

Family social support and reading-skill development among children with intellectual disabilities: A qualitative study at an Indonesian special school

Inda Puspita¹

Universitas PGRI Yogyakarta

Ramdhan Harjana²

Universitas PGRI Yogyakarta

ABSTRACT

Children with intellectual disabilities often require intensive, repeated, and contextually meaningful literacy instruction. This study examined the forms of family social support provided during reading activities and explored how such support contributes to children's self-efficacy and early reading development. A descriptive qualitative study with a phenomenological orientation was conducted at SLB Rela Bhakti I Gamping, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Participants comprised four parents or guardians as key informants, three classroom teachers, and the school principal as supporting informants. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document review, and were analysed using the interactive procedures of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings identified four interdependent forms of family support: emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support. Emotional security reduced anxiety during repeated reading attempts; learning materials and direct assistance created opportunities for mastery; parent-teacher communication aligned instructional practices across home and school; and praise or recognition strengthened children's willingness to persist. Interpreted through social support and self-efficacy theories, these practices formed a reinforcing pathway from family support to confidence, persistence, and gradual reading progress. The study suggests that literacy support for children with intellectual disabilities should be designed as a coordinated home-school process rather than as a school-only intervention.

Keywords: family social support; self-efficacy; intellectual disability; home literacy environment; reading development

Address for Correspondence:

¹ indapuspita76@gmail.com

² ramdhan@upy.ac.id

INTRODUCTION

Literacy is a fundamental educational entitlement and an important pathway to communication, participation, self-determination, and everyday independence. For children with intellectual disabilities, however, access to literacy instruction has historically been restricted by low expectations and an excessive emphasis on functional routines rather than comprehensive reading development. Current perspectives define intellectual disability in terms of significant limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour while also emphasizing that functioning can improve when individualized supports are sustained and responsive to the person's context (Schalock et al., 2021). This support-oriented view is consistent with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which requires equitable access to education and reasonable support for learners with disabilities (United Nations, 2006).

Learning to read can be particularly demanding for children with intellectual disabilities because progress may be affected by limitations in working memory, attention, language, and the ability to generalize newly learned skills. Nevertheless, research demonstrates that these learners can acquire meaningful literacy skills when instruction is explicit, systematic, intensive, and adapted to their individual profiles (Afacan et al., 2018; Erickson, 2017; Lemons et al., 2016). Multisensory practice, repeated exposure, instruction in phonological awareness and decoding, and opportunities to read meaningful text are therefore more appropriate than an exclusive reliance on isolated sight-word memorization (Rusli et al., 2025). Because the acquisition process is often gradual, the amount and consistency of practice available beyond formal classroom hours become especially important.

The home literacy environment includes the literacy materials available to a child, the frequency and quality of shared literacy activities, caregivers' beliefs about literacy, and the interaction strategies used during reading. A recent scoping review found that parent practices and interaction styles can support engagement, language, comprehension, and literacy-related outcomes among children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, while also identifying a need for research involving culturally diverse families and naturally occurring home practices (Biggs et al., 2023). Survey research further indicates that parents value literacy for children with intellectual disabilities but may experience uncertainty about appropriate instructional expectations and methods (Wakeman et al., 2021). These findings suggest that families should not be treated merely as recipients of school information; they are active partners who shape the frequency, emotional climate, and continuity of children's learning experiences.

Evidence from parent-implemented intervention research supports this position. Reviews and meta-analyses show that caregivers can learn to use language, communication, and shared-reading strategies effectively when they receive clear modelling, coaching, and feedback (Akamoglu & Meadan, 2018; Heidlage et al., 2020; Roberts & Kaiser, 2011). During storybook reading, for example, parent use of modelling, prompts, wait time, and responsive feedback can increase children's opportunities to communicate and participate (Akamoglu & Meadan, 2019). More specifically, Heidlage et al. (2024) demonstrated that parents of young children with intellectual and developmental disabilities could implement a multicomponent reading intervention with fidelity and improve targeted reading outcomes after systematic training. However, most intervention studies have been conducted in high-resource contexts and have focused on structured programmes designed by researchers. Less is known about how families in Indonesian special-school settings provide everyday support using the resources, knowledge, and time available to them.

