Facilitating children's emergent literacy using shared reading: A comparison of two models

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Ian Hay

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND

Ruth Fielding-Barnsley

QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

This paper investigates early home literacy practices and their influence on preschool children's literacy and reading development. In particular, two recently developed Australian home literacy interventions are reviewed that were based on a parent shared reading and dialogic reading framework. While both interventions facilitated preschool children's reading development and parent involvement, each intervention had a different focus. One of the interventions was designed for children with language delays and it concentrated on motivating book reading. The second intervention was designed for children with a family history of reading disability, and this intervention concentrated more on children's alphabetical and phonological awareness development, along with home reading. The strategies used for both interventions have the potential to be incorporated into mainstream early childhood literacy education and tuition.

Reading is fundamental to a child's academic, personal, and social development and it is perceived to be a process as well as a product that involves both cognitive and linguistic construction (Bishop & Leonard, 2000; Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson & Barr, 2000). Among the many aspects that have been explored in the development of children's reading is the helpfulness of a conducive and supportive family and school environment (Elias et al., 2002; Hay, Elias & Booker, 2005; Hay & Fielding-Barnsley, 2006).

Home environment

Large scale international research studies investigating the factors that have influenced children's reading achievement reported significant correlations between the following five home factors: (1) regular engagement in early pre-school literacy activities, (2) speaking in the home, the language used in the tests to assess the child's reading, (3) having a greater number of books in the home, (4) the amount of time parents spent reading with their child, and (5) the parents' and child's attitude towards reading (Mullis, Martin,

Gonzalez & Kennedy, 2003). Similarly, in terms of supportive literate home environments, Donahue, Voelkl, Campbell and Mazzeo (1999) identified that children who were more successful in reading had a positive correlation between receiving books as gifts, the level of home recreational reading, and reading achievement. Thus, the evidence is that the frequency and quality of parent-child reading is an important determinant of children's later literacy attainment (Donahue et al., 1999; Elley, 1989; Mullis et al., 2003), in part because shared reading with an adult serves the crucial function of moving young and preschool aged children from paying attention only to pictures to paying attention to print (Sulzby, 1985).

Emergent literacy

In their review of children's acquisition of literacy, Whitehurst and Lonigan (1988) proposed that there should be a continuation between the pre-reading behaviours of very young children, and the reading skills the children later acquire more formally in the primary and middle school settings. These skills are conceptualised as falling along the same developmental continuum. Accordingly, these authors support the concept of emergent literacy (Teale & Sulzby, 1986) to refer to 'the skills, knowledge and attitudes that are presumed to be developmental precursors to conventional forms of reading and the environments that support these developments' (p. 849). In particular, children's early language development is considered to be a good predictor of children's early reading development in the domains of metalinguistic awareness, and alphabetic and book concepts (Saada-Robert, 2004).

Certainly, it is widely accepted that preschool children have learnt much that is important about literacy before formal reading instruction begins (Bishop & Leonard, 2000; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; Teal & Sulzby, 1986). In particular, there is recurring evidence that children from homes of higher socio-economic status (SES) are advantaged in later reading achievement scores (Teale, 1986; White, 1982), and are more successful at making the transition from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn' (Campbell, Kelly, Mullis, Martin & Sainsbury, 2001). While White's (1982) meta-analysis was supportive of the relationship between higher SES and children's reading achievement, White also noted that SES alone was a weak predictor when it was studied separately from specific home environment factors. White (1982) argued that SES measures, such as parental occupation and family income, were not the main impact factors on children's reading achievement, but rather it was the social and literacy enhancement activities associated with higher SES homes that were the critical influence on children's literacy development. These activities involved the parents doing shared reading, reading aloud and discussing the stories and vocabulary with their child (Hewison & Tizard, 1980; Raz & Bryant, 1990; Teale & Sulzby, 1986;

Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994). For example, Teale and Sulzby reported that book reading occurred as seldom as five times per year in some low-income families. As others have pointed out (Snow et al., 1998; Wasik, Bond & Hindman, 2002; Whitehurst et al., 1994), such findings have underpinned the need for the development of literacy programs that aim to encourage parent-preschooler book reading in communities of low socio-economic status, and for preschool and Year 1 teachers to ensure that they incorporate significant language and vocabulary development within their regular program, particularly for children from families where English proficiency is an issue (Hay, Elias, Fielding-Barnsley, Homel & Frieberg, in press; Marvin & Wright, 1997; Schiff-Myers, Djukic, McGovern-Lawler & Perez, 1993).

