

BOOK-SHARING AND PARENTAL READING
ATTITUDE: COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PARENTS
AND CHILDREN

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Reading to pre-school children has long been advocated as a means of enhancing children's language acquisition and pre-reading knowledge (e. g. Larrick, 1982). Recent book-sharing investigations have sought to isolate specific behaviors by parents and their children which may contribute to children's acquisition of language and pre-reading skills.

Several investigations examined the book-sharing behaviors of individual parent-child dyads using one highly-literate parent; they did not compare the diversity of book-sharing styles which exist between parents and children from different backgrounds (Ninio & Bruner, 1978; Snow & Goldfield, 1982; Bagban, 1984). Another group of investigations focused on larger samples of parent-child dyads (Flood, 1977; Guinagh & Jester, 1971) but did not investigate specific types of verbal interactions between parents and their children, nor did they consider the issue of the parental attitude towards reading. Therefore, the objective of the following studies was to examine specific parent-child book-sharing behaviors which may be influenced by the reading attitude of the parent. This was accomplished using two approaches: a statistical approach and a case study approach.

Theoretical Framework

Vygotsky (1978) proposed that children acquire a variety of concepts before formal schooling through proximal development. Proximal development is the distance between the level of the child's ability to solve problems independently and the level of potential for problem solving with the assistance of an adult. Elaborating on Vygotsky's theories, Bruner (1975) proposed that the parent builds a scaffold which provides a means of support to enable the child to learn language. Language development and literacy acquisition is made possible through the presence of an interpreting adult who provides the experience and expands on the child's responses.

The results of recent research yielded many disparate results regarding parent-child book sharing behaviors. Ninio and Bruner (1978) found that book-sharing was governed by an implicit set of rules with regards to turn taking by parents and children. Hogan & Shanahan (1982) found that parents who relate story content to children's experiences can enhance the child's conceptual background and metalinguistic development. Brigg & Elkind (1973) and Hogan & Shanahan (1982) found that the amount of time spent reading to the child was related to the child's linguistic awareness.

Health (1982) proposed that the use of the bedtime story varied between socioeconomic groups. Middle-class parents used question-answer routines which prepared their children for the classroom discussion format used in the school setting. In white working-class homes three and a half year-old children are expected to sit quietly and listen to the story and

not interrupt. Black working class parents seldom if ever read to their children. Therefore, the success of parent-child book-sharing seems to be dependent upon a number of different factors.

Method and Results of the First Study

The population of these studies consisted of 28 parent-child dyads. The children's ages ranged from 41 to 56 months. The children were administered the *Concepts about Print Test* (CAP) (Clay, 1972) and the *PPVT* (Dunn, 1965). These tests were administered in the children's nursery schools.

A modification of the *Estes Attitude Scale* (Estes, 1971) was administered to each parent who would read to the child. Each parent was also interviewed to obtain general and specific information regarding parent-child book-sharing in the home. At this time the parent received two children's books to read to the children: *Pinkerton, Behave* (Kellogg, 1979), and *May I Bring a Friend* (de Ringers, 1964). The parents were instructed to read one book three times to the child. The other book was to be previewed by the parent, but not read to the child. The book order presentation and the amount of exposure were counter-balanced; therefore, there were four treatment groups. Appointments were set for book-sharing observations which took place in the dyad's homes one week after the initial contact with the parent.

The book-sharing observations were tape-recorded and later transcribed. Additionally, the researcher took detailed field notes of the book-sharing sessions and interviewed the parents in depth after the sessions. The transcriptions were analyzed based on an information category scheme developed by Snow & Goldfield (1982) for six types of interactions which were related to the structure of the story. They included: item label, item elaboration, event description, motive/cause, evaluation/reaction, and schema related comment. The number of specific interactions, along with the parent's attitude score, the amount of time spent reading to the child, and the number of children's books in the home were entered into two step-wise multiple regressions using the CAP and the PPVT as dependent measures. The results indicated that the parent's reading attitude was the only significant predictor of the child's score on the CAP ($R^2 = .21$, $df = 1,26$, $F = 7.10$, $p < .05$), and the child's score on the PPVT ($R^2 = .43$, $df = 1,26$, $F = 19.75$, $p < .0001$). Therefore, it was concluded that the parent's reading attitude was the best predictor of the child's pre-reading knowledge and receptive vocabulary for this population and was used as a guide for the second study.

