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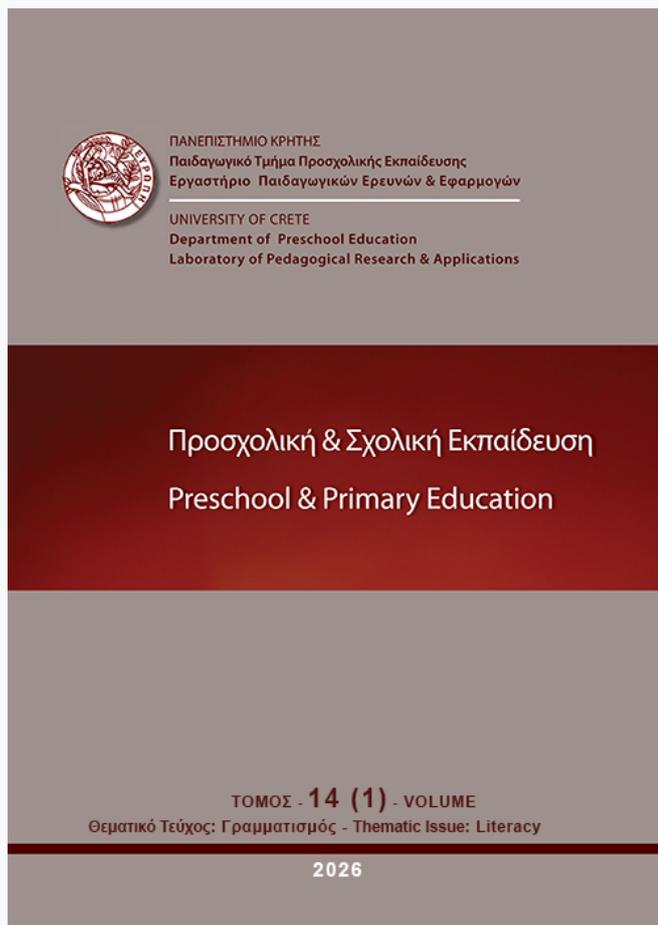
Enhancing family engagement in preschool settings: Reflections on parental attitudes

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Enhancing literacy-related family engagement at home in preschool settings: Reflections on parental experiences

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Abstract. The present study reports on a literacy-related family engagement intervention which aimed to empower story reading techniques that parents use at home and reflects on their experiences. One hundred and forty-two parents selected from six public kindergartens in Rethimno, Greece, participated voluntarily in the intervention. This study employed a quasi-experimental methodology design that included two intervention and one control group. Parents were allocated in three groups: (1) the *intensive support group*, where parents attended storybook reading workshops and were introduced to four story reading techniques (*N=43*), (2) the *non-intensive support group*, where parents received written notes about the same story reading techniques as the intensive support group (*N=51*) and (3) parents in the *control group*, who weren't engaged at all (*N=48*). Qualitative data presented in the present study, were based on (a) the researcher's diary that focused on reflections on the research process, and parents' experiences on implementing story-reading techniques at home, and (b) parents' answering sheets with three open-ended questions concerning parents' experiences of their efforts at home. Lastly, changes in home literacy practices were measured. Results indicated that parents who joined the intensive support group and attended workshop meetings valued the group, as they felt motivated by other parents and learnt from each other. They received feedback on their efforts and felt a shift from uncertainty to confidence. On the other hand, parents who joined the non-intensive group and received notes, indicated that it was a lonely process, many of them were not sure if they implemented the suggested story-reading techniques correctly at home, and they avoided some story-reading techniques, claiming they were too complex to follow. Despite that, both intensive and non-intensive support groups significantly increased their home literacy practices concerning story book reading, while parents in control group did not follow the same pattern. It seems that parents can be important partners in education, despite the way they are engaged.

 Keywords: family engagement, story reading practices, parental attitudes, intensive or non-intensive approaches, preschool education.

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Introduction

Family engagement in education

Family engagement in children's education is considered a key element in the growth and development of both children and families (Mapp & Bergman, 2019). Research has shown that when parents engage in education, children improve their academic and social skills (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Family engagement in education is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological approach of child development, which emphasises the interconnected roles of family, schools and the community. During early childhood, these environments should collaborate and share common goals to support the child's overall development, as they are among the most influential environments in a child's life.

Encouraging family engagement in preschool settings is considered an important quality indicator (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Studies indicate that parents who engage in their children's education as early as the preschool years, tend to recognise the value of engaging in education, and remain engaged throughout subsequent levels of schooling (Goff et al, 2012; Lindeboom & Buiskool, 2013). Welcoming parents at school is definitely a challenge, and teachers usually feel unprepared for it (Epstein, 2019). As there are several reasons why parents avoid engaging in education, teachers need to take the responsibility of reaching out to them in innovative ways. (Boag-Munroe & Evangelou, 2012). Mapp & Bergman (2019), underline the importance of building trusting relationships with parents. They suggest that trust between parents and teachers is a key element in enhancing family engagement at schools.