This need for compensatory language development is illustrated in the Australian research study by Hay et al. (2003), which reported that of a cohort of children from a disadvantaged community who commenced formal schooling in Year 1, around 1 in 3 of the children demonstrated at least a 12-month delay in receptive (understanding) language age test scores, and almost 1 in 4 of the children demonstrated at least a 12-month delay in expressive (saying) language age test scores. Investigating the links between language delay and reading, Neuman and Celano (2001) and Marvin and Wright (1997) have noted that children with language delays were less likely than other children to listen to stories, engage in dialogue with adults about books being read, or to ask or answer questions about past and future events in stories. Also, children with language delays were less likely to have adults point to words or letters in books, have words spelled for them during their writing activities at home, or have adults provide commentary when the children were watching television.

Engaging parents in the literacy development

Importantly, Whitehurst et al. (1994), concerned about the early literacy development of children from low SES communities, taught mothers specific interactive techniques to use when reading picture books with their preschool-age children. This intervention program, called dialogic reading, produced substantial effects on preschool children's language development. Dialogic reading involves families and parents reading with their children, rather than to their children or correcting their child's reading (Arnold, Lonigan, Whitehurst & Epstein, 1994; Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000; Morgan & Goldstein, 2004).

The implication for educators from the dialogic reading research is that caregivers in low socio-economic status communities need be encouraged to use with their children the types of oral language interactions that should help prepare their children for the instructional demands of the classroom. In terms of children's early literacy development a critical issue is the one-on-one, adult and child, dyadic interaction during storybook reading time

(Arnold et al., 1994). In a dialogic reading situation, parents are asked to engage in a dialogue with their child about the content and context of the story and allow the child to direct and share in the conversations associated with the text and the pictures (Sénéchal, 2006; Whitehurst et al., 1994). The caregiver expands on the child's dialogue, and the evidence is that the child then practises this linguistically enhanced dialogue. Thus the child improves in vocabulary knowledge, syntactic (the rules/patterns of language) knowledge and semantic (word meaning) knowledge, as well as in the social skills of turn taking, and the conventions associated with reading text (pragmatics). In time, the child will be able to read along with, and direct, the caregiver in re-reading familiar text, but this is secondary to the dyadic interaction. For the child, dialogic reading helps to connect reading with positive parental social interactions and attention; for the caregiver, it facilitates confidence and involvement in the child's reading acquisition process (Morgan & Goldstein, 2004; Whitehurst et al., 1994).

Notably, the results of the Bus, van Ijzendoorn and Pellegrini (1995) meta-analysis on the intergenerational transmission of literacy identified that parent-preschooler book reading was a pivotal environmental factor in children's readiness for and success with reading. These investigators found that the frequency of book reading to preschool children affected the children's language growth, emergent literacy, and reading achievement. Further, Craig-Thoreson and Dale (1999) suggested that shared book reading was an ideal context for the development of children's language skills because it provides: (1) opportunities for the development of new concepts, (2) opportunities for the adult to monitor children's comprehension through questioning, and (3) occasions for the development of the child's vocabulary and for listening to and practising more advanced language forms. In this regard, Kim and Cole (2002) identified that mothers tended to utilise more language 'instructional strategies' during picture book reading than in other interaction situations.

Australian evidence of effective dialogic reading program

Recent Australian research by Elias, Hay, Homel, and Freiberg (2006) and by Fielding-Barnsley and Purdie (2002; 2003) have utilised and adapted the dialogic reading intervention of Whitehurst et al. (1994). Both of the Australian emergent literacy interventions concentrated on children who potentially were considered early 'at risk' readers, and both demonstrated that they were successful, compared to similar preschool children who did not receive the intervention. There are, however, differences between the two studies, and in general terms, the Elias et al. (2006) intervention was more language focused, while the Fielding-Barnsley and Purdie (2002; 2003) intervention was more directly related to pre-reading skills, such as concepts about print, phonological awareness, and alphabet knowledge. In some ways the two

approaches reflect what Sénéchal (2006) refers to as the 'informal' or 'formal' early literacy experiences for preschoolers, with the Fielding-Barnsley and Purdie method the more formal or structured of the two approaches. Each of these interventions will be reviewed below.

Language focused intervention
In the Elias et al. (2006) study a parent–child dialogic reading program was implemented across four preschools, involving 62 caregivers/parents in a low socio-economic status, disadvantaged community where English was not the first language in 54 per cent of the homes. This socio-culturally sensitive program aimed to enhance children's language and emergent literacy development, and increase parental involvement in their preschoolers' education. The intervention was conducted by visiting teachers with additional training in children's language development, who co-taught and collaborated with the regular preschool teachers. Over the six months of the program, the amount of child–parent reading more than doubled, from an average of 38 minutes of parent–child reading per week, to 89 minutes of parent–child reading per week. Year 1 teachers in the following year reported positively on the children's literacy readiness for reading, the children's understanding of the concepts about print, and the intake children's willingness to engage with text and illustrations, compared to that of previous intakes from the same preschools.

