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Strengthening Vocabulary Ability among Toddlers in their Early Childhood Literacy through the Reading Seed Programme (RSP)

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Abstract

The Reading Seed Programme (RSP) by PUSTAKA Negeri Sarawak has the potential to be the main nationwide literacy programme, especially to inculcate a reading culture. For instance, the RSP is designed to aid children in developing their reading vocabulary, and the RSP's target participants were pregnant mothers. The mothers would be utilising the RSP kits during pregnancy and after childbirth on their babies and toddlers. A substantial number of survey respondents were mothers and/or guardians of toddlers under three years old, and they shared their experiences with the RSP programme. Therefore, this paper aims to collect empirical data to assess the extent to which the RSP has achieved its objective of enhancing vocabulary ability among the toddlers during their participation in the reading programme. Convenience sampling was employed to collect the data among the RSP participants (the parents who enrolled in the RSP). This pilot study targeted RSP users in Kuching City, the hometown of PUSTAKA Negeri Sarawak. 385 respondents completed the online questionnaires, which yielded a 92.33% response rate. The findings of this research demonstrate that the RSP has proven to significantly contribute to the toddlers' vocabulary ability in reading. However, the RSP needs to address individual learning capabilities, incorporate updates or monitoring systems, improve training, establish a strategic roadmap of the RSP outcomes, and clarify the programme's attitudinal components with respect to the targeted outcomes. The RSP should continuously empower programme implementation to develop a global brand of early childhood reading programmes.

Keywords: *Reading Seed Programme, early childhood, early intervention, reading literacy, vocabulary ability*

INTRODUCTION

To achieve a satisfactory national literacy level, innovative and effective reading development programmes are required to assist children in learning to read, identify the elements that impede children's learning to read, and identify the roles and responsibilities of supporting systems (such as family, library, and society). According to Snow and Tabors (2001), early literacy development is complex and influenced significantly by the language environment surrounding children, particularly for those with diverse linguistic backgrounds. Gibson et al. (2020) also suggested that the quality of a child's early language and communication environment (ELCE) is an important predictor of later educational outcomes, in which reading skills in turn could aid children's engagement with texts and production of their own writing, on which formal academic assessment often depends.

In relation to Malaysians' literacy, about 5.36 % (i.e., 1.6 million out of 30.27 million Malaysians as of 2015) of Malaysians are illiterate, according to the UNESCO's Institute for Statistics (Macrotrend, 2024). When examining urban-rural disparities, it is clear that the literacy rate in rural areas of Sarawak falls significantly behind that of urban regions, as highlighted by the Ministry of Education Malaysia in 2015 (Macrotrend, 2024). Given this gap, it is crucial to investigate the effectiveness of reading programmes organised by the Malaysian National Library and state libraries in improving literacy rates across the country.

The primary objective of the Malaysian National Library (*Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia*, PNM) establishment is to promote literacy and reading by providing access to a vast collection of resources across diverse subjects (Nurul Suhaidi, 2023; PNM, 2013). This extensive array of materials allows the public to explore various topics and broaden their knowledge. Additionally, PNM has been making significant strides in enhancing reading habits among Malaysians through a range of initiatives, including reading encouragement programmes, campaigns, and activities. In fact, libraries across the country, including those in rural areas, have organised a variety of activities focused on reading and learning, with the goal of fostering values of togetherness, inclusion, and unity. The reading development programmes (RDPs) are classified into various segments to include community and family institutions, babies and preschoolers, primary and secondary school pupils, teenagers, government sectors, special needs groups (OKU), and the publication industry. The success and impact of the reading programmes initiated by the PNM and state libraries are the essential indicators for achieving the desired levels of literacy among Malaysians.

Over the years, Sarawak's state library (PUSTAKA Negeri Sarawak, PNS) has implemented three phases of the Family Literacy Programme: Phase 1 (Born to Read: 2001–2011); Phase 2 (Every Child Ready to Read: 2012–2015); and Phase 3 (Reading Seeds: 2015–present) (PNS, 2018). Initially, Born to Read is an American-born reading development programme founded to provide the spark that will ignite the love of books, libraries, and learning since early childhood. Learning from the Born to Read programme, the Reading Seeds Programme (RSP) was invented and kicked off in 2016 (Version 1.0) in Sarawak. Version 1.0 of the RSP was initially developed for the reading awareness programme in 2016. The version 2.0 of the RSP (2017) added child growth elements that incorporated medical experts in the RSP development phases. Version 3.0 of RSP, established in 2018 was further enhanced with panels of early childhood education experts where the RSP was tested with a series of focus groups (toddlers, children, and parents) sessions. The contents of the RSP encompass five specific areas, including physical growth and nutritional status, developmental growth (gross motor skills, fine motor skills, language and hearing skills, social and cognitive skills), literacy development,

immunisation, and screen time. To add, RSP is an ongoing early literacy programme that has evolved based on the public reviews and feedback (PNS, 2018, 2019).

