Shared Storybook Reading – An Authentic Context for Developing Literacy, Language, and Communication Skills

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Abstract

Shared storybook reading provides an authentic context for facilitating the literacy, language, and communication skills of children with complex communication needs who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). This paper discusses the research surrounding the effectiveness of shared storybook reading and provides suggestions on how to maximize the language and literacy outcomes for children who use AAC. The paper highlights how simple AAC technologies, aided language displays, and picture communication symbols can be used to support communication during shared storybook reading for beginning communicators. In addition, it outlines how systematic strategies can be implemented to extend the communication skills of children with access to comprehensive AAC systems. Finally, the paper discusses the need to select books for shared storybook reading that are appealing, engaging, and age-appropriate, and the importance of providing frequent opportunities for repeated readings.

Shared storybook reading is an activity embedded in the daily routines of many children that provides an authentic context for teaching and developing important language, literacy, and communication skills. Storybooks provide children with the opportunity to learn about sights, sounds, and words that they might not experience at home, or in their communities or schools. For example, shared storybook reading can introduce children to new vocabulary about sea creatures and jungle animals; descriptive adjectives such as grumpy, fierce, and scary; basic concepts such as many, few, fragile, and heavy; and onomatopoetic words such as the 'chuff- chuff-chuff' of the train. Shared storybook reading also increases familiarity with grammar and pragmatic rules while providing examples of how stories and narratives are structured. In addition, shared storybook reading helps children learn how books themselves work, how print is organized, and, through repeated exposure to the alphabet, how sounds form words and words form sentences with meaning (Ezell & Justice, 2005).

A large body of research has demonstrated that the interactions that take place between adults and children during shared storybook reading are particularly important, and that the behaviors that adults engage in can maximize the gains that children make as a result of the shared experience (e.g., Justice, Meier, & Walpole, 2005; Wasik, Bond, & Hindman, 2006; Zucker, Cabell, Justice, Pentimonti, & Kaderavek, 2013). Examples of these adult behaviors include commenting on the story, discussing new vocabulary, and making connections between the story and the child's own lived experiences (Whitehurst et al., 1994). These behaviors are commonly referred to in the literature as extratextual talk, which is the talk that extends beyond the words in the book (Price, van Kleeck, & Huberty, 2009). This extratextual talk is an important aspect of shared reading. As Gonzalez et al. (2014) stated, children make the greatest gains "when adults use cognitively demanding reading styles that stimulate deep processing of information . . . in conjunction with discussions that scaffold children's learning, focus children's attention, and encourage children to think about the content and construct meaning from what they hear" (p. 215).

High-quality shared storybook reading may be especially important for children who are at-risk of later literacy learning difficulties (Cabell, Justice, Vukelich, Buell, & Han, 2008).

Shared Storybook Reading as a Context for Intervention

Over the past couple of decades, shared storybook reading has become increasingly prominent in the research literature as a key context for providing language and literacy intervention to young children (Justice, Kaderavek, Fan, Sofka, & Hunt, 2009; Kaderavek & Justice, 2002). There has been considerable variation across studies in terms of the treatment "agent" (e.g., parent, teacher, or researcher) and in terms of the targeted skills (Erickson, Hanser, Hatch, & Sanders, 2009), but attempts to synthesize the research suggest that these interventions are robust and lead to important language and literacy outcomes (National Institute for Literacy, 2009; Swanson et al., 2011). A recent synthesis and meta-analysis of research on the effects of shared storybook reading interventions for children at risk for reading difficulties (Swanson et al., 2011) identified significant, positive effects for five key skill areas: language, phonological awareness, print concepts, comprehension, and vocabulary.

Kaderavek and Justice (2002) attributed the increasing interest in shared storybook reading as an intervention context to four main variables: (1) *Increased awareness of the emergent literacy perspective*, including greater awareness and appreciation for the literacy skills and understandings that develop prior to formal literacy instruction, and the interactive and reciprocal nature of children's oral language and early literacy development; (2) *Greater emphasis on naturalistic approaches* that focus on embedding interventions in the context of daily routines and interactions that provide frequent and authentic opportunities for learning, (3) *Increased support for social interactionist perspectives on language development* which emphasize the importance of the child being actively involved in the language acquisition process and the importance of interactions with more skilled communication partners who are able to mediate and scaffold learning; and (4) *Growing recognition of the need to broaden the focus of preschool intervention for children at-risk* to focus on systematically and explicitly targeting the skill areas that we know are critically linked to later school success.