Epstein (2019) also noted that it is important for schools to tailor their practices to meet the needs and interests of students and their families, and promote a variety of opportunities for schools, families and the community to work together. Following Epstein's framework of six types of parental involvement (1995), one type to conceptualise family engagement is learning at home. Parents are provided information and ideas on how to support student learning at home. It seems that families are interested in enhancing their abilities to work as partners to support children's overall development (Mapp & Kuttler, 2013). A dialogue between parents and school should take place to inform them about curricula, courses, school routines and learning techniques and guide them on how to support their children at home. Inviting parents to school seems to be a practice that would achieve this, as parents would be given the opportunity to understand more about their children's abilities and achievements, but also to be introduced to learning practices they can use at home.

Approaches in family engagement at home

Interventions that focus on supporting family engagement at home are offered in several ways. For the present study, we followed the design of intensive and non-intensive approaches. When parents engage to the intervention intensively, they experience the process, and their physical attendance is required. For example, parents join meetings or workshops, they receive home visits etc., which usually are repeated more than twice throughout the school year (Landry et al., 2017; Mathis & Bierman, 2015). During intensive approaches to supporting parents at home, they are introduced to learning practices they can use at home, while time to work on the practices and feedback is provided. On the other hand, when parents engage to an intervention non-intensively, they are usually engaged at their own pace, and their physical attendance is not required. For example, they receive notes, messages on mobile phones, attend single meetings,

etc., and so they are informed about learning practices they can use at home. Usually feedback is not included (Colmar, 2014; Niklas & Schneider, 2017).

It is suggested that intensive approaches to support family engagement at home are needed for positive and especially for longitudinal effects on children's outcomes (Evangelou et al, 2008). Also, when parents receive support and feedback about learning practices they can use at home, they feel more confident implementing them, and as a result they make stable changes in their routines (Hajal et al., 2019; Mathis & Bierman, 2015). On the other hand, non-intensive approaches to support family engagement at home are also considered effective, but also necessary especially nowadays that parents do not have much free time (Hurwitz et al, 2015; Niklas & Schneider, 2017). Although they are also effective, non-intensive approaches are suggested when small changes are sought (Evangelou et al., 2008).

Hannon et al., (2020), also mention two different parental roles that are usually enhanced during all approaches that support family engagement at home: the '*instructional*' role where parents follow very specific guidelines, and the '*facilitative*' role, which may be embedded in real-life situations. They suggest that it is better for parents to extend their facilitative 'teaching', because they learn to '*think differently about their role and make decisions about how to facilitate their children's learning, rather than to follow prescriptions*' (p. 7). Following previous evidence, it is indicated that the support of parents' instructional role tends to improve their practices only in what they have been trained for, but there is a lack of knowledge transfer to other non-trained home learning practices (Levin & Aram, 2012). Supporting the facilitative role of parents is claimed to be effective and leads to many changes in home literacy routines (Borisova et al., 2017; Mathis & Bierman, 2015). It is considered to be more appropriate for parents, since it is more relaxed and adjustable to every home environment (Hannon et al., 2020).

Family literacy environment

In preschool settings, probably the most popular focus of family engagement interventions that support learning at home, is scaffolding school readiness and emergent literacy skills (Hajal et al, 2019; Saracho, 2017). Particularly for the empowerment of children's emergent literacy skills, family literacy environment is widely recognized as a strongly influential contributor (Salinas et al., 2017; Sheridan et al, 2011). Story reading is considered the most common informal experience that parents offer their children, and has a major influence in the acquisition of emergent literacy skills (Morrow et al., 2009; Sénéchal, 2006; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Frequency of story reading, asking questions, defining new vocabulary, identifying concepts about print etc., affect children's language and cognitive development (Hannon et al., 2020; Saracho, 2017).

In Greek settings, although family engagement is officially supported in preschool education (Penderi et al, 2022), it seems that many teachers tend to be sceptical about creating close relationships with parents and therefore they rarely organise family engagement activities (Petrogiannis & Penderi, 2014; Rentzou & Ekine, 2017). Relations of trust, attendance and communication are basic elements to prepare family engagement, but it is not a given fact in every classroom (Petrogiannis & Penderi, 2014). However, it is promising that when teachers organise activities for parents, Greek parents tend to engage (Nastou, 2016).

The current study

Enrichment of story reading techniques that parents use at home has revealed positive effects on children's emergent literacy skills (Greenwood et al., 2020; Reese et al, 2010).