The RSP has now been extended to several states in Malaysia under the auspices of PNM. The PNS has also gained fruitful partnerships with the state and federal governments, namely the Ministry of Welfare, Women, and Family Development; the Ministry of Local Government; the Sarawak Ministry of Health; the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development; the Ministry of Tourism and Culture of Malaysia; and the National Library of Malaysia. As reported by the PNS, RSP mainly promotes early literacy, where parents play imperative supporting roles and provide efforts to develop a reading culture within their family nest, tailored to the Malaysian context. The RSP also aims to create sustainable, community-based early literacy programmes that offer opportunities for all children in Sarawak, particularly those living in lower socio-economic communities in the rural areas (PNS, 2018, 2019).

The RSP is an in-house-developed RDP by the PNS, which encourages early childhood programmes to foster literacy (reading and writing) among parents and babies, from the mother's prenatal phase until the child is three years old. For the record, about 12,000 RSP kits have been distributed since 2015 (PNS, 2019). The RSP, particularly, is an early literacy programme designed mainly for children under 3 years old and their parents. Reading passion and other cognitive developments ideally could be nurtured from the time that the child is in the mother's womb, so that reading becomes part of the child's process of growing up and the reading habits will continue to prosper until adulthood. It is believed that the more toddlers able to read in their early years, the better prepared they will be for formal education when entering a formal education system (kindergarten age four). Later on, the more toddlers and children can read, the more things they will know and the more confident they will become in their ability to comprehend the knowledge. Scholars (Aprilia & Neisya, 2024; Fitria, 2020; Kaharuddin et al., 2023) advocate for initiatives to establish effective early childhood literacy programmes, particularly in Malaysia's socio-cultural context. Thus, the objectives of RSP are mainly designed to promote reading culture (helping children learn to read from a young age) and eventually empower them to be independent readers for life. The RSP also encourages parents to read to their newborns, as frequent activities between parents and their infants can also increase intimacy. Hence, reading will become an enjoyable and beneficial activity for both parents and children. Moreover, RSP helps enrich a child's vocabulary and develop their confidence in reading to prepare them for their school age. Hence, the key objective of this paper is to investigate the effects of the RSP on toddlers' vocabulary ability development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading programme and child's vocabulary ability enrichment

When children engage in reading activities, their vocabulary is significantly enhanced. A study by Kaharuddin et al. (2023) indicated that reading aloud and vocabulary enrichment significantly affected students' speaking skills in English. Reading aloud and vocabulary enrichment contribute 18.80% to students' speaking skill improvement. Therefore, it is recommended that the students should read English reading material aloud to practice the tongue in pronouncing English words and hence, will enhance the students' good mastery of English vocabulary. According to the National Reading Panel (2000), students who read often and frequently at an early age would acquire a superior vocabulary, and this early vocabulary acquisition results in better comprehension and a greater capacity to learn new concepts throughout their lives. This statement underlines the importance of frequent early reading for boosting vocabulary and comprehension, which lays the foundation for future academic achievement. In this paper, the child's vocabulary ability refers specifically to the

content developed and designed for the RSP kit and module. The RSP includes kits and modules tailored to support the developmental growth of early childhood education, particularly in relation to language and psychomotor skills. When a child is able to recognise and use words encountered during RSP activities, whether in speech or writing, it signifies an enhancement of their vocabulary.

Klass et al. (2024) recommended that frequent shared reading with infants and young children strengthens the bond between them and their parents or caregivers during a crucial stage of development, stimulating brain activity and fostering early attachment. They also highlighted that a positive parenting practice, reading together, lays the groundwork for healthy social-emotional, cognitive, language, and literacy development, will help prepare children for school, and offers lasting benefits throughout their lives. In fact, in the same study (Klass et al., 2024), the American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP; 2016) recommends that paediatricians should encourage shared reading beginning at birth and continuing at least through kindergarten as a strategy for supporting parents/caregivers, enhancing foundational relationships, promoting positive language-rich interactions, and helping families create a nurturing and stimulating home environment.

In a study done by Hoff et al. (2024), parent-implemented interventions such as book reading that begin early would encourage language-supporting quality of children's early conversational experience, which in turn would benefit the children's language development, and parents who often talk with their children have been found to be supportive of children's language growth. Some of these efforts have met with success (Mendelsohn et al., 2018; Riordan et al., 2022).