Kaderavek and Justice (2002) also highlighted other practical advantages for using shared storybook reading as a context for intervention, including the fact that books are generally portable, accessible, and affordable. Books can also be easily matched with different goals, themes, and interests. Finally, shared storybook reading is highly valued by many families, and as a result parents may be motivated to carry over the interactions from therapy and apply the strategies with their children during shared storybook reading at home.

Children with Complex Communication Needs

Although children with complex communication needs may grow up in literacy-rich homes that provide exposure to reading and writing artifacts and experiences, research suggests that

these children may be less involved in shared storybook reading when compared to their peers without disabilities (Light, Binger, & Kelford Smith, 1994). Their complex communication needs may impact on the manner in which adults respond to them. It is clear from the research that adults frequently take more control in the interactions by asking yes/no questions instead of open-ended questions, providing fewer opportunities for interaction, interrupting conversations when AAC is used, and/or paying more attention to the technology than the child (Kent-Walsh, Binger, & Hasham, 2010; Light et al., 1994; Light & Kelford Smith, 1993).

As a result of these observations, a small but growing body of research has explored the impact of using shared storybook reading as an intervention context for children with complex communication needs (e.g., Bellon-Harn & Harn, 2008; Binger, Kent-Walsh, Berens, Del Campo, & Rivera, 2008; Binger, Kent-Walsh, Ewing, & Taylor, 2010; Kent-Walsh et al., 2010; Koppenhaver, Erickson, & Skotko, 2001; Liboiron & Soto, 2006; Rosa-Lugo & Kent-Walsh, 2008; Skotko, Koppenhaver, & Erickson, 2004; Trudeau, Cleave, & Woelk, 2003). These studies support the view that shared storybook reading has specific advantages for facilitating the communication and language development of these children. For example, the focus is primarily on communication during these interactions as opposed to other skills areas such as gross and fine motor skill development (Kent-Walsh et al., 2010).

Shared storybook reading has been recognized as one context for providing aided language input to children who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). Aided language input involves communication partners supplementing their spoken communication by modeling on a child's AAC system (Kent-Walsh et al., 2010). Many advantages for aided language input have been identified, including the fact that it provides valuable learning opportunities for the child who uses AAC, it helps communication partners to become familiar with the child's system, and it slows communication partners down and gives the child more time to process language and learn it (for example, see Parker, 2014).

There is now a strong research base for aided language input in the AAC literature (for example, see Binger et al., 2010; Binger & Light, 2007; Dada & Alant, 2009; Drager, Postal, Carollus, Gagliano, & Glynn, 2006; Harris & Reichle, 2004; Kent-Walsh et al., 2010). Studies which have focused on aided language input in the context of shared storybook reading have led to a range of child outcomes including increases in the number of communicative turns (Kent-Walsh et al., 2010; Rosa-Lugo & Kent-Walsh, 2008), the number of semantic concepts expressed (Kent-Walsh et al., 2010; Rosa-Lugo & Kent-Walsh, 2008), and the number of multisymbol utterances produced (Binger et al., 2008; Binger et al., 2010).

Strategies for Maximising the Quality of the Interaction During Shared Book Reading

A number of different strategies have been used to teach adults to interact more effectively during shared storybook reading. Two will be highlighted in this paper. The first is the "RAAP" strategy used in the research by Drs. Cathy Binger and Jennifer Kent-Walsh and their colleagues (http://aac-ucf.unm.edu), and the second is the 'CROWD in the CAR' strategy developed by Dr. Patsy Pierce and recommended by the Centre for Literacy and Disability Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (www.med.unc.edu/ahs/clds). Both of these strategies are described in detail below.

RAAP

The RAAP strategy consists of a cuing hierarchy that includes four steps: **R**ead, **A**sk, **A**nswer, and **P**rompt. Each step is followed by an expectant delay of at least 5 seconds to see whether or not the child will produce the modeled utterance. Binger et al. (2010) used this strategy to support educational assistants to facilitate multisymbol message productions in three children with complex communication needs.