The present study integrates two complementary theoretical perspectives. House's (1981) social support framework distinguishes emotional support, instrumental support, informational support, and appraisal support. These dimensions clarify what families provide: reassurance and acceptance; time, materials, and direct assistance; guidance and information; and evaluative feedback that recognizes effort or progress. Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory clarifies how support may influence learning behaviour. Self-efficacy develops through mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological or affective states. In reading activities, a child who experiences small successes, observes a calm and persistent adult model, hears credible encouragement, and feels emotionally safe may be more willing to attempt difficult tasks and persist after errors.

Existing studies have documented the value of family involvement, the home literacy environment, and parent-teacher collaboration (Biggs et al., 2023; Fahmi & Tarsidi, 2025; Wang et al., 2022). Yet there remains a conceptual and contextual gap: research rarely maps naturally occurring forms of family support onto the psychological processes through which children with intellectual disabilities sustain effort during reading. Addressing this gap is important because the same material assistance may produce different outcomes depending on whether it is delivered in an emotionally secure, consistent, and autonomy-supportive manner. Accordingly, this study asked: (1) What forms of family social support are provided to children with intellectual disabilities during learning-to-read activities? and (2) How do parents, teachers, and school leaders perceive the contribution of these forms of support to children's self-efficacy and reading development? The study aims to contribute an integrated, context-sensitive account of family support that can inform home-school literacy planning in special education.

METHOD

This study used a descriptive qualitative design with a phenomenological orientation to examine how participants understood and experienced family support during children's reading development. A qualitative design was appropriate because the study sought to interpret meanings, routines, and interactions rather than to estimate causal effects or population prevalence (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research was conducted at SLB Rela Bhakti I Gamping, a private special school in Sleman Regency, the Special Region of Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The site was selected purposively because it provides educational services to children with intellectual disabilities and maintains routine communication with their families.

The key informants were four parents or guardians of children with intellectual disabilities, identified in the data as P1–P4. They were selected purposively because they were directly involved in home-based reading support and could describe the assistance provided before and after school. Supporting informants were three classroom teachers and the school principal. Teachers contributed observations of children's reading participation and parent–school communication, whereas the principal provided information about school policy and expectations concerning family involvement. Children were not interviewed directly; their learning behaviours were considered through observations, school records, and adult accounts.

Fieldwork was conducted over two weeks. Data collection began with school orientation and preliminary observation, followed by semi-structured interviews with parents, teachers, and the principal. The interview guide addressed the four dimensions of social support, examples of reading assistance at home, communication between families and teachers, children's responses to praise and correction, and perceived changes in confidence or persistence. Participant observation focused on reading-support interactions at home and school, including the availability of materials, adult prompting, repetition, feedback, and children's behavioural responses. Documentary evidence included the school profile, literacy-development records, and relevant academic documentation. Interview quotations were translated from Indonesian into English and lightly edited for readability without changing their substantive meaning.

Data were analysed using the interactive model of Miles et al. (2020), comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The analysis proceeded iteratively. First, interview notes, observational records, and documents were organized by participant and data source. Second, meaningful units were coded using House's four support dimensions as an initial sensitizing framework while retaining additional observations that did not fit the framework. Third, the researchers compared how each support form was associated with Bandura's sources of self-efficacy and with reported reading behaviours such as willingness to attempt, persistence, and repeated practice. Matrices were used to compare accounts across parents, teachers, and the principal and to identify convergence or discrepancy.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation, method triangulation, member checking, prolonged engagement within the available field period, and maintenance of an analytic audit trail. Credibility was supported by comparing interview claims with observations and school documents; transferability was addressed through contextual description; dependability was supported by documenting analytic decisions; and confirmability was pursued by linking interpretations to specific data excerpts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reporting was informed by established qualitative-reporting principles, particularly the COREQ and SRQR recommendations (O'Brien et al., 2014; Tong et al., 2007).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participant context and cross-source convergence

