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**Same Book, Different Experience: A Comparison of Shared Reading in Preschool Classrooms**

Karen J. Kindle  
University of Missouri-Kansas City  
[Kindle@umkc.edu](mailto:Kindle@umkc.edu)

*Shared reading is a common practice in preschool classrooms and is purported to develop oral language, print concepts, and listening comprehension. This study compares the practices of four preschool teachers while reading aloud a common text. Findings suggest that the shared reading experience differs significantly from classroom to classroom in key dimensions. Implications suggest that more effective means of professional development are needed to maximize learning during shared reading events.*

*Keywords: shared reading, preschool, literacy, language support*

Some form of early childhood education is experienced by most preschoolers in the United States (Barnett, Epstein, Friedman, Sansanelli, & Hustedt, 2009). Children from well-resourced families attend private preschools for enrichment and to give them increased advantage in elementary school. Working parents enroll their children in various daycare options to provide appropriate care in the parents' absence. Children from under-resourced families may attend a Head Start program that is intended to prepare them for school entry. The nature of these experiences is in part dictated by the adopted curriculum, but perhaps even more so by the instructional decisions of individual teachers.

Teale, Hoffman, and Paciga (2010) stated that “the preschool classroom can be a significant source of early literacy for children. What is taught and how it is taught in this setting is a product of multiple influences: social, epistemological, and policy environments, teachers' beliefs and backgrounds, and – increasingly these days—research” (p. 311). Preschool literacy experiences are the subject of much study and scrutiny in efforts to determine what types of experiences produce the best outcomes. For example, the National Early literacy Panel (NELP) was charged with summarizing the research literature (NELP, 2008) concerning effective instruction and programs in early literacy instruction. A recent issue of the *Educational Researcher* (May, 2010) was devoted to discussions of the findings and policy implications of this report. Other federal initiatives such as Early Reading First have attempted to improve student outcomes on various readiness skills with mixed results.

Although much of the research in this area focuses at the curricular level, the influence of the individual teacher's beliefs and instructional decisions also have a significant effect on the child's experience in preschool. This study explores the impact that teacher instructional approaches and decisions may have on learning by describing and comparing the practices of four preschool teachers during a shared reading of a common text.

### **Shared Reading in Preschool**

The term *shared reading* is used in various ways in the literature. In some cases it is used to denote a specific style of reading that features enlarged text, the purpose of which is to develop early concepts about print by modeling skills such as tracking print and by drawing children's attention to specific print features such as punctuation marks, words, and letters (McGee & Richgels, 2008; Tompkins, 2007). Other times, and in this article, the term is used in a broad sense to denote reading aloud to children in an interactive manner that fosters the development of language and listening comprehension and well as print-based skills (Schickedanz & McGee, 2010).

Reading books aloud to children is a practice that purports to have a positive influence on the development of various literacy skills, language development, and world knowledge. The fact that “shared-reading activities are often recommended as the single most important thing adults can do to promote the emergent literacy skills of young children” (NELP, 2008, p. 153) speaks to the potential of this developmentally appropriate and commonly employed (Bravo, Hiebert, & Pearson, 2007) practice. Shared reading provides opportunities to build oral language, vocabulary, comprehension, phonological awareness, and print awareness (Beauchat, Blamey, & Walpole, 2009) or to focus on more narrowly constrained skills such as print functions,

directionality and book handling concepts, letter identification, and concepts of word (Zucker, Ward, & Justice, 2009).

Early and intensive language support is critical for children who are at risk of reading difficulty (Biemiller & Boote, 2006), and “early childhood programs that build vocabulary and conceptual knowledge make lasting contributions to later language and comprehension abilities” (Dickinson, Golinkoff, & Hirsch-Pasek et al., 2010, p. 307). Oral language in the classroom and at home tends toward functionality as teachers, parents and children get on with the “business of life” (Bravo et al., 2007, p. 140). In contrast, book language is rich in unusual verbs, descriptions, and figurative language. As teachers draw children into the reading, the ensuing motivation and engagement increases the possibility that new words will be learned (Bloom, 2000).

Shared reading also contributes to future reading ability by exposing children to “important ideas and themes of consequence” (Heisey & Kucan, 2010, p. 675) before they are able to engage with text independently. Through the interactions of shared reading, children develop schema for topics and concepts beyond their own experiences that will support their later reading comprehension.

Research studies on shared reading interventions frequently used vocabulary development as a learning outcome and were typically conducted in preschool and kindergarten classrooms (e.g.: Ard & Beverly, 2004; Eller, Pappas, & Brown, 1988; Justice, 2002; Leung & Pikulski, 1990; Reese & Cox, 1999; Senechal, 1997; Senechal & Cornell, 1993; Wasik & Blewitt, 2006). Many studies have focused on at-risk preschoolers, often within the context of a Head Start or Title 1 program (e.g.: Dickinson, Cote, & Smith, 1993; Hargrave & Senechal, 2000; Wasik & Bond, 2001; Whitehurst, Epstein, Angell, Payne, Smith & Fischel, 1994). With the current attention to the achievement gap, this body of research increases in importance as effective and developmentally appropriate instructional methods are sought to support the language development of those children in greatest need of that support: often children from under-resourced homes and who represent non-dominant cultures. This is particularly important in light of findings that suggest that children with lower vocabulary knowledge respond differently to interventions than students with stronger vocabulary knowledge (Elley, 1989; Coyne, Simmons, Kame’enui, & Stoolmiller, 2004; Justice, Meier, & Walpole, 2005).

