

## Article

# The Affordances and Constraints of Supporting Father-Child Shared Reading in the Multilingual Emirates

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**Abstract:** This paper reports on the affordances and constraints encountered in the case of an innovative project designed to support early literacy development in Arabic and English while enhancing father-child wellbeing in Abu Dhabi. The project sought to encourage Emirati fathers to engage in interactive shared book reading at home with their young children. In a context where adult-child home reading is not a traditional practice and where children's reading proficiency in public schools is often below international standards, the project sought to support families with their children's early literacy development and to develop positive dispositions towards reading. Fathers (N = 80) of kindergarten children (4–5 years) in state schools in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were invited to participate in interactive workshops about shared parent-child reading. Fathers were provided with selected, high-quality books in both Arabic and English to read aloud with their children at home and were given guidance on ways to read interactively. In this paper, which draws upon survey results, focus group recordings, and researcher field notes from the workshop sites, the affordances and constraints encountered in supporting early home reading and parent-child wellbeing are explored. Recommendations are made for similar reading and wellbeing programs in multilingual contexts. These include providing accessible information to both fathers and mothers on the importance of reading with their children at home, sharing tips and modelling parent-child interactive reading, and the provision of culturally and linguistically appropriate books for families.



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**Keywords:** home language and literacy; early reading; parent-child reading; father-child reading; fathers' engagement; fathers' wellbeing; multilingual

## 1. Introduction

As the traditional role of fathers in Arab families evolves to encompass more expanded versions of parenting, this paper reports on a project that sought to increase fathers' involvement in their children's literacy development while building parent-child wellbeing by supporting fathers in engaging in interactive shared reading with their young children at home. In the United Arab Emirates, a progressive young nation in the Middle East's Lower Arabian Gulf, a key aspiration of the Early Childhood Authority (a recently formed agency to promote early childhood care and education) is for every parent to feel confident, competent, and capable to support and promote the optimal development of their children. This agency's strategy also highlights, as a key aim, the enhancement of fathers' involvement in their children's lives ([Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority, 2022](#)).

At the same time, there is national concern about the relative underachievement in reading of many children in the UAE in comparison with both national and international

peers, as evidenced by the results of international standardized tests of reading achievement (Taha Thomure, 2019). While students in the UAE have achieved the highest scores amongst all the Arab countries in the international standardized reading test, PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), overall reading proficiency is below the international mean (Marquez et al., 2022). Multiple governmental initiatives have been launched to address this issue in the UAE (Opoku et al., 2024), such as the Arabic Reading Challenge and a Reading Law which removed tax on all reading and reading-related products (Taha Thomure, 2019). However, the ongoing gap between the actual reading proficiency of many children and national aspirations for advanced achievement (Marquez et al., 2022) has been connected not only to educational factors such as the reading curriculum, resources, teachers, and pedagogy in schools (Gregory et al., 2021), but also to limited parental engagement with children's learning at home (Alramamneh et al., 2023).

In the UAE, national expectations for parental involvement in their children's education have increased in recent years, and there is "growing recognition . . . that the education of the young is the key to future economic growth and prosperity" (Hefnawi & Jeynes, 2022, p. 127). It has been argued that home-based parental engagement with children's learning is more effective than school-based parental involvement (Hefnawi & Jeynes, 2022). In their review of the limited number of parental engagement studies in the UAE, Hefnawi and Jeynes (2022, p. 145) conclude that "parental involvement studies consistently recommend that Emirati parents be provided with training on how to engage positively with their children's learning".

For the Emirati participants in this study, Arabic is their first language and is the official language of the UAE. A regional variety of Arabic known as Emirati Arabic is spoken in the homes of UAE nationals. As Arabic is a diglossic language, the standard form (known as Modern Standard Arabic) is used in formal and written settings and is acquired through schooling. Emiratis also use English widely as a lingua franca within the multinational environment of the UAE for daily transactional purposes, and for education and work (Gallagher, 2024). Emirati national children primarily attend public schools which are funded by the government, while fee-paying private schools primarily cater for expatriate children, although some Emirati children do also attend private schools (Alhosani, 2022). Emirati children are exposed to English at school from kindergarten onward, and in many schools, it is a language of instruction also so that the children of participating fathers are emerging multilinguals. Other languages are also often heard in Emirati homes, including Tagalog and Urdu, as domestic workers from Asia are frequently employed by Emirati families for their often-large households.

In light of the foregoing, this project aimed to support fathers' interactive shared book reading skills with their children in order to enhance the development of early reading, develop a culture of reading in the home, and support father-child wellbeing. To achieve these aims, fathers of children in public schools were invited by the project team to join interactive workshops wherein simple techniques for reading together for pleasure at home with children were modeled and discussed. During the workshops, fathers were provided with selected high-quality books in both Arabic and English to read with their children.

In this paper, the affordances and constraints encountered during this project are examined as the first reported father-child home reading initiative in the Gulf region, and recommendations are made for similar projects in multilingual contexts. Taking a sociocultural and ecological view of learning and language, as developed for example by Van Lier (2000), affordances are opportunities for interaction and learning that emerge from the relationship between the learner and the environment, while constraints are the limitations that are encountered. To identify the affordances and constraints, the paper

draws upon the results of a survey of participating fathers, focus group recordings, and research team members' field notes from the workshop sites.

### 1.1. Father-Child Shared Reading

In early childhood, shared reading provides an interactive experience of reading for meaning within in a dyad where an adult reads a text aloud and guides the child with questions to promote understanding (Hoyne & Egan, 2019). Research studies internationally show that parent–child shared reading time at home correlates positively with the development of child literacy (Hall et al., 2018). Early shared reading, as well as the availability of books at home, has been found to predict reading attainment in middle childhood, thus supporting reading interventions that provide books and foster shared reading opportunities in early childhood (Stone & Erickson, 2023).

