

Starting Empathy Early: How Read Aloud Routines Anchor

Discourse and Foster Empathy Development

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At the Heart of Us Coaching & Consulting

Abstract

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Through a review of the literature, the author argues the development of empathy in young children using read aloud routines and carefully selected children's books. Social Learning Theory and Barbara Rogoff's conceptualization of learning as a transformation of participation (2003) provide a foundation for viewing interactive read alouds as a cultural activity. Through teacher child interactions intentionally framed to support empathy building, children not only learn valuable literacy skills, but develop social emotional skills, which empathy is a part. The author provides examples of prompts teachers can use with children's books to facilitate discourse within the classroom routine such as "I wonder" and distancing.

Setting the Stage

In my work as a coach and consultant for Head Start programs in our state, I am lucky to be surrounded by teachers who diligently and tirelessly work to promote the well-being of the children in their care. Whether working with infants and toddlers, or three through five year olds, each one could share that they want the best for the children and families. But, what does “the best” mean per se? Does it mean that the children leave Head Start knowing all of the letters of the alphabet? Does it mean that they can count to 20? Beyond these academic indicators, we want our children to grow up to be well rounded adults who care and relate to each other. So how do we foster that in the context of supporting literacy development? Research demonstrates that intentional teacher interactions not only promote social emotional well-being through quality attachments, but also support early literacy development—thus, the development of empathy and equity in the context of literacy development begins in early childhood. The following pages will explain this conjecture and offer strategies-particularly read aloud strategies-for facilitating these characteristics from an early age.

My personal interest in the intersection between social/emotional competence and literacy learning comes partially from my years spent as a teacher in both preschools and elementary schools, as a college instructor, as a researcher, trainer, coach and consultant. The other part is from my perspective as a parent of a child on the autism spectrum, who first opened my eyes to the need to understand the complexities of our social world, and the role of communication, both verbal and non-verbal in our ability to participate in it. I’ll never forget when my son asked the man next to us in the line at the movie theater if he wanted to come home with us for a sleep over because he liked his whistling! We had a really great talk that night about appropriate actions to take in that situation! In my parenting and my teaching (including

with adults on the spectrum) I have learned that we rely on social subtleties to guide our actions and they are not always absorbed naturally-they often need to be taught. These experiences have strengthened my belief in the pivotal role adults play in fostering language and literacy development and social emotional development in young children. The skills acquired during this formative period are foundational not only for success academically, but also socially and culturally, as they provide access through the sharing of communication.

A Look at the Literature

Though diverse in topic, the research reviewed here is drawn from the fields of psychology, education, and early childhood education. The theoretical frame begins with social learning theory then takes a glimpse at the connections between social emotional learning- specifically empathy development and early language and literacy development. Finally, the literature will demonstrate the powerful role that interactive read aloud routines, acting as the cultural activity mediating discourse on empathy, can play in facilitating the development of these important skills. In closing, I will provide some practical recommendations for fostering this this discourse during the read aloud routines.

Social Learning Theory

The theories that make up the social learning perspective vary slightly in their emphasis, but they all posit a conceptualization of literacy learning as a dynamic process that occurs via social interaction (e.g., Au, 1997; Rueda, 2011; Tracy & Morrow, 2007). Au, in *A Sociocultural Model of Reading Instruction* (1997), explains that sociocultural research on literacy learning “explores the teacher’s role as a mediator, the use of instructional scaffolding, and the social systems within which children learn” (p. 184). Vygotsky and other social constructivists posit

that children's learning is mediated by interactions with either adults or knowledgeable peers (Au, 1997; Rogoff, 1990).

Within this rich social context, children's academic learning cannot be separated from their emotional experience, social development, or language (Gee, 2001; Rogoff, 1990). Intentional teaching incorporates observation and reflection of these in concert with each other. Careful, thoughtful, sometimes minute, decisions are made that influence children's participation and responses—ultimately supporting the co-construction of learning through verbal and non-verbal interactions. Rogoff (1990) refers to this as guided participation.

Guided Participation.

