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The Role of Shared Reading in Developing Effective Early Reading Strategies

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Abstract

Shared reading is a part of a balanced early literacy framework. The shared reading experience offers a way teachers can use engaging texts and authentic literacy experiences to help children develop the strategies necessary for effective, independent reading.

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One January morning in her kindergarten class, Ida Patacca selected *I Went Walking* by Sue Williams to share with the children. This appealing picture story book has print large enough for the children to follow along, an interesting repetitive text, and clear illustrations that support the story. Ida had read the book several times; now, children joined in easily.

> *"I went walking. What did you see?" As she reads, Ida pointed underneath each word, indicating which way to go when reading and showing the children word by word matching. The illustration on that page depicted the back of a pink and black pig standing near a mud puddle.*
>
> *The children answered Ida's question eagerly. "Pig!" "A black pig." "A pink pig!" Their replies predicted the answer that would appear on the next page.*

Two children offered suggestions on the upcoming text. Brittany said, "I think it will say, 'I saw a black pig looking at me.'" Kyle said, "I think it will say, 'I saw a pink pig looking at me.'"

"Wait a minute," Ida said. "We have a way to figure this out. If the text says 'pink pig,' what letters would you expect to see?"

"I'll see a 'p' and a 'k' if it's pink," Kyle noted.

"And what letter would you expect to see at the beginning of the word if it says 'black pig?" Ida asked.

"Black," said Brittany. "I hear a 'b' at the beginning and a 'k' at the end."

Ida turned the page. The children searched the text. Vanessa pointed and exclaimed, "Pink! I see a 'p' at the beginning of the word a 'k' at the end."

"You're right," replied Ida. "Read the sentence with me as I point under the words."

This engaging scene took place in a kindergarten classroom during shared reading time. First, shared reading offers a context in which a teacher can demonstrate early reading strategies as children are actually engaged in the process of reading a meaningful text while gathered on a carpet near their teacher who is seated on a low chair. Second, the entire class reads a common text, in this case a picture story book with print large enough for all children to see. Finally, this process of shared reading has a research base with objectives supporting a balanced literacy curriculum.

Shared reading within a balanced literacy curriculum

Shared reading is one component of the Early Literacy Framework developed at The Ohio State University (Button, Johnson, & Furgerson, 1996; Pinnell & McCarrier, 1994). The framework outlines a balanced literacy program that immerses children in using written language. Several contexts in the framework support reading: 1) selected books are read

aloud to children; 2) small group reading instruction is provided through guided reading (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996); 3) time is provided for children to read independently, and 4) development of early reading strategies is supported through shared reading. Writing is also a prominent part of the framework. Children work together to compose and write meaningful stories during interactive writing (Button, Johnson, & Furgerson, 1996), receive one-on-one support during guided writing, and have opportunities to build their ability to write words and stories during independent writing. The children's progress is carefully documented by the teacher through multiple forms of assessment, providing on-going information to guide daily instruction.

Shared reading, as defined above, was created in New Zealand to support children who had limited experiences with print prior to entering school. Holdaway (1979) described shared reading as "the unison situation properly controlled in a lively and meaningful spirit, [which] allows for massive individual practice by every pupil in the teaching context" (p. 129).

Objectives of shared reading

During shared reading teachers use a familiar text to help children engage in the act of reading even before they can independently decode words. This engagement supports the development of critical concepts about print. The text might be a big book, poetry charts, or any product of interactive writing such as a survey question, a story retelling, or the rules of the classroom. Teachers often use shared reading time to explicate such concepts as left and right directionality, differentiation between letters and words, recognition of high frequency words, and utilization of graphophonic cues.

All readers use strategies, the "in the head" operations that enable them to access the information they need swiftly and flexibly (Clay, 1991). Teachers can support children's development of these "in the head" strategies during shared reading. For example, they may ask questions to help children predict what might come next in the story or what they might expect to see in the text. Children search to confirm their predictions. When children's predictions are not confirmed by what they encounter, they learn — under the teacher's guidance — to cross-check different cueing systems to make sense of the text. Teachers might suggest for example, that children use illustrations, look carefully at the print, consider sentence syntax, or re-read a passage.

Through shared reading, children experience and enjoy literacy texts they are not yet ready to read independently. Teachers focus on specific concepts of print and strategies of reading; teaching is often direct and explicit, but it take place within a highly meaningful context. Sometimes teachers select texts the children themselves have written during interactive writing. At other times teachers choose powerful examples of children's literature that contain vivid language and will hold the interest of children over multiple readings. The power of literature provides support for children to develop a sense of story and how narrative and expository texts are organized. As children become a community of readers, the teacher encourages them to use all that they know, to search for meaning, and to take risks.