Across the four family cases, participants differed in employment demands, economic resources, and the amount of time available for direct tutoring. Despite these differences, parents, teachers, and the principal consistently described family involvement as a necessary extension of school instruction. The strongest cross-source convergence concerned the need for repetition, emotional patience, simple learning materials, and regular communication between home and school. The findings were

organized into four forms of support—emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support—and then interpreted in relation to self-efficacy and reading behaviour.

Emotional support: Creating psychological safety for repeated attempts

Emotional support was expressed through attention, acceptance of the child's condition, patience during repeated errors, and encouragement to continue. Parents described setting aside time to accompany reading practice even when progress was slow. One parent explained:

"I pay attention when my child practises reading. At home, I sit with the child and repeat syllables such as ba, bi, and bu." (P1, parent interview)

Observations were consistent with this account. Parents corrected pronunciation, prompted the child to look again at a letter or syllable, and generally remained physically present during practice. Several accounts also indicated that parental expectations became more realistic over time: initial disappointment was gradually replaced by acceptance and attention to incremental progress. In House's (1981) framework, these behaviours constitute emotional support because they communicate empathy, care, trust, and belonging.

The significance of emotional support extends beyond comfort. Repeated failure or correction can produce anxiety and avoidance, particularly when a child already anticipates difficulty. From Bandura's (1977) perspective, a calm and accepting learning climate regulates physiological and affective states that inform self-efficacy judgments. When errors do not lead to ridicule, anger, or withdrawal of attention, the child is more likely to interpret difficulty as manageable rather than as evidence of incapacity. This finding supports Indonesian research showing that family social support is sustained through patient, repeated involvement rather than through one-time encouragement (Lubab et al., 2022). It also complements family-support programmes that emphasize caregiver well-being and positive interaction as foundations for child development (Coulman et al., 2021).

Instrumental support: Providing materials, time, and guided practice

Instrumental support consisted of tangible resources and direct assistance. Families provided alphabet books, notebooks, pencils, handwritten examples, and other low-cost materials according to their economic capacity. They also contributed time and effort by modelling sounds, segmenting words into syllables, and asking children to repeat items. A second parent stated:

"I provide alphabet books. When reading is difficult, I first write an example on paper and ask the child to follow it." (P2, parent interview)

The value of these resources was not determined by their sophistication. Their principal function was to make practice immediately available and repeatable. Observations showed that materials were commonly kept within the child's reach and used in short, recurring learning episodes. This pattern aligns with evidence that the home literacy environment is multidimensional: material availability matters, but its effect depends on how adults use resources during interaction (Biggs et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022).

Instrumental support also created opportunities for mastery experiences. Each successfully recognized letter, decoded syllable, or completed word provided concrete evidence that effort could lead to improvement. The cumulative nature of these small successes is especially important for children whose progress may be slower and less linear. The finding is consistent with reviews showing that multicomponent, explicit, and repeated reading instruction can support learners with intellectual disabilities (Afacan et al., 2018; Lemons et al., 2016). It also parallels parent-implemented intervention research in which structured coaching enabled caregivers to deliver reading instruction accurately at home (Heidlage et al., 2024). The present study adds that, even without a formal programme, families attempted to approximate these principles through simple modelling and repetition.