In the first step, the communication partner *reads* and provides aided language input by modeling two symbols on the child's AAC system. In the second step, the communication partner *asks* a WH-question, again modeling the two-symbol utterance. In the third step, the communication partner *answers* the WH-question and models the utterance an additional time. In the final step, the communication partner provides a brief verbal *prompt* such as "your turn" or "show me two." The research on this strategy has primarily used book-specific communication displays (see http://aac-ucf.unm.edu/resources/aac-boards.html); however, the same strategy could be used to provide aided language input to children using their own comprehensive AAC systems.

CROWD in the CAR

This strategy combines two evidence-based approaches used to teach adults to interact more effectively during shared storybook reading. The first approach is the CAR (Notari-Syverson, Maddox, Lim, & Cole, 2002) which stands for: **C**omment and wait, **A**sk questions and wait, and **R**espond by adding a little more. The original strategy calls for the adult to wait at least 5 seconds between each step in the approach; however, there is evidence suggesting that many children with complex communication needs require wait times that are dramatically longer than 5 seconds (for example, Skotko et al., 2004).

The second approach is the CROWD (Whitehurst et al., 1994) which consists of five different prompts or question types that the adult uses while a book is being read: **C**ompletion, **R**ecall, **O**pen-ended, **W**h-questions, and **D**istancing questions. Adults are taught to cycle through these while reading with children.

Completion Prompts

Completion prompts or questions require the child to "fill-in" a word left out by the reader for example, "the cat said: I'm very . . .." *Recall* prompts or questions ask children to recall key elements of a story, while *open-ended* questions require the child to talk about the story in his or her own words. *Wh-questions* are used to elicit responses to "who," "what," "where," "when," or "why" questions, and *distancing* prompts or questions help the child to relate what is happening in the book to his/her own experiences. For more information on CROWD strategies, see the module on "Dialogic Reading" provided as part of the CONNECT modules: http://community.fpg.unc.edu/connect-modules/learners/module-6 .

In the combined Crowd in the CAR strategy, adults are taught to use the five prompt or question-types from the CROWD approach to encourage the child to interact during the A (ask) stage of the CAR. Some children will respond to the comment (C) made by the adult in the first stage of the CAR. When this happens, adults can follow their lead and extend the interaction. Other children may not respond to the comment (C) and adults can use the CROWD prompts as a means to encourage interaction.

For children with complex communication needs who have access to comprehensive AAC systems, we can try and match the prompts given to the vocabulary that we know is available in their AAC system. This enables us to model and teach a range of vocabulary as well as the pathways needed to access it. For instance, if we are reading the book: "*Where is the Green Sheep*" by Mem Fox, the interaction might go as seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Example Interaction Using CAR and CROWD Strategies while Reading "Where is the Green Sheep?" by Mem Fox.

Person Communicating	Language Used	Strategy Used
Adult	"Wow – look at the colour of that sheep"	[**C**AR - **C**omment and Wait]
Child	No response	
Adult	What colour was the sheep at the farm?	C**A**R - **A**sk Question and Wait CROW**D** - **D**istancing prompt, Also a WH-question.
Child	No response	
Adult	Navigates through the child's AAC system to find the colour vocabulary. Talks aloud about the pathway needed. Finds the colour vocabulary. Models the use of the vocabulary saying, "this sheep is *green"* while pointing to *green.* Then repeats the question. What colour was the sheep at the farm?	C**A**R - **A**sk Question and Wait
Child	Selects WHITE.	
Adult	Acknowledges child's response: "I remember that too. The sheep at the farm was white." Uses core vocabulary and colour page to supplement spoken communication and model the multisymbol utterance: YOU SEE WHITE. Then uses aided language input to add a little more saying, I SEE WHITE AND BLACK sheep on the farm.	CA**R - R**espond by adding a little more

Some adults may find it easy to use a range of CROWD prompts across shared storybook reading interactions, while others may require more support. Sticky notes placed throughout books may help adults to remember to use a variety of prompts/questions. Video is an excellent tool for self-reflection and can help individuals to see the strategies that they are and are not using. It can also be a great way of tracking progress in implementing the approach.