Regarding the intensity of literacy-related family engagement interventions, evidence suggests that both intensive and non-intensive approaches, can yield positive outcomes. Studies show that when parents are supported- whether through intensive or non-intensive approaches- in story-reading techniques they can use at home, they enhance the learning experiences they offer their children. This, in turn, positively impacts children's learning outcomes (Knauer et al., 2020; Landry et al., 2017; Sim et al., 2014). In terms of parental roles, research indicates that both the facilitative and instructional parental roles can be effectively supported through both intensive, and non-intensive approaches (Borisova et al., 2017; Colmar, 2014; Hajal et al., 2019). However, there appears to be stronger emphasis on enhancing the facilitative parental role, as it offers greater adaptability to the unique needs of individual families (Hannon et al., 2020).

Research to date has largely focused on quantitative outcomes to establish the efficacy of literacy-related family engagement interventions. Less is known about parental experiences and perceptions during their engagement at the interventions (Buttler et al., 2020).

Systematic reviews on qualitative research concerning family engagement interventions that focus on parenting (e.g. positive parenting, building parental self-efficacy etc.), give insight into parents' experiences during their participation in intensive approaches (Buttler et al., 2020; Mytton et al., 2014). Researchers refer to a period between the time that parents agree to participate (enrolment) and when they decide to participate till the end of the intervention (attrition/retention). During that period, several factors influence initial and ongoing family engagement (Beasly et al., 2021; McCurdy & Daro, 2001).

Researchers identified key elements that make family engagement interventions with regard to parenting meaningful for parents, such as the need each family has to improve the practices used at home, the changes that parents recognise during their engagement, the attitude of the group leader (non-judgmental, friendly), and also the content and delivery of the programme (well focused, non-didactic) (Buttler et al., 2020). Another key element is the value of the group. The group supports parents to feel less alone, providing them a sense of belonging, and a source of support (Buttler et al., 2020; Kane et al.,2007). Research also suggests that conditions such as parents working in groups, practice and receive feedback on skills and tools that are focused on enhancing their ability to support children's development, motivate parents to learn and apply what they have learnt (Mapp & Kutner, 2013).

Successful implementation of evidence-based family engagement interventions depends on process insights, rather than just outcome data (Buttler et al., 2020). So, beyond results, it is interesting to focus on parents who joined activities designed for them and reflect on their experiences. Parents as important partners and major recipients of family engagement programmes, have an important point of view, a voice to be heard.

In the present study, parents were supported in using story-reading techniques at home using two different approaches. The *intensive* approach consisted of eight workshop meetings with parents. Parents were introduced to the following four story reading techniques, which they implemented during the workshops and at home: (a) identifying concepts about print in books, (b) asking questions about the story (c) introducing new vocabulary, and (d) retelling stories. Parents were also provided feedback regarding their efforts during the meetings and at home. They were also given written notes concerning the story-reading techniques they were introduced to at the workshops. The *non-intensive* approach consisted of providing written notes

to parents concerning the same four story reading techniques to which parents in intensive support group were introduced.

It is valuable to explore the experiences of parents who participated in a literacy-related family engagement intervention, particularly in relation to their involvement in two distinct support approaches. Parental experiences shed light on both the benefits and challenges associated with each approach and provide insight into their perceived effectiveness.

Based on the above conclusions, the purpose of this study is to:

(a) Provide insight of parents' experiences during their participation in two different literacy-related family engagement support groups when their facilitative role is enhanced.

(b) Improve our understanding of key elements that make intensive and non-intensive literacy-related family engagement approaches meaningful for parents.

(c) Examine the effects of the intensive and non-intensive approaches of literacy-related family engagement on family literacy practices.

Methodology

Participants

The sample of the present study consisted of one hundred and forty-two parents from six public kindergartens in Rethimno, Greece. Parents belonged to medium socio-economic status and were recruited in a voluntary basis (convenience sampling). They were informed at the beginning of school year in a parent's meeting about the purpose of the study and most of them agreed to participate. By the end of the intervention, seven parents in total resigned from the procedure (4.92 % attrition rate).

Schools were carefully selected based on two criteria. First, all schools both at intensive, and non-intensive support group had at least two classes, so that the expected non-availability of parents to engage would not affect the research procedure. Second, teachers were working at the selected schools for several years and declared at the beginning of the school year that they usually use practices to engage parents at school, and they seek to build trust with them. This was important to ensure that parents did not have negative past experiences with teachers that could prevent them from joining the process (Mapp & Bergman, 2019). Parents were welcomed at school, although some of the teachers declared that usually only a few parents attended afternoon meetings at school.

Research design

This study employed a quasi-experimental methodology design that included two intervention and one control group. Thus, during the study parents were allocated into three groups: (1) the ***intensive support group***, where parents attended storybook reading workshops (*N=43*), (2) the ***non-intensive support group***, where parents received written notes about story reading techniques (*N=51*) and (3) parents in the ***control group***, who weren't engaged at all (*N=48*).

Intervention

The present literacy-related family engagement intervention focused on two literacy events: (a) concepts about print and (b) dialogic reading techniques. More specifically, parents, either in intensive or non-intensive support groups, were introduced to four story reading strategies: (a) identifying concepts about print in books, (b) asking questions about the story (c) introducing new vocabulary, and (d) retelling stories.