Despite widespread endorsement of shared reading, the actual measurable benefits of this practice are harder to identify. Studies typically compared some specified or intensified approach to reading to typical, usual practice (NELP, 2008). In their analysis, the NELP concluded that shared reading interventions are moderately effective in developing oral language (NELP, 2008). Additionally, findings indicated that “given the existing pattern of results, it seems reasonable to conclude that shared reading is appropriate and useful for a very diverse group of young children” (NELP, 2008, p. 152). It is possible that shared reading has positive effects on other aspects of reading; however, other variables were not examined in the studies included in the meta-analysis (NELP, 2008). This suggests that further research needs to be conducted exploring the effects of shared reading on other literacy outcomes.

### **The Role of the Teacher in Shared Reading**

Despite widespread support for the practice of shared reading, there is no single agreed upon practice for doing so (Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004) which leads to significant variations in the way it occurs in classrooms. Whether a particular shared reading activity is a powerful teaching and learning experience or a pleasant pastime is dependent on the teacher. The teacher controls both the types of books that are read and the way in which they are shared. Both of these factors, along with the children's current levels of knowledge and skills, impact learning outcomes from shared reading (Schickedanz & McGee, 2010). As Wasik (2010) noted, "the value of the teacher as the expert who delivers and mediates the curriculum content cannot be overstated" (p. 623).

The manner in which a book is read has a significant impact on the learning that occurs. Different approaches to shared reading produce different outcomes, and "combining styles may produce a wider range of outcomes than a narrowly focused approach does, for both comprehension and vocabulary and for comprehension and print awareness" (Schickedanz & McGee, 2010, p. 327). Thus, the quality and quantity of teacher dialogic interactions during the shared reading affect the children's language participation outcomes. Teachers aware that "children who are asked open-ended questions, encouraged to expand on their language, and provided with feedback to their comments and questions have more opportunities to talk and use language, and therefore, are more likely to develop language" (Wasik, 2010, p. 624) are more likely to incorporate these features in their readings.

Dickinson and Smith (1994) studied patterns of book talk in 25 Head Start classrooms and found that "variation in how teachers in typical early childhood classrooms discuss books with 4 year olds in full-group settings is strongly related to long-term growth in early vocabulary development and story comprehension skills" (p. 117). Increased incidence of child-analytic talk, such as making predictions, analyzing story elements, and discussing word meanings, resulted in increased gains in vocabulary.

It is the responsibility of the teacher to structure the read-aloud in ways that match the text, the intent of the reading, and to meet the needs of the children who are listening. Since texts vary in language complexity, teachers adjust their interactions based on the text they are reading. It is neither feasible nor advisable to pack in too much into a single reading. Although a single shared reading can target multiple skills, "a single shared reading experience *should not* target every emergent language and literacy skill" (Beauchat et al, 2009, p. 27). The teacher determines what the instructional focus for a particular reading will be. Since many teachers focus on the story and related comprehension skills to the neglect of print-based skill development (Ezell & Justice, 2000), care should be taken to achieve a balance.

Teachers also need to adjust their interactions to meet the needs of the children in their classrooms. Practices which are highly effective for children who are well-resourced and from the dominant culture may not be sufficient for children of poverty (Silverman & Crandell, 2010; Wasik, Bond, & Hindman, 2006). Children from linguistically diverse backgrounds and from non-dominant groups may benefit from additional attention to word meanings or from specific instructional strategies embedded into the reading. Increased interactions and enriched verbal environments have positive impacts on vocabulary development (Dickinson, Cote, & Smith,

1993; Rush, 1999), thus teachers might intentionally include more opportunities for children to talk during a shared reading with one group of students more than with another. Teachers must also consider the experiences and background knowledge of their students when planning a shared reading. Children who have limited experience with growing vegetables will need more discussion prior to reading a book on the topic than children who have had extensive experiences. Vocabulary discussions in classes with English language learners might be different than classes with monolingual students, with realia or photographs of objects shared. Additionally, teachers must decide *when* they will incorporate interactions into their reading. The timing of such interactions/interruptions is a salient factor in learning outcomes with interactions during reading proving to be more effective than those occurring prior to or after reading (Brabham & Lynch-Brown, 2002).

This study extends the research on shared reading by describing the varied experiences of children in four classrooms as they engaged in a shared reading on the same text. Analysis of the data indicates significant differences in the experience, having a potential impact on children's learning.

### **Method**

This study was part of a year-long collaborative effort with an early childhood center in an urban school district in a Midwestern state. At the Bridge Center (pseudonym), 80% of the children qualified for free and reduced lunch and the student population was diverse (17% Hispanic; 20% white; 2% Asian; 61% Black). During the 2009-2010 school year, 143 children were enrolled in the prekindergarten program. Funding for the early childhood program came from several sources including Head Start for children from low-income families, Title 1 for children with developmental delays, and Early Childhood Special Education. Additionally, a special state-funded program allowed any child to attend the center at the parent's request.

During a professional development session prior to the beginning of the school year, the purpose of the study was explained, and the teachers were invited to participate. For this portion of the study, teachers were observed reading a text to their class and asked to conduct a typical shared reading. The teachers were aware that shared reading was the focus of professional development for the year and that the principal expected to see evidence of shared reading in weekly lesson plans. They were also aware of a district-wide emphasis on vocabulary development and of the researcher's interest in this area. These facts could have potentially caused changes in their typical interaction patterns to include a greater focus on words.