From a broader perspective, a metaanalysis of the international research on parental involvement by Jeynes (2022) found that home-based parental reading with children is a statistically significant indicator of parental commitment. Across the board, it appears that children who are good readers start early and are supported in developing literacy at home (PIRLS, 2017). The impact of early home reading on future literacy has been confirmed for the UAE by Al-Jefri and Aarepattamannil (2019), who report that early home literacy activities are positively related to reading engagement among fourth-grade students.

Some studies have reported that mothers read with their children at home more so than fathers (see, for example, Duursma (2016) in the USA, and Swain et al. (2017) in the UK). It has been suggested that Emirati fathers, although highly competent in providing for their families, may have lower levels of engagement with their children's learning compared with other Arab fathers in the region (Ridge et al., 2017). However, it is recognized that fathers *do* read with their children and that interventions must acknowledge that fathers are involved at home, disavowing a potential assumption that fathers are not interested in reading with their children (Swain et al., 2017). It has been noted that fathers are “vastly underrepresented in research related to parenting, family processes, and child development” (Yaremych & Persky, 2023, p. 2), yet fathers' involvement in early literacy development has been found across multiple studies to be positively correlated with children's development as readers (Cutler & Palkovitz, 2020; McWayne et al., 2013; Varghese & Wachen, 2016). It has also been suggested that fathers tend to use more conversationally challenging language than mothers with their young children, leading to greater linguistic complexity of input and therefore more complex interactions with young children (Cutler & Palkovitz, 2020). This includes, for example, asking more high-order “wh” questions and more specific information in comparison with mothers.

### 1.2. Early Shared Home Reading Practices

There are many dimensions to the concept of literacy, but for the purposes of this study, we take literacy to simply mean “reading”. Focusing on the emergent literacy phase in early childhood, we understand shared home reading in the context of this project as the development of familiarity with books by reading together with an adult at home in a pleasurable, informative way that promotes mutual wellbeing. Sénéchal and LeFevre (2002, 2014) note that there are two types of parent–child home literacy activities: print-focused activities and meaning-focused activities. In print-focused reading activities, parents teach children to read letter names or whole words. In meaning-related reading activities, on the other hand, parents read for the child and discuss the contents of the book without necessarily focusing on decoding the print. For this project, parent–child interactive shared reading is primarily conceived as a meaning-related activity which indirectly influences young children's reading acquisition by enhancing language development (Šilinskis et al.,

2020) and by fostering positive learning dispositions toward language and literacy (Zhang et al., 2024).

This experience may later lead to higher reading skills among children. Both early shared reading and the availability of books at home have been found to predict reading attainment in middle childhood (McNally et al., 2023). Moreover, picture story books act as a springboard for oral language development (Wang et al., 2023) through informal conversations which may be prompted by the book, but are not confined to the book. These conversations may take place in any of the languages within the readers' repertoires, and not necessarily in the language in which the book is printed (Dillon et al., 2024). In addition to enhancing language and literacy development, early parent–child home reading develops conceptual frameworks that foster continuing reading development at school (Raban, 2022). Furthermore, oral storytelling has been linked to the development of children's narrative competence and comprehension skills (Al-Janaideh et al., 2022). Such research findings support reading interventions that provide books and shared reading opportunities in early childhood.

The importance of involving parents in the UAE in promoting children's early reading development has been made clear in recent literature. For example, a study into the outcomes of the 2016 PIRLS literacy assessment amongst Arabic-speaking children in the UAE found that positive parental attitudes toward reading are a predictor of children's reading attainment in Arabic, and that participation in literacy activities before primary school, including shared reading, results in improved reading literacy in Arabic (Alramamneh et al., 2023).

There have been very few studies of parent–child reading in the UAE, or indeed in the wider Gulf region. A study by Barza and von Suchodoletz (2016) found that Muslim parents in the UAE believed there are three reasons for reading with their children, which are to teach reading skills and vocabulary, to gain factual knowledge, and to teach morals. Parents also reported that they lack culturally relevant books for their children, that is, books depicting culturally familiar characters and settings (Barza & von Suchodoletz, 2016). None of the parents in their study expressed pleasure or enjoyment related to reading with their children. In fact, a survey of parents in Abu Dhabi found that only 23% read to their children under the age of eight every day (Ashwani, 2022).

### *1.3. Father-Child Literacy Activities and Fathers' Wellbeing*

Much of the work on father-child reading has focused on the benefits for children's literacy and development, but some have addressed the potential impact on fathers (Cutler & Palkovitz, 2020) and on their own wellbeing. In this paper, fathers' wellbeing is associated with emotions, feeling connected, and feeling competent and confident (Ortiz, 2000), and fits within larger conceptualizations of subjective wellbeing. Fathers reading with their children display positive emotions such as enjoyment (Ortiz, 2004; Swain et al., 2017) and actions such as fun (Ortiz, 2000). In addition, fathers value the father-child bond gained through shared reading (Palm, 2013), as they express appreciation for building a closer relationship with their child (Nichols, 2000; Stile & Ortiz, 1999; Swain et al., 2017), and thus feeling more connected. When engaging in reading activities with their children, there is a positive impact on fathers' self-esteem (Stile & Ortiz, 1999) and confidence (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004), including confidence in their own reading literacy skills (Potter et al., 2012). Providing fathers with specific training can contribute not only to the family's and child's development (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2004), but to the key elements of fathers' own wellbeing (Ortiz, 2000). Interestingly, these elements of wellbeing not only carry benefits inherent to fathers, but also increase the likelihood of

fathers' involvement with their children (Lamb, 2010). However, fathers report that finding time to read with their children is a challenge for them (Swain et al., 2017).

#### 1.4. Parental Engagement

It has been suggested that guidance should be offered to fathers on how to read with their young children, including modeling reading strategies for them (Swain et al., 2017), as well as providing explicit support to families overall in supporting children's literacy skills (Steiner, 2014). In fact, intervention approaches to provide fathers with strategies to support children's emerging reading in the home have long been found to be effective (Saracho, 2008).