Moreover, reading aloud is one of the most powerful strategies for improving literacy skills. Armbruster et al. (2006) outlined several key recommendations for reading aloud effectively, which can significantly help a child develop their vocabulary. One important suggestion is to make reading a pleasurable experience. To achieve this, read to your child in a comfortable space, such as having them sit on your lap or next to you, where they can see and point to the print and pictures. This physical closeness not only makes reading more enjoyable but also helps the child identify new words by connecting the written text with visual images. By creating a positive, engaging environment, children can learn that reading is both fun and rewarding.

To add, prior studies (Haland et al., 2021; Ledger & Merga, 2018; Rahayu & Mustadi, 2022; Senawati et al., 2021; Wong & Neuman, 2019) also recommended parents to show enthusiasm when reading with their child. Reading the story with expressions—such as mimicking how the characters would speak, adding sound effects, and using facial and hand expressions—makes the experience more engaging. When children see that you are enthusiastic, they are more likely to develop a love for books, which encourages them to become eager to read on their own.

Finally, Armbruster et al. (2006) also emphasised the importance of reading to your child frequently. It is helpful to set aside special times each day for reading, such as after lunch or before bedtime. These reading sessions don’t need to be long—around 5 to 10 minutes is sufficient—but the key is consistency. The more often you read to your child, the more opportunities they have to encounter new words, thereby boosting their vocabulary and fostering a lifelong love of reading.

Development of Children’s Language Growth

According to Fitria (2020), the external factors (including demographic environment, stimulation from family, and customs or habits) and the internal factors (maternal health during pregnancy and parental genes) influence the development of children's language and will foster language growth as

argued by scholars (Aprilia & Neisya, 2024; Hoff, 2003; Rozaimie, 2018, 2024). Reading aloud to toddlers and mother-child interaction was found to be positively related to the diversity of maternal lexical input and maternal language and literacy skills (Aprilia & Neisya, 2024; Rowe, 2022). Furthermore, scholars (Acosta-Tello, 2019; Heubeck, 2024; Moussa & Koester, 2022; Omar & Saufi, 2015) have consistently demonstrated that reading aloud is one of the most powerful and effective instructional strategies for improving children's literacy skills. This literacy strategy proves essential for enhancing children's comprehension skills, broadening their vocabulary, fostering language development, and intensifying cultural understanding, particularly for children whose first language is not English (Haland et al., 2021; Ledger & Merga, 2018; Rahayu & Mustadi, 2022; Senawati et al., 2021; Wong & Neuman, 2019).

Rowe (2022) revealed that children whose parents engage them in more frequent verbal interactions, including talking, reading, and asking questions, tend to have larger vocabularies and experience faster language growth. This study underscores the importance of interactive verbal communication between parents and children in promoting vocabulary development. Prediction of future reading difficulties among children is likely to be improved when considering family history of language or literacy difficulties alongside infant vocabulary levels (Dale et al., 2023; Duff et al., 2015).

Therefore, the RSP is designed to begin with the pregnant mother, initiating the reading programme to stimulate the foetus's brain development. The RSP encompasses five domains—social, perceptual, cognitive processes, conceptual, and linguistic—within early intervention, with a focus on vocabulary development, as supported by scholars such as Dale et al. (2023), Stolarova et al. (2016) and Johnston (2010). As discussed earlier, the critical question to be addressed is whether the current RDP conducted by the public libraries has increased or decreased children's reading interest. Furthermore, most of the existing RDPs are intended to improve literacy among kids in school. This paper anticipates that little initiative has been taken to foster literacy among toddlers in their early childhood literacy development. Therefore, to assess the impact of the RDP, a programme developed by the PNS in nurturing toddler vocabulary ability, this paper will investigate the impacts of the RSP.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study is designed as quantitative research that employs a cross-sectional survey method (the data was collected from the respondents at a single point in time). A purposive sampling technique is employed to identify the relevant respondents to administer the online survey questionnaire. The respondents are purposely recruited among those who have enrolled (registered) in the RSP. The data provided by the Reading Seed Programme team of PNS indicated that 1027 participants had signed up for the RSP programme, which covered the Kuching Division, as it is the home ground of PNS, and it also gave quick access to the programme's organiser. It is recorded that only 590 participants had completed the RSP training and received the RSP kit (population of the study). Therefore, the sample size required (the minimum satisfactory and usable responses) for the present study are 234 participants (with a 95% confidence level) for an *N* population of 600 (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). Considering the participants' commitment in completing the RSP, a sample size of 300 is presumed to be sufficient to administer the questionnaire. 417 respondents were approached, but 385 completed responses were collected, which yields a 92.33% response rate.