The Elias et al. (2006) research was influenced by the theoretical perspective of Bishop (1997) and Catts (see Catts & Kamhi, 2005 for review), showing that children's oral and early language proficiency underpins the emergence of children's formal reading. Evidence for this perspective comes from research that has shown that even when studies control for intelligence and socio-economic status factors, students with early language delays have more difficulties with reading fluency, spelling, and reading comprehension than their age-matched peers, and in the long-term these children with early language delays are also more likely to select educational pathways that are considered less academic, and exit school earlier than their peers (Beitchman et al., 2001; Snowling et al., 2001).

To enhance the preschool children's emergent literacy development, Elias et al. aimed to make the books meaningful, motivating, and engaging to the children and their parents by individualising each of the home/school books. This was achieved by using a digital camera to take photographs of the child during various activities (at school and during other educational activities), and the photographs were then printed on A4 sized paper, and in collaboration with the child a piece of text was typed under each picture. These pages were compiled into personal books of about ten pages, with the front and back pages laminated.

The content of the Elias et al. picture books gave children opportunities

to engage in dialogue with their parents about real and meaningful experiences in the children's lives. For example, after printing the children's sports day photographs, parents were invited to collaborate with their child to create written text to accompany each of the pictures. The text could be written in English or the child's home language and, if the parent wished, text in the child's home language had the English translation below. Parents were encouraged to use the child's home language when creating text, as it has been shown that mastery of the child's first language is a good predictor of later literacy for bilingual children (Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

As the intervention progressed the text accompanying each picture became longer; for example, at the start of the intervention the text under one of the pictures read 'playing marbles', while later on the text under the picture read 'I was sitting on the carpet singing'. The main purpose of the text and pictures was to encourage the parents to talk with their child about the pictures and indirectly for the child to see the relationship between words, letters, and sound patterns. Over time, some of the children could recite the text that accompanied the pictures, but this was secondary to developing the children's concepts about print and extending their vocabulary and their semantic, syntactic, and linguistic skills. The books were popular with the children and their parents and were read both in the preschool setting and in the home.

In part, the Elias et al., approach to facilitating children's emergency literacy development is similar to the socio-culturally sensitive program used in the Pajero Valley project with Spanish-speaking parents and their children (Auerbach, 1989) and the early literacy program developed for children of native Hawaiian ancestry (Au, 2003). In these interventions, the aim was to create written texts that encouraged the parents to dialogue with their child and provide the child with meaningful experiences relating to the conventions and functions of print and the relationships between oral and written language.

Purposely, in the Elias et al. books, the text written to accompany the pictures was short (perhaps a few words or a sentence). One reason for the brevity of the text was that, as Sénéchal, Cornell and Broda (1995) pointed out, less text leads to higher levels of parent-child dialogue than when large amounts of text are used (with consequential benefits for language gains and later reading achievement). Furthermore, it has been proposed that the use of books with little or no text 'may be of value to practitioners who work with parents with culturally unique linguistic skills or who work with parents who have very low literacy levels' (Sénéchal et al., 1995, p. 335).

Skills focused intervention

The Fielding-Barnsley and Purdie (2002; 2003) emergent literacy research was also designed around the dialogic reading intervention of Whitehurst et

al. (1994); however, Fielding-Barnsley and Purdie included more activities that encouraged the parents to develop their preschool child's concepts of print, phonological awareness, and alphabet knowledge. The Fielding-Barnsley study used an experimental design involving an intervention and control group of preschool children and their families This intervention was conducted for eight weeks, with the parent in the experimental group provided with instruction on how to facilitate their children's reading using a videotape, a pre-reading booklet, along with telephone support from an experienced literacy teacher. Preschool children were selected for the intervention if there was a family history of reading disability, such as a sibling who was not coping with reading in school.