Shared reading emerges from and is closely connected to other classroom literacy events. It is not a program for teaching specific reading skills in a predetermined sequence. As teachers and children work together on gaining meaning from print, "teachable moments" occur. With careful monitoring the teacher may identify those moments and provide

the children with just the instruction they need. The purpose of shared reading is to help students become independent, problem solving readers who choose to read.

Research supporting shared reading

Shared reading is well supported by research and theory in the area of emergent literacy. Holdaway (1979) developed big books to emulate lap reading experience of young children and their care givers. He noted the benefits of the highly interactive exchanges between care givers and children and found that this same level of interaction could be created through shared reading in school settings. In lap reading the child often reads along with the care giver. Holdaway described unison activities during shared-book experiences. As the text becomes familiar, children join in the reading of it with their teacher. Holdaway stressed the individual nature of these unison activities. Children participate according to their levels of understanding and confidence, some with complete proficiency and others with approximations of the actual text. Because the texts used are meaningful and engaging, the children actively and enthusiastically choose to participate.

Teachers in New Zealand have used shared reading for many years and studied its effects on emergent readers. A guide published by the New Zealand Department of Education (1985) stated that the main purpose of shared reading is for children to be introduced to "the riches of book language, and given shared opportunities to develop the strategies of sampling, predicting, confirming, and self-correcting for future independent use" (p. 58).

Clay's work (1966, 1979, 1991) on shared reading stemmed from her extensive observations in New Zealand of what good readers do. She found that skilled readers attend to

meaning and syntax before print details. In shared reading, teachers use meaning and syntax to scaffold children's developing knowledge of print. Clay (1991) emphasized the supportive nature of the group to individual learners and the importance of reading meaningful and connected texts. The child tentatively joins with the group to exhibit "more responses [to texts], finer discrimination, and more flexibility" (p. 227). She noted that texts might range from "the most enjoyable story books to very simple books, but are not just word labels on pictures" (p. 226). According to Clay, children always need to be reading for meaning and to address the analytic aspects of texts within the reading of real stories, both narrative and expository. As children engage in reading, they learn more about text structure.

Fisher (1991) described shared reading in her kindergarten classroom. She modeled her shared reading practices on Vygotsky's notion that children benefit from the scaffolding of learning experiences. The focus on meaning supports the children's growing awareness of concepts about print. As the children interact with print, they not only develop strategies for deriving meaning but also gain confidence in their competence as literacy users. Drawing on the work of Holdaway, Fisher (1991) stated that through shared reading her students begin to move to the 'early reading stage' in which they attend more closely to the visual details of the graphophonic cueing system, becoming what we recognize as 'true readers.'

Weaver (1988) noted that as children develop understanding of print naturally, they move from addressing the meaningful whole of a text to attending to its parts. The children move from relying most heavily on their own schema to greater reliance on semantic/syntactic cues and then to graphophonic cues. Eventually, Weaver concluded children

are able to coordinate all cueing systems and cross-check one against the other as they become independent readers.

Shared reading in one kindergarten classroom

In a kindergarten classroom in West Texas, Paige Furgerson and her children were engaged in a study of the weather. After hearing *Rain* (Kalan, 1978) and *Outside, inside* (Crimi, 1995) as read aloud selections, the children decided to write their own big book about the weather which they entitled *After the Rain*. Before beginning to write their next page of text, the children re-read what they had already written. Brody volunteered to point to the text as his classmates joined in the reading.

> *Paige asked Brody, "Where will you start reading?" He pointed to the upper left hand corner of the page.*
>
> *The children joined Brody and, in unison, read, "See the sun. See us play outside."*
>
> *Paige asked, "Why did Brody point only one time under the word 'outside?'"*
>
> *XuChen replied, "'Outside' is a compound word."*
>
> *Paige replied, "You are right, XuChen. We match our pointing with each word, and 'outside' is one word." Turning to the class, Paige asked, "Why did Juan draw a sun on this page?"*
>
> *Keith responded, "So the pictures match the story."*
>
> *Paige then asked, "How did you know this word was 'sun?'"*
>
> *Brody pointed to the word and said, "It starts with 's' and ends with 'n.'"*
>
> *Paige said, "You're right. Both the pictures and the letters can help you."*

As material for shared reading, Paige used an informational text written by the children. She began by asking the class questions related to concepts about print. She then made

explicit the children's use of cross-checking different kinds of cues by helping them check graphophonic information against the illustration.