Instruments

The survey questionnaire items were adopted and adapted from four main sources of RSP and reading-related programmes: PUSTAKA's Reading Seed feedback form, RSP's Module for Parents, RSP's kit, and Children's Early Literacy Practices at Home and in Early Year Settings: Second Annual Survey of Parents and Practitioners (Formby, 2014). Apparently, the initial assessment tools of RSP were not academically published, and their psychometric property was not established. The survey questionnaire used in this paper contains a demographic section that includes age, gender, the source to obtain the RSP kit, the date/year of receiving the RSP kit, ethnicity, highest qualification, employment, household income, and details on the respondents' child who participates in the RSP (age, place of birth, and gender). A confidence development item was included to assess the impact of the RSP on the child's psychomotor skill development. The survey items related to the RSP were designed to evaluate the participants' understanding and the perceived usefulness of the programme. Both the confidence development and the perception of the programme (RSP) are measured using a 10-level Likert scale ranging from 0 (not applicable/strongly disagree) to 10 (totally applicable/strongly agree). The questionnaire was designed in dual language (English & Bahasa Melayu) and inter-rater validity (Pallant, 2013) has been performed beforehand to ensure the language compatibility in context. The questionnaire was in dual language to ensure that the respondents fully understood the questions and were able to respond as truthfully as possible. The questionnaire is attached as the appendix.

In establishing the reliability and validity of the survey instrument, first, a face validity protocol is conducted to verify the extent to which a measurement (questionnaire) appears 'on its face value' and to measure the construct of interest. Ten RSP users and a team of enumerators were invited to verify the survey questionnaire. They were required to give their responses to the questionnaire based on their understanding of the contents, intensity (coverage), language, length (total survey items), section, dimension, and item (statement) arrangement, measurement scale, overall questionnaire design, and other related issues (if any). Minimal changes were made to the questionnaire based on the comments and suggestions received.

Second, a content validity check is required to ensure that the survey covers the construction of interest. Three experts who were involved in the invention of RSP had verified the content of the survey questionnaire. Referring to the face and content validity feedback, the researchers in this study had revised and fine-tuned the survey instrument comprehensively to ensure that all the items (statements) and the scale cover the constructs as conceptualised.

Third, criterion validity is a process used to ensure that the scores of targeted respondents on a measure correlate with other variables (known as criteria) that are expected to be associated with the convergent aspect of criterion validity. This, in turn, helps demonstrate the feasibility of the survey instrument. When the average loading value of a variable is greater than the cut-off value of 0.7, convergent validity is established. Additionally, the discriminant elements of the criterion validity of the survey questionnaire are assumed, which indicates that the scores on the measure among the variables are not correlated to each other (supposedly the variables are conceptually distinct). In particular, an exploratory factor analyses (EFA) procedures were performed to establish the criterion validity (Pallant, 2013), whereby the variance extracted from the survey questionnaire was found to be greater than the correlation square. In particular, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values of the independent variable (vocabulary ability) are 0.921 and the dependent variable (RSP) are 0.915, which are greater than 0.8. Additionally, Bartlett's test of Sphericity marked a significantly lower than 0.05 value, which statistically indicated that there is no certain redundancy between the variables. The inspection of the communality extraction has shown that all items accounted for more than the cut-off point of 0.50. Communality is estimated based on the variance of each item accounted for by the

components. Further criterion validity is analysed where the 'pattern matrix table' for all the items' variance loading values is inspected, and it is found that the average loading value for all variables is greater than 0.7. Thus, this analysis indicates that the criterion (convergent and discriminant) validity of the survey questionnaire is established.

Fourth, the scale's reliability is an assessment of the internal consistency of the items (statements), which reflects the conceptual construct of the study. It is important to assess the correlations between the multiple items in a construct that are intended to measure the same construct. The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha value) of the scale is marked as greater than 0.70 (RSP: 12 items, $\alpha = 0.97$; child's vocabulary ability: 20 items, $\alpha = 0.96$). It is indicated that the reliability of the instrument is established and highly reliable for further statistical analysis (Cronbach, 1951; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Moving forward and to recapitulate, this paper is written to determine the impacts of PNS's RSP in enriching the toddlers' vocabulary abilities in reading. Thus, a simple regression analysis was performed to statistically determine the impact (strength) and character of the relationship between the dependent variable (vocabulary ability) and the independent variable (RSP). The findings of the statistical analyses are demonstrated in the following section.

RESEARCH ETHICS

The questionnaire's psychometric properties did not cause the respondents to suffer any afflictive, cognitive, or behavioural consequences. The research protocols for this study complied with the World Medical Association's (WMA) Declaration of Helsinki on the ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects. The confidentiality statement in the questionnaire primarily states informed consent, and all participants and survey data were anonymised due to the retrospective study design. Thus, ethical approval was received from the PNS's Research Ethics Committee on May 18, 2022.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, most of the respondents, i.e., 66.2% (255 out of 385), were between 31 and 40 years old. 84.7% were females; 50.9% were Malay; 47.5% were university graduates; 43.9% had household income between RM1001 and RM3999; 48.3% were working in the public sector, joined the RSP, and received their RSP kit between 2020 and 2022; and 88.6% received their RSP kits directly from PNS. Apart from that, 64.2% of respondents claimed that their children who have been exposed to the RSP kits are between 0 (newborn) and 3 years old; 79.8% were born in government hospitals; and 52.2% are males.