A study from Finland (Šilinskas et al., 2020) found that parental engagement in reading with kindergarten-age children is related to growth in reading skills from kindergarten to Grade 1, and is also related to children's independent reading later. More generally, a meta-analysis of studies on parental involvement internationally found that intervention projects that target parents of children from 3 to 8 years have a positive impact on children's academic as well as nonacademic development (Cosso et al., 2022). Moreover, a meta-analysis of the international research on parental involvement (Jeynes, 2022) found that home-based parental reading with children is a statistically significant indicator of parental commitment.

Internationally, there has been a recent surge in the number of projects to promote parent–child reading at home, including, for example, in South Africa (Salley et al., 2022), Spain (Romero-González et al., 2023), and the United States (Steiner et al., 2022). Regarding parental engagement with their children's learning in the UAE, there are a handful of studies that focus on parents in general, but none focusing on fathers in particular. Al-Sumaiti's policy brief related to Dubai (Al-Sumaiti, 2012), for example, suggests that higher levels of interaction between community stakeholders can lead to better educational outcomes for children, while a study by Moussa-Inaty and de la Vega (2013) suggested that having a deeper understanding of parental beliefs regarding education would improve partnerships between stakeholders. A study by Saeed et al. (2024) recommended that training programs should be organized for parents to learn more about balancing their work and finding time to support their children's learning. Overall, parental involvement projects in early childhood have been characterized as “sporadic and uncoordinated in emerging economies, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE)” (Saeed et al., 2024, p. 1).

#### 1.5. Conceptual Framework

This project is broadly informed by sociocultural and ecological systems perspectives on human activity and language and literacy development. Sociocultural perspectives, originating from the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978), assert that learning occurs through interaction with others within a particular social and cultural environment. In this vein, Rogoff (1990), for example, views linguistic and cognitive development as occurring through guided participation in cultural activity. Such a sociocultural perspective is manifested in the project's efforts to gather interested fathers together with an Emirati mother as workshop facilitator to share the experience of participating in interactive reading for pleasure, to discuss aspects of home reading, and provide fathers with selected culturally and linguistically appropriate books for home reading.

The project is also informed by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems framework, which posits that development occurs through interactions within a complex set of systems envisaged as concentric circles of relationships, broadly referred to as the microsystem, the mesosystem, and the macrosystem. Within this framework, the project sought to influence early reading development and parent–child wellbeing within the first layer, the



microsystem, that is, the child's immediate environment which includes the family, the local community, and educational settings by enabling parent–child reading for pleasure at home. Working at the next level, the mesosystem, conceived by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as the network of relationships between the various microsystems, the research team contacted school principals to invite the fathers of children in kindergarten classes to attend a workshop at the school and receive selected books to read with their children at home. At the level of the macrosystem, the third level which encompasses social and cultural values and traditions, the project team was cognizant of the fact that participants in this project inherit a strong and rich oral culture, where home reading for pleasure with children is not a traditional practice (Al-Hameli, 2014), but where young parents may be interested in starting to incorporate such practices, alongside oral story telling.

However, Bronfenbrenner's theory has been criticized for placing culture merely at the macro level, as if culture were somehow unrelated to the microsystem of the child's immediate home and educational environment. Again, drawing upon the work of Rogoff (1990) and also Weisner (2002), we follow Vélez-Agosto et al. (2017) in emphasizing that culture forms a core part of daily routines and practices within the microsystem of families, childcare, and school settings. As such, the project sought to be culturally responsive through strategies, including inviting a team of bilingual Arabic–English experts in children's literature to recommend age-appropriate and culturally appropriate books in Arabic and in English for Emirati families, hiring a workshop facilitator who is an Emirati parent and who speaks the same Emirati Arabic dialect as the participants, and liaising with kindergarten school principals to provide a welcoming environment in familiar surroundings for the workshops.

In light of the foregoing considerations, this paper addresses the following two research questions:

1. What are the affordances and constraints encountered in a project to support early home reading and paternal wellbeing in the multilingual context of the UAE?
2. What recommendations can be made for similar reading and wellbeing programs in multilingual contexts?

## 2. Materials and Methods

This project was carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki for work involving human participants and was approved by the research team's Institutional Review Board, and by the local school authority. Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study. In this section, the process for the selection of books is described, the recruitment of workshop participants is explained, the features of the workshop are outlined, and the use of a questionnaire, focus group recordings, and field notes as data collection tools are outlined. In addition, fathers' experiences of engaging in shared reading at home were elicited through voice messaging after participating in the workshops; however, the findings from that dataset are not included here, but are reported in Dillon et al. (2024).

### 2.1. Selection of Books

The selection of books for the project was an important first consideration. Experts who teach and publish in the field of children's literature and literacy education in the UAE were invited to recommend high-quality children's books in a variety of genres in both Arabic and English, and suitable for Emirati parent–child interactive reading with girls and boys between 4–6 years. The expert panel members were selected for their familiarity with contemporary children's literature and for their support for recent advances in the writing and production of picture story books for children in Arabic, as discussed, for example,

by [Dillon et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Taha Thomure et al. \(2020\)](#). The research team members then collaboratively selected the final list of books from among the provided recommendations, according to the following quality criteria: textual and linguistic suitability for four- and five-year-old Emirati children, relevance and variety of themes covered, visual appeal of illustrations to the target age group, and relevance to Emirati culture. The availability of books was also a consideration.

Animal fiction was the most frequently recommended genre by the expert panel members, and books that featured the natural environment were also popular. Examples are *Fanteer the Fluffy Flamingo* (in Arabic), about a flamingo who lives in a mangrove plantation in the UAE, and *I Spy a Desert* (in English), about a little girl who enjoys spotting desert animals and plants while camping with her family, a popular activity during the cooler months in the UAE. At the conclusion of the workshop, fathers were given a mixed bag of ten books in both languages to take home and share with their children.

