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Teacher-Mediated Learning for Young Readers: Successful Strategies with Predictable Book Reading

Janice Porterfield Stewart

Young children's emergent literacy development can be enhanced by storybook reading, discussing the books, paying attention to the print and illustrations, and by involving parents (Heath, 1983; Snow and Ninio, 1986; Mason, Peterman, Dunning, and Stewart, 1992; Keer and Mason, 1993). Often children from high risk backgrounds have limited experiences handling books, being read to, asking questions and attending to visual stimuli found in books. Consequently, in the beginning of kindergarten many children are not reading and some do not know the letters of the alphabet. However, predictable books provide interactions with prints and pictures which can be a powerful means for enhancing the development of literacy concepts. Big books and predictable storylines allow the children to see the print and encourages them to participate in reading (Strickland, 1990).

The basic premise of a successful early literacy instructional model was to identify excellent instructional practices in which teachers mediate the instruction with a theoretical understanding of young children's development and learning. The Early Literacy Project was developed with the theoretical understanding that there is an optimal zone for

learning, a zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD is the area between a children's actual development and the potential development (Vygotsky, 1978). It is within this area where adults (parents and teachers) and more capable peers can collaborate and assist the child in solving problems and engaging in otherwise too difficult tasks. In the area of emergent literacy, cognitive constructs are frequently acquired by children prior to formal instruction, as a result of their interactions with supportive adults (parents or early childhood teachers) and more knowledgeable peers (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Heath, 1983; Snow and Ninio, 1986; Stewart, 1986, Teale, 1986; Wells, 1986; Martinez and Teale, 1988; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Stewart and Mason, 1989; Stewart, 1993).

The assistance provided by the adults and more knowledgeable peers is often referred to as scaffolding. When scaffolding is provided to learners, they can construct meaning and complete tasks too difficult to accomplish alone. When children are learning to read and becoming independent readers, scaffolding becomes an invaluable teaching strategy. Evidence of effective scaffolding and adult support has been amply documented (Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Keer and Mason, 1993; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990). The Early Literacy Project was designed to assist teachers who worked with high risk children ages 4-6 years old (Stewart, Mason and Benjamin, 1990). Components in the project included 1) morning message reading and structural analysis; 2) predictable book reading; 3) tradebook reading; 4) parental involvement; and 5) teacher education.

The most salient feature of the project was modeling of teaching strategies by the researcher. Underlying each component in the project was the idea of working with the children at their individual learning levels. This meant discussing with teachers the concept of scaffolding or the zone of

proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), and how powerful mediated instruction is for both the teacher and the child.

With respect to predictable book reading, portions of the instructional strategies were adapted from Au's Experience-Text-Relationship (ETR) method (1979) with graduated mediation throughout the kindergarten school year. This article presents an example of an effective lesson using the predictable book reading component.

Predictable book reading

Predictable book reading was selected as one of the components in the Early Literacy Project because it was a natural extension from picture book reading and had proven successful in several research studies (McCormick and Mason, 1989a; Mason, Keer, Sinha, and McCormick, 1990; Stewart and Mason, 1989). Predictable book reading had displayed its effectiveness with low-income children, both in terms of fostering phonological awareness and later reading (McCormick and Mason, 1989a, 1989b), and as a means of encouraging peer reading, oral retelling, and book orientation concept development (Stewart, 1993).

Method

Subjects. Data on the predictable book reading sessions for this study were collected through observations, videotapes, teacher journals and pre-post testing of the kindergarten children. Four teachers volunteered to work in the project and were matched with four teachers who continued to use their regular curriculum. The teachers were involved in the project for two years and were all experienced teachers. Of the two hundred children in the study, seventy percent were identified by the teachers to be moderate to high risk. Results from analyses of test results and teacher reporting indicated that the children in the project classes made

substantial gains with respect to early literacy measures such as book orientation, phonological awareness, and early reading behaviors (Stewart, Mason, and Benjamin, 1990).

Materials. In this study the teachers were given big books with corresponding little books (McCormick and Mason, 1989b) that had very simple pictures and large print across the bottom of each page. The story lines were predictable, often matching the pictures, sometimes with funny or surprise endings. The books had been duplicated on a ditto machine so that all children could have individual copies. Ten different books were provided, each of which consisted of six pages with no more than six words per page, and featured a story containing some type of predictability with respect to the story line or ending.