Informational support: Aligning home and school instruction

Informational support was evident in two connected practices: parents provided guidance based on what the child had learned at school, and parents and teachers exchanged information about current reading targets, difficulties, and progress. Communication occurred through WhatsApp messages, telephone calls, and direct meetings. A classroom teacher noted:

"Communication between parents and teachers usually takes place through WhatsApp, telephone calls, or direct meetings." (T1, teacher interview)

This communication reduced the risk that children would encounter conflicting prompts or expectations across settings. For learners who benefit from consistent repetition, alignment of letter

sounds, vocabulary, correction procedures, and task difficulty is pedagogically important. The result supports research emphasizing ecological collaboration between teachers and parents of children with intellectual disabilities (Fahmi & Tarsidi, 2025). It also addresses a concern identified by Wakeman et al. (2021): parents may value literacy highly but require clearer information about appropriate methods and expectations.

Bandura's concept of reciprocal determinism helps explain this theme. The child's reading behaviour is shaped by the interaction of personal beliefs, adult practices, and the learning environment. Information exchanged between home and school changes the environment by making adult responses more coherent; the child's progress or difficulty then influences the guidance teachers provide and the support parents deliver. Thus, informational support is not a one-way transfer of instructions from school to home. It is a feedback process in which both settings adapt to the child's responses.

Appraisal support: Recognizing effort and strengthening persistence

Appraisal support involved praise, recognition of effort, affectionate responses, and occasional simple rewards when a child completed a reading task. Parents reported that acknowledgement of even modest progress increased enthusiasm. One combined account from P3 and P4 illustrates the pattern:

"When my child reads successfully, I say that the effort was good and encourage the child to continue. Sometimes I give a favourite snack or invite the child for a walk." (P3–P4, parent interviews)

Observations suggested that children often re-engaged after receiving praise, a hug, or access to a preferred activity. In House's (1981) model, appraisal support provides evaluative feedback that helps an individual interpret performance positively. In Bandura's (1977) framework, credible encouragement functions as verbal persuasion. Its effect is likely to be strongest when it is specific, linked to effort or strategy, and supported by actual mastery experiences. Praise that merely labels a child as "smart" may be less informative than feedback such as "you looked at each letter and tried again." Accordingly, the practical implication is not to maximize rewards, but to make feedback immediate, truthful, and focused on observable progress.

An integrated support–self-efficacy pathway

The four support forms did not operate independently. Emotional support made it safer for the child to attempt a task; instrumental support made practice possible; informational support made practice more consistent across settings; and appraisal support helped the child interpret effort and success positively. Together, these forms of support generated repeated learning experiences through which self-efficacy could develop. Table 1 summarizes this integrated interpretation.

Table 1. Integration of family social support and self-efficacy mechanisms

Support form	Observed family practices	Self-efficacy mechanism	Expected literacy function
Emotional	Attention, acceptance, patience, and reassurance	Regulation of affective and physiological states	Reduces anxiety and supports willingness to attempt
Instrumental	Materials, time, modelling, prompting, and repeated practice	Mastery and vicarious experiences	Creates repeated opportunities for successful decoding
Informational	Guidance and two-way parent–teacher communication	Reciprocal interaction between person, behaviour, and environment	Aligns methods and targets across home and school
Appraisal	Specific praise, recognition of effort, affection, and simple rewards	Verbal persuasion and interpretation of mastery	Strengthens confidence, motivation, and persistence

Source: Authors' analysis based on House (1981) and Bandura (1977).

The integrated model suggests that family support contributes to reading development indirectly as well as directly. Directly, families increase access to materials and practice. Indirectly, they influence how children interpret difficulty, success, and their own capability. This distinction is important because the present qualitative data cannot establish that support caused measurable reading gains. Rather, the data show a coherent perceived pathway: children who experienced patient assistance, consistent guidance, and recognition were described as more willing to try, repeat, and persist. That interpretation is compatible with experimental evidence on parent-implemented literacy intervention (Heidlage et al., 2024) and broader evidence that parent-implemented language interventions improve

child outcomes when caregivers receive systematic support (Heidlage et al., 2020; Roberts & Kaiser, 2011).