## 2.2. Participants

Fathers who participated in this project were recruited through public kindergarten school principals in Abu Dhabi. A key transition point in Emirati family life occurs when children commence pre-school or kindergarten, a time when parents are receptive to involvement in their young children's education. Because enrolment rates in public kindergartens are very high in the UAE ([Gallagher, 2020](#)), holding the workshops in kindergarten schools (primarily serving national Emirati children aged 4–5 years) enabled access to several hundreds of potential participants. Although specifically aimed at fathers of children in this age group, it was hoped that younger and/or older children in the home could also benefit from the project, as would spouses who might also wish to read the provided books with their children.

The project team set modest targets of 50 fathers at five school sites due to the novelty of the project in the region and uncertainty as to the number of likely participants. In fact, these targets were exceeded, with 80 fathers participating from 8 schools, with an average of 11 fathers attending one of seven workshops (two schools combined for one of the workshops). A pilot workshop was first conducted with five fathers at the Early Childhood Authority's offices in Abu Dhabi, the funding body for this project, and while these pilot participants are not included in the results reported in this paper, the workshop materials and activities were modified based on the pilot session.

## 2.3. Survey of Participating Fathers

Before the workshop commenced, participating fathers were invited to complete a questionnaire administered and analyzed in Qualtrics. The questionnaire for the fathers was created by the research team in alignment with the aims of the research project and drew upon pre-existing validated instruments: a survey of parent-child reading practices and attitudes ([Cutler, 2020](#)), a fathering self-efficacy scale ([Sevigny et al., 2016](#)), and an unpublished validated parental wellbeing survey developed previously by a member of the research team. The draft instrument was reviewed and revised iteratively and collaboratively in English, before being translated into Arabic by bilingual research team members. The questionnaire was then piloted with a group of five Emirati fathers and was further revised, before being deployed. Offered in both Arabic and English, it included questions about demographics, father-child activities, the languages used at home, and attitudes to reading. The survey data reported in this paper pertain only to participants' self-reported demographics, languages used, father-child activities, and attitudes to reading.

#### 2.4. Workshops and Focus Groups

Drawing upon sociocultural approaches to learning and development (Rogoff, 1990), the project facilitator modeled interactive shared reading by reading a picture story book aloud for fathers, and then guiding them in a discussion about the observed interactive reading techniques. Simple but effective read-aloud techniques were modeled during a 90 min workshop, including, for example, pre-reading engagement techniques such as predicting the story from the title; while-reading techniques such as occasionally pointing to some words or pictures in the text and using physically performative behavior such as gestures and facial expressions (Cutler, 2023); and post-reading techniques including asking open-ended questions and oral discussions about the book. The importance of finding a suitable time and a comfortable space for home reading was also discussed. As noted above, the project facilitator was an Emirati national who speaks the Emirati Arabic dialect and is passionate about reading. She read the books aloud for fathers in modern standard Arabic, as written, and switched to the local dialect to discuss the strategies she had used. After the book reading, fathers were encouraged to try reading with their children at home and they received a bag of selected children's books to take home.

Fathers were also invited to attend a follow-up focus group held approximately one week after the workshop, with the intention of further discussing the benefits of reading with them and eliciting post-workshop home reading experiences in a community of practice setting. Attendance proved problematic for the focus group discussions however, and even when moved online, uptake remained low, with only 10% of workshop participants joining a focus group.

#### 2.5. Transcription and Analysis of Focus Groups

The focus groups were recorded and transcribed into English using the *Translingua* translation app, which can handle Modern Standard Arabic, Emirati Arabic, and English, as the main languages used by participants in the project. Each transcription was then checked for meaning, and fathers' turns were highlighted before being thematically analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2019) steps for the reflexive thematic analysis of qualitative data. The first stage was to become familiar with the data by individually reading and re-reading the transcripts. Then, two members of the research team met together to generate open codes from the focus group data, in response to the questions posed during the focus groups, which were as follows:

1. Do you normally read to your children or is this a new experience? What types of books did you enjoy reading during the project?
2. What types of books did your child enjoy reading?
3. Were there any challenges to reading with your child?
4. Were there any benefits to reading with your child?
5. Do you plan to continue with reading stories with your child?
6. What is needed to make that happen?

Having generated the initial codes, themes or patterns were then extracted by the two team members. These themes were then reviewed, revised, and finalized, before being interpreted as affordances and/or constraints, as seen in Table 1 in the following section, where a sample of the thematic data analysis process is provided.

#### 2.6. Field Notes

The members of the research team recorded or wrote field notes at three stages in the project: immediately after the first explanatory visit with school principals to seek their support in recruiting fathers and hosting the workshops; immediately upon the completion of the school-based workshops; and upon returning to each workshop site after



the completion of the project to thank the principals for their support. Field notes related to the school principals' and school staff's reactions to the project are highlighted in this paper, because, as Emirati nationals, they provided important insights into the affordances and constraints of parent–child shared home reading for this population of fathers and children within the multilingual context of the UAE.

### 3. Results

The findings reported in this paper draw upon the three sources of data described above: a survey of participating fathers conducted at the beginning of each workshop with a focus on their reasons for reading and for not reading, the audio recordings of fathers' remarks during the workshops and during follow-up focus group discussions, and the field notes recorded by project team members chronicling the insights of school principals and school staff.

#### 3.1. Results from Fathers' Survey

In this section, descriptive results from the survey completed by 75 out of the 80 (94% completion rate) fathers during the workshops are first presented, starting with a brief demographic overview, which includes a summary of fathers' reported spoken languages at home. Then, survey data on fathers' reported reasons for reading are presented, followed by their reported enjoyment of reading, followed by their reasons for engaging in parental reading with children. Finally, barriers to parent–child reading faced by fathers are presented.