### **The Teachers and their Classrooms**

Four of the eight lead teachers at the school agreed to participate in the study. All names referenced in the article are pseudonyms. Three of the teachers, Sara, Lisa, and Kelly, were graduates of an early childhood program and had taught exclusively in prekindergarten settings. The fourth teacher, Bree, was a former kindergarten teacher in the district who had been "moved down" due to fluctuations in enrollment in the adjoining elementary school.

The classrooms reflected the diversity of the school and district. Some children were eligible for special education services and received support from push in and pull out programs. Classrooms were multi-age with 3, 4, and 5 year olds present. Class size was consistent across the four teachers. Each teacher had a morning and afternoon class with 15 children enrolled in each

section. Children from various funding sources were equally represented in all classes with one exception. Children enrolled through the state-funded open access program (4 students), were all placed in Kelly's class.

### **Shared Reading Observations**

The shared reading observations were scheduled individually with the teachers to ensure minimal disruption to the daily routine. Additionally, teachers were able to select if they wanted the observation to take place with their morning or afternoon class. Observations did not begin until the fourth week of school to give the teachers time to establish their classroom routines and get to know their children. Extended observations of approximately 45 minutes in length were scheduled so as to provide an opportunity for the children and teacher to become comfortable with the researcher's presence in the room as well as provide time to gain a sense of the make-up of the class and typical interactions in the classroom.

Since the focus of this study was to compare the teaching decisions of the four teachers, it was essential that all of the teachers read the same book. Teachers were provided with a copy of the book in advance to allow them to do whatever preparation was typical for them. The text selected for the observation was *In the Small, Small, Pond* by Denise Fleming (1993). This text was selected because it fit criteria established for quality shared reading texts (Machado, 2010; Morrow, Freitag, & Gambrell, 2009). For example, the illustrations are large enough to be seen by all children; the text is simple, and the presence of rhythm and rhyme are engaging.

The observations were audio-taped using multiple digital recording devices. This was deemed necessary to capture as many interactions as possible. Preschool children's voices can be difficult to hear and understand. Multiple recording devices located at different places in the room helped with capturing some interactions that might have been lost. Additionally, field notes were kept to capture visual aspects of the reading. For example, the teacher might point to the illustration when labeling or to the words of the title of the book. Gestures and facial expressions used to indicate meanings were also recorded in the field notes.

Audio tapes were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative analysis software and constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Initial coding identified three main categories of interactions consistent with literature of shared reading: concepts about print, language development, and concept/comprehension development. Subsequent coding analyzed the interactions in each of these categories, further refining the coding scheme seen in Figures 1 through 3.

### **Same Text: Different Teachers, Different Experiences**

Readers engage with text through aesthetic and efferent channels (Rosenblatt, 1994) which occur along a continuum. When readers are focused on reading for information, they are primarily reading through the efferent channel. When a reader's attention is focused on emotional, sensory, and interpretive aspects of text, the reading event is at the aesthetic end of the continuum. In the shared reading context, the stance adopted by the teacher dictates the nature of the experience for the children in the class. For example, children are prompted to take an efferent stance with a text when the teacher poses questions dealing with factual recall, while questions focused on the character's feelings encourage children to adopt an aesthetic stance. Using the same text, two of

the teachers took a stance on the efferent side of the continuum, while the others focused more on the aesthetic aspects of the text.

### **Shared Reading in Bree's Class: Do You Know What I Know?**

Shared reading in Bree's class was highly teacher-directed. Given the low number of interactions, it is not surprising that this shared reading was so brief in duration at just over seven minutes in length (see figures 1-3).

Bree began by asking the children to recall the kinds of books and animals they had been reading about. She reviewed print concepts including the front cover, title, author, and illustrator in a manner that suggested this was a typical routine. Children were able to respond to her requests for identification of book parts as well as join in the song about authors and illustrators.

Once the reading began, opportunities for the children to participate were minimal. Bree did not ask the first question until the fifth page spread where she asked a child to identify the animal in the picture. The child responded correctly; Bree repeated his single word answer and resumed reading. On the few occasions where children made comments about things they noticed in the illustrations (*C: I see a gray one*), their comments were minimally addressed (*C: It looks like a spider. Bree: It does, doesn't it.*), or not acknowledged at all.

Bree's reading of the text took on the feeling of an assessment. Not one open-ended question was posed during the reading, and the majority of questions were answered with single word responses, giving the impression that having the "right" answer was valued over the use of language. Children were cautioned to be good listeners prior to reading and recall questions were posed at the end to evaluate children's attention to the story. In fact, children who raised their hands to answer questions were seldom the ones called on as Bree appeared to be checking whether children had been listening or not. Children assumed a fairly passive role during the reading. For the children in this class, reading stories seemed to be about listening quietly and remembering so you can answer the teacher's questions.

### **Shared Reading in Sara's Classroom: Do What I do- Learning Through Imitation**

Sara's approach to this text emphasized enjoyment of the experience and children's active engagement, primarily through imitation and repetition.

Sara: Well this book is a lot of fun, so everybody get your hands ready. Shake them out, because you need your hands for this book. Are you ready?  
Cause this has lots of fun little things to do with my book.

Sara's reading was teacher-directed, but also interactive. Children were asked to repeat phrases from the text and perform various movements that were related to the actions described. Explicit attention to the verbs was not given at any time, so the meaning of any one word was not clear. Rather, the actions and repetition might best be categorized as attention sustaining devices. For example, the children put their arms on their shoulders like wings and moved side to side for the text *waddle, wade, geese parade*. Without specific attention to the word *waddle*, it was unlikely that a child would realize that the motion was related to one word in particular if not already familiar with the word.

