliance and, eventually, a mindset which places theory in one compartment and practice in another. Some research (Cole & Knowles, 1993; Veenman, 1984; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981) shows that the transfer of theory to practice is often minimal or non-existent. There are claims (Zeichner & Gore, 1990; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981) that many of the educational conceptions developed during pre-service teacher education are 'washed out' during actual teaching practice, which often creates problems for teachers as they transition from pre- into in-service practice.

That no statistically significant differences were found in teacher practices due to academic qualification may be seen as an inevitable result of the fact that Jordanian teacher education programs are similar. Many teachers had had similar pre-service training in terms of studying children's literature courses either in their undergraduate or post-graduate schooling, as was also pointed out in interview excerpt 26 below:

To tell you the honest truth, I do not know anything about the effective practices to encourage children to have an interest in reading. I have never studied any course about that when I was a student 14 years ago, but I think Ms. Reem, who has just graduated from Yarmouk University, would know about that because I know she has studied a course on the subject [26].

When approached, Ms. Reem was forthright about having studied the course on which she reflects in excerpt 27 below:

True. I have studied a course on children literature at university, which helped me a lot in learning about effective ways to encourage children to read with enthusiasm, but, unfortunately, it is an elective and not many students have the good sense to study it. I wish it were required from all students [27].

This teacher's response may be valuable for pointing out the importance of raising teachers' awareness of the role of literacy-related coursework in developing children's reading. Her suggestion clearly has implications for decision-makers both at the Jordanian MoE and pre-service preparation programs who need to take into consideration these courses potential to inform and improving teacher practice in developing children's life-long interest in reading.

In addition, the findings seem to suggest that longer teaching experience reflects negatively on teachers' literacy-related practices. This result may be attributed to that teachers with longer experience had not necessarily studied courses on children literature, not to mention that early childhood education is a fairly recent field of study at Jordanian universities, which means that teachers with longer experience specialize in other fields such as language, history, and social studies rather than early childhood education. Excerpt 26 above seems to corroborate this observation, especially as the respondent was keen to point out that she had not studied any literacy-related courses when she was a student 14 years earlier, unlike *Ms. Reem, who has just graduated from Yarmouk [.. and] studied a course on the subject.*

Conclusions and implications

The results gleaned from this study are largely congruent with the literature on teacher education. Primary grade teachers need to be well prepared in the theoretical and technical aspects of teaching children to read and write. To fully develop their children's literacy in general, and reading skills in particular, teachers must design/adapt materials to support/supplement the curriculum. In addition, children need chances to read independently both in- and outside the school. Libraries/book corners are needed to encourage children to read by themselves. A variety of reading materials, such as stories, informational books, magazines, and picture books, should be on hand with lively displays to encourage children to read and broaden their reading experiences (Neuman & Bredekamp, 2000).

Many teachers encourage children to talk about what they read based on evidence—such as that provided by NAEYC (1998), for instance—that this practice promotes children's interest in reading. Children should also be allowed opportunities to read to audiences, including teachers and peers, and to talk with one another about the books they are reading not only to motivate reading itself but also to increase reading accuracy and fluency. With peer pressure to read, because children want to read what their peers are reading, reading becomes an integral part of the classroom culture (Manning & Manning, 1984).

Furthermore, reading should be part of children's out-of-school activities, thus facilitating parental involvement in supporting children's reading habits at home. Early parental involvement in children's reading has been found to play a key role in these children's literacy and reading achievement (Darling, 2004). Research shows that the earlier this involvement, the more profound and the longer-lasting its effect (Mullis, Mullis, Cornille, Ritchson & Sullender, 2004) on children's interest in and attitudes towards reading (Rowe, 1991), language and literacy development (Wade & Moore, 2000), reading achievement and expressive language skills (Gest, Freeman, Domitrovich & Welsh, 2004) which continues into their teenage and even adult years (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003).

To encourage voluntary independent reading, children should have access to a library/book corner inside or outside the school. They should be encouraged to read easy series books (also known as page turners) rather than the classics. Quantity is more important than quality in building up fluency (Murray, 1999).

Along the same lines, Celano & Neuman's (2001) survey of recent literature showed that libraries play a major role in fostering literacy, especially among groups such as preschool and elementary school children, who need the most assistance in developing literacy skills. Similarly, Krashen (1993) reports on

research which reveals the value of free voluntary reading in developing children's reading, writing and spelling skills. He reports on research which reveals, among other things, that children read more when they see others (e.g. teachers, peers, and parents) read and that the relationship between free voluntary reading and literacy is consistent, even when different tests, different methods of reading habits and different definitions of free reading are used.

To demonstrate literacy responsive pedagogy, primary grade teachers need to resort to a host of practices, the most important amongst which, according to Callins (2006, pp.6-7), are the following:

- communicating high expectations and having genuine respect for their children and belief in their capability;
- using active teaching methods to promote children's engagement by requiring them to play an active role in both the curriculum and learning activities;
- facilitating learning within an active teaching environment in which the teacher plays the role not only of instructor but also of guide, mediator, and knowledgeable consultant;
- including individualized and cooperative learning activities to insure low-pressure, student-controlled learning groups that can support children's literacy development;
- being aware of parents' role in children's literacy development and opening channels for their inclusion in literacy-related activities; and
- adjusting the curriculum to respond to children's needs and interests.

Despite the limited scope of this study, the findings have several implications for teacher education, the most significant of which is that teacher education programmes have a key role to play in equipping pre-service teachers with the basic knowledge and skills for developing their pupils' literacy. However, one should not assume that the programmes which provide specific literacy-related courses are necessarily graduating teachers with the know-how to develop young children's literacy.

As with other facets of teaching and learning, teachers seem predisposed to rely on traditional approaches they had been exposed to as students themselves (Graham, 2005). Crow (1987), Koster, Korthagen & Schrijnemakers (1995), and Ross (1987), who examined the effect of former teachers on the way pre-service teachers teach, claimed that these can serve both as positive and negative role models to pre-service teachers even though this effect does not necessarily take place at a conscious level (McEvoy, 1986; Zeichner, Tabachnick & Densmore, 1987).

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Note

1. For a copy of the Checklist and/or Interview Schedule, contact the corresponding author at rubab@yu.edu.jo.

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