

# Facilitating Reading Habits and Creating Peer Culture in Shared Book Reading: An Exploratory Case Study in a Toddler Classroom

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**Abstract** Fifteen toddlers (2- to 3-years old, nine boys and six girls) in a university preschool classroom were observed for 7 months while spending time with books during transition time, between story time and lunch. This qualitative case study investigated the ways that teachers can facilitate toddlers' reading habits by providing literacy opportunities in unstructured learning environments and explored the contexts in which toddlers engage in independent reading activities. The findings of this study show that (1) toddlers can develop literacy through participating in meaning-making activities with peers while reading books together in unstructured environments and (2) toddlers want to read and choose to read in order to satisfy their curiosity, involvement, and social interchange, just as older children do.

**Keywords** Peer · Toddlers · Emergent literacy learning · Transition · Peer culture · Shared literacy activity

## Introduction

### Episode

Jenny<sup>1</sup> was reading the book by herself, turning the pages left to right. She was reading it aloud to me. She was looking at pictures, not letters. For example, although the text was on the bottom of the right page, she was looking at

the illustration on the left page first while telling me what the story said. Yet she seemed to have memorized the story of the book, because her story matched its words pretty well. (When I asked her later if she liked the book, she answered, "My favorite.") Tom came to us and became interested in what Jenny was doing with me. "What you doing?" Tom asked. "Reading this book," Jenny answered. Tom sat down close to Jenny and looked at the book curiously.

Tom: What's this?

Jenny: It's like doggy loves to eat a cake.

Tom: A puppy?

Jenny: No! It's not a puppy. It's a doggy. See? ((pointing to a picture on a page)) It's a doggy.

Tom: ((looking at the picture)) looks a puppy.

Jenny: No! A puppy is small. It's big. It's a doggy.

This is an excerpt of my observational notes from 1 day when I observed 2- to 3-year-old toddlers after their story time outside of their classroom. In this episode, Jenny chose a book that she wanted to read among the books that her teacher had read during story time and started reading aloud, which might have led to Tom's involvement. Then, they started discussing whether the character of the story was a puppy or a dog. No person or structured learning activity forced these toddlers to get involved in this activity or even facilitated the discussion. Rather, after story time, the teacher just put out the books that she used for their story time and allowed the children to have either free play time or independent/shared book reading time as they chose before they went inside for lunch. As a result, Jenna chose to read the book by herself and Tom became

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interested in looking at or reading the book with her. To them, this activity might be playful in the sense that it is a self-initiated, child-directed, meaningful literacy learning opportunity or meaningful, authentic literacy learning opportunities (Bateson 2000; Saracho and Spodek 2006).

Researchers and educators have long recognized the importance of motivating children to read by examining the relationship between motivation and achievement and indicated that highly motivated readers generate their own reading opportunities, which helps them become active, engaged readers (Clark and Rumbold 2006; Gambrell 2011; Morgan and Fuchs 2007). In addition, a number of studies have investigated the need of providing “authentic opportunities” for literacy engagement and development in unstructured learning environments (Luongo-Orlando 2010; Putman and Walker 2010, p. 140). Thus, it is crucial to pay attention to contexts where children engage in literacy activities by themselves, without teachers’ supervision or direction, in order to gain a better understanding of how children become motivated to participate in meaningful literacy experiences and how they respond to the experiences. However, there are few studies examining the contexts where young children, especially toddlers, are motivated to read books and engage in independent reading activities. Rather, many studies have focused on the role of adults in the shared storybook reading contexts on young children’s literacy development (Hindman et al. 2008; Justice et al. 2008, 2009). It is important to consider toddlers’ independent reading activities or shared-reading activities with their peers as simple pretend play. Some researchers have recognized that there is a need to recast pretend reading as one of the earliest forms of reading by redefining and broadening “what counts as literate behavior” (Kantor et al. 1992, p. 185).

This study, carried out over a 7-month period, seeks to build on the previous body of emergent literacy research by investigating the ways that teachers can facilitate toddlers’ reading habits in unstructured learning environments and exploring the contexts in which toddlers engage in independent reading activities.

## Method

### Participants

Participants in this study were fifteen 2- to 3-year-old toddlers (nine boys and six girls) in the toddlers’ class of an early educational center in an urban setting in the United States. Parents of participants were all highly-educated (most holding advanced degrees) and worked at an institution of higher education (IHE). All of the participants were White and non-Hispanic, with relatively high socioeconomic status.