With her primarily aesthetic approach to the reading, building concepts and knowledge were not primary goals. After reading the title, Sara posed a question about ponds to activate prior knowledge. The children seemed to use the cover illustration as clues for their responses which focused on what can be done in a pond such as swimming, jumping in, and drinking water. One child mentioned that “*frogs are there*,” a detail also evident in the illustration. It is interesting that Sara did not expand on this comment since animals figure so prominently in the text. Sara only briefly touched on print concepts by mentioning the author.

Questions posed generally focused on identifying the names of the animals in the pictures with occasional follow-up questions on the action in the story (*Sara: What do you think they’re swooping for?*). Sara noticed the children’s attention was fading toward the end of the reading and let them know the story was almost done (*Sara: Let’s turn the page – two more.*). It is important to note that this was the longest shared reading at approximately 15 minutes in length. Sara’s question at the conclusion of the text (*Sara: How did you like the story?*) and the children’s response of applause supports the interpretation that reading in this class was about creating an enjoyable experience.

### **Shared Reading in Lisa’s Class: In the Book and Beyond the Book**

The shared reading in Lisa’s class was an opportunity for children to learn new information as Lisa regularly went beyond the book to expand children’s knowledge about the world. Lisa began by providing the title of the book and posing a question to activate children’s prior knowledge about ponds. She centered the discussion more specifically on the text by asking the children to brainstorm animals that might live in a pond. Her style of reading might best be categorized as a combination of teacher-directed and student-directed. Lisa followed the children’s lead, responding to the questions they asked, but also directed the children’s attention to key concepts and words she wanted them to learn.

Like Bree, Lisa reviewed concepts of print including front cover, back cover, pages, and spine. She provided information about the concepts of author and illustrator in child-friendly terms. Lisa was quite masterful at weaving information seamlessly into the conversation (*Lisa: Okay, here’s our title page because here’s our title again; Lisa: She’s the author. She wrote the words that I read that tell us the story.*).

Meaning was co-constructed as children were prompted to think beyond the page and wonder about what might have happened or might happen next as well as to make connections to the world, other texts, and themselves. Children in this class noticed a great deal in the illustrations and felt free to ask questions and make comments (*C: But there’s no fish.*), demonstrating a high level of engagement with the text.

Lisa encouraged children’s participation in the construction of meaning by asking many open-ended questions, prompting inferential thinking and language development, often in response to a child comment. Lisa asked many open-ended questions, and in most cases, her questions were in response to children’s questions and comments. For example, on the first spread, a child tried to make sense of the illustration.

C: What is that? Uh, he’s going in the water.



Lisa: What do you think he's reaching for?  
C: He's trying to find something.  
Lisa: What was he looking for – trying to get? What is it?  
C: A lizard?  
Lisa: A frog. See the frog.

Lisa infused rich language and new information into her reading. Although the words are not mentioned in the text, she used *dragonfly*, *goose*, *turtle*, *waterbug*, *lily pads*, *crawdads*, *raccoon*, and *hibernate* in her comments. As she introduced animals that she thought might be unknown to the children, she provided additional information. For example, on the page depicting tadpoles, Lisa expanded knowledge by adding to the text.

Lisa: These are tadpoles (pointing to illustration) and they are baby frogs. When they grow, they'll turn into a frog.

Through their active engagement in constructing meaning, children in this class demonstrated their beliefs that reading means questioning, thinking and conversation. For the children in Lisa's class, this reading was a time of inquiry and discovery as teacher and children truly shared in the reading of the text.

### **Shared Reading in Kelly's Class: Tell Me a Story**

Of the four teachers in this study, Kelly's style was the most student-directed. She followed the lead of the students, responding to the things they noticed in the text and building her own narrative from their responses to her questions.

Like Sara, Kelly took an aesthetic approach to reading this text. Kelly did not introduce the concept of a pond, but rather began by asking the children to look at the cover and tell her what they saw. When a student noticed the Caldecott Medal, calling it a *coin*, Kelly provided information by telling the children that this special coin means some people thought the "pictures in here were absolutely awesome." This comment primed the children to focus on the sensory experience of the reading.

Concepts about print were addressed in a minimal fashion. Kelly asked children to identify the title page, but did not address other concepts of print as seen with the other teachers.

Like Sara, Kelly's initial interactions featured the repetition of words in conjunction with gestures as an attention sustaining device. She did not continue that device throughout the reading as consistently as Sara did. In an unusual approach, Kelly appeared to use a child's suggestion that the heron was trying to eat the frog to develop a narrative story line. The remaining interactions during reading focused on making a story out of the book as seen in the following excerpt.

Kelly: The frog's hiding under the water. I don't think they can see him. So he got away from the heron and the bird, and he made the minnows swim away, and now the bugs are looking at him. And some friends think he's gonna

get eaten. Do you think he's gonna get eaten? Ohh, I hope not. Let's find out.

This approach rendered the actual text superfluous as Kelly wove a story around the illustrations, essentially treating it as a wordless picture book. In her interactions with the children, Kelly focused heavily on open-ended questions that were extra-textual, requiring them to make inferences from the illustrations such as *how do you think his hands feel* and *what is he trying to do here*.

For the children in Kelly's class, the focus of the reading was on the illustrations and telling a story. The children's responses to Kelly's questions helped guide the direction for the story. Thus, reading in this class was about constructing one's own meaning with little consideration of the author's intent.