Table 1
Respondents' Demographic Profiles

Demographic	*n*	%	*Demographic*	*n*	%
(Respondents)					
Age			**Household Income**		
20-30	82	21.3	Less than RM1000	40	10.4
31-40	**255**	**66.2**	RM1001-RM3999	**169**	**43.9**
41-50	32	8.3	RM4000-RM8500	136	35.3
Not specified	16	4.2	Above RM8500	40	10.4
Total	*385*	*100.0*	*Total*	*385*	*100.0*

Demographic	*n*	%	*Demographic*	*n*	%
Gender			**Employment**		
Female	**326**	**84.7**	Public Sector	**186**	**48.3**
Male	59	15.3	Private Sector	87	22.6
Total	*385*	*100.0*	Self-employed/small business	28	7.3
			Unemployed / housewife	82	21.3
Ethnicity			Not specified	2	0.5
Bidayuh	36	9.4	*Total*	*385*	*100.0*
Chinese	116	30.1			
Iban	15	3.9	**Year received the RSP kit**		
Orang Ulu	4	1.0	2017–2019	69	17.9
Malay	**196**	**50.9**	2020-2022	**313**	**81.3**
Melanau	16	4.2	Not Specified	3	0.8
Not Specified	2	5.0	*Total*	*385*	*100.0*
Total	*385*	*100.0*			
			The RSP kit obtained from:		
Highest Qualification			Health Clinic/Polyclinic	26	6.8
University Degree	**183**	**47.5**	PUSTAKA Negeri Sarawak	**341**	**88.6**
Diploma	85	22.1	Others: *Can't remember, event booth, KEMAS, local council, PERKIM, Pusat Internet 1Malaysia.*	18	4.6
Certificate	31	8.1			
Secondary School	81	21.0			
Primary School	5	1.3			
Total	*385*	*100.0*	*Total*	*385*	*100.0*
(Child)					
Age			**Child's Place of Birth**		
0-3 yrs old (born 2019-2022)	**247**	**64.2**	Government Hospital	**307**	**79.8**
4-6 yrs old (born 2016-2018)	122	31.7	Private Hospital	76	19.7
≥ 7 yrs old (born in ≤ 2015)	10	2.6	Others	2	0.5
Not Specified	6	1.6	*Total*	*385*	*100.0*
Total	*385*	*100.0*			
Child's Gender					
Female	184	47.8			
Male	**201**	**52.2**			
Total	*385*	*100.0*			

The result of the simple regression analyses as shown in Table 2 demonstrated that the RSP is generally found to be statistically significant in predicting a child's vocabulary ability [t (1,383) = 8.66, $p < 0.001$ ($p < 0.05$)]. This result reveals a positive effect of the RSP on a child's vocabulary ability. Moreover, the $R^2 = 0.16$ indicates that the model (RSP) explains 16.4% of the variance in a child's vocabulary ability. The RSP also found that it significantly predicts a child's vocabulary ability with a large effect size [$f^2 = 0.20$, $\beta = 0.40$]. Additional regression analyses were specifically performed to examine the effect of the RSP on the child's vocabulary ability according to the demographic factors. The statistical analyses indicated that the child's age, marital status, and year the respondents obtained their RSP kits significantly affected the prediction of RSP on the child's vocabulary ability.

First, it was found that children aged between 0 and 3, whose parents followed the RSP module and whose exposure to the RSP kits was measured, showed statistically significant results [t (1,245) = 7.49, $p < 0.001$, $\beta = 0.43$, $f^2 = 0.23$, $R^2 = 0.19$]. The RSP, based on demographic factors, predicted the children's vocabulary ability.

The β coefficient indicates the effectiveness trend was found in the children who are aged between 4 and 6 years old [t (1,120) = 4.35, $p < 0.001$ (p < 0.05), $\beta = 0.37$, $f^2 = 0.16$, $R^2 = 0.14$], and based on the demographic factors, it showed statistically significant predictors of a child's vocabulary ability by the RSP. Secondly, the regression analysis revealed that the marital status of participants (parents) was statistically significant in predicting the child's vocabulary ability based on the RSP and demographic factors. Specifically, married participants showed a significant effect [t (1,378) = 8.82, $p < 0.001$, $\beta = 0.41$, $f^2 = 0.21$, $R^2 = 0.17$]. The β coefficient indicates single parenthood was found statistically not significant [t (1,3) = -0.18, $p = 0.87$ (p > 0.05), $\beta = -0.10$, $f^2 = 0.01$, $R^2 = 0.01$] in predicting a child's vocabulary ability by the RSP.