Methods of the Second Study

Three dyads were chosen for detailed analysis based on the parent's reading attitude score. The comparisons which follow will compare the book-sharing sessions from *Pinkerton, Behave* (Kellogg, 1979) in addition to the following data: field notes, interview data not quantified, observed non-verbal behaviors, in addition to the quantified interactions. These data were analyzed in terms of specific behaviors which may have been influenced by parental reading attitude.

Results of the Second Study

The data of each dyad were considered individually. The summaries which follow use pseudonyms rather than the real

names of the parents and children.

Nellie and Barbara: Nellie's age was 4 years, 2 months at the time of the recorded book-sharing session. She was the fifth of Barbara's six children. They lived in a working-class neighborhood. Barbara's reading attitude score as measured by the author's modification of the *Estes Attitude Scale* was the lowest of the population of parents in this study. Barbara reported that she was only able to read to Nellie once every two weeks because she frequently had to work overtime.

During the book-sharing session the T.V. was left on although the sound turned off. Nevertheless, Nellie looked at the T.V. three times during the session. The session was also interrupted twice by one of the other children running through the room.

Barbara and Nellie did not verbally interact during the session. Barbara seemed concerned with the accurate reading of the text. Barbara did not ask Nellie questions during the session. The session was also interrupted twice by one of the other children running through the room which in combination with the distraction of the T.V., seemed to limit Nellie's interest in the stories which were read. Barbara reported that Nellie did not have a favorite book. Although there were 50 books in the home, many of them belonged to Nellie's older siblings. According to Barbara, she was the only person who read to Nellie.

Frank and Donald: Donald's age was 4 years, 3 months at the time of the recorded book-sharing session and was the youngest of three children. Frank was employed as a Professor of Business at a large University in the Southeastern United States. They lived in an upper-middle class subdivision. Frank's score on the attitude scale was at the mean of the study's population. Frank reported that both parents read to Donald, although he read to Donald more frequently than his wife. A typical book-sharing session lasted between fifteen and twenty minutes and took place in the bedroom. The observed session took place in the living room.

During the reading of *Pinkerton, Behave*, which was being read to Donald for the first time, the following exchange was recorded.

(Note: The text of the book is in quotes).

Frank: "We begin with the simple command. Come. COME! COME! COME!" What does old Pinkerton do this time?

Donald: He jumped out the window.

Frank: Jumped right out the window

During this sequence Frank read Donald a section of the text and asked Donald a question which Donald answered. Frank supported Donald's answer by repeating Donald's answer.

Later, during the climax of the story the following exchange was observed.

Frank: "Psssst! Pinkerton. A Burglar. I warned you lady. Pinkerton, come." Pinkerton picks up the burglar and throws him right out the window. Right? Pinkerton. Did I miss something here? Oh, yeah, I missed a page. Let's go back here. Okay. Missed it. "Pinkerton, Fetch!" And what's he do? Jumps the burglar and gets him down to the ground. There we go. "Pinkerton, Come!" Hauls that guy

right out the window. "Pinkerton, I'm a burglar."
What's old Pinkerton do?

Donald: Licks him.

Frank: Right . . .

In this instance Frank lost his place in the story and demonstrated to Donald an adult problem-solving procedure. However, Frank did not ask Donald to help find their place in the story nor did Donald volunteer the information. In terms of book-sharing interactions the following pattern was observed during Frank and Donald's book-sharing: 1) Frank read a section of text and asked Donald a question, 2) Donald answered the question, and 3) Frank supported Donald's answer and read on. Frank explained the action of the story as depicted by the illustrations of the story. Their interactions centered around the action of the story and were coded as event descriptions (Snow & Goldfield, 1982). There was little variation in this routine nor of the information categories pursued. However, in one instance Donald broke the established pattern.

Donald: Why didn't they have to go out?

Frank: Because they weren't bad dogs. Just Pinkerton didn't do what he was told.

This cutting shows Donald initiating a new category of information (motive/cause) when he asks Frank the motive of a character's action in the story. However, usually Frank took the lead during story-sharing and Donald followed. Thus, the above cutting was the only instance in which the above mentioned three-step pattern was broken. Frank's questions are limited to event-description questions which limit the types of response by Donald to the story. Donald was not encouraged or invited to pursue his own hypotheses and conclusions about the story.

When interviewed, Frank reported that Donald usually chose the book to be read. His favorite was *Richard Scarry's Best Book*, which Frank added was "best for teaching principles." He believed that "quality not quantity" was important and added that he preferred to read books which "taught" useful information or concepts. Therefore, while Donald makes the ultimate choice of the book to be read, Frank appears to provide guidance.