Parents in the *intensive support group* were introduced to story reading techniques, by attending in total eight workshop meetings. Two workshops were organised for each of the four story-reading strategies. Workshops were held in children's schools in the afternoons for about an hour.

At every first meeting the researcher informed parents about the importance of each reading strategy and then introduced books with the appropriate structure. Then she acted as a role model and read a story to introduce each technique. The researcher then provided books to parents so they had the opportunity to practice what they had learnt. Parents were also encouraged to implement each new technique during the workshops and at home with their own books. Parents were also provided feedback on their efforts during the meeting by the researcher. At the end of the meeting, parents were given written notes concerning the introduced story-reading strategy.

At every second meeting, parents and the researcher thoroughly discussed their efforts at home. They were given feedback and advice so that they were more confident when using each strategy at home. After that, they were provided books again, and they were given a task. For example, they were asked to read a story and then think of open- and close-ended questions concerning the plot, choose words that could be easily explained to children, etc. Then they all had the chance to present their effort, discuss it with other parents, and get feedback from the researcher. During, and at the end of each workshop the researcher kept notes in her diary, reflecting on the research process, on parents' efforts, and their concerns.

To motivate the facilitative role of parents, they were not provided specific books to use at home. It was a challenge for parents to implement story reading strategies in real life conditions, in a convenient way for each family. Parents were advised to use story-reading techniques with books they already had at home. They were also given a list of suggested books they could find in public or in school libraries or even buy from a bookstore if they wanted. The book list was formed in a way that parents could find an appropriate book structure for every reading technique. As seen from parents' actions, most of them were motivated and borrowed or even bought several books from the list.

The non-intensive support group received the same written notes as those provided to the intensive support group. Parents were given four sets of notes, one for each story reading technique. Every Friday for four weeks they received written notes but did not have any further guidance. An email address was available to parents in case they needed support or feedback on their efforts. At the end of the intervention parents were given an answering sheet where they had to complete three open-ended questions concerning the process and their efforts.

Control group parents did not receive any support. All children in both the intervention and the control group followed the formal school curriculum.

Instruments

The present study initially focused on the experiences of parents who joined the intensive support group. The researcher maintained detailed notes to document these experiences and provide appropriate feedback. As the study progressed, it became of interest to also explore the experiences of parents in the non-intensive support group. However, due to time constraints, data from this group was collected through a questionnaire. Common themes emerged from both the researcher's diary and the questionnaire responses, offering valuable insight into the experiences of parents across the two types of support groups.

Researcher's diary (intensive support group): The researcher maintained a diary throughout the process, documenting insights from the parents' workshop meetings. More specifically, her notes were based on two axes: (a) reflections on the research process, and (b) parents' experiences concerning the implementation of story-reading techniques at home.

Answering sheet (non-intensive support group): At the end of the intervention parents were given an answering sheet with three open-ended questions: (a) Describe the story-reading techniques you used most, (b) How did you feel while implementing story-reading techniques? and (c) Please comment on this learning opportunity that was organised by your school.

Home literacy practices. Changes in home literacy practices were assessed using a questionnaire concerning emergent literacy and story reading practices used at home, which was used before in Greek settings (Tafa et al., 2003). The questionnaire was given to parents before and after the intervention. It consisted of 28 questions using a 5-point Likert Scale (1=rarely, to 5=very often). Questions were related to: (a) family reading routines, (b) identifying concepts about print, (c) making questions, (d) introducing new vocabulary, and (e) retelling a story during storybook reading.

Statistical analyses

Researcher's notes and parents' answers in the answering sheet, were carefully read. Following the research procedure of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), there were some coding stages, before concluding on the final themes for the first and second purpose of the study.

Paired samples *t*-test was used to measure the post-test changes in home literacy practices for each group for the third purpose of the study.

Results

Two main themes emerged from the researcher's diary and parent's questionnaire: (a) reflections on the research process and (b) reflections on the implementation at home. Each theme includes subthemes that relate to parents' experiences and reveal elements that made the present literacy-related family engagement intervention meaningful for parents.

Reflections on the research process

Researcher's experiences on the process

Following researcher's instructions, most parents from the intensive support group followed the guidelines they received through the workshops at home. They shared experiences during workshops, and made comments that revealed that they had worked very carefully at home with their children. They were asking for feedback on practical issues. For example, many wondered if they asked children proper questions, or if they handled issues that came up during story reading correctly. According to researcher's notes, parents emphasised the story elements, asking questions during story reading and about the punctuation marks.

There was an overall pleasant atmosphere during the workshop meetings. Parents were consistently present at meetings with a small attrition rate of 4,5%. Parents gradually created bonds and a warm atmosphere among them. They felt comfortable showing other parents their efforts during workshops. Many of them declared that they had organised their daily schedules so as to be able to attend the workshops. It seems that they were dedicated to their decision to

join the workshops. "*Please do not change the meeting hour, it is my happy hour, and I am not sure I can find another one...*" a father (School 4) declared when another parent in the group suggested changing the hour of the scheduled meetings.