Third, the regression results show that those who obtained their RSP kits according to the year, between 2017 and 2019, were found to be statistically significant [t (1,67) = 6.78, $p < 0.001$ (p < 0.05), $\beta = 0.64$, $f^2 = 0.67$, $R^2 = 0.41$] in predicting the child's vocabulary ability by participating in the RSP. The β coefficient indicates that the effectiveness of the programme was followed by those who obtained their RSP kits between 2020 and 2022, which is statistically significant [t (1,311) = 7.50, $p < 0.001$ (p < 0.05), $\beta = 0.39$, $f^2 = 0.18$, $R^2 = 0.15$] in predicting a child's vocabulary ability by the RSP based on demographic factors. Apparently, other tested demographic factors (the respondents' age, respondents' and child's gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, residence location, respondents' and child's place of birth, respondents' employment, highest academic qualification, mode of joining the RSP, and numbers of siblings) are identified to be not statistically significant in predicting a child's confident development when undergoing RSP. This demographical test is vital to ensure the effectiveness of the RSP is novel and biased-free from the controlled variables. Future iterations should continue to be designed with a focus on inclusivity, ensuring that the program remains equitable and accessible to all children, regardless of these demographic variables. Furthermore, these findings highlight the RSP's potential for addressing early literacy gaps, particularly those related to toddler vocabulary development. The following section discusses the implications of the findings.

Table 2

Simple Regression Analyses on The RSP and Vocabulary Ability Based on Demographic Characteristics

	R^2	f^2	*df*	β	*t*	*Sig*
RSP ► Vocabulary ability	0.16	0.20	1,383	0.40	8.66	**0.00**
RSP ► Vocabulary ability	0.25	0.33	17,367	0.42	8.92	**0.00**
► Respondents' Age				0.01	0.12	0.90
► Child's age				0.13	2.65	**0.01**
► Respondents' gender				0.01	0.25	0.80
► Child's gender				0.07	1.45	0.15
► Ethnicity				-0.02	-0.50	0.62
► Socio-economic Status				0.06	1.06	0.29
► Current Location				-0.02	-0.40	0.69
► Respondents' Place of Birth				-0.03	-0.68	0.50
► Child Place of Birth				0.01	0.21	0.83
► Marital Status				-0.09	-1.99	**0.05**
► Employment				-0.02	-0.45	0.65
► Highest Qualification				-0.20	-1.59	0.11
► Date/year received kits				-0.14	-2.76	**0.01**
► RSP kits obtained from				-0.01	-0.22	0.83
► RSP Joining				0.08	1.53	0.13
► Siblings used the RSP kits.				0.06	1.20	0.23

Note:

R^2: <0.02 (very weak), 0.02≤ R^2<0.13 (weak), 0.13≤ R^2<0.26 (moderate), ≥0.26 (substantial)

f^2: ≥0.02 (small), ≥0.15 (medium), ≥0.35 (large)

DISCUSSION

To reiterate, this paper aims to examine the impact of the RSP on a toddler's vocabulary development in reading. Specifically, a child's vocabulary ability refers to their capacity to expand their language skills. It is believed that this ability can be nurtured from an early age through participation in the RSP by utilizing its kits and modules. RSP was initially invented for early childhood literacy, targeted to engrain reading aptitude as early as newborns to 3-year-old children, as advocated by scholars (Dale et al., 2023; Duff et al., 2007; Rozaimie, 2024). Familiarisation of the reading materials and other developmental growth effects among babies and toddlers can be instituted if the parent understands and applies the RSP module (since the mother is in the pregnancy stage until the child is 3 years old). Specifically, the RSP has formulated interactive kits and modules tailored to facilitate the developmental progress of early childhood education, particularly in terms of language and psychomotor skills.

The RSP was designed and established not only to encourage children to read at an early age but also to speak with a rich vocabulary. Through the process of using the RSP kit and following the programme's module, once the child begins to speak, they are expected to say at least one syllable word, communicate in their own baby language, imitate playful sounds, mimic adults' voices, and sing along to children's songs. In addition, the child is also expected to be able to say what he or she is thinking, laugh at funny made-up words, ask questions, and count (number of alphabets, numbers, number of words, body parts, colours, shapes, names of animals, and number of objects).