Procedure. The predictable books were usually presented to groups of six to eight children of mixed ability. The order of presentation for the little books was a teacher decision but most teachers selected books that contained familiar concepts to be read first. Additional criteria for book selection were books that coincided with seasonal themes and holidays. In addition, children's requests were considered. The books had been prepared because they ensured immediate success for beginning readers, and served as the vehicle for teachers to mediate instruction by scaffolding (Appendix A). At the beginning of the project, the researcher showed the teachers examples of the little books, and modeled the instructional procedure with groups of six to eight children in the classrooms of the project teachers.

A key feature in the ETR method is to use questions to guide children's understanding. During the experience phase the teacher determines the children's level of understanding of the concept. It is at this point that gaps and misconceptions

are discussed. This may be in the form of the teacher asking questions and providing cues or from other students providing their personal knowledge. During the ETR text phase the students usually read the text silently. However, since the study included young children who did not read and were not early readers they were shown how to read the title and the text by listening and watching as the teacher called attention to various parts of the text. In the relationship phase the teacher helped the children make connections with their background knowledge and the text information.

In order to ensure mediation or scaffolding during the reading sessions the following structure was used: 1) activation of prior knowledge; 2) discussion of what the children already understood about the topic; 3) reading the book aloud to the group; 4) rereading as children followed the print in their own books; 5) group book reading and rereading; 6) structural analysis, where each child took turns reading words or sections of the books, answered questions about the graphics and word construction and commented on other children's responses; and 7) discussion of the story with the teacher. The implementation of this structure is not linear but recursive in that the teacher was expected to ask questions and provide clues to increase the children's understanding either at the global semantic level or at the micro word structure level.

During activation of background knowledge, the teacher introduced the concept or topic of the book orally before holding up the big book or passing out the corresponding little books. During the discussion, the teacher and children discussed what they knew about the topic. The teacher listened carefully to each child's response and provided the essential background knowledge needed to enrich the reading experience. The cover of the big book was shown and questions

related to the topic, picture, and title were asked and answered. When the teacher read the book aloud to the children, she was modeling the behavior, the language and phonemic awareness. In the beginning of the kindergarten year the teacher attended to book orientation concepts such as top and bottom of the page, tracking print from left to right and discussion of the pictures. As the children's knowledge of letters and sounds developed (as a result of the enriched classroom environment, and teacher and peer mediated experiences), the teacher began to focus on the children's phonemic awareness.

Additionally, we felt it was important for the teacher to read the book first in order to allow the children to hear the story language, to enjoy the story without interruptions and to feel comfortable when they were asked to read the book. When children first start using the predictable little books they are not actually reading the words, but they remember what the teacher read, and they read and predict from the pictures. The structural analysis was intertwined throughout the reading. The teacher mediated her questions concerning letters, sounds and words to help children figure out the text. During a session for one child the teacher might focus on questions concerning the picture and for another more mature reader she might ask about the structure of a word. Using structural analysis as a part of the mediated instruction was considered important because calling children's attention to the orthographic features of words helps them move from invented to morphemic spelling (Ehri, 1989). While the children attempted to read the book, the teacher provided assistance at each child's level of phonemic understanding. During this time the teacher asked questions about the print and pictures and provided cues and prompts that assisted the children in decoding words. During the discussions about the book, the children were encouraged to relate what they read to

other experiences they may have had. This was similar to the relationship phase in the ETR method and encouraged children to verbalize their understanding of the text with respect to their own experiences. The lesson culminated with volunteers in the group reading the entire book to the groups with or without peer and teacher assistance.

After the book had been read in the small group session, it was placed in the library center and the children were encouraged to read it individually or with peers during play, center time, or quiet time. Often, children used the books that they had read to find words during their process writing time. This is when children create stories, draw, or label using invented spelling (Stewart, Mason, and Benjamin, 1990).

Little books were presented at the rate of one new one per week, but those read previously were often reviewed. Once a book had been completed, it was duplicated and individual copies were sent home to be read with parents; other copies remained in the class library so that they could be reread individually or with peers. The individual book was sent home and each child was required to read it to someone at home or in the community. Children are instructed to have the person that they read the book to sign it before they returned it to the teacher. This encouraged parent involvement and provided an opportunity for the children to feel successful. Parents reported to the teachers that the children were excited when they brought home a book to read to them and often the children read it to everybody who would listen. When the children returned the signed book, they were allowed to color it and keep it in their personal libraries.