It is interesting to note that mostly mothers were present at the workshops, and only four fathers. But these fathers really worked carefully following the researcher's suggestions.

Besides the scheduled program, workshops with parents always included other issues that concerned them. For example, parents discussed their favourite books, or they talked about reading routines their children had. Workshops always had always a feeling of warmth and sharing.

Parent's experiences on the process

For the present study parents in both support groups joined the research process in a relaxed way, extending their facilitative parental role. It was important that parents felt they benefited from a well-organised process that covered their needs. Especially for parents that joined the intensive support group, who decided to fix their daily schedules to be present at the workshops, it was important to ensure that their time was well spent. "*This intervention is so interesting! Personally, I had no idea about reading techniques*", a mother from the intensive support group declared (School 3), revealing to the group her interest in practicing something new for her. "*I keep the notes on the door of my fridge! I have given all the notes to my sister who also has a preschool child*", another mother declared (School 5), showing that she paid attention to the story-reading strategies.

Many parents noted that they decided to join the workshops as they felt that it was a focused, non-didactic procedure that covered their needs, without making them feel any pressure. The fact that they had to follow the introduced story-reading techniques at their own pace, made them feel free and more creative. They also appreciated the fact that they joined the workshops and were part of a group.

"*It is such a wonderful opportunity for me to meet with the group and chat.*"

"*It was such a nice experience! I have talked about it everywhere! I wish we could have this opportunity again next year!*" (Mother, School 1)

There were two different views about experiences on the process among parents that joined the non-intensive support group. A small group of parents (*N=8*) declared that they were very pleased with the fact that they received notes, as it was convenient for them. More specifically they declared that receiving notes, reading them at their own pace and then trying to implement the suggested story reading strategy was very suitable for them, as they did not have free time to join any afternoon meetings, and preferred to work from home.

'*Parents work, usually they both work and it's a bit difficult for them to be at school. For example, for me it is fine to come two or three times (...a year), but not more often...it's a bit difficult.*" (Father, school 6)

On the other hand, the other parents from the non-intensive support group (*N=27*) declared that they enjoyed receiving notes, but preferred to be supported and provided feedback by an expert. They found some of the suggestions provided in the notes useful and easy to implement; however, they missed the opportunity of sharing their efforts, which would have helped them feel more confident about what they are applying at home.

'*To be honest, I am not sure if I have done everything correctly! But I liked to have other options of reading a story...*" (Mother, school 6)

"*Some notes were easy, and some difficult. For example, I never searched for the story elements (...in retelling notes), in any book. I know I could ask more information about it, but I never did...*" (Mother, school 6)

Parents' experiences concerning the implementation of story-reading techniques at home

Parent's feelings regarding their effort

Parents that joined the intensive support group expressed positive feelings, and a shift from uncertainty to confidence while using the introduced story-reading techniques. Most of them needed time and the appropriate feedback to start experimenting with story-reading techniques, "*At first I was afraid to try.. I needed to feel more confident about the process. But when I tried, it wasn't so difficult!*" (Mother, school 1).

Gradually they acquired new skills, but most importantly they identified their new skills and were proud of their efforts. Being more certain about what they could achieve, allowed them to be more creative with books. They used their books at home in many different ways.

"*Their favourite book is now my favourite also! Once we read it and we asked questions about the plot, another day we read it and search for new words, now we have a retelling competition!*" a father of triplets (School 3), announced proudly at his skill in offering new ways of reading a story with his children.

Consequently, parents in the intensive support group felt more determined to implement the story reading techniques they were introduced to at home. Their new skills also concerned the ability to recognise high quality books. They paid attention to the illustrations and the plot. They were introduced to many books that were not familiar to them, they learnt how to identify story elements and how to use a book based on story-reading techniques. Gradually, they managed to think more carefully about children's books.

"*I have read so many interesting children's books with you! You made it easier for me to choose an appropriate book*" (Mother, School 3).

'*After our meetings, I started to think that I have many books at home which are not interesting at all. I believe I should visit the library more often, and find new books for my children*" (Mother, School 5).

Being part of a group with other parents also made them feel more confident on presenting their efforts during the workshops. The ability to present is not a given but parents gradually managed to present their efforts. As a result, they felt more confident not only about themselves, but also about their efforts with their children.

"*Practicing with the group made me feel sure on how to work at home. Sometimes I remember the beating of my heart when it was my turn to present. But then everything was easier*" (Mother, School 1)

Parents that joined the non-intensive support group declared overall positive feelings on their efforts. They were eager to learn new story-reading strategies, as it helped them feel they were supporting their children. They declared that the information given in the notes were well-structured, and as a result they could easily implement the introduced story-reading techniques. Retelling stories was the only technique that was reported as difficult to follow.