During another shared reading episode in Paige's classroom, Paige and the children read Margaret Miller's *Whose Shoe?* The repetitive nature of the text supports the children's reading of this informational book. The text is organized so that the question "Whose shoe?" appears on the left of each two-page spread. On the right appears a large, colorful photograph of a shoe. On the next page is a photograph of the person who would wear the shoe. The text tells the person's occupation.

Paige held up the book in her left hand and pointed under the text with her right hand as the children read, "Whose shoe?" Pictured was an athletic shoe with cleats. The children suggested possible owners.

Brody suggested, "It's used to play soccer."

Paige asked, "If it's used by a soccer player, what letter would you expect to see at the beginning of the word 'soccer' on the next page?"

The children repeated the word, "soccer," and predicted it would begin with the letter 's.'

Keith said, "It looks like a football shoe."

Paige replied, "If the text is 'football player,' what will you see at the beginning?" Jessica suggests that there would be an 'f' at the beginning of the word "football."

Rosa thought that "it looks like a baseball shoe to me."

Paige asked, "If it's worn by a baseball player, what would you see?"

XuChen repeated the words, "baseball player" and told Paige that there would be two words on the page and baseball would begin with a 'b.'

Paige summarized the students' statements: "If it's soccer, the word will begin with an 's,' if it is football, the word will begin with an 'f,' and if it's baseball player, the first word will begin with 'b.'"

Paige turned the page and the children leaned forward to check their predictions. Qhang said, "It says 'baseball player.'"

Paige asked, "How do you know?"

Jacob said, "I play baseball and I have shoes like that."

XuChen offered, "Baseball begins with a 'b' and it's a long word."

In other shared reading episodes Paige consciously helped children coordinate different cueing systems as they problem solve to derive meaning from print. Paige used a pop-up counting book, *How Many Bugs in a Box* (Carter, 1988), as her shared reading selection. The illustrations appear on the right side of each two page spread. On the left is text such as "How many bugs are in the tall box?" and "How many bugs are in the green box?" Paige selected one word in a line of text to mask so that the children could predict what the word might be.

Paige pointed under the text as the children shared in the reading of the words: "How many bugs are in the..." The children stopped reading when they came to the masked word.

Paige asked, "What's wrong here?"

Rosa said, "I can't see the word. It's covered up."

Paige then asked, "Let's see if we can guess what the word might be. Could we check the picture? What would make sense?"

Keith said, "The word has to tell us about the box."

Paige said, "Yes. On the other pages the author told us about the color or size of the box."

Rosa suggested, "I think the author says it's a little box."

XuChen noted, "It could say it's a yellow box, because it is yellow, actually."

Paige said, "Let's take off the masking paper and check." She removed the paper.

The children looked at the word and several of them exclaimed, "It's small!"

"Does that make sense? Does it look right and sound right to you?" asked Paige. "Let's re-read the sentence and see."

In this example Paige used a masking technique to prompt the students to use all they knew about syntax and semantics to make predictions. They then checked their predictions by using graphophonic cues. Through her questions, Paige supported her students' use of the three cueing systems and modeled the "in the head" problem solving procedures good readers use.

Concluding remarks

Any text that engages the children and is large enough for all to see the print can be a successful text for shared reading. Variety is important to help young readers develop a broad repertoire of examples. The children's own writing can serve as a text as can narrative and expository children's literature selections. As the children revisit a familiar text, they develop the strategies necessary for effective reading while deriving meaning from print.

Within the components of a balanced literacy framework, shared reading makes a unique contribution. Because it emerges from classroom literacy activities, shared reading requires that we as teachers know about effective early literacy operations and the behavior that provides evidence of children's growing knowledge. Our goal is to ensure that all

children develop the skills they need to be successful in literacy. Shared reading offers a way teachers can use engaging texts and authentic literacy experiences and help children develop strategies to become independent readers. Rather than teaching skills in isolated ways, teachers can use the powerful examples that arise while children are engaged in shared reading to explicate and illustrate principles and strategies. Teaching is efficient and effective because the observant teacher is attuned to children's behavior and engages the children's attention. Skills are explicitly taught. The teacher has good information about what children need to know; shared reading offers numerous opportunities to prompt children's attention to strategies. When used within a balanced literacy framework, shared reading is a powerful means of supporting children as they build a repertoire of strategies for reading.

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