The findings also underline the importance of family-centred and culturally responsive implementation. Families in this study used inexpensive materials and communication channels already embedded in daily life. A support programme for this context should therefore avoid assuming that effective home literacy requires costly technology or lengthy formal sessions. Instead, schools can provide short, clearly modelled activities; demonstrate how to give corrective feedback; agree on a small number of weekly targets; and invite parents to report what works at home. This approach is consistent with Biggs et al.'s (2023) recommendation that home literacy interventions attend to family diversity and with parent-support research emphasizing collaborative, accessible service delivery (Coulman et al., 2021).

Practical implications

For parents, the findings support a balanced routine in which emotional safety precedes correction, materials are simple and accessible, practice is brief but regular, and feedback recognizes effort and strategy. For teachers, the central implication is to convert general advice such as “practise at home” into specific, manageable guidance: the target sound or word, the prompt to use, the number of repetitions, and the response to an error. For school leaders, structured communication can be established through weekly home–school reading logs, short demonstration videos, or scheduled consultation periods. These mechanisms may reduce inconsistency and distribute responsibility more equitably between families and schools.

Limitations and directions for future research

Several limitations constrain interpretation. The study was conducted in one private special school with a small purposive sample and a two-week field period; consequently, the findings are context-specific and should not be generalized statistically. Participant demographic characteristics and differences in children's level of intellectual functioning were not reported in sufficient detail to support subgroup analysis. The study relied primarily on adult accounts and observation and did not include children's direct perspectives. Moreover, no standardized pre–post reading assessment or longitudinal follow-up was used, so the study cannot determine the magnitude, durability, or causal direction of reading change. Future research should combine qualitative analysis with repeated literacy measures, include children's communicative perspectives where ethically and developmentally appropriate, compare multiple schools and socioeconomic contexts, and evaluate structured home–school support models over longer periods.

CONCLUSION

Family support for children with intellectual disabilities at SLB Rela Bhakti I Gamping was expressed through four mutually reinforcing forms: emotional support, instrumental assistance, informational coordination, and appraisal feedback. The findings suggest that these practices matter not only because they extend reading practice beyond school, but also because they shape the child's emotional security, interpretation of success, and willingness to persist. Integrating House's social support framework with Bandura's self-efficacy theory provides a plausible explanation of how everyday family actions can support gradual reading development. The practical priority is therefore a coordinated home–school literacy process in which families receive clear, feasible guidance and children encounter consistent methods, patient assistance, and credible recognition of progress. Because the evidence is qualitative and context-specific, the proposed pathway should be tested through longitudinal and mixed-methods research using direct measures of reading development.

Acknowledgment

The authors gratefully acknowledge the principal, teachers, parents, and students of SLB Rela Bhakti I Gamping for their participation and cooperation. The authors also thank the academic supervisors and Universitas PGRI Yogyakarta for their guidance and institutional support during the research process.