"*I am not sure that I understood correctly the notes concerning retelling*" (Mother, School 6).

"*To be honest, retelling ability was something that I could not do. I think it is complicated...*" (Mother, school 6).

At the same time, most parents in the non-intensive support group revealed that they needed support to feel more confident. "*My feelings are mixed...I feel so proud of myself for trying new things, but on the other hand I wish I was more sure of myself.*" (Mother, School 6).

Comments from parents on their children's achievements

Parents that joined the intensive support group were happy to see improvements in their children's achievements. They could identify changes during their interactions at home, and they were then confident to state the change using specific vocabulary (e.g. retelling, print, open-ended questions etc.).

"I have a surprise for you! My son managed to retell a story without any difficulties. I checked the story elements, so I wanted to be sure to tell you that." (Mother, School 1)

They also noticed changes concerning children's ability to identify letters.

"He likes finding letters and playing with the letter sounds so much that sometimes he prefers to play with print instead of reading the story!" (Father, School 3).

Also, there was increased curiosity about the plot of, that consequently increased the questions from children and discussion time during story reading. Finally, it seems the children managed gradually to become the storytellers as their parents declared their improvement in narrating or even retelling a story. Parents also noticed that their children's narrations become richer, as they remembered details of a story, and used new vocabulary related to the story. Children seemed to be alert, even from the first time reading a story. They also declared that reading books with their children was indeed a productive and helpful time.

"I asked them questions during the story, as you told us. It was funny to see that after a while they started asking me questions." (Mother, School 2)

"I am impressed! I think he remembers details from the story, that I didn't even remember. He loves to help me read a story together" (Mother, School 1)

Parents who joined the non-intensive support group, were also glad to notice improvements on their children's literacy skills. It is important to note, that parents who received notes reported on children's achievements concerning mainly (a) concepts about print, and (b) asking questions. No other accomplishments were mentioned.

"I was so happy to see that she could answer my questions! Sometimes I felt I asked her something difficult, but she answered me..." (Mother, School 6).

"My daughter loves the books she had as a baby. Now we read these books again, but now she tries to identify letters! It is funny, as she is proud of herself, she feels she has grown up!" (Mother, School 6)

Comments on changing routines

Parents that joined the intensive support group reported changes in two different areas. First, they changed their reading routines with their children, and second their home learning environment.

Their reading routines were enriched or even changed by their attendance at the meetings. Parents seemed to implement the story reading techniques they were introduced to and finally adopted appropriate ways to read them.

"I changed totally the way I read a story with my daughter. To be honest, I thought that I should not stop during story reading. Often my daughter wanted to make comments or ask questions during story reading, and I was telling her to be quiet.. I was so wrong.. Now I give her the time and also I encourage to engage when we read stories" (Mother, School 5).

"Now we spend more quality time together! We enjoy reading! Actually, reading has become more interesting for me! (Father, School 2)

It is a fact that parents at the intensive support group had an increased interest about books and many of them borrowed or bought new books for their children. Many of them also changed the time of story reading. For example, they started reading books to their children during the day when children were not tired, instead of reading stories only in bed time.

"We now have a new routine! Reading books together. They love it and we visit the public library all the time" (Mother, School 2).

Parents were inspired not only by their experience at the workshops, but also by their presence at school. As the workshops were held inside their children's classrooms, they were able to see appropriate ways to organise a learning environment at home. For example they could see different types of library corners, different ways to organise children's stuff at home, or how to create a relaxing corner for them.

"I decided to make a library corner at home, just as you do it at school", a mother (School 3), declared, as she realised that she had her children's books in high selves. The library corner in her children's school was made out of recycled materials, using cardboard and boxes, so she was inspired to do it also at home.

Most of parents that joined the non-intensive support group declared that they increased the amount of questions they asked to their children. They thought it was easy for them to start asking questions to children. They could think of many questions during story reading. They also introduced letters and new unknown words to children, while concepts about print was also a matter of interest for some parents.

" I had not realised that there are indeed so many unknown words in the stories we read! We tried to explain many of them" (Mother, school 6).

"We started reading again books he had as a baby, as the letterform is big! He liked to identify letters in the text" (Mother, school 6).

Only a few parents at non-intensive support group mentioned that they tried to foster children's retelling ability, while the others did not note any effort towards this direction.

Effects of the intervention on Home Literacy Practices

The third purpose of the study was to investigate potential changes in home literacy practices, with a specific focus on the frequency of story reading practices used by parents. To assess this, parents completed a structured questionnaire in which they reported the frequency of engaging in story-reading practices at home. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1(very rarely) to 5 (very often), and a mean score was computed for each participant.