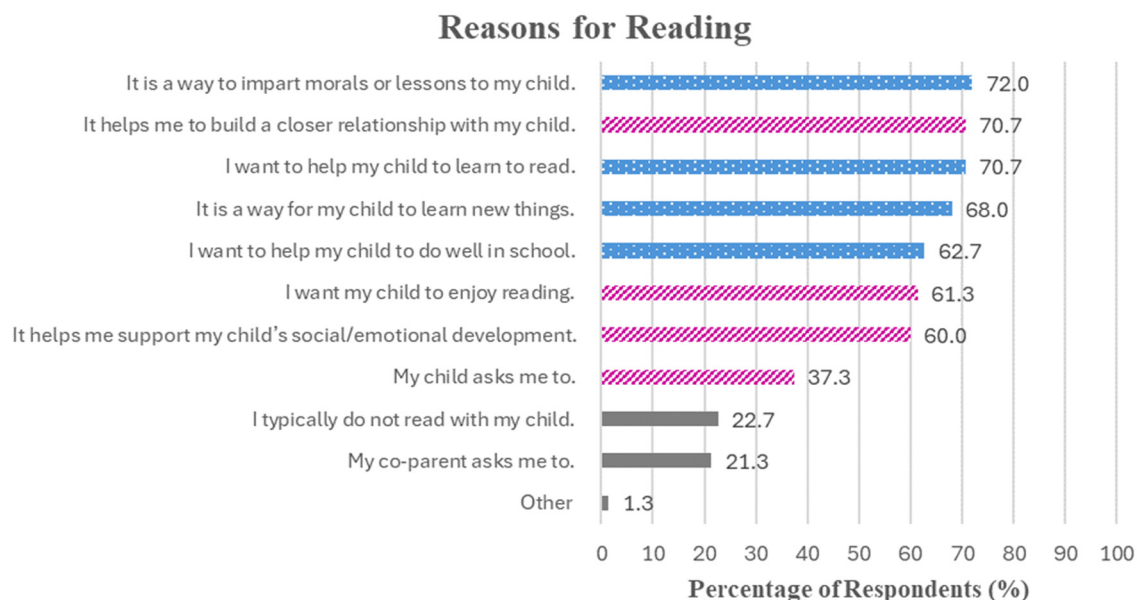
The survey revealed that the fathers who participated in the workshops ranged widely in age from 26 to 64 years, with a mean age of  $38.9 \pm 7$  years. All had completed high school, while 28% had also completed a bachelor's degree, and 15% had completed a postgraduate degree. Most fathers (81%) were employed at the time of the study, mainly with fulltime jobs (77%). Occupations consisted of professionals across various fields (engineering, business, management, law, IT, and education), the military and police, and technical work.

In terms of family languages used at home, most fathers (73%) reported that two or more languages were spoken. The most common languages spoken were Emirati Arabic and English (51%), while 24% of participants reported using Arabic (both Modern Standard Arabic and Emirati Arabic<sup>1</sup>). The use of Modern Standard Arabic, Emirati Arabic, and English was reported by 18% of fathers, while 6% reported that another language was used in addition to Arabic and English. Most fathers who said that only Arabic was spoken at home reported using Emirati Arabic (77%), with a smaller number reporting the use of Modern Standard Arabic (23%). This is indicative of the multilingual nature of the contemporary Emirati society, where both Arabic and English are widely used, and where speakers of Arabic switch between the local dialect and the standard form, depending on the situation. This multilingual reality was factored into the project design by the provision of children's books in both Modern Standard Arabic and English, and by the use of Emirati Arabic during the workshops by the facilitator, as mentioned previously.

#### 3.2. Reasons for Reading

Regarding participants' selected reasons for parent–child reading, three motives were prominent: most fathers (72%) believed that reading presents an opportunity to impart moral lessons to children. A similar proportion (71%) believed that reading helps build a closer relationship with the child, and the same number of fathers believed that it helps their child to learn to read (71%). Other reasons for parent–child reading identified by fathers included two from the cognitive domain, including learning new knowledge (68%) and

helping the child to do well in school (63%), while reasons related to the socio-emotional domain included fostering the child's enjoyment of reading (61%) and supporting the child's socio-emotional development (60%). The full range of reasons is seen in Figure 1 below and is shown in rank order according to the frequency of selection. Reasons categorized as cognitive are depicted with blue-dotted bars, socio-emotional with pink-hatched bars, and other reasons with solid gray bars.



**Figure 1.** Reasons for reading.

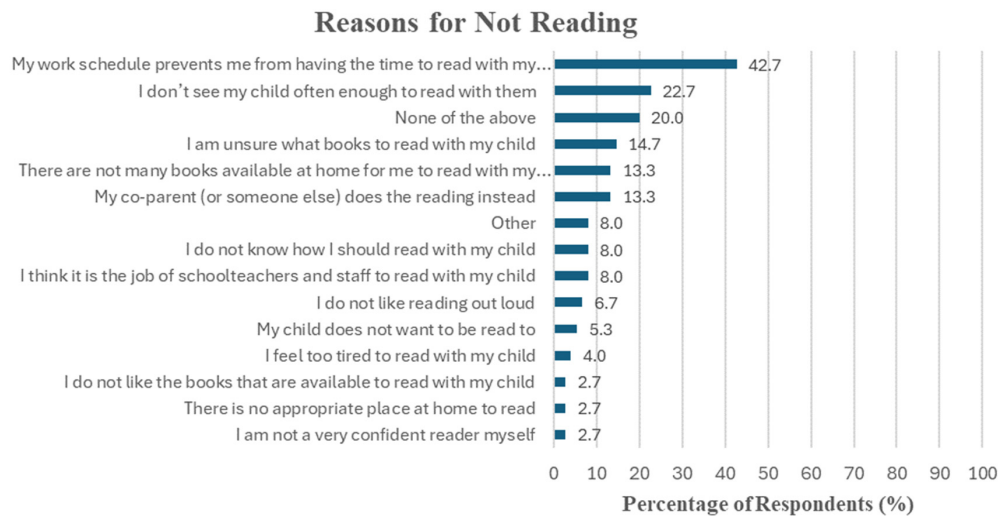
### 3.3. Enjoyment of Shared Reading

Before the workshop, when fathers were asked if they liked reading with their children at home, only 34.5% reported that they either enjoyed it or enjoyed it very much. Indeed, when asked to list the types of activities that they typically engage in with their kindergarten-age children, only five of the participating fathers listed language and literacy-related activities. On the other hand, very few fathers reported not enjoying or avoiding parent–child reading (9%). When asked about their children's enjoyment of reading with them, a much higher proportion of fathers indicated that their children enjoyed it or enjoyed it very much (52.3%). Despite this, only 37% of fathers reported that their child asks them to read.