Setting. The session presented in this article took place in April of the kindergarten year and portrays a group of eight African American kindergarten children ranging from 5 years

one month to 5 years eight months as they engage in a predictable book reading session. Mrs. Riley had been using the predictable books with the children for seven months. The indepth examination of one of Mrs. Riley's lessons reveals how she learned how to listen to her children and adjust her questioning to meet each child's developing knowledge about a particular concept. It was 10:00 a.m. and Mrs. Riley's kindergarten children had just finished reading the morning message. As the children moved quickly to their centers, some trying not to run, but nevertheless running, there was an enjoyable chatter of voices. Even a casual observer could sense that these kindergarten children knew what they were about, whether at free play, learning centers, storybook time, writing or reading. It was April of the kindergarten school year and Mrs. Riley had initiated several teaching strategies from the Mediated Early Literacy Project beginning in October.

Analysis

A videotape of the predictable book session was transcribed and analyzed. This was supplemented by nonverbal information taken from the videotape and the observation. Teacher interviews and journal comments added to the interpretation of the session. This session was considered to be representative of Mrs. Riley's instructional approach by both the researcher/observer and by Mrs. Riley.

The session took 32 minutes and comprised 255 statements and questions, 176 teacher made statements/questions and 79 made by the students (see Table 1). The coding of the statements were defined, in the case of the teacher as: 1) elaboration on children's response by providing more information; 2) reading text; 3) presenting topic information; 4) prior knowledge; 5) restatement of information in children's responses; 6) acknowledgment of children's responses (e.g., *o.k.*, *good*); and 7) providing a structure or management for the

lesson (e.g., *We are going to take turns reading*). The teachers' questions were coded as 1) prior knowledge; 2) asking for information by providing clues; and 3) requesting text related information. The students' responses were coded as 1) relating to prior knowledge; 2) extension of information provided by the teacher; 3) text information (e.g., visual discrimination, text, phonemic awareness); 4) reading text or attempting to read; and 5) bidding for a chance to respond. The reliability in coding teacher and student statements according to this system was 92% based on the number of agreements over total number of statements with two unbiased coders.

Table 1
*Teacher and Student
Statements and Questions During Reading*

Teacher statements n = 108	
Elaboration	5.1% (13)
Reading	6.7% (17)
Topic information	3.5% (9)
Prior knowledge	.4% (1)
Restatement	5.1% (13)
Acknowledgment	9.1% (19)
Structure	12.6% (32)
Teacher questions n = 68	
Prior knowledge	5.1% (13)
Clues	3.9% (10)
Text related	16.9% (43)
Student statements n = 79	
Prior knowledge	9.7% (25)
Extension	1.5% (4)
Text information	10.6% (27)
Read	1.2% (3)
Bidding	1.2% (3)

Table 1 — The percentages reflect modeling, mediation and reading questions and statements for the teacher and students from a lesson consisting of 255 verbal statements and questions.

Results

Table 2 provides a profile of Mrs. Riley's mediation with respect to her statements and questions. The greatest number of teacher interchanges were related to text information, 43 questions (16.9%) and structure/management, 32 statements (12.6%). Mrs. Riley constantly focused the children's attention on information to be obtained from the text:

- T: Six eggs. Do you notice something about these eggs?
- S (All): Yes, I know... (no response).
- T: Are they all the same size?
- S (All): No.
- T: Which looks different?

Table 2
*Teacher and Student Profile
of Modeling, Mediation and Reading*

MODELING Teacher Reading Structure	MEDIATION Teacher Prior Knowledge	Teacher Elaboration Clues	Teacher Attention to Text
12.6%	5.1%	9.8%	16.9%
Children Reading	Children Prior Knowledge		Children Attention to Text
7.8%	11.2%		18.4%

During these teacher-student interchanges the teacher was requesting information that could be obtained from the text. It was information the children could find in the pictures. She also called their attention to the graphics:

- T: Did you see that 's' there? Why is it there?
- S (All): Because there's many.
- T: Do we have an 's' here?
- S (All): No. It's only one.

In these exchanges the teacher reminded the children of some information about plurals that they had discussed during the morning message. She was emphasizing information from the structural analysis phase where the children learned that adding an 's' indicates plural nouns.