### **Potential for Learning**

The different stances or approaches to reading the same text resulted in vastly different opportunities for learning for the children in these classes. Using an efferent lens, learning opportunities were examined across three dimensions that are typically associated with shared readings: language development, print concepts, and concept/comprehension development. While basic elements such as attention to language development, print concepts, and concept and comprehension development were common in most classrooms, the extent and intent of the interactions were substantially different.

### **Language Development**

Attention to language development is an important part of the preschool curriculum. In language development, teachers seek to provide opportunities for children to respond to questions, provide models of language, and use advanced vocabulary. Preschool teachers also work to develop phonological and phonemic awareness, which are considered important predictors of later reading achievement (NELP, 2008). As seen in Figure 2, differences were evident in the way teachers used the shared reading to develop language.

Language can be developed by posing open-ended questions that require children to respond with more than a single word. Significant differences were found in the number and type of open-ended questions that the four teachers posed during their readings of the text. Bree did not pose a single open-ended question. At times, she even began the sentence that would answer her own question so all the children had to do was to supply a single word (This is the....). Although this strategy does model sentence structure, it also limits children's language. Kelly's use of open-ended questions was tied into her narrative approach to reading the text. Her questions focused on what the animals might be feeling (*Kelly: Oh, how's that frog feeling?*) and making inferences from the illustrations (*Kelly: What is he trying to do?*) that drive the story she and the children were creating.

Open-ended questions in Lisa's reading often took the form of follow-up questions, engaging children in a feedback loop that extended their language use and thinking about the text. In the following exchange series, Lisa's follow-up questions provided the child extended language opportunities as well as built conceptual knowledge about frogs for all of the children. Unlike her

colleagues who typically initiate the question/response sequence, Lisa's questions generally occurred in response to a comment initiated by a child as seen in the following example.

- C: He's looking for something.  
 Lisa: Maybe. What do you think he's looking for?  
 C: Maybe he's looking for food.  
 Lisa: Yeah, what kind of food do frogs eat?  
 C: Bugs.

The amount of child-initiated talk varied greatly among the four classes. Child-initiated talk was defined as child questions or comments related to the text that was not solicited by the teacher. Although Kelly posed the most open-ended questions, there were only four instances of child-initiated talk. Bree's teacher-dominated style of reading had few opportunities for children to either ask questions or make comments. Children in Sara's and Lisa's classes often contributed their own thoughts to the reading discussions, providing unsolicited comments on 13 occasions in each class.

It is particularly interesting to note the dramatic difference in the incidence of child-initiated questions in these four readings. During Lisa's reading, children posed questions about the text on nine occasions, whereas there were no incidences of child-initiated questions in the other three classes. It is possible that Lisa's frequent use of follow-up questions served to validate children's participation in this way.

Teachers provide models of language in a variety of ways. They frequently repeat children's responses, validating the response and ensuring that all are able to hear and understand. At times, the teacher may repeat a child's response verbatim, but other times, might recast the response with an extension (*C: Fish. Bree: Fish live in the ocean.*), clarification (*C: Sharks Lisa: Well, sharks live in the ocean.*), or correction (*C: Them are little fish. Lisa: They are little fish.*). All of the teachers employed this strategy regularly, although instances are more limited in Bree's reading since children were given fewer opportunities to talk.

A second aspect of language development is vocabulary. It is interesting to note that although the teachers were aware of vocabulary as being a focus of interest, attention to vocabulary was not a focus in instruction. The teachers varied quite a bit in their approach to vocabulary with this text, which seemed clearly related to their focus in the story. Kelly, who treated the illustrations of the story as basically a wordless picture book, focused very little on the names of the animals in the text, and thus used the labeling strategy only a few times. In contrast, Sara asked children on almost every page "What kind of animal is this?" Bree seldom used the questioning/labeling strategies, in keeping with the quasi-performance style of her reading. She asked children to identify animals on only two occasions – the turtle and the crawdad, which was incorrectly identified as a lobster. Lisa was more likely to simply label the animal (*That's a big bird called a heron.*) than to ask children what they thought the animals were. Labeling has some advantages over the questioning technique. First, it is more efficient in terms of time. Secondly, it eliminates possible confusions from children identifying animals incorrectly. For example, in Sara's class, the muskrat was identified as a mouse, a squirrel and a beaver before Sara reads the text and clarified that it was a muskrat. In addition to labeling, teachers elaborate on word meaning by

providing additional information. Lisa provided information about the animals in conjunction with her labeling on four different occasions, whereas Kelly and Lisa did so only once, and Bree not at all.

In comparison to the direct attention to word meaning seen in questioning and labeling, the teachers also used indirect means of providing information about the meanings of unfamiliar words. Three of the teachers used gestures in their readings. Sara and Kelly used this strategy extensively, having the children repeat the words and imitate a motion to match, such as shaking, wiggling, and waddling. The pairing of the motion and the word provided children with a broad sense of the word's meaning that could be refined in subsequent exposures (Carey, 1978). Kelly used rephrasing with synonyms as another indirect means of elaboration on two occasions. For example, in one instance, she provided information about the meaning of minnow by saying, "*What did the minnows, little fish – what are the little fish doing?*".

Teachers are often admonished to infuse the words of mature language users into their conversations with children, categorized as Tier 2 words (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). Kelly demonstrated the use of this strategy more than the other teachers, describing the illustrations as *absolutely awesome*, telling a child he had an *interesting hypothesis*, and drawing the children's attention to the lobster's *pincers*. Lisa's infusion of Tier 2 words was text specific as she identified the *lily pads* in one illustration and discussed *hibernation* when a child mentions the frog was sleeping.