### Case Study

This qualitative/interpretive case study explored events within a bounded system (Creswell 2007) in a specific setting (a toddler classroom) by focusing on certain contexts (independent reading and shared book reading with peers). The participants were observed three times a week in the classroom for 7 months to gain better understandings of how teachers can facilitate toddlers’ reading habits in an unstructured environment and of the role of peers and their peer culture in this context. This study aimed to find out what some phenomena mean as enacted within a particular case by observing how toddlers individually and collectively respond to particular situations through reading books independently or during interactions with their peers (Dyson and Genishi 2005). In addition, this study used an interpretive approach to seek to construct the meaning of some patterns of phenomena through the thick and rich descriptions developed (Merriam 2009).

### Data Collection

Data were collected three times a week for 7 months in the toddlers’ classroom in a “natural” setting by focusing on (a) the contexts in which toddlers were reading books by themselves or together and (b) toddlers’ interactions with their peers while reading books, during transition time between storybook reading time and lunch time (which usually lasted 15–20 min) for 7 months. The total number of observations was 84. Since video cameras are particularly efficient data-gathering technologies for small group interactions, classroom studies, and participant observation, a digital camera was used to collect and preserve the interactions among children. Field notes were also taken to record the experiences for later analysis.

### Analysis

First, I went over all the observation notes (including analytic memos and narratives) and video clips, developed analytic codes to group pieces of data in relevant categories, noted recurrent themes that could represent meaningful differences among contexts, and identified key narratives (Dyson and Genishi 2005).

Additionally, constant comparative analysis was used to identify inductive category coding (Thomas 2006) and to compare and integrate each event observed within the same setting (Dye et al. 2000), which helped to construct the case study by identifying relevant, differentiated, or meaningful contextual pieces, refining categories, and attempting to overarch the categories to create a coherent, persuasive narrative (Bowen 2009).

## Description of Classroom Dynamics

The children had their story time outside of their classroom except on rainy days. Story time usually took place in the playground connected to their classroom, usually under the porch or next to the slides, because their story time was right after their free play time. Story time usually lasted 10–15 min, sometimes 20 min, and teachers typically read 4–6 books in that time. When a teacher read books to the children under the porch, they sat down on the bench, which was long and wide enough for them to sit together and form up in two ranks, or on the ground as long as they could see the pictures of the books and they didn't interrupt the rest of the children trying to see the pictures. When they had their story time next to the slides, they sat on the colorful plastic tunnel, stuck in the ground horizontally, or leaned on the tunnel. On rainy days, they had their story time in the hallway, and the children leaned on the wall. Wherever the location, the teacher who was the storyteller sat on a chair, facing the children and holding the books toward them. The other teachers sat with the children.

After story time, they had their lunch inside. However, the teachers wanted to make the transition smooth, so they had the children take turns to go inside to wash their hands and be ready for lunch. Therefore, while two or three of the children went inside first, the rest of them had independent reading times or free play time as they chose.

## Findings

This current study was conducted to investigate the ways that teachers can facilitate toddlers' reading habits by providing literacy opportunities to toddlers in unstructured learning environments. This study also explored the contexts in which toddlers engage in independent reading activities. Findings in this study show that allowing children to read the books that teachers used during their story time could not only make the transition smooth, but also provide the children another meaningful literacy opportunities, such as independent reading or shared reading with their peers, in unstructured environments, which created their own peer culture. In addition, the findings show that toddlers want to read and choose to read in order to satisfy their curiosity, involvement, and social interchange, just as older children do (Gambrell 2011). Lastly, the participating children in this study often competed over, shared, or exchanged books as they did with toys, but they also used each other as resources in literacy learning.

## Theme 1. Competing Over/Sharing or Exchanging Books

This first theme illustrates that the children considered books as important objects. From the beginning of the observation, they were often seen competing over the same book, as they did with toys in class.