Getting Started in the Absence of Comprehensive AAC

In order to garner the maximum benefit from shared storybook reading, students with complex communication needs require access to comprehensive AAC systems that include a variety of both core and fringe vocabulary. Unfortunately, many children do not currently have such systems. Da Fonte, Pufpaff, and Taber-Doughty (2010) found that the vocabulary on two commercially available communication displays did not match the vocabulary used by typically developing preschoolers. Most of the vocabulary available on the displays they reviewed represented concrete nouns and did not foster active participation in shared storybook reading.

Below are some suggestions for how to get started with shared storybook reading while you are in the process of getting a more comprehensive AAC system in place that will support students in responding to the CROWD prompts/questions and eventually direct the interactions during shared storybook reading.

Simple AAC Technologies

One way to increase participation in shared storybook reading is to use simple AAC technologies. These include single message devices such as the Big Mack (Ablenet), sequential message devices such as the Step-by-Step (Ablenet) and other simple devices with buttons in fixed

positions, such as the SuperTalker (Ablenet) or the GoTalk range of devices (Attainment). These can be used to encourage children to join in with a repeated line, for example, "*Where is the green sheep*?" in the Mem Fox book discussed above. This encourages active listening, turn-taking, and anticipation skills.

These devices can also be used to enable a child to comment on a story, for example, an adult could program different messages, such as "I know about that," "tell me more," or "what do you think?" This enables even very beginning communicators to become active participants in shared storybook reading. It is important to teach open-ended comments like these because the student can use them across storybooks and can also generalize their use to other activities (Erickson, Hatch, & Clendon, 2010).

Skotko et al. (2004) used shared storybook reading as a context for providing communication intervention with young girls with Rett Syndrome. The girls in the study had access to single-message devices that were typically programmed with a repeated line from the story and 4–6 picture communication symbols that allowed them to label things that appeared in the illustrations in the story.

The mothers were taught a range of strategies to maximize communication during the shared storybook readings, for example, they were encouraged to respond to their child's attempts to communicate by attributing meaning, to relate events in the books to their child's life, and to ask more prediction and inference-type questions. Interestingly, 3 of the 4 girls demonstrated increased interaction (labeling/commenting or use of 'yes/no') when their mothers asked prediction or inference-type questions. The girls did not have the specific vocabulary we might think they would need to respond, yet they were more likely to interact when the adults asked questions or used prompts that were not linked directly to the vocabulary they had available.

When using these simple AAC technologies, it is vital that they are constantly available throughout the storybook reading interaction. In a situation where only one or two devices are available for a class, it is better for one student to have access to the device for the whole activity and the other students to be watching and listening to that student use the AAC device than for each student to "hit the switch" when it is put in front of them. The purpose of including these technologies is for students to learn anticipation, turn-taking, active listening, and initiation skills as well as the more obvious language and literacy skills. In order to do so, they must have access to the technologies for the entire interaction.

Aided Language Displays

Paper-based communication displays can also be used to support communication during shared storybook reading. Again, these displays should include vocabulary that can be modeled across storybooks rather than book-specific vocabulary. Frequently, these displays include vocabulary that can be used to form multisymbol utterances such as: "WHAT is THAT?" "I LIKE THAT," "I WANT to CHOOSE the BOOK," "Can I LOOK at the PICTURE?" or "THAT is FUNNY."

Objects and Props

When children first begin participating in shared storybook reading, it may be difficult to keep them engaged and interactive. Using objects or props may assist with this. If nothing else, the research suggests that incorporating objects or props can increase the amount of time students will engage in shared storybook reading (Roy, 2006). However, objects or props are also intended to help children make connections with the book and support their interactions while they learn more about shared reading, communication, and language.

Objects or props might include a real item or a representation such as a toy or miniature object, but objects can also be picture communication symbols or duplicates of illustrations from the book or laminated versions of the flaps in lift-the-flap books that we sometimes call "pull-offs" as students can pull them off or put them in the book.

Selecting and Using Books

Children need to interact with a wide variety of books that are appealing and engaging. A number of characteristics have been suggested as important to consider when selecting books for shared storybook reading (for example, see Ezell & Justice, 2005). Some of these characteristics are captured in the questions below:

- Is the story short enough to be read and re-read in a single session?
- Is it interesting?
- Does it have repetitive or predictable text?
- Is the language level appropriate?
- Is the content age-appropriate?
- Is it culturally appropriate?
- Is it a familiar topic?
- Does it have simple and clear pictures?