Attention to phonological and phonemic awareness was minimal in the four readings of the text. In one instance, Lisa gave her students a phonological clue to help them recall the word minnow, drawing on the children's phonological memory (*Lisa : Yeah, and do you remember what they're called? Mmmmmmm. C: Minnows.*). In the remaining instances, development of phonological awareness was indirect and incidental through repetition of words and phrases.

Two of the teachers incorporated repetition into their readings, which may be seen as a vehicle for building the phonological representation of the words (Beck et al., 2002). Bree (*Can you say lobster?*), Kelly (*Can you say wiggle jiggle?*) and Sara (*Are you ready? Hover, shiver, wings quiver. Let's do it again*) had the children repeat words and phrases from the text. Although Bree's use of the strategy was clearly to establish the word, the way Kelly and Sara used the strategy seemed more of strategy for sustaining the children's attention or encouraging participation in the reading. As Kelly became involved with creating a story from the illustrations, her use of this strategy ended. Sara did continue the strategy, but direct attention was not given to the phonological properties of individual words which supports the interpretation of the intent of the practice.

It is somewhat surprising that given the strong rhyme scheme of this text, none of the teachers opted to focus the children's attention to rhyme. Developing children's sensitivity to rhyme could occur as children are led to repeat rhyming pairs as Kelly did (*Can you say wiggle, jiggle?*) or entire phrases as Sara did (*Waddle, wade, geese parade*).

### Concepts About Print

Knowledge of print conventions, such as directionality and alphabet knowledge, and print concepts, such as the parts of a book, is considered a moderate predictor of later literacy achievement for preschoolers (NELP, 2008). Preschool teachers are encouraged to develop this knowledge through “activities with books or other forms of print to help children understand “*how print works*” and to “make sure children can see the print while it is being read, and use your finger to track the print as you read to show children the direction.” (Goodson, Layzer, Simon, & Dwyer., 2009, p. 11 emphasis in original). Shared reading is a natural context for such instruction. The development of concepts about print, including book handling skills, is widely viewed as one of the purposes of shared reading.

The four teachers in this study varied in their attention to print based concepts in both the number of elements they addressed, and the way in which the elements were addressed. Two of the teachers, Kelly and Lisa, identified the title of the story explicitly (*The title of the story is...*). Bree read the title and prompted children to identify the part of the book it represented (*Bree: This is the..... Bree and Children: title of the story*). Sara simply read the title without calling specific attention to it in any way. Kelly and Lisa also drew children’s attention to the title page. Kelly did so by turning to the page and asking the children to identify it (*What’s this page?*). Lisa embedded the definition in her conversation (*Okay, here’s our title page because here’s our title again.*). Neither Sara nor Bree mentioned the title page.

Three teachers identified the author and provided some information about what an author does. Bree relied on a song to convey the information (*the author writes the words*). Most of the children joined in the singing, suggesting that this was a usual part of their reading routine. Lisa and Sara both explained that the author is the person who writes the words – Lisa somewhat more explicitly than Sara (*Lisa: Denise Fleming – she’s the author. She wrote the words that I read that tell us the story*). Kelly read the author’s name but provided no additional information.

Two teachers mentioned the illustrator. Bree did this in a decontextualized manner, asking the children what the illustrator does and singing the appropriate verse to the song but without linking it directly back to this book. Lisa pointed out that the author was also the illustrator (*Lisa: And you know what else she did? She’s the illustrator. And the illustrator is the person who makes these pictures*), thus identifying the illustrator for the text and defining the role. It is interesting that although Kelly discussed the meaning of the Caldecott award in response to a child’s mention of the coin on the cover, she did not use the term *illustrator* or connect it to the text.

Many assessments of early literacy ask children to identify the front cover of the book (e.g.; Clay, 1993). Sara made no mention of the cover. Kelly referenced it indirectly (*Look at the cover. What do you see on the cover, friends?*). Bree and Lisa quizzed the children (*What is this part of the book called?*), suggesting that attention to this aspect of print was routine. Of the four teachers, Lisa’s attention to book concepts was the most extensive. In addition to the items discussed above, she had the children also identify the back cover, the pages and the spine.

Preschool children are also expected to be developing concepts of words and letters. In share reading contexts, these concepts can be developed through print referencing (Zucker et al, 2010).

Little or no attention to print concepts was demonstrated in these readings. Bree touched each word in the title as she read it, modeling one-to-one matching and finger point reading. After reading, Lisa asked the children to look at the title and identify letters that they knew. Sara and Kelly did not incorporate any print referencing into their reading of the text.

### **Concept and Comprehension Development**

In addition to language development and concepts about print, shared reading is also a developmentally appropriate vehicle for developing concepts and world knowledge as well as comprehension strategies. In preschool settings, teachers show children how to comprehend texts through their own modeling of strategies and by prompting them to activate their prior knowledge, make predictions and inferences, and make connections to their own lives (Tompkins, 2007).

The teachers in this study did include these types of discussions into their readings, although to varying extents. Three of the teachers activated prior knowledge in some way prior to reading the text. Lisa and Sara both posed a question – does anybody know what a pond is – to start the discussion. Lisa focused on brainstorming animals that might live in a pond which is well matched to the text, while the discussion in Sara’s class focused on things you can do in a pond, keying off the first child’s response that a pond is where people swim. Bree activated a different type of prior knowledge as she attempts to link the text to others books the children had read. She does so by asking them to recall what kinds of books they had been reading and what kinds of animals live in the ocean. Lisa did not use this strategy prior to reading, but did pose some questions during reading that prompt children to think about what they already know such as *what kind of foods do frogs eat* and *what does the frog do when it’s wintertime outside*.