### Example 1.1

Robert was also one of the children who loved to read books independently, and he usually picked up more than one book from the ground when the teacher put out the books that they used for their story time. He always sat on the books that he chose and didn't share them with others even if someone asked him to share it or even if he had finished reading the book. For example, when he read one book and wanted to read another book, he pulled out a book from the books that he was sitting on, placed the book that he had just read on the other books, and sat on the books again. He usually picked big books and small books together, and it seemed to make the other children interested in the books because they could see which books he was sitting on. If someone tried to take away one of the books that he was sitting on, he instantly screamed at him/her and refused to share it. One day, after the teacher had the children choose and read the books used during story time, Robert was reading the book *Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed*. A few seconds later, Molly approached him from behind. She looked at the book over his shoulder, and she tried to grab it. Robert turned his body on his left side, saying, "You read THAT book!" He didn't specify which book he meant. He seemed simply to want her to go away from him. As soon as Molly heard this, she hit his head pretty hard with her right hand, which made him cry. One of the teachers came to them and said to Molly, "Use your words." Then, she took the book that they had fought over to read it to them, trying to comfort him, which made him cry even harder as if he felt that the teacher had taken his book away from him. Another day, after they had their story time sitting on the bench under the porch, Robert was reading the book *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See*, putting it on the bench and standing by the bench. Ana climbed up the bench, sat down, and tried to look at the book without letting him notice what she was doing. However, as soon as he noticed, he dragged the book to the opposite end of the bench, and then he fastened his eyes upon her for a while as if he were guarding the book.

As this example shows, when the children read books individually and independently, they often chose and fought over books that they wanted to read, just as they did with toys. They also held on to the chosen books, not sharing what they had with other children, until they were distracted by other things such as other books or other toys. The books were just like toys that they couldn't stand to share, even though they shared the books as a large group when the teacher read to them.

However, 4 months after the observations began, the children started sharing or exchanging books when they wanted to read a different book that another child was holding.

### Example 1.2

After listening to stories, the teacher said, "Who wants to look at books?" The children ran to the teacher to grab books before the others did. Ellie was one of them, but she was little bit late.

- Teacher: Do you want *Is Your Mama a Llama?*  
((showing the book to her))
- Ellie: ((shaking her head))
- Teacher: What do you want then↓
- Ellie: The monster!
- Teacher: ((giving her the book *Go Away, Big Green Monster!*))
- Ellie: ((sitting on the ground and putting the book on her lap, leaning on the plastic tunnel))
- Robert: ((as reading other book)) I WANT monster one
- Ellie: No↓
- Teacher: You can read it when she's done, (boy's real name)↓
- Robert: ((just crouched in front of Ellie and looked at pictures))
- Ellie: ((reading the book without paying attention to Robert)) Go away, hair, ((turned a page)) Go away, ear, ((turned a page)) Go away, nose [Robert: nose,] ((turned a page)) Go away, face [Robert: face,] ((turned a page)) Go away, ((turned a page again)) eyes, [Robert: eyes,] ((turned a page)) Go away, ((turned a page)) monster.
- Robert: Monster.
- Ellie: STOP! ((closed the book)) Yay! ((putting the book on the ground))
- Robert: ((grabbed the book *Go Away, Big Green Monster!*))
- Ellie: ((grabbed the book that Robert had, which he put next to him))

This example shows that Ellie and Robert shared and exchanged their book after all. The teacher intervened to suggest that Robert could wait until Ellie was finished reading the book. Examples categorized as "sharing books" or "exchanging books" indicate that the children started learning naturally that they could share or exchange books if they wanted to read a book that another child was holding with or without the teachers' assistance. Interestingly, when children were sharing or exchanging books, I witnessed the same behaviors that I observed when they were playing with toys. Of course, the children didn't share or exchange things, including books, in all cases. However, as this theme shows, behaviors of sharing or exchanging books began to become a meaningful part of peer culture during the children's independent reading times.

## Theme 2. Forming Groups Without Reciprocal Interactions

This theme emerged 3 months after the observation began. It shows that the children started sitting together and forming special groups, creating their own peer culture. This was a quite different phenomenon compared to the first theme. In both themes, the children sat together and read books. However, in the case of the first theme, they just sat where they had their story time. In the second theme, they began to independently choose where to sit and whom to sit next to.