### 3.4. Barriers to Father-Child Reading

The biggest obstacle to father-child reading in Emirati homes, as reported by the participants in this study, is fathers' lack of time for reading due to busy work schedules. Almost half of fathers cited the demands of working life as a factor in not reading with their children (43%). Related to this, almost one in four fathers (23%) reported that they do not see their children often enough to read with them, while 4% of fathers said they felt too tired to read with their children. These work and lifestyle-related factors apart, almost one-third of fathers reported book-related barriers to reading. Overall, one in three fathers were either unsure about what books to read with their children or else indicated that there were few books or unsuitable books for parent–child reading available at home. Other book-related issues reported by fathers were a lack of knowledge of how to read with their children (8%) and a dislike of reading aloud (7%), as well as the lack of a suitable space for parent–child reading (3%). All barriers to home reading, as identified by fathers, are

shown in Figure 2 below, where reasons are shown in rank order according to the frequency of selection.



**Figure 2.** Reasons for not reading.

### 3.5. Workshop and Focus Group Data

Workshops (WS) and focus group (FG) sessions were recorded as a source of fathers' "in-the-moment" responses to the project. The workshop recordings primarily comprised explanations to participants about the project, explanations of the methods of data collection, the completion of consent forms and surveys, book distribution, and also included a modeled read-aloud session with explanations for the strategies used. While there were relatively few non-procedural comments made by fathers while participating in the workshops, the remarks made were revelatory. For example, one father observed that he had opted to attend the workshop because "workshops like these are important to raise fathers' awareness of parenting" (WS3).

The focus group held after the workshop, on the other hand, sought to elicit fathers' post-workshop experiences of reading with their children. However, the first two focus groups resulted in low participation, and, in an effort to better accommodate fathers' busy schedules, the remaining focus group meetings were switched from in-person meetings at school to online sessions, but this did not result in an increase in the number of participants, which remained low.

In this section, themes from the remarks made during the focus groups by participating fathers are reported. These include their experiences of shared reading prior to the project, their experiences after reading the books at home with their children, their reported sense of wellbeing after shared reading, and their perceptions of shared reading as a means of reducing screen time, are reported.

The first salient theme from the focus groups relates to fathers' previous habits of reading with children. Most fathers said that they had never read to their children. One father (FG1) said that he sometimes tells made-up stories during long car journeys—a nod to the oral traditions of the society—but this was "the first time I read for them". He said that shared reading built "more of a connection" with his two children, aged four and five years. Similarly, another father shared that he tells his children stories "daily from my imagination" before bedtime, but "this was the first time to read from the book. They enjoyed it more" (FG4). In contrast, another father commented that "We are used to reading at home . . . we read five days a week, [and] at the weekend it's going out to places. They are used to this routine" (FG2). The steps in the generation of this theme are shown in

Table 1 below as an example of how thematic analysis was conducted in response to the questions posed (the final column interprets the themes in light of the implied affordances and constraints for father-child shared reading, and which will be further addressed in Section 4 that follows Section 3).

**Table 1.** Sample of Thematic Data Analysis.

Focus Group Guiding Question	Response	Code	Theme	Affordances and/or Constraints
Do you normally read to your children or is this a new experience?	“Very rarely. When we are driving to Dubai, long ways, sometimes I try to tell him a story from my mind, from my experience. Like that. From the book, this is my first time. Yeah, first time to read for them.”	Reading is rare. Father sometimes tells his own made-up stories on car journeys. First experience of reading for his children.	Oral story telling. Habit of storytelling/habit of reading. Time/place for stories.	<b>Affordances:</b> <i>Oral story telling</i> Oral story telling is common and may be seen as an <i>affordance</i> as it occurs along one end of the continuum from oracy to literacy; it can develop comprehension and narrative competence which are essential for reading texts, especially narrative texts. <i>Time/place for stories</i> Bedtime and car time are good times for engaging with children through stories. <i>Children’s enjoyment</i> Children like being read to.
	“We are used to reading at home. 7:45 p.m. an alarm goes, they get dressed for sleep. We read five days a week. At the weekend, it’s going out to places. They are used to the routine”.	Shared reading is a normal practice. Bedtime stories. Every weekday, not weekends.	Regular home reading. Time/place for stories.	
	“For us, before bedtime, daily from my imagination to tell them stories, but this was the first time to read from the book. They enjoyed it more”.	Oral storytelling at bedtime.	Frequent oral story telling. Children’s enjoyment of being read to. Time/place for stories.	
	“I used to rely on fables and stuff I created from my imagination; it wasn’t official stories with all elements. I tell them sometimes at night, before bedtime”.	Telling traditional stories. Telling made-up stories. Bedtime.	Oral storytelling. Time/place for stories.	<b>Constraints:</b> <i>Oral story telling</i> Habit of storytelling versus habit of reading. Oral storytelling may however be seen equally as a <i>constraint</i> , insofar as it excludes text. <i>Reading habits</i> Few fathers ever read to their children. <i>Busyness</i> Busyness of fathers precludes reading together.
	“My son would always ask me to read, but I’m busy, I’m travelling, or need to go somewhere. Or they’re going somewhere at the weekend. After coming back from school they are exhausted. I hardly have time to sit and do other stuff, I even forgot about this meeting and joined late.”.	Child wanted father to read. Lack of time. Father busy with travel. Children tired after school.	Children want to be read to. Busy father. Tired children. Lack of time to read.	