The statistical evidence found in this study is compatible with prior studies (see McGowan et al., 2020; St-Laurent et al., 2019) that confirmed that RSP is a beneficial programme but moderately predicts the child's vocabulary ability. Prior studies (see McGowan et al., 2020; St-Laurent et al., 2019) have shown that the Reading Seeds initiatives and an online reading programme designed for children aged 3 to 8 years old have led to significant improvements in children's reading skills and confidence. Furthermore, proved by scholars (McGowan et al., 2020), research has demonstrated that children who use reading seeds materials have reported a feeling of confidence in their reading abilities and have shown increased engagement and enjoyment in reading. Clearly, the RSP is a valuable tool for promoting children's confidence and motivation in reading. In line with that, national literacy policies should prioritize training and engaging parents in their children's literacy development, offering free or low-cost resources, workshops, and support. By building a nation-wide culture of parental literacy engagement, countries can improve literacy outcomes across generations.

Enriching vocabulary, particularly at an early age, is a valuable effort that can help children before starting their formal education in kindergarten, at age four. According to a study by St-Laurent et al. (2019), using reading seed instruments led to significant improvements in both the reading skills and motivation of children aged 4-6 years old. These improvements were most notable among children who had not yet started school, suggesting that the program may be particularly effective in preparing children for formal education. Furthermore, another study by McGowan et al. (2020) found that children involved in the early reading seed programmes were reported to be more confident in their reading abilities and showed increased engagement and enjoyment in reading.

The findings showcased in this paper are in accordance with prior studies that indicate storybook reading programmes that include explicit instruction and active engagement strategies, such as asking questions and making connections to prior knowledge, could lead to significant gains in vocabulary knowledge among children aged 3 to 5 years old (Singer et al., 2021). Scholars (Folsom

et al, 2020; Richardson et al., 2019; Singer et al., 2021) suggested that reading programmes can positively nurture children's vocabulary abilities regardless of their age. Moreover, studies (Aprilia & Neisya, 2024; Colson & Dworkin, 1997; Folsom et al., 2020; Hoff, 2003; Richardson et al., 2019; Singer et al., 2021) have shown that comprehensive reading programmes that include explicit vocabulary instruction and active engagement strategies, as well as storybook reading programmes that provide opportunities for practice and application, have led to significant gains in vocabulary knowledge among children aged 3 to 6 years old, particularly those from low-income families. Additionally, home-based shared reading programmes have also been found to be effective in promoting vocabulary development among preschoolers aged 3 to 5 years old (Neuman et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the findings also demonstrated that the RSP is significantly useful in achieving the objective of the programme, such as to enhance the vocabulary ability of children. These findings align with the conclusions of scholars (Aprilia & Neisya, 2024; Hoff-Ginsberg, 1990; Gremmen et al., 2016), who suggest that enriching toddlers' vocabulary and improving their ability to speak during early childhood education necessitates ongoing support and active engagement from their parents.

A key strategy is for parents to engage toddlers in frequent conversations, read regularly, and use ‘parentheses’—a melodic speech style that facilitates language development. Foremost, the RSP provides tools that encourage vocabulary ability and foster the children's confidence and motivation in reading, which may be particularly important for children who are just starting to learn to read. This result implies that encouragement, parental role, and support are the key motivational elements to engrain early childhood literacy to develop vocabularies and faster vocabulary growth, as suggested by the scholars (Aprilia & Neisya, 2024; Gremmen et al., 2016; Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991; Huttenlocher et al., 1991).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The findings reveal significant improvements resulting from the literacy development intervention programme, as supported by scholars such as Hoff et al. (2024), Rahayu and Mustadi (2022), Senawati et al. (2021), Haland et al. (2021), Wong and Neuman (2019), and Ledger and Merga (2018). However, this paper also identifies certain limitations of the RSP programme, particularly in enhancing the vocabulary abilities of the children.

This study recommends that the programme’s organiser (PNS) revamp their physical training strategically for the RSP participants. The physical training should be conducted in-house at the PNS by well-trained RSP trainers, and those enrolled in the RSP are encouraged to receive exclusive training on how to effectively utilise the RSP kits. The findings of this study indicate that the physical training (conducted from 2017 to 2019) was more effective than the online training (which took place from 2020 to 2022 during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown). Furthermore, the RSP also requires an instructional revision to ensure that the participants (parents) clearly understand the programme's structure and the expected outcomes. Therefore, in addition to the conventional training given to the RSP participants, attractive audio-visual instructional material would help to improve the programme’s effectiveness. Clear pictures or other types of visuals can enhance the participants’ comprehension of the programme, helping to reinforce key messages, clarify concepts, and capture their interests. The positive impact of the RSP on vocabulary development suggests that scaling the programme could be highly beneficial. Technology can play a critical role here by providing remote learning tools (e.g., mobile apps, interactive websites) for parents and caregivers. Digital platforms can help overcome geographical barriers, especially in rural or underserved areas, while maintaining programme quality and engagement.