Glenda and Megan: Megan's age was 3 years, 8 months at the time of the recorded book-sharing session. Glenda, her divorced mother was completing her undergraduate studies at this time in teacher education. They lived in a middle class neighborhood with Glenda's parents. Glenda's score on the reading attitude scale was the highest of the total population. Glenda reported that there were approximately 100 children's books in the home and that she read to Megan approximately 20 minutes a day.

During the observation, Megan sat in Glenda's lap. Glenda was enthusiastic in her reading to Megan as evidenced by Glenda's smooth reading style, and her facial and vocal expressions. Book sharing seemed to be a time for her to interact and exchange ideas with Megan. This is illustrated in the following sequence from *Pinkerton, Behave*, which was being read to Megan for the first time.

Glenda: Do you know what a burglar is?

Megan: Uh huh.

Glenda: A burglar's someone who sneaks in your house and

takes all your toys and stuff like that and runs away with 'em.

Megan: Comes with a mask on.

Glenda: Yeah, comes with a mask on. We've seen them on TV sometimes.

Glenda took this opportunity to reinforce and extend a label or concept which Megan had some knowledge of. She used examples which were part of Megan's prior knowledge ("takes all your toys", "we've seen them on TV"), and supported Megan's contribution ("comes with a mask on"), through her agreement and restatement of Megan's contribution. Megan's hypothesis was supported and she was shown that her contribution was important, resulting in Megan's further assimilation of the concept "burglar".

Later, their conversation centered on the action of the story.

Glenda: "COME! COME! COME!" What did Pinkerton do?

Megan: He jumped out.

Glenda: Yeah, he did, didn't he? He didn't come.

Megan: Why?

Glenda: I don't know. What do you think?

Megan: Cause he didn't want to.

Glenda initiated this event description through her question. After Megan answered, Glenda supported Megan's response and expanded it. Megan then responded by initiating a new information category, motive/cause (Snow & Goldfield, 1982), when she questioned Pinkerton's motives for not coming. Instead of directly answering Megan's question, Glenda encouraged Megan to hypothesize and draw her own conclusion. Thus, Megan is a full partner in this story-sharing episode, rather than being a passive observer on the process.

Glenda also referred to Megan's prior knowledge by comparing the character Pinkerton with other dogs Megan knew of. During one sequence, Glenda compared Pinkerton to the family dog "Betsy" along with other large dogs in the neighborhood. Megan used that information in the following cutting:

Glenda: Who are they acting like?

Megan: I don't know . . . Betsy?

Glenda: (Laughs, seems surprised) They're acting like Betsy.

As shown here, it seems that Glenda expected Megan to compare the other dogs in the story to Pinkerton. Instead, Megan compared them to Betsy, the family dog. Glenda accepted this as a reasonable answer.

Finally, during the climax of *Pinkerton, Behave* the following dialogue transpired between Glenda and Megan.

Glenda: "Psst, Pinkerton a burglar".

Megan: (whispered) Stealin'!

Glenda: He's stealin', yeah. And the burglar says, "I warned you lady." And what's Pinkerton doin' to the burglar?

Megan: Gettin', lickin' 'im.

Glenda: Lickin' him? Is that doin' any good?

Megan: (Shakes head no)

Glenda: No. She told him to get the burglar and he jumps up and down and starts lickin' him.

Megan: (laughs) Yeah, he doesn't know any better.

Megan initiated the event-description "stealin'". Her whisper seemed to imply involvement with the suspense of the story

or a negative value judgment toward the burglar. Again, Glenda supported Megan's statement and followed with another question which Megan answered and Glenda supported. Then, Glenda asked Megan to make another judgment ("Is that doin' any good?") to which Megan responded minimally with a shake of the head. Glenda's support and elaboration for Megan's response encouraged Megan to extend her judgment of Pinkerton's actions ("Yeah, he doesn't know any better").

These examples illustrate the partnership which exists during book-sharing episodes between Glenda and Megan. Glenda encouraged Megan's participation through leading questions, warm support, and elaboration. At times, Glenda took the lead and asked Megan leading questions which allowed Megan to make hypotheses about the action of the story. On the other hand, Megan sometimes took the lead in making hypotheses about the story ("stealin' "). Glenda, in conjunction with Megan, took time to explore and explicate the action of the story. Book-sharing was used to reinforce and extend Megan's conceptual knowledge through examples which were related to Megan's prior knowledge, in addition to confirming and extending Megan's hypotheses. Glenda encouraged Megan to contribute her own ideas and predictions to the story. Both Megan and Glenda seemed to enjoy this particular book-sharing experience as evidenced by their frequent laughing and giggling.