In terms of its theoretical perspective, the Fielding-Barnsley and Purdie (2002; 2003) emergency literacy intervention was based on research that has demonstrated that letter name knowledge and phonological awareness (e.g., the awareness of the sound units, such as syllables and phonemes in spoken words) facilitate rapid decoding and are important predictors of reading success (Lovett, Barron & Benson, 2003; Walker, 2005). The evidence is that successful emergent and developing readers need to develop positive attitudes and exposure to print, as well as extend their vocabulary and phonological awareness, but whereas most young children achieve the necessary levels of phonological awareness through incidental learning experiences, this is not always the case for some children (Rack, Snowling & Olson, 1992). The argument is that young children with early reading difficulties are more likely to have difficulties in manipulating letter knowledge information in reading and in decoding unknown words than their more academically successful reading peers (Byrne, Fielding-Barnsley & Ashley, 2000; Hatcher & Hume, 1999). That is, the more successful early readers and decoders are able to recognise the word or letter/s by identifying and blending its phonological (sound) elements and comparing this sound pattern to the sound patterns of known words or letter/s in her/his spoken vocabulary (Walker, 2005). Support for the notion that parents need to be encouraged to focus more on the word level of the text when they read with their children, as well as the narrative level of the story, comes from the research by Sénéchal et al. (1995), who noted that although parents may take advantage of book reading to highlight the written words, observational data show that they seldom encouraged the children to look into the words at the letter level.

In the Fielding-Barnsley and Purdie (2002; 2003) study the families were encouraged to utilise the Whitehurst et al. (1994) structure, as outlined above, and they were also encouraged to focus on their child's letter, rhyme, and concepts of print knowledge. To do this the parent was asked to read the text with their child and then go back over the text for discussion about the words and letters. For example, the parent may go back over the word 'Sam'

in the text and pointing to the word 'Sam' ask the child, 'What is the first sound you hear when I say Sam?' or 'What is another word that sounds like Sam?' or 'Do jam and Sam sound alike?' For the Fielding-Barnsley and Purdie intervention the books were selected from the *Reading Together Series* (Barrs & Ellis, 1998), which included rhyme, fictional stories, alphabet books, and traditional songs. On average, in the Fielding-Barnsley and Purdie study the parents read each of eight books to their child at least six times over the eight weeks of the intervention.

The books were selected to fulfil the requirements of the study as they provided for the development of children's rhyme awareness (phonological awareness), alphabet knowledge, alliteration awareness (phonemic awareness), and rich vocabulary. Included within the set of books were alphabet books, which were made up of pages for each capital letter and example words with corresponding pictures. The indications are that alphabetic instruction plays an important role in developing children's phonemic awareness (Saada-Robert, 2004). In particular, Murray, Stahl and Ivey (1996) have noted that children achieved greater gains in decoding and phoneme awareness when they used alphabet books with example words to demonstrate the sounds associated with the letters. The claim is that alphabet books provide children with the opportunity to link phoneme awareness with alphabet knowledge, because of phonemic information of the first letter's name, such as B for bear, for beach, and for bus.

Implications

There are a number of educational implications associated with the Fielding-Barnsley and Purdie (2002; 2003) and the Elias et al. (2006) research that need to be highlighted. First, implementing early reading interventions requires effort, time, and resources, and the co-operation of schools and homes. As a consequence the probability of a successful outcome cannot always be predicted given the level of complexity of the interactions between these factors. Second, the indications are that shared book reading and dialogic reading interventions can facilitate children's reading development and parent involvement in their children's reading, and these general strategies can be adapted and modified to accommodate different target audiences. The finding that the amount of parent to child reading increased across both studies is encouraging, and is supportive of the notion that repeated exposure to specific books facilitates children's language development and confidence with text (Sénéchal, 2006). It could be that future researchers may consider combining the two approaches used by the two research teams into one intervention that incorporates the letter focus strategies along with the language focus strategies, within a dialogic reading framework.

The finding that both the Elias et al. (2006) and the Fielding-Barnsley and Purdie (2002; 2003) research reported some level of success from their in

home literacy focused interventions raises the question of what are the possible long-term effects of such interventions? This question is particularly relevant given the research by Chapman, Tunmer and Prochnow (2001), which has suggested that many remedial reading interventions fail to demonstrate long-term gains. In part, this issue has been investigated by Sénéchal (2006), who researched the long-terms effects of home literacy interventions and found that those interventions that were more language and storybook focused (i.e., Elias et al., 2006) predicted children's early years of schooling vocabulary development and the frequency with which the children reported reading for pleasure in Year Four. In contrast, the more formal home literacy interventions (i.e., Fielding-Barnsley & Purdie, 2002; 2003) directly predicted children's alphabet knowledge in the early years of schooling and Year 4 reading fluency. Sénéchal (2006) also reported that across both types of home literacy interventions, the amount of storybook reading exposure experienced by the children, that is the greater the amount of time on task with reading, indirectly predicted the children's Year 4 reading comprehension achievement.

In conclusion, the results of Australian research on home literacy development are clarifying a set of reading enhancement strategies that have the potential to be incorporated into early childhood programs. They support the importance of an enriched literacy environment for preschool children, particularly for those children who are seen as 'at risk', and needing to develop their print concepts and oral language skills. The findings also support the notion that it is possible to target home literacy interventions for different cohorts of children and their families within the early childhood population.

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