Additionally, to fully assess the impact of the RSP on a child's vocabulary development, it is essential to incorporate the feedback from the participants and monitoring mechanisms to evaluate the programme's effectiveness. Post-training evaluations also enable the programme organisers (PNS) to ensure that the participants fully understand the objectives of the RSP, particularly its goal of enriching the children's vocabulary skills from infancy through later childhood (Dale et al., 2023; Duff et al., 2015). Furthermore, incorporating an interactive reward system and regular feedback sessions could enhance the programme's impact. Besides, the positive effects of the RSP on toddler vocabulary development point to the importance of early literacy programmes as a foundational element of national literacy strategies. Policymakers should prioritize vocabulary development and early language skills, incorporating these goals into national early childhood education policies and curriculum standards.

To sum up, this paper has presented statistical evidence demonstrating that the RSP by PUSTAKA Negeri Sarawak has positively impacted children's vocabulary development at an early age, serving as a preparatory intervention for later school years and fostering early reading habits. The findings of this research offer compelling evidence that the RSP contributes to the mainstream adoption of early childhood literacy tools, aligning with global efforts to promote high literacy rates.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire

State the scale for the statement that is most applicable to you on the scale from 0 (Not Applicable / strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree). *Nyatakan skala untuk pernyataan yang paling berkaitan dengan anda berdasarkan skala 0 (tidak berkenaan / sangat tidak bersetuju) sehingga 10 (sangat bersetuju).*
We would like to hear from you about your child's literacy development. *Kami ingin mendapat pandangan anda tentang perkembangan literasi anak anda.*

Vocabulary Ability

My child: [anak saya:]

_____ can say one-syllable word [*Boleh menyebut satu suku kata perkataan*]
_____ can speak in a unique baby language [*Boleh bercakap dalam bahasa bayi yang unik*]
_____ can imitate playful sounds [*Boleh meniru bunyi main-main*]
_____ can imitate adults' voices [*Boleh meniru suara orang dewasa*]
_____ can sing along to children's songs [*Boleh menyanyi bersama lagu kanak-kanak*]
_____ can say what he/she is thinking [*Boleh memberitahu apa yang dia fikirkan*]
_____ can laugh at funny made-up words [*Boleh ketawa dengan kata-kata lucu yang dibuat-buat*]
_____ can ask questions. [*Boleh bertanya soalan*]
_____ can count the alphabets [*Boleh mengira bilangan abjad*]
_____ can count the numbers [*Boleh mengira bilangan nombor*]
_____ can say the number of words [*Boleh menyebut bilangan perkataan*]
_____ can tell body parts [*Boleh memberitahu bilangan anggota badan*]
_____ can tell colours [*Boleh memberitahu bilangan warna*]
_____ can tell the number of shapes [*Boleh memberitahu bilangan bentuk*]
_____ can tell the name of animals [*Boleh memberitahu bilangan nama haiwan*]
_____ can tell the number of objects [*Boleh memberitahu bilangan objek*]

Reading Development Programme (RSP)

Reading Seed Kit:

_____ I know how to use all the materials in the kit [*Saya tahu penggunaan setiap bahan di dalam kit RSP*]
_____ I know how to use the RSP module for Parents Reading Friends [*Saya tahu cara menggunakan Modul RSP Ibu Bapa Rakan Membaca*]
_____ I know how to use the growth development checklist [*Saya tahu menggunakan Senarai Semak Perkembangan anak*]
_____ The growth chart helps to monitor my child's development [*Carta pertumbuhan membantu saya memantau perkembangan anak saya*]
_____ Language used in all the materials are clear [*Bahasa digunakan bagi setiap bahan dalam kit RSP ini adalah jelas*]
_____ Reading materials attract my child's interest [*Bahan bacaan menarik minat anak saya*]
_____ RSP materials help me to communicate with my child [*Bahan-bahan RSP membantu saya berkomunikasi dengan anak saya*]

I believe that the Reading Seed Programme: [Saya percaya bahawa RSP:]

_____ Provides access to quality early literacy materials [*Menyediakan akses kepada bahan literasi awal yang berkualiti*]
_____ Gives me the skill to read to my newborn [*Memberi kemahiran membaca kepada bayi yang baru lahir*]
_____ Makes reading enjoyable for me and my child [*Menjadikan aktiviti membaca seronok bagi saya dan anak saya*]
_____ Exposes my child to greater number of words through books [*Mendedahkan lebih banyak perhatian kepada anak saya melalui buku*]
_____ Grooms my child for more precise oral communication [*melatih anak saya untuk memperluaskan menggunakan komunikasi lisan yang lebih tepat*]