### Example 2.1

After reading books under the porch, the teacher started giving the books to the children who wanted to read, and the other children who had left to play with other things came back to read books. However, due to a scarcity of books, they started fighting over the books and screaming at each other. "We need more books!" said the teacher to the other teacher loudly. The other teacher brought more books from inside to give them to the children who didn't get a book. "Book! Book!" The children who didn't have books ran over to the teacher to grab a book. Hanson was one of these children. As soon as he was handed the big book, *Things I Like*, he went to the other side of the porch where Ana was sitting and sat down next to her, keeping a little distance from her. Then, he called Robert. "Sit down! Sit down!" Robert came to Hanson, holding the book, *A Day with Firefighters*, and sat on Hanson's left side. Robert even moved his bottom toward Hanson so that he could sit closer to him. When Hanson turned a page, he noticed

that his book covered Robert's right leg and a part of the book that Robert held. Then, Hanson turned his body a little bit to the right so that he wouldn't disturb Robert, even though Robert didn't react at all and kept reading his book.

### Example 2.2

Kate grabbed one book, *Things I Like*, and sat on the borderline between the concrete and the grass, right next to the concrete pillar supporting the porch. Dan came over, holding the book, *The Wheels on the Bus*, and sat next to her. The place where they sat was about 3.5 feet away from where they had their story time. At the same time, Robert, Hanson, and Ana were standing next to the bench where they had story time, and placing their books on the bench in order to read them.

These examples indicate that participation in reading activities of their own volition in unstructured context was a powerful way to create not only forms of intentional reading at the individual level, but also unique motivations to share the space with others and unique forms of groups for doing so, even though it was not reciprocal interaction. In addition, it would be noteworthy that this theme could be an example of parallel play, which is a form of play among a group of children, primarily toddlers, in which children sit alongside, but they play separately with toys, not interacting with one another.

## Theme 3. Peer Tutoring

This theme indicates that the children were sometimes seen teaching their peers regarding book knowledge. This peer tutoring emerged 5 months after the observation began. The following episodes indicate that the children could help their peers to develop their literacy skills.

### Example 3.1

Dan was reading the book, *The Little Mouse, the Red Ripe Strawberry and the Big Hungry Bear*, holding it upside down and turning pages right to left. Hanson was sitting on Dan's right side, reading the book, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. Dan started pretending to eat the big strawberry on the page of the book, just as the children usually did when they were read the book. Whenever the teacher said, "Who wants to have some?" the children stood up, approached the teacher, and pretended to take a part of the big strawberry on the page and brought to their mouths as if they really had it; this was their favorite part of reading the book. Hanson looked at Dan and watched him pretending to eat the strawberry.

Suddenly, Hanson stood up and came near Dan. I thought Hanson would do the same thing that Dan was doing. I was wrong. Hanson said to Dan, "You hold it wrong!", taking the book and helping Dan to hold it correctly. Then, Hanson returned to where he had been sitting. Dan didn't seem to be upset when Hanson took his book for a second. Rather, after getting the book back, Dan kept reading the book, quickly found the favorite page where the big strawberry was, and pretended to eat it again.

### Example 3.2

Kate was sitting on the concrete, leaning on the pillar, and reading the book, *Abiyoyo*. Nathan was reading the book, *Annabel*, singing the song as the children always did together when the teacher read the book. They sat facing each other.

The part below indicates what the book says on a page.

Annabel said we'd better go  
Annabel said we'd better go  
Better better go go go Better better go go go  
Annabel said we'd better go

Now, this is what Nathan read.

Nathan: ((like singing the song))  
Bell, ba ba go  
Bell, ba ba go  
Ba ba go go go Ba ba go go go  
Bell, ba ba go

Nathan substituted a part of the words, reading "Annabel" as "Bell" and "Better" as "Ba." Kate looked at what he was doing, and she said correctly, "Annabel." Nathan looked at her, not saying a word, and he seemed to be trying to figure out what she was talking about. As though Kate thought she needed to let him know what she meant, she said again, but slowly, "An-na-bel," looking him in the face. A few seconds later, she stood up and sat on Nathan's right side. She closed the book that Nathan was holding and pointed to the picture of Annabel.

Kate: Annabel↓ not bell↓  
Nathan: Bell↑  
Kate: No! Not bell↓ An-na-bel↓  
Nathan: An-na-bel↓  
Kate: Yeah, that↓ Annabel↓  
Nathan: Annabel↓

Then, Kate returned to where she was sitting, giving me a little bit of a smile as if she were satisfied with what

she had done for Nathan, and continued reading the book that she had been reading.