Structure/management statements comprised 12.6% (n=32) of the session. Examples were, "Now we will take turns reading," and "I will read and you listen." Mrs. Riley provided positive reinforcement 9.1%, but most of her immediate responses to children's answers took the form of re-statements. Mrs. Riley's statements concerning structure involved extensive modeling of the appropriate framework for reading.

Mrs. Riley modeled turning the pages, attending to the graphics and pictures, tracking the text and taking turns reading. In the beginning of the lesson, Mrs. Riley activated the children's prior knowledge about chicken and hatching by asking them to remember something that occurred in the classroom. The children readily used their prior knowledge information to help them understand the meaning of the text and to read. The children used prior knowledge for meaning, and to add information to what the teacher stated about the text. Additionally, they used prior knowledge from their home experiences and classroom experiences. The following is an example of Mrs. Riley activating the children's prior knowledge:

T: Remember about two or three weeks ago the rabbit came and hid some of the eggs. What did we do with them?

C: We went to find them.

T: We went to find them, right! Now, who lays those eggs?

C: Chickens.

T: The chicken lays them. What do we do with them?

C: Paint them.

T: We can paint them. After the painting, we can crack them and open them.

C: Eat them.

C: Boil them.

C: Boil them first.

These exchanges continued until the teacher moved the discussion closer to the text which was about chickens and ducks hatching eggs. The teacher mediated with questions and statements that provided the children with additional knowledge or helped them make connections. When the children talked about alligators and dinosaurs laying eggs, the teacher confirmed their answers but then gave a clue.

T: There are other animals that lay eggs.

C: I know.

C: A dinosaur.

T: Yes, they swim and the mother lays eggs. Could you tell me another?

C: Alligator.

T: That's the alligator, too. But they look like chickens.

C: A duck.

T: A duck. Very good. A mother duck lays eggs too.

The children's answers were always acknowledged with a positive comment.

The manner in which Mrs. Riley extended the children's language encouraged more attempts at reading the text. Whenever a child gave one word for an answer, the teacher repeated the responses making it into a sentence. Often additional information was stated and left open ended so that children could respond.

Discussion

Mediation and modeling were a constant part of this lesson. The dialogue focused on what the children knew or what they could do with a little assistance. Children's bidding for a chance to respond was seen only three times in the verbal coding. The non-verbal gestures which were recognized were not coded because the children constantly raised their hands excitedly. The participation structure of this lesson reflected Mrs. Riley's understanding of two factors. First, during the school day the children frequently engaged in peer dialogue that consisted of overlapping talk, quite similar to the Talk Story exhibited by Hawaiian children (Au, 1979, 1980). Children spoke at the same time and built on each others' responses without waiting for a formal bid. In this lesson, Mrs. Riley allowed the children to respond as a group 68% of the time. Second, by using a voluntary response framework, Mrs. Riley created opportunities for peers who were more knowledgeable with respect to their phonological awareness of experiences to provide some scaffolding for their classmates. This framework was apparent during other literacy activities in Mrs. Riley's classroom as in the reading of the morning message.

Classroom applications

In the Early Literacy Project, predictable book reading was done in conjunction with three other very effective components, the morning message, repeated tradebook reading and process writing (Stewart, Mason, and Benjamin, 1990). Therefore, the children engaged in early literacy activities that provided many oral and written language experiences which led to language and vocabulary enrichment.

It is known that these types of experiences ultimately lead to later reading achievement (Elley, 1989; Mason, Keer,

Sinha and McCormick, 1990; Dunning, Mason, and Stewart, 1994). The classrooms in the project were structured in such a way so that the tradebooks and predictable books were accessible to the children. It was not uncommon to see children sitting together reading or talking about a predictable little book that they had read with their teacher. Introducing early literacy materials and guiding their use promotes voluntary literacy behaviors (Morrow and Rand, 1991).

Teachers can influence emergent literacy development even for children from low-income urban, minority families. Mediating the learning environment is the key. Until the child has internalized the dimensions inherent in a concept, the teacher serves as interpreter of the understandings. The teacher provides the necessary scaffolds to move the child from dependent action to independent action. This scaffolding serves as the link from the external knowledge which will eventually become internalized by the child. If a teacher can properly mediate literacy concepts, nearly all children can learn and apply the concepts to school reading and writing tasks.