The issue around age-appropriateness is critical for older students who are beginning readers. They must have access to books that are engaging and relevant. Tarheel Reader (www.tarheelreader.org) is an excellent resource for access to books that appeal to teenagers and adults (and young children as well). Another useful resource is a blog post recently completed by Jane Farrall linking readers to appropriate Picture Books for Older Readers (http://www.janefarrall.com/picture-books-for-older-readers/).

Sometimes we might read a book with a child only once or twice, but as Ezell and Justice (2005) suggest, there is a lot to be gained through repeated readings. Reading a book across several occasions can help to boost vocabulary learning and layer understanding. Below is an example plan for the book *Blue Hat, Green Hat* by Sandra Boynton (Table 2). This plan was used by the first author in her work implementing whole-school balanced literacy programs in special schools. It was designed for a classroom of children who didn't yet have comprehensive AAC systems in place so the aim was to maximize the use of simple AAC technologies, picture communication symbols, and props to build their interest and engagement during shared reading. The students engaged in shared readings with other books as well, but this book was read repeatedly across the week. The book formed a useful platform for other literacy lessons such as predictable chart writing.

Table 2. Weekly Plan for Blue Hat, Green Hat by Sandra Boynton

Monday	Talk about the title and the cover page of the story. Show the students the first few pages. Talk about what you think the story might be about. Read the story all of the way through with lots of animation. Ask the students if they liked the story using picture communication symbols – yes/no?
Tuesday	Read the story through. Record the word "oops" onto single message devices. Read the story again and encourage the students to join in with the "oops". Go back through the story and look at all the pages where the turkey says "oops". Use visuals (illustrations from the book) to get the students to choose the funniest oops page!
Wednesday	Read the story through. Record the word "oops" onto single message devices. Read the story again and encourage the students to join in with the "oops". Go back to the first page, and introduce a 'hat' (clothing prop). Talk to the students about how we wear a hat. Model putting the hat on 'right' and 'wrong'. Use picture communication symbols, to ask the students to choose whether they would like to put the hat on 'right' or 'wrong'. Put the hat on them as directed. Discuss who is wearing the hat 'right' and 'wrong' in the story. Turn to the next page and repeat above with 'shirt'. Turn to the next page and repeat above with 'pants'.
Thursday	Read the story through. Record the word "oops" onto single message devices. Read the story again and encourage the students to join in with the "oops". Go back through the story and follow the format for yesterday's lesson but focus on 'coat', 'socks', and 'shoes'.
Friday	Read the story through. Record the word "oops" onto single message devices. Read the story again and encourage the students to join in with the "oops". Go to the final page, and use all of the props to dress up like the turkey. As you put each clothing item on, have the students tell you whether you have put the item on 'right' or 'wrong'. Take photos to use to make a fun story for your classroom library.

Conclusions

Shared storybook reading provides an authentic and effective context for facilitating the language, literacy, and communication skills of children with complex communication needs. The strategies used during shared storybook reading can be implemented by a variety of communication partners (e.g., parents, teachers, education assistants) across both home and school settings. Simple AAC technologies, aided language displays, and picture communication symbols can be used to support communication for beginning communicators, whereas strategies like "RAAP" and "CROWD in the CAR" can be used to extend the communication skills of children with access to more comprehensive AAC systems. The books selected for shared storybook reading must be appealing, engaging, and age appropriate, and there must be frequent opportunities for repeated readings to maximize language and literacy outcomes.

Useful Web Resources

- The Centre for Literacy and Disability Studies website: www.med.unc.edu/ahs/clds

- The Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM) Shared Reading Module: https://unc.az1.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_bvYhBPKFtXLRc5n
- Cathy Binger and Jennifer Kent-Walsh's website: http://aac-ucf.unm.edu
- The CONNECT module on dialogic reading: http://community.fpg.unc.edu/connect-modules/learners/module-6
- The Praactical AAC website: http://praacticalaac.org/
- Jane Farrall's website and blog: http://www.janefarrall.com/
- Tarheel Reader: http://tarheelreader.org

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