These examples indicate that even toddlers can help their peers to develop their literacy skills. This corresponds to studies demonstrating the importance of peer tutoring, focusing on the positive relationship between active social interactions and discourses among children and their contributions to knowledge acquisition (Fuchs and Fuchs 2005; Wilkinson and Fung 2002). Interestingly, the toddlers who tried to teach their peers were a few months older than their peers; Hanson was 7 months older than Dan, and Kate was 6 months older than Nathan. This shows that developmental level can be one of the important agents, along with peers' influence, that affects young children's literacy development (Azmitia and Hesser 1993). In addition, this supports other studies focusing on peer collaboration as a source of development opportunities—young children learn and accomplish skills and knowledge through educational dialogues with more knowledgeable partners, including peers (Vass and Littleton 2010).

## Conclusions and Implications for Educators

The findings of this study suggest that preschool-aged children, even that toddlers can develop literacy through participating in meaning-making activities with peers while reading books together. Therefore, there is a need to recognize that when children spend time reading books together, it is “a form of group improvisation in which children engage in multimodal, semiotic activity” (DeZutter 2007, p. 232). In addition, educators need to offer opportunities and times for children to spend time with books with their peers in unstructured environments, without adults' direction, because children can learn things from one another in ways different from how they learn from adults; children can model, assist, negotiate, affirm, and contradict each other, engaging in conversations and literacy activities as equal-status partners (Ryokai et al. 2003). In addition, researchers have suggested that classroom peer culture may structure literacy-related activities, which can be considered as a crucial mediator of literacy learning (Corsaro and Nelson 2003). As children construct and share their own versions of thinking and understanding about literacy with their peers, they can stimulate each other's language and literacy development as well as their perspective taking (Goodman and Martens 2007; Oden and Hall 1998). Thus, teachers need to let children control their own literacy learning and give sufficient opportunities to them to respond to their experiences with literacy because children become literate as “the result of social literacy experiences surrounded by talk and attitudes about literacy and the literate”

(Goodman and Martens 2007, p. 10). Accordingly, it is crucial to pay attention to contexts where children engage in literacy activities by themselves, without teachers' supervision or facilitation, in order to gain a better understanding of how children influence each other in literacy learning as they play at literacy practices together. In addition, as teachers closely observe and document children participating in meaningful literacy experiences and analyze the children's strategies to make sense of literacy, they may use their learning to reexamine their instruction and reorganize their classroom environment (Goodman 2007). Therefore, educators need to view children as strategic and active agents who can help one another to create their own culture and participate in cultural learning (Cook-Gumperz and Kyratzis 2001; Goodman and Martens 2007), not just as passive reproducers of adult culture (Kyratzis 2004).

In this study, during the transition time, after the children had story time and before they came into the classroom for lunch, they could choose to read the books that had been used during story time by themselves or with others (teachers or their peers). They often exchanged books with each other (sometimes with the teachers' help) when they wanted to read different books, which might help them realize that they could share objects, not just books, and space with their peers. In addition, allowing the children to read the books that they were read during their story time motivated them to engage in another meaningful literacy opportunities, not like when a teacher read them the books during story time.

Lastly, providing a literacy enriched play environment in which children can engage with their peers is crucial (DeZutter 2007). In this study, the children had frequent opportunities to have books in their hands, to choose books that they wanted to read, and to use books as learning tools on a daily basis. In addition, the lead teacher in this class replaced some of the books on the shelves in the library area with new ones once a week while leaving other books that the children loved to read, which helped children engage in reading books willingly and facilitated their exposure to a variety of books.

When educators create pleasant, unconstrained, and undirected literacy learning opportunities, children will receive benefits that are different from those that they get through interacting with adults. In addition, they will be able to use each other as great resources in literacy learning by exchanging their book knowledge.

## Limitations

This study has a limitation. Since the participating children were from upper-middle socio-economic status families, they might have brought pre-existing knowledge from their

home literacy environment into the classroom. For example, parental literacy habits with children or the children's literacy competence could have created the unique phenomena found in literacy-related activities. The ways that toddlers respond to and interact with book in various contexts is a topic that merits further study.

**Informed Consent** This project followed the policies of the Institutional Review Board and obtained signed consent forms from the parents of the participating children prior to initiation of a research project.

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