Descriptive analysis of the data revealed the following distribution of average story reading frequencies: 3% of parents reported scores ranging from 1.61 to 2.11, indicating infrequent engagement. A further 27% reported scores between 2.25 and 3, suggesting moderate frequency. The majority (62.4%) of parents indicated average frequencies between 3 to 4, while 5.3% reported frequencies from 4 to 4.6, reflecting relatively frequent engagement in story-reading practices. These findings suggest that the predominant pattern among participants was the use of story reading practices **sometimes** to **often**.

To assess whether the frequency of story reading practices changed following the implementation of the literacy-related family engagement intervention, paired samples *t*-tests were conducted separately for each group. This analysis allowed for the evaluation of within-group differences in the mean frequency of story reading practices before and after the intervention.

According to the results, both intensive and non-intensive support groups demonstrated statistically significant increases in the frequency of home literacy practices following the intervention. In contrast, no significant change was observed in the control group (see Table 1). To further validate these findings, the non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test was conducted. The results confirmed the initial analysis, indicating a significant increase in literacy practices for both the intensive support group (*Z*=-2.110, *p*=0.026), and the non-intensive support

group (Z=-2.110, *p*=0.035). However, the control group did not exhibit a statistically significant change (Z=-1.234, *p*=0.217).

Table 1 Mean score (M), standard deviation (Sd) and paired samples t-test of home literacy practices at pre- and post-test.

Group	Home Literacy Practices			
		M	*Sd*	*t* test
Intensive support group	Pre-test	3.21	0.605	*t*(21)= -2.592, *p*=0.017
	Post-test	3.64	0.600	
Non-intensive support group	Pre-test	3.21	0.435	*t*(25)= -2.325, *p*=0.029
	Post-test	3.39	0.508	
Control Group	Pre-test	3.28	0.581	*t*(22)= -0.960, *p*=0.347
	Post-test	3.42	0.450	

Discussion

The present study gave insights on the experiences of parents who joined two different support groups that focused on supporting literacy-related family engagement at home. Parents in both support groups reported that it was a beneficial procedure for them. They also were committed to the process, showing their willingness to engage.

Parents who joined the intensive support group were offered eight workshops, they received feedback and had the opportunity to practice the introduced story reading techniques as members of a group. As a result, they were able to identify reading routines that needed to be changed at home. They applied newly acquired knowledge in practice and observed improvements both in their own skills and in their children's. Most of them reported that gradually they felt confident, and that confidence derived from their participation at the group. This result is in agreement with other studies indicating that practice increased feelings of confidence for parents (Borisova et al, 2017; Steiner, 2014).

It was a relief for them that they did not have specific tasks to do at home, and that reduced any feelings of stress. The fact that they used books they already had at home, or from the list provided by the researcher, lead to the recognition of each book's story elements, which then they used appropriately. Avoiding providing parents with specific books, accompanied by specific instructions on how to use them, seems to have led to a larger range of action, and a larger transfer of knowledge by parents, following the findings of Levin and Aram (2012).

Another important issue derived from researcher's diary is the importance of giving parents the opportunity to enter the school. Although workshops took place in the afternoon, parents worked inside their children's classrooms. Their presence in the classrooms was motivating, as they had the opportunity to see ways teachers use to organise an appropriate

learning environment. Many parents enriched their home learning environment motivated by their visits to the school. Of course, giving parents the opportunity to be in the classroom, even during evening hours, could be a source of anxiety for teachers as they might feel that they could be judged for the quality of work they offer (Epstein, 2010).

During parent workshops it was noted that beyond the scheduled activities, many other unscheduled discussions emerged. The time parents spent together at the workshops, led gradually to a feeling of belonging and sharing. The sharing of information, ideas, concerns and experiences between parents provided them with the opportunity to chat and learn from each other. The sense of belonging in a group with other parents having the same aged children, having the same experiences and concerns with their children, created bonds among parents, and between parents and the researcher. This finding is in agreement with previous research that discussed the value of the group as an important element of ongoing family engagement (Buttler et al, 2020; Kane et al, 2007; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). It also seems that a warm and trusting atmosphere was created, which might have led to the small attrition rates on the process (Mapp & Bergman, 2019).

Referring to the experiences mentioned by parents who joined the non-intensive support group and received notes, it seems that many of them needed the support that parents in the intensive support group were offered during the workshop meetings. Parents who attended the workshops experienced the shift from uncertainty to confidence, while parents who received notes did not. Working at their own pace, without any obligation on attending meetings, was surely easier, but was a lonely process. Of course, this might work for some parents who do not have time to attend meetings at school. As time constraints are a common concern among parents, less intensive interventions could offer a more accessible and sustainable option (Epstein, 2019; Niklas & Schneider, 2017).

It is a fact that parents who joined the non-intensive support group declared that they used the story reading techniques they were introduced to, they identified changes in their children's skills, and also enriched their home learning environment. Parents in the non-intensive support group reported that they more frequently implemented the story-reading techniques of: (a) concepts about print, and (b) asking questions. Less frequently they introduced new vocabulary, while they seemed to hesitate using the retelling techniques. This finding supports previous findings that suggest that non-intensive approaches are appropriate when longing for small changes (Evangelou, et al., 2008).