The approach that the teachers took to reading appears to have a significant effect on their incorporation of prediction and inference strategies. As previously noted, Kelly’s reading of the text quickly took on the characteristics of a narrative text as she developed a story line about the frog depicted in each illustration. Since the text itself did not support a narrative approach, Kelly prompted the children to infer a story line from the illustrations and to make predictions about what might happen next on almost every page. None of the other teachers used prediction questions with this particular text and reading. In contrast to Kelly’s “beyond the text” inferences, Sara’s prompting for inferences were based directly on the text such as *why do you think they are circling* and *what do you think they’re swooping for*. These questions prompted the children to think more deeply about the text and the illustrations and to make inferences based on what they saw in the illustrations and knew about animals from their own experiences. Lisa’s prompts for inferences were often in response to inferences the children had already made, and she attempted to get them to explain their thinking. For example, when a child inferred that the dragonfly was looking for something, Lisa asked the child what the dragonfly might be looking for. Bree’s teacher dominated reading style resulted in no incidences of inference and prediction questions.

A common strategy for enhancing comprehension is to make connections between the current text and one’s own experience, other texts, and the world. While activating prior knowledge is one way of making connections, the only clear examples of attempts to make connection were evidenced in Lisa’s class as she asked the children to recall another book they had read that

featured a raccoon. This discussion led one child to make her own text-to-self connection as she relayed a story of seeing a raccoon at a family member's home.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The four teachers in this study had vastly different styles for this shared reading. Although all of the children heard the same text, their experiences were substantially different. Some of the differences can be attributed to the amount of preparation, the teachers' educational philosophy, and their own concepts of the purpose of shared reading. The findings of this study suggest that in order to derive the maximum benefit from shared reading experiences, teachers should approach reading with greater intentionality and purpose.

### **Intentionality and Preparation**

Shared reading experiences in the classroom setting should be approached with the same level of preparation as any other instructional experience during the day. Although taking a book off the shelf and reading it to children without planning may result in an enjoyable experience, the potential for learning is diminished without adequate preparation.

The apparent simplicity of texts that are appropriate for shared reading with preschoolers is deceiving. Although the teachers in this study were given copies of the text in advance, there was some evidence that previewing and planning was minimal and in some cases. This resulted in mistakes being made. For example, two of the teachers identified the crawfish as lobsters and the whirligigs were misnamed by all teachers. While these are seemingly small errors, in two of the classes children listed lobsters and spiders as animals they remembered in the story during recall questions.

Reader miscues can also be evidence of a lack of preparation. While reading this text, two of the teachers experienced difficulty pronouncing *whirligig*. One pronounced it as *wriggling* and another as *whirgilly*. In the first case, the miscue changed the part of speech from noun to verb and the second resulted in a nonsense word. In all of the classes, the children were interested in this particular page, possibly due to the novelty. Unfortunately, despite this interest, none of the children heard the insects correctly identified.

Inadequate planning may also account for the apparent mismatch in stance seen with two of the teachers. It is possible that a lack of familiarity with the content of the text accounted for the lack of any pre-reading conceptual development in Kelly's class or the omission of a discussion on animals in Sara's. The fact that the two whirligig miscues occurred in these two classes is further support for a lack of preparation by Kelly and Sara.

### **Competing Philosophies**

Teachers of young children are often caught in the intersection between conflicting philosophies and beliefs about how and what young children should be taught in preschool. This conflict is quite visible in discussions about literacy instruction in general and in shared reading specifically. Some early childhood educators seem resistant to focused literacy instruction in preschool, believing activities should be child-centered rather than the instructional content being determined by teachers (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 344). The concern is that an early focus on academic skills will take away from the critical need for "prekindergarten and kindergarten classrooms need to be places where the development of conceptual understandings and subject

matter knowledge begins” and that focusing on discreet skills in preschool “could be especially problematic for children in rural and urban schools who come from under-resourced homes” (Teale, et al., 2010, p. 313).

Others advocate for more explicit instruction in early literacy skills that are predictors of later reading achievement (NELP, 2008). Activities that promote letter identification, phonemic awareness and how print works are recommended for inclusion in daily activities to better prepare children for kindergarten (Goodson, et al, 2010). The recent proliferation of literacy curricula for early childhood is evidence of the growing use of this type of instruction in preschools.

This philosophical divide was evident at the Bridge Center. Kelly adhered strongly to constructivist principles and resisted efforts by the principal to select texts for shared reading in advance, preferring to have children select the books each day (Personal communication, 2010). In contrast, Bree’s experience teaching kindergarten in the adjoining elementary school was evident in her highly directed approach to reading and her concern that the children were “ready for next year” (Personal communication, 2010). Sara’s approaches were closely aligned with Kelly’s, while Lisa took a more moderate approach, seeking to honor the requests of her principal in a developmentally and child-centered manner.

#### **Areas for Improvement and Further Research**

Children from under-resourced families typically have different language patterns (Hart & Risely, 1995) and different ways of interacting with text (Heath, 1983) than children from middle and upper class homes. The differences noted in the interactions in these four read-alouds call attention to the need to help teachers use language in more effective ways during shared readings. The dominance of yes/no questions, single word responses, and recall over open-ended questions that require more language and critical thinking suggests that preschool teachers need continued professional development in maximizing opportunities for high-quality interactions. These findings are consistent with research that suggests that “training teachers to talk with children and promote language development can lead to increases in children’s opportunities to talk, to use descriptive language, and to learn new words (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). Without this training, it is likely that implementation of even the highest quality curricula will vary across early childhood teachers, undermining efforts to build children’s language skills at the very time when interventions could have the strongest long-term effects.” (Wasik, 2010, p. 621).