During the post observation interview, Glenda reported that Megan likes many books, but has no particular favorite. In addition to reading children's books, they often read the comics in the newspaper. Glenda added that Megan will correct her if she misses a comic frame. Glenda also reported that Megan was able to read road signs such as "STOP" and could also read "Food Giant" in newspaper advertisements. Therefore, Megan's print awareness extends beyond story-books and into the rich environment of print encountered in daily living.

Book-sharing as a Social Event, Proximal Development, and Parental Reading Attitude

The preceding case summaries illustrate the variety of parent-child book sharing behaviors. Barbara did not interact with Nellie. She seemed to be concerned with reading accuracy, rather than telling a story and interacting with her child. While it is possible that the prospect of being observed caused anxiety, another plausible explanation is that she is not an able oral reader. In addition, Barbara has a low attitude toward reading. Also, her time is limited in that she worked and had five other children to tend to. Therefore, book-sharing is a low priority in their home. The presence of frequent distractions (the T.V. and interrupting children) may also explain why book-sharing is not an important activity in their busy home. The home-literacy environment in this home appears to be somewhat akin to that of the working-class community reported by Heath (1982) since Barbara and Nellie did not interact with the text and each other.

Frank and Donald pursued the events of *Pinkerton, Behave*, through Donald's answering questions about the events of the story and Frank's description of the illustrated action. Glenda interacted extensively with Megan, allowing for a full exploration of the stories which were read. Both of the above dyads are somewhat similar to the middle-class parents of

Heath (1982).

Although both Glenda and Frank interact with their children during book-sharing, the types of interactions differ. The book-sharing of Frank and Donald was characterized by a read-question-answer-read pattern. Unlike Glenda and Megan, Frank and Donald did not seem to fully explore the possibilities of the text. A possible explanation is that in terms of reading attitude Glenda fully appreciated the interactive nature of reading which was reflected in her book-sharing with Megan. Book-sharing was a time of interpretation and exploration. In contrast, Frank read the words and his interactions with Donald were characterized by literal questions on the content of the book.

In terms of proximal development, it seems as though Glenda invited Megan to hypothesize and draw conclusions which challenged Megan to use her prior knowledge and knowledge of story structure. Megan is asked to make predictions which she could not make on her own—extending the limits of her knowledge of the story. In contrast, Frank only asked Donald questions which can be answered using the spoken text and the illustrations. When questioned by Donald, Frank provided the answer. In contrast, Glenda sometimes challenges Megan to supply the answers to her own questions.

Another difference between Glenda and Megan and Frank and Donald seems to be in the literature which is read. Megan liked many books but she had no special favorite. Also, Glenda reported that she frequently read the comic section of the newspaper to Megan. As a result, she experienced a variety of literature and genres. Frank and Donald's book-sharing seems to be restricted to books selected by Donald, with Frank serving as a guide. From this interview data it can be inferred that: 1) Megan is exposed to a wider variety of literature than Donald and 2) book-sharing for Glenda and Megan transcends the traditional bedtime story.

Book-sharing is a social event built around a text and the speech which surrounds the event. The child as well as the adult is an active participant in the process (Teale, 1984). In these cases, it can be argued that Megan is more actively involved in the process than Donald, who is more actively involved than Nellie. However, it is difficult to determine which variable most influenced the outcomes of these events—the text, the parent, the child, or the setting of the book-sharing event.

As a result, some interesting questions can be raised. Do some parents have an intuitive sense of the distance between their children's range of proximal development thereby challenging their children through more difficult questions? Or, do the responses of the child dictate the types of questions and interactions?

Given the nature of these studies, it is difficult to make firm conclusions. Although the reading attitude of the parent was a significant predictor of the child's pre-reading knowledge and receptive vocabulary, it must be cautioned that the small population prohibits firm conclusions. However, it is hypothesized that parental attitude towards reading influenced the book-sharing behaviors of the parents in the case summaries, although alternative possibilities exist.

Taken together, the results of the two studies, seem to support Bruner's extension of Vygotsky's theory of proximal development, with one qualification. The process seems to be dependent upon the attitude of the parent towards reading.

The findings of this study have practical implications along with the previously mentioned theoretical implications. For parent educators, the book-sharing techniques of dyads such as Glenda and Megan can serve as a guide for instructing parents who are interested in improving their book-sharing techniques, although it must be cautioned that book-sharing is dependent upon social context and the reading attitude of the parent. Early childhood educators should note that children have divergent backgrounds in terms of their conceptual backgrounds and experiences with literacy. Therefore, it may be necessary for early childhood educators to provide appropriate book-sharing experiences for children such as Nellie.

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