Research suggests that even short interventions, can enable parents to provide meaningful learning experiences for their children (Niklas & Schneider, 2017). This is particularly encouraging, as non-intensive approaches are less demanding for schools and the community to implement, while increasing accessibility for a broader range of parents-especially when physical attendance is not required. However, it is important to acknowledge that although all parents in both intervention groups reported positive changes in their home learning environments, those who participated in the workshops appeared to have stronger experiences throughout the process.

So, instead of not engaging parents at all, even a non-intensive approach is also beneficial. Considering the fact that parents in both the intensive and non-intensive support group increased the times they used the story-reading techniques they used at home, while parents in control group did not follow the same pattern, it could be suggested that parents can act as agents of change when they are empowered to do so (Epstein, 2010; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Concluding, both intensive and non-intensive approaches are important and useful. Parents can

be very important partners in education no matter how they are engaged (Borisova et al., 2017; Landry et al., 2017).

Looking for key elements to organise parent meetings, data from the researcher's diary could lead to some important conclusions. First, it is important to offer parents a well-organised frame with specific targets. The fact that each meeting had a specific agenda helped parents to focus on specific literacy events, avoiding any confusion. The above findings are in agreement with previous qualitative research that indicated the quality of the offered activities are a key element of ongoing family engagement (Buttler et al, 2020). Also, the fact that parents were given books to practice on what they were introduced to at every meeting allowed them to feel more secure and move easily from theory to practice. It is important to offer parents the opportunity to learn new knowledge, but also to be able to work on what they learned (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Most of them declared that through practice facilitated understanding each story-reading technique, and that they felt more confident to use them during story reading time with their children.

Limitations of the present study

The present study offered valuable insights into parents' experiences across two approaches in family engagement at home. Initially, the research aimed to explore the experiences of parents who joined the intensive-support group. However, as the study progressed, the scope was expanded to include the experiences of parents in the non-intensive support group as well. Consequently, data on parents' experiences were collected using different instruments for each group. Future studies could benefit from employing consistent methods such as parent interviews for a more comprehensive and comparable understanding of participants' experiences.

Additionally, the study did not include parents who chose to withdraw from the intervention. Their perceptions could provide important insights into potential barriers to engagement and inform the design of more inclusive and supportive intervention strategies.

Conclusions and implications

The present study provided insights into two different literacy-related family engagement support approaches, indicating that the process was overall positive for all parents. Parents managed to follow the process, and practice on the new information they were provided, no matter which support group they joined. They were able to identify changes in their children's skills, and be proud of their effort. Both support groups also identified changes in family routines and that is an encouraging result. So, it seems that literacy-related family engagement support approaches can be motivating for parents, even if they follow simple guidelines. This result can be useful for schools, as family engagement can take place in very simple ways. Also, the effectiveness of the facilitative role of parents and the fact that they had to follow simple guidelines, suggest that engagement in education is not a demanding or difficult task.

Of course one cannot disregard the fact that parents valued the workshop meetings as an important element that helped them feel less alone and provided them a source of support. Parents gradually felt warmth, a sense of belonging, and trusted each other. They had the opportunity to practice and receive feedback, and that made them feel secure. Group-based initiatives, as opposed to those conducted individually, are considered more suitable for families because they foster shared learning and bring families together (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Parents'

presence at school was also inspiring in several ways. Thus, although inviting parents at school is a demanding process, it seems to be motivating for them.

Home literacy questionnaire measures indicated that when parents are supported in story-reading techniques, they proceed to changes at home. This result was not seen in control group measures which probably indicates that parents need support to be valuable partners in education.

Voluntary participation in the intensive support group revealed parents' intention to be engaged in education. The low attrition rate (4.92%) suggests a strong willingness among parents to engage, particularly when considering that participation in the intensive support group required a substantial time and effort commitment. Probably the feelings of trust that were created, or the fact that they were offered a well-structured frame that matched their needs, supported their decision to remain engaged throughout the whole process (Buttler et al, 2020). It is also interesting that withdrawal was not evidenced when parents were non-intensively engaged. Non-intensive approaches seem to be more attractive for parents especially nowadays that they do not have much free time (Hurwitz et al., 2015; Sim et al., 2014).

Concluding, literacy-related family engagement interventions should be well organised, and parents should enjoy their participation in family engagement support programs. Moreover, the main components of any family engagement approach should be the support and the inclusion of all families, and not training by experts (Epstein, 2019). Family engagement is considered a quality indicator in education, especially because it is an inclusive procedure where every parent is welcomed and important (Epstein, 2010; Mapp & Bergman, 2019). The present study supports the above statement.

Results of the present study can be useful to schools or the community to organise future activities for parents. Parents provided interesting elements that fostered their ongoing engagement. Future studies could include common qualitative measures, such as interviews with parents or quantitative data concerning children's skills.

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