As Teale et al (2010), suggested, “leaving the “how” issues underspecified while drawing conclusions about what needs to be taught” does not provide enough guidance for practitioners who seek to provide quality instruction (p. 313). Each of the teachers in this study cared deeply for the children they worked with and strove to provide the best learning experiences for them each day. Professional development focused on maximizing their strengths and developing their areas of weakness would help ensure that all children have the high quality, preschool experiences needed for literacy success.



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Figure 1: *Summary of Language-Focused Interactions*

	Bree	Sara	Lisa	Kelly
Infusion of Tier 2 words	pinchers		Hibernate, lily pads	Coin, absolutely awesome, hypothesis, pincers
Labeling of animals in text	Questions: What kind of animal is this? (multiple xs)  Labeling: Are they lobsters? (X1)	Questions: What's a tadpole?; What kind of animal is this? (x7)  Labeling examples: This is a goose.; It's called a heron.; (X4)	Questions: What is that? Do you know what that's called?  Labeling Examples: It's a raccoon.; That's a big bird called a heron; that's called a dragonfly. (X6)	Questions: What is the heron?; What do you see on this page?  Labeling: that's the bird; I see some lobsters. (X2)
Focus on word meanings/indirect	Motions: chill; sleep	Motions: wiggle; waddle; hover; doze; scatter; circle; swoop, flip, flash; pack		Motions: shiver, shake, scoop, chill, flash Synonyms example: what did the minnows, little fish, what are the little fish doing? (X2)
Providing information		Ducks and geese live by the pond, don't they.	Example: These are tadpoles and they are baby frogs. When they grow, they'll turn into a frog. (X5)	That means the turtles are getting sleepy.
Recastings (repetitions with extensions or corrections)	Examples: Fish live in the ocean; It is kind of like a crab, It has the same pinchers, doesn't it. (X4)	Examples: Yes, tadpoles wiggle.; That's right, he's warmer under the ground. (X15)	Examples: Yeah, it's a goose; Yep, we got fish now, don't we.; They are little fish. (X7)	Examples: There's a frog in there.; Yeah, he jumped in the water; Oh, you think he went back with the bugs. (X13)
Verbatim Repetitions (frequency)	2	10	10	7
Open-ended questions (frequency)		9	7	15
Child questions (frequency)	0	0	Example: What's that?; Why is he sad?; What are those fish doing?; Why do they have those big claws?; (X9)	0
Child unsolicited comments (frequency)	I see a gray one.; that looks like a spider.; (2)	Examples: They're looking for their momma.; I don't like those.; The frog's not sleeping. (X13)	Examples: He's looking for something; But there's no fish.; He's opening up his mouth. ;(X13)	Examples: They're getting away from him.; They're firemen.; (X4)
Phonological and Phonemic awareness	Can you say lobster? (phonological representation)	Do it with me – wiggle jiggle, tadpoles wriggle (children do the motions and repeat the words – develop phonological representation and rhyme) does this through most of the text	Mmmmm (hint for minnows – draws attention to the initial phoneme)	Can you say wiggle, jiggle? (phonological representation –rhyme) Waddle (children repeat) Say it with me – hover.

Figure 2: *Summary of Print Concept Interactions*

	Bree	Sara	Lisa	Kelly
Concepts about print	Title, author, illustrator, cover	Author	Title, title page, author, illustrator, front cover, back cover, pages, spine	Title, title page, Indirect author, cover
Concept of word	Pointing to words in title as read			
Concepts of letter			Identify letters within the title (Do you see a letter you know in the title? – children identify s, m, and incorrectly identify i as l.)	

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Figure 3: *Summary of Concept and Comprehension-focused Interactions*

	Bree	Sara	Lisa	Kelly
Connections/Activation of prior knowledge	Activated prior knowledge about oceans; brief connection to knowledge about snow	Activate prior knowledge about ponds (Who knows what a pond is?: children focus on what you can do in a pond (swim, jump in, drink water)	Activate prior knowledge about ponds (does anybody know what a pond is?; What do you think might live in a pond?); clarify difference between oceans and ponds (size) What kind of foods do frogs eat?; What does the frog do when it's wintertime outside?	
Inference		Examples: When their eyes are closed, what do you think they are doing? Why do you think they are circling? Why do you think it has those lines in the water? (X6)	Examples: What do you think he's reaching for; Why do you think they're looking for fish?; (X8)	Examples: How do you think his hands feel?; What do you think they want with the fish?; How do you think the frog feels that the snow's coming down?; (X14)
Connections to texts			What other book do we read that has a raccoon in it?	
Providing information		Ducks and geese live by ponds, don't they.	Example: These are tadpoles and they are baby frogs. When they grow, they'll turn into a frog.  Other animals addressed: shark, muskrat, raccoon, crawdad, hibernate  (X6)	This sticker says that some people through that pictures in here were absolutely awesome. (Referring to Caldecott medal)
Recall	Do you remember an animal from the story? (x3)	What happened at the end? Who remembers one thing that lived in the pond? What else lived in the pond? (X3)	And what kind of fish did we see in this book? So far we've seen... (X1)	
Evaluation		How did you like the story?		
Prediction	(0X)	(0X)	(0X)	Examples: Do you think he's going to catch him?; Do you think they'll catch him?; Do you think he's going to get eaten? Let's find out.; (X11)

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