A second theme from the discussions with participants is that of emotional closeness to their children when reading, which impacts upon wellbeing. This was expressed most completely by a father in FG4 who explained that,

As a father I never thought about being close to my kids; my concern was only to provide for them. So, when I started reading with them, and they became engaged, we discussed things, and they started asking questions. I now know what they need and want; they felt more comfortable and at ease. (FG4)

Another father expressed a poignant wish to learn how to build a stronger relationship with his children in the context of shared reading, as follows:

So, I'd like to start from the beginning to understand how to bond and strengthen the relationship between you and your kid and you try to direct him in the right direction where he will be a good asset to his country in the future. (FG4)

A third salient theme was concern about their children's excessive screen time, which distracts from reading. One father said, "Before I read . . . for him, he was playing with the iPad. I took the iPad from him, please stop, now I have something better than the iPad. I will read a story for you" (FG1). Another parent in the same group remarked that "it's better than the phone" (FG1), while a father in FG 4 observed that he "noticed that kids are mostly shy and introverted since they remain on the devices for long". Similarly, in FG5, a father explained that "I give them half an hour to 40 min of screen time; I control the Smart TV, and once the timing is off, the TV shuts down immediately, and they become in the mood for reading".

Fourthly, fathers discussed the languages that they used to read the storybooks for their children. Most reported reading in Arabic, and some reported that their children, in turn, took the opportunity to read in English for them, as seen in FG3, for example, when a father mentioned that "I read the story in Arabic for them and tried to be funny with them. And they started to do the same with me in English". Another father in FG2 remarked about reading with his trilingual child that "It's nice that he can switch between languages at the same time". One father saw bilingualism as problematic, however, remarking that "the problem at home is that we speak two languages. I am married to a foreign mother. I try to speak to her in Arabic, but she speaks English" (WS4). Overall, fathers said that they mostly preferred to use Arabic for reading with their children, but they also accommodated English, as seen in the comment from a father in FG2 who noted that "for a child you need to have a story in Arabic, sometimes an English story".

### 3.6. Field Note Data

Data informing this paper also came from field notes made by project team members before, during, or immediately after each school-based workshop. These field notes tended to focus on the reactions of the school principals and school staff who hosted the workshop in their schools, and, as Emirati nationals, these personnel proved to be key informants for the project.

Principals warmly welcomed the project and made suitable facilities available to hold the workshops at their schools. At some schools, they joined with the research team and facilitator to welcome the fathers in person to the workshops. Some principals emphasized the importance of early reading development during the kindergarten years. The principals of School 1, School 2, and School 3b (two of the principals wanted to host a joint workshop, and these are referred to here as schools 3a and 3b) enthusiastically examined samples of the project's selected children's books during the research team's introductory visit. The principal of School 1 expressed a wish for more English books for father-child home reading. The reason for this became clear during a post-workshop visit to her school when it was mentioned that there was sufficient access to Arabic books for children, but the provision



of more books in English had been a recommendation in a recent school inspection report, and thus the project was viewed in part as potentially helping meet key literacy support performance indicators for her school.

In School 7, the principal spoke about the need to get fathers more involved in everyday support for their children's education because, she said, fathers tend to show up at school only for big events. This principal added that she believes that fathers' lack of involvement in their children's development is not because it is not a traditional part of Emirati family culture, but just due to a "lack of habit". She suggested that if fathers are encouraged and invited, and even expected to participate in their children's development, it will become a normal part of an Emirati father's role. She also observed that many mothers work nowadays, as well as fathers, and that the key to parental involvement in her experience is giving parents different timing options for participating in activities related to their children's development.

Another theme emerging from the field notes is the keenness of principals and their staff to involve mothers in the reading literacy project also. Although they welcomed the project wholeheartedly and made concerted efforts to invite fathers to the workshops, all the principals expressed interest in involving mothers as well as—or, in some cases, instead of—fathers. On the other hand, an Emirati teacher who had helped with the workshop arrangements at School 5 commented that even though she was disappointed that few fathers in her school actually attended the workshop, she was confident that participants would talk about the workshop with their brothers and friends, suggesting that there would be a male-to-male ripple effect from the project.

Regarding the availability of books for parent-child home reading, a field note from School 4 noted that a member of staff observed that the school does not have any suitable books in the library for children and parents to read at home. The staff member contrasted this with her experience as a parent of children in a private school where children are provided with a new book to read at home with their parents every week. She said that she would like to see this practice introduced in state schools and kindergartens, to ensure more uptake of parent-child shared reading at home amongst children in state schools. This point was corroborated by the response of fathers in the survey, with one in three fathers either unsure about what books to read or having few suitable books at home.

A final notable theme that emerged from the field notes was the prevalence reported by principals of separation and divorce amongst their parent body, suggesting that many fathers may spend very limited time with their children. At schools 3a and 3b, this factor was explained as an impediment to recruiting fathers for the workshops. At school 4, the principal indicated that as many as 30% of families in her city school's catchment area are divorced, and she linked children's weak emergent literacy in Arabic, as well as general academic and behavioral issues, to the relatively high number of non-Arabic speaking, foreign-born spouses of Emirati fathers of kindergarten children. In fact, this observation by school principals was corroborated by some fathers during the workshops, such as the father at School 3b who mentioned that he does not see his son regularly, and cannot read with him as he lives in another city.

#### 4. Discussion

In this section, the project findings are drawn together in response to the aim of this paper: to examine the affordances and constraints of the project in developing shared reading between fathers and children in a multilingual context where home reading is not commonly practiced.

