

## Parent-child interaction and early literacy development

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In the overarching framework of this special issue, development is conceived as embedded in the sociocultural context. In this context, culture shapes the mind and the basic form of higher mental activity is social, arising from collaboration with more experienced others. This line of thinking is associated with the sociocultural approach of Vygotsky (1978), with cultural psychologists like Bruner (1996), and contextual ecological models of development, like that of Bronfenbrenner (1979).

The important role of parental mediation in child development is well established (e.g., Holden, 1997). Parents interact daily with their children and these interactions contain elements of teaching which may provide a basis for later outcomes. Beyond the debates about different ways to promote children's literacy, there is general consensus among researchers that, in early childhood, the parents comprise the main mediators of children's learning processes (Meisels, 1998).

The call for papers that resulted in the present special issue invited studies that focus on parent-child interaction and early literacy development. The spectrum of invited subjects included the frequency and nature of literacy interactions, as well as [accompanying] parental beliefs regarding these interactions; analyses of specific joint activities like storybook reading, playing with the alphabet at home, writing interactions, watching television with children, interactions with computer software that involve literacy, interactions with environmental print, family discourse with children, and parental involvement in literacy programs.

Nine innovative studies relevant to these topics are published in this issue. Interestingly, despite the wide range of subjects presented in the call for papers, eight of these papers directly or indirectly address storybook reading/telling. Although it might seem that everything possible has already been said on this subject, the response to this journal issue shows that storybook interactions continue to intrigue researchers.

Storybook reading is considered, particularly in literate cultures, to be a loving, everyday parent-child interaction. Not only do educators strongly urge parents to read to their children as early and as much as possible (e.g., Adams, 1991), but even the media reveals that reading books to young children is a culturally accepted representation of caring and loving them. An Israeli radio broadcast that encourages parents to fasten their young children's seatbelts declares: "To love your children is to give them a glass of orange juice in the morning, to read them a story before they go to bed in the evening, and to fasten their seatbelt in the car."

In the mid-1990s, we witnessed - and some of us participated in - a debate in the research regarding the relations between storybook reading and early literacy. A meta-analysis (Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995) and a review (Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994) pertaining to joint reading's relations with the development of literacy both concluded that storybook reading reliably accounts for about 8% of the variance in children's literacy. However, Bus et al. claimed that joint book reading is a productive early literacy predictor ( $d = 0.59$ ), whereas Scarborough and Dobrich raised doubts as to the unique contribution of joint reading to children's early literacy.

Since then, books have been published on the topic of reading books to children (e.g., van Kleeck, Stahl, & Bauer, 2003). A short review of the Psycho-Info Database at the time of this writing revealed around 454 peer reviewed journal articles

regarding storybook reading, shared reading and storytelling to young children since 1996. It seems that many questions regarding shared reading with young children remain open, and researchers are continuing their attempts to unravel the nature of shared reading, its relations with the child's home on the one hand, and its relations with the child's development, mostly literacy and language development, on the other.

The articles in this issue move the literature on parenting and early literacy one step forward, and many also present current research on shared reading. A few of these studies aim to deepen our understanding regarding the nature and the benefits of shared reading with populations characterized by diverse special needs. Mol, Bus, de Jong, and Smeets found, in their meta-analysis, that children at risk for language and literacy impairments gain less in terms of vocabulary from dialogic reading. Skibbe, Justice, Zucker, and McGinty's study may provide an explanation to Mol et al.'s findings: Perhaps lack of practice among children at risk for language impairments is what lowers the efficiency of their shared reading and hence its contribution to early literacy. Skibbe et al.'s investigation of literacy interactions reported that mothers of children with specific language impairment exhibited fewer positive beliefs about literacy and engaged in fewer literacy practices than mothers of children with unimpaired language skills. Interestingly, Fletcher, Cross; Tanney; Schneider and Finch demonstrated the value of an interactive, rich shared reading experience. They showed the predictive value of rich storybook reading interactions to the language development of children with mild to moderate developmental delay due to prenatal exposure to cocaine. Storch and Fischel, who explored [family] reading behaviors within low income families, found that frequency of parent-child reading interactions and children's reading interest were linked to children's language and early literacy.

Thus, in addition to the parents who make a difference by initiating shared reading interactions, the children's interest enables pleasant and beneficial interactions.

In the current issue, we witness a serious evolvement in the sphere of early literacy and language measures that are related to shared reading. For example, Sénéchal, Pagan, Lever, and Ouellette studied the contribution of shared reading not only to children's expressive vocabulary but also to their morphology and syntax comprehension and to their narrative ability (story grammar, cohesion, and language complexity), for book stories as well as personal stories. Studying the nature of shared reading, Curenton, Craig, and Flanigan found that the storytelling context presented the best opportunity for mothers to showcase their discourse skills, but the story-creating context provided interactions during family conversations has been linked with higher reading achievements in school (e.g., Davidson & Snow, 1995).