REFERENCES

- Afacan, K., Wilkerson, K. L., & Ruppard, A. L. (2018). Multicomponent reading interventions for students with intellectual disability. *Remedial and Special Education*, 39(4), 229–242. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932517702444>
- Akamoglu, Y., & Meadan, H. (2018). Parent-implemented language and communication interventions for children with developmental delays and disabilities: A scoping review. *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 5(3), 294–309. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40489-018-0140-x>
- Akamoglu, Y., & Meadan, H. (2019). Parent-implemented communication strategies during storybook reading. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 41(4), 300–320. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053815119855007>
- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84(2), 191–215. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.84.2.191>
- Biggs, E. E., Arserio, A. P., Robison, S. E., & Ross, M. E. (2023). Home literacy environment and interventions for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities: A scoping review. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 66(6), 2118–2140. https://doi.org/10.1044/2023_JSLHR-22-00334
- Coulman, E., Gore, N., Moody, G., Wright, M., Segrott, J., Gillespie, D., Petrou, S., Lugg-Widger, F., Kim, S., Bradshaw, J., McNamara, R., Jahoda, A., Lindsay, G., Shurlock, J., Totsika, V., Stanford, C., Flynn, S., Carter, A., Barlow, C., & Hastings, R. P. (2021). Early Positive Approaches to Support (E-PAtS) for families of young children with intellectual disability: A feasibility randomised controlled trial. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 12, 729129. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.729129>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Erickson, K. A. (2017). Comprehensive literacy instruction, interprofessional collaborative practice, and students with severe disabilities. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 26(2), 193–205. https://doi.org/10.1044/2017_AJSLP-15-0067
- Fahmi, H., & Tarsidi, I. (2025). Kolaborasi antara guru dan orang tua untuk meningkatkan interaksi sosial anak tunagrahita ringan melalui aspek ekologi. *JIP: Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu Pendidikan*, 8(7), 7329–7333. <https://doi.org/10.54371/jiip.v8i7.8488>
- Heidlage, J. K., Cunningham, J. E., Kaiser, A. P., Trivette, C. M., Barton, E. E., Frey, J. R., & Roberts, M. Y. (2020). The effects of parent-implemented language interventions on child linguistic outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 50, 6–23. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2018.12.006>
- Heidlage, J. K., Lemons, C. J., Balasubramanian, L., & Dunnivant, L. (2024). Parent-implemented reading intervention for children with intellectual and developmental disability. *Remedial and Special Education*, 45(5), 267–278. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325231211333>
- House, J. S. (1981). *Work stress and social support*. Addison-Wesley.
- Lemons, C. J., Allor, J. H., Al Otaiba, S., & Lejeune, L. M. (2016). 10 research-based tips for enhancing literacy instruction for students with intellectual disability. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 49(1), 18–30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040059916662202>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE.
- Lubab, W., Muwaffiqillah, M., & Muzakki, I. (2022). Dukungan sosial orang tua pada anak tunagrahita di SLB Muhammadiyah Kertosono. *Happiness: Journal of Psychology and Islamic Science*, 1(1), 39–47. <https://doi.org/10.30762/happiness.v1i1.327>
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2020). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- O'Brien, B. C., Harris, I. B., Beckman, T. J., Reed, D. A., & Cook, D. A. (2014). Standards for reporting qualitative research: A synthesis of recommendations. *Academic Medicine*, 89(9), 1245–1251. <https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000000388>

- Roberts, M. Y., & Kaiser, A. P. (2011). The effectiveness of parent-implemented language interventions: A meta-analysis. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 20(3), 180–199. [https://doi.org/10.1044/1058-0360\(2011/10-0055\)](https://doi.org/10.1044/1058-0360(2011/10-0055))
- Rusli, R., Erika, R., & Safitri, J. (2025). Efektivitas metode multisensori dalam meningkatkan kemampuan membaca pada anak disabilitas intelektual ringan. *Prosiding Konferensi Nasional Psikologi Kesehatan*, 157–169. <https://doi.org/10.33476/knpk.v5i1.5172>
- Schalock, R. L., Luckasson, R., & Tassé, M. J. (2021). An overview of intellectual disability: Definition, diagnosis, classification, and systems of supports (12th ed.). *American Journal on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, 126(6), 439–442. <https://doi.org/10.1352/1944-7558-126.6.439>
- Tong, A., Sainsbury, P., & Craig, J. (2007). Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): A 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, 19(6), 349–357. <https://doi.org/10.1093/intqhc/mzm042>
- United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.
- Wakeman, S. Y., Pennington, R., Cerrato, B., Saunders, A., & Ahlgrim-Delzell, L. (2021). Parent perceptions regarding literacy instruction for students with intellectual disability. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 65(1), 86–98. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jir.12795>
- Wang, Q., Ma, M., Li, M., Huang, Y., & Wang, T. (2022). Impact of socioeconomic status on literacy development of children with intellectual disabilities: A moderated mediation model. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 71(2), 150–164. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912X.2022.2094899>