#### 4.1. Affordances

In terms of affordances, overall, this project contributes to building family capital (Leithwood, 2022) related to literacy for a multilingual population, through the provision of workshops on shared reading for fathers with books provided in Arabic and English. The project is both reactionary (in responding to the literacy needs of the local community) and visionary (approaching literacy development in a novel way, in its context). As the first reported study of father-child interactive reading and wellbeing in the Middle East, overall, it had positive outcomes for stakeholders which point towards the value of extending such projects. From the fathers' perspectives, they reported that reading with their children brought them enjoyment and closeness, with some reporting enhanced wellbeing through reading with their young children for the first time. Parental enjoyment may lead to positive effects on their children's reading, as indicated by international research findings across several countries which show that children of parents who read for pleasure are better readers (Clavel & Mediavilla, 2020).

Notably, fathers who participated in the workshops were enthusiastic about shared reading and afterward reported enjoyment in engaging in reading with their children at home, whether they were in the habit of doing so or were new to parent-child reading. Moreover, fathers reported different ways of engaging their children in stories, including oral storytelling, as well as reading of the text. While this could be construed as a constraint, and although oral story telling is not a print-related activity, it can be seen as an affordance insofar as it contributes to the development of literacy-related skills such as narrative competence and comprehension (Al-Janaideh et al., 2022), as well as being an important part of Emirati cultural inheritance. Thus, when shared reading is viewed as a meaning-focused activity, story books are seen to act as a springboard for oral language development (Wang et al., 2023) which can support future literacy development. At the same time, the workshops sought to convey to fathers the many cognitive and linguistic advantages of reading texts for pleasure with their children.

An additional aspect of this project was its dual focus on shared reading for father-child wellbeing. The socio-emotional benefits of shared adult-child reading are becoming increasingly apparent in the literature (for example, Schapira & Aram, 2020; Sun et al., 2024). Indeed, in the survey, fathers expressed a belief that reading helps build a closer relationship with their children. Furthermore, they believed that parent-child reading could support their children's socio-emotional development, while helping their child to learn to read, to acquire new knowledge, and to succeed academically. Nevertheless, only one in three fathers in the pre-workshop survey said that they actually enjoy reading with their children, perhaps because the idea of reading as a pleasurable activity is a novel one for many of the participants in this Gulf context and will take time to become an embedded practice, although most fathers recognized that their children enjoyed being read to.

Within multilingual Emirati homes where Emirati Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, and English are used to varying degrees, with Emirati Arabic reported by fathers as being most widely used, the books provided by the project afforded opportunities to develop all the languages of their children. The gradual transition from the spoken dialect of the home (Emirati Arabic) to the formal Arabic of schooling (Modern Standard Arabic) is a key feature of early childhood education in the Arab world (Ribeiro Daquila, 2020), and home reading can support this, as well as supporting Arabic language development in general. One aspect of this was that the fathers of children who lived with mothers who did not speak Arabic especially enjoyed the opportunity to read with their children in Arabic. With English being taught from kindergarten onwards, and in some such schools being an additional language of teaching, translanguaging opportunities across Arabic and English

also arose in the project, for example, when fathers reported that they read in Arabic and their children responded in English.

#### 4.2. Constraints

In terms of constraints, father-child reading is still quite a rare occurrence among this population of fathers, however. Fathers acknowledged a number of barriers to reading, the most common being a lack of time for parent-child reading at home. In common with research conducted elsewhere, most fathers reported that finding time to read with their children is a challenge for them, just as it is for fathers in the UK, for example (Swain et al., 2017). More child-friendly workplace policies in the UAE might help address this (Dickson et al., 2024). In addition, fathers reported a lack of children's books, and a lack of knowledge of how to read with their children, two constraints which the project sought to address through the selection and provision of books and the modeling of adult-child shared reading in the workshops.

Another challenge faced in the implementation of the project lay in the low number of fathers who turned up for the post-workshop focus group sessions; yet, on the other hand, the number of fathers who opted to participate in the project exceeded the research team's expectations. In addition, while kindergarten principals were very welcoming and supportive of the project, there was an insistence in some schools that home reading with children was something for mothers to undertake, not fathers.

### 5. Conclusions

To conclude this paper, and to address the second research question, recommendations arising from the project are considered, while recognizing that the findings constitute a starting point for initially exploring the field. For similar emerging biliteracy and wellbeing intervention programs in multilingual societies where home reading is not a common practice and where few children's books may be available, the first recommendation is to provide families and schools with access to multiple children's books in their preferred languages for shared parent-child home reading for pleasure. These can be provided directly through nurseries, kindergartens, schools, or community centers, or as digital books on customized websites. For populations such as the Emirati population, books that focus on moral development and that contain culturally congruent settings and content are important, as are books in both Arabic and English for a bilingual society. There is also a need for books for this population and age group written wholly or partially in the Emirati Gulf Arabic dialect, or in standard Arabic that is easily rendered into Emirati Arabic by adult readers. Contemporary books that focus on aspects of children's socio-emotional development are also important, with principals expressing concern about the negative emotional impact of divorce on children and fathers too, recognizing the importance of books for socio-emotional development. In a culture with strong oral traditions, storytelling by parents, with or without books as prompts or stimuli, should also be encouraged as it can contribute to literacy development.

Secondly, the inclusion of both fathers and mothers in home reading programs is recommended, explicitly providing a variety of timings for such meetings, and perhaps different times for mothers and fathers if this is in line with gender-segregation norms. As one school principal pointed out, the more fathers are expected and encouraged to attend workshops and information sessions in kindergartens, the more it will become a normal part of fathers' role; and the more fathers participate in reading-related awareness raising, the more they can be supported in engaging in father-child reading for their own benefit and that of their children.

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> Arabic is a diglossic language, meaning that there is one standard form of Arabic that is used primarily for reading and writing (known as Modern Standard Arabic), and very different everyday spoken forms (or dialects) that vary from place to place. In the UAE, this dialect is known as Emirati Arabic.

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