Researchers have frequently linked shared reading with early literacy development, but do parents share this assumption? Meagher, Arnold, Doctoroff, and Baker examined the synchronicity between parental aims for shared reading and their behavior while reading books to their children. They found that mothers who believed that shared reading should involve learning showed more learning-focused behaviors, whereas mothers who believed that reading should be fun had more positive interactions with their children. Do the goals, the benefits, or the practice of shared reading remain consistent along children's development? Audet, Evans, Mitchell, and Reynolds found that parents of children in JK, SK, and Grades 1, 2, and 3 shared the same goals for reading to their children: Enjoying books and bonding with the child were rated the highest at each grade level, followed by fostering reading and stimulating development. Yet, Mol et al. found that dialogic reading is more effective with young children age 2-3 years. It seems that although the efficacy of shared

reading in promoting early literacy decreases over the years, its importance to parents stays stable. Maybe parents are right to think it is important to keep on reading to children who are 4-6 and even older, though the benefits to the child may vary along the years.

Before leaving the subject of storybooks, some comments are necessary on the expected direction of future research. Studies in this area have traditionally focused on cognitive domains related to storybook reading interactions, mainly language and literacy achievements. Yet shared book reading potentially offers benefits for children in the affective (e.g., empathy) and social (e.g., social acceptance, understanding of norms) domains that have yet to be systematically studied. Researchers have begun to relate storybook reading or telling to the development of theory of mind (e.g., Adrian, Clemente, Villanueva, & Rieffe, 2005), which has implications for socioemotional functioning. This line of studies should receive a boost in the near future. In addition, other developmental competencies deserve empirical exploration in this context, like the development of creativity and imagination. To the best of my knowledge, these aspects have not yet been explored.

Likewise, up till now researchers have paid less attention to the genres that parents prefer to read to their children (fairytales, expository texts, poetry) and in more general terms, little is known about how parents choose books for reading. What are the important aspects of a good children's book in the parents' eyes - or in the children's eyes? How important is it to make "good" books available to young children? These topics call for continued exploration in future research.

Along the years, parent-child interactions other than shared reading have gained some attention in the realm of early literacy. A few studies in the present special issue added other home literacy activities such as reciting rhymes, telling stories, drawing

pictures (Skibbe et al.), or story creating (Curenton et al.). Heather, Anthony, Aghara, Smith, and Landry studied daily activities and toy play with infants and preschoolers and found that maternal responsiveness across early childhood predicted children's decoding and reading comprehension skills when children were 8 years old.

The spectrum of literacy related interactions extends beyond what is discussed in the present issue. Parent-child writing interactions, though proven to be very effective in predicting early literacy in kindergarten (Aram & Levin, 2002) and later literacy achievements in second grade (Aram & Levin, 2004), have received too little attention so far.

Previous studies have drawn attention to the importance of phonological awareness and encouraged parents to initiate activities that include practicing phonological awareness. At the same time, others doubted the causal link from phonological awareness to success in learning to read (Castles & Coltheart, 2004). Likewise environmental print was considered a central parent-child context for promoting literacy in the 1980s (e.g., Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1982), an approach that was criticized severely in the 1990s (e.g., Adams, 1991). Exposing children to letters at home and playing with letters and letter names are productive parent-child activities that can enhance environmental print recognition like recognizing commercial logos or children's names on drawers at the child's kindergarten. For example, Levin and Ehri (2008) found that even mere recognition of only half of the letters correlated with children's success in recognizing their classmates' names. Aram and Biron's (2004) intervention study demonstrated that preschoolers' interaction with the letters composing their own names establish a good context for promoting their alphabetic skills.

To promote early literacy, more interventions should view the children's home and family as the central arena of early literacy development. Programs are frequently run in preschools and kindergartens, and they indeed promote children's literacy, but does this advantage last? Though interventions at home are difficult to conduct and parents are frequently resistant to change, parents are their children's first literacy agents. Hence, policy makers and researchers must continue investing in promoting parental literacy mediation.

All the studies in this special issue were conducted in western countries and so present a cultural bias. Parent-child literacy interactions are culturally dependent, and we must therefore be careful in our generalizations. More studies regarding parent-child interactions in a variety of cultures will deepen our understanding of parent-child interactions and early literacy.

I made a special effort to include as many studies as possible in this issue. It is unfortunate that only these articles, from among a longer list of submissions, could be published. I would like to thank all of the authors who submitted papers for this special issue, thereby contributing greatly to its scope and ingenuity. I would also like to thank all of the reviewers for generously offering their time and expertise in commenting on the manuscripts. Finally, I am indebted to the continuous, patient support provided by Susanne Denham and the editorial team of *Early Education and Development*. I hope that this special issue will help those who study and those who practice early literacy mediation and will pave the way for more research in this domain.

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