Predictable book reading was one of the components in the Mediated Early Project which enhanced teacher instruction and children's development of concepts for oral and written language. The teachers in this project realized that dynamic verbal interactions assisted them in determining the appropriate level for instruction. Often the instruction was fluid. As the teacher engaged in scaffolding and mediation of children's attempts through modeling and talking, increments of understanding were achieved by the children and transferred from one task to the other.

The primary factor to address here is the nature of the mediation that occurred during this reading session and in

other activities in this classroom. Often children are expected to assimilate information about concepts by listening and repeating what has been said or by carrying out a specific task to indicate understanding. When children are unable to accomplish the level of the demand, they are presumed to be immature, not ready, or in need of more practice.

This dialogue, representative of many predictable book reading sessions, demonstrates that learning involves dynamic interactions between the novice and expert and that the expert (teacher) must recognize the child's independent level and determine through careful observations (modeling and verbal) what type of support to provide. Additionally, the expert (teacher) must be able to alter the scaffolding as the child's conceptual understanding changes, realize that emergent literacy development is constantly changing, and that children's miscues often signal an awareness about a construct, although incomplete. To guarantee the effectiveness of the paradigm, the implementation of instructional models must include modeling for the teachers, and feedback on their performance. The most salient feature for effective teaching is for the teacher to be a mediator of instruction in order to individualize instructional interactions even within whole class activities.

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Janice Porterfield Stewart is a faculty member in the Department of Learning and Teaching at Rutgers University in New Brunswick New Jersey.

Call for Manuscripts for the 1996 Themed Issue: Integrating Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum

The 1996 themed issue of *Reading Horizons* will be devoted to articles linking reading and writing with all areas of the school curriculum. Articles relating excellent practice, theory, and research, to integrating reading, writing, speaking and listening across the curriculum should be sent to Dr. Jeanne M. Jacobson, Editor, *Reading Horizons*, WMU, Kalamazoo, MI 49008. Manuscripts should be submitted following Reading Horizons guidelines: send four copies and two stamped, self-addressed business size envelopes; include a cover sheet with author name and affiliation; using a running head (without author identity) on subsequent pages; follow APA guidelines for references and use of gender-free language. Manuscripts intended for the themed issue should be postmarked by March 1, 1996.

APPENDIX A

Example of little books

Eggs

One baby chick, peep.
Two baby chicks, peep.
Three baby chicks, peep.
Four baby chicks, peep.
Five baby chicks, peep.
Here's the big egg.
One baby duck, quack.

Apples

Red apples.
Yellow apples.
Green apples.
Blue apples.
Red apples, mmmm.
Yellow apples, mmmm.
Green apples, mmm.
Blue apples, yuk.

Pick up Toys

Pick up the bus.
Pick up the bear.
Pick up the boat.
Pick up the ball.
Pick up the bunny.
Pick up the blocks.
Oh, Oh, Boom!

Time for School

Wash your face.
Eat breakfast.
Get dressed.
Find your coat.
Get on the bus.
Bye.

APPENDIX B

Guidelines for reading predictable books

1) Background knowledge activation — The teacher introduced the concept or topic of the book orally before giving out the books. The children discussed what they knew about the topic. This was the time when the teacher cleared up any misconceptions and provided the essential background knowledge needed to enrich the reading experience. The teacher then showed the cover of the big book and asked the children questions to elicit more discussion.

2) Modeling reading — The teacher modeled the reading of the predictable book and the children followed along. Sometimes the teacher interjected questions about the picture or print information.

3) Individual reading — The teacher requested each child read one page of the book. In the beginning the children were memorizing or reading pictures.

4) Mediated Instruction — While the child attempted to read a portion of the book the teacher provided assistance at the child's level of phonemic awareness. During this time the teacher asked each child some questions about the print and picture. Often the teacher gave cues and prompts to assist the child in decoding the words.

5) Rereading — The teacher read the book again without any interruptions. Then children and teacher read the book straight through.

6) Discussion — The teacher and children engaged in a discussion about the book. The teacher asked several types of questions including comprehension and prediction questions.

7) Additional reading — The teacher allowed individual children to read the entire book aloud to the group. Usually the children volunteered to read. The books were then placed in the library area so children could engage in individual or peer readings.

8) Home support — The children were encouraged to take the books home and read them to a member of their family or a friend in their neighborhood.