Guided participation names the activity that occurs during interactions—in the case of this article, between children and teachers, working collaboratively in an iterative learning process. The teacher's role in the process is to build “bridges from children's present understanding and skills to reach new understanding and skills” and to arrange and structure “children's participation in activities, with dynamic shifts over development in children's responsibilities” (Rogoff, 1990, p. 8). In other words, adults guide children's learning through a scaffolding process and increasingly release responsibility for activities to them. Through guided participation, children participate in social and cultural activities, relying on “social resources for guidance—both support and challenge—in assuming increasingly skilled roles in the activities” (Rogoff, 1990, p. 8).

Transformation of Participation.

Rogoff's work is especially helpful in conceptualizing an often broad and nebulous topic: children's learning. She posits that traditional conceptions of children's learning, in an attempt to isolate the variables that influence learning, isolate the child from the context of their learning

(2003). By thinking of learning as an event that occurs within the context of the cultural activities we participate in, it is feasible to imagine that learning can be observed through the level of involvement, or participation, an individual has in the activity and with the other participants. In other words, one's learning shapes and is shaped by the activities within which it occurs and with whom it occurs—it is therefore not an internal process occurring in isolation from its cultural context (Rogoff, 2003). In her paper: *Developing Understanding of the Idea of Communities of Learners*, Rogoff states: “Learning is seen as a function of ongoing transformation of roles and understanding in the sociocultural activities in which one participates” (1994, p. 210). Children's learning happens in the context of the cultural activities they participate in which she coins transformation of participation.

Linking Literacy and Social Emotional Learning

Transformation of participation can be helpful in recognizing the interrelatedness between children's growth and development across the domains of literacy learning and social and emotional learning. The following sections synthesizes literature from both fields to highlight their overlap—especially with regard to language and communication.

Early Literacy.

Leaders in the field of early literacy (e.g., Morrow, Tracey & Del Nero, 2011) recognize the influence of sociocultural theory in early literacy learning, noting Marie Clay's description of the interwoven nature of early literacy skills. Children's literacy development begins long before they enter a classroom, starting with the initial sounds of speech in utero, then the communications they overhear and are directed toward them as infants and toddlers. Adults respond to children's early attempts at communication in a plethora of ways. The children learn to weed out their initial attempts that are not rewarded and are encouraged to continue

communications that are rewarded. In short order, young children are using verbal and non-verbal cues with their adult partners, and soon speak in sentences similar, to their caregivers (Fernald & Weisleder, 2011). These early milestones are closely tied to children's later literacy development where they learn that communication can occur in print as well as with speech (Morrow, Tracy & Del Nero, 2011; NELP, 2008).

Hart and Risley (1995), in their pivotal study on talk between young children and their caregivers, discovered socioeconomic status to have a notable impact on language development in young children. The authors led a study of the amount and variety of talk in the homes of 42 families spanning demographics and socioeconomics across the first three years of children's lives. The results demonstrated a 30-million-word gap for the children raised in homes in extreme poverty versus children with parents in professional positions (Hart & Risley, 1995). This disparity in oral language is not just in quantity, but in quality—through the development of vocabulary and syntax as well (Hart & Risley, 1995; Vasilyeva & Waterfall, 2011). The significance of this disparity is great considering the notable body of research documenting the impact of early oral language on later academic achievement (Lonigan, Burgess & Anthony, 2000; NICHD Early Childcare Research Network, 2002; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998)—implying a lack of educational equity from birth.

In 2008, the National Institute for Literacy released a report created by the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) synthesizing the research on early literacy development and practices. In this report, *Developing Early Literacy*, the authors document that early literacy skills are predictive of later outcomes for young children. These early skills include: receptive and expressive oral language, knowledge of the alphabetic code (including alphabet knowledge, phonemic and phonological awareness), use of invented spelling, print knowledge (including

recognizing environmental print, concepts of print and name writing), and related skills such as rapid naming of letters and numbers, visual memory and visual perceptual abilities (NELP, 2008; Morrow, Tracy & Del Nero, 2011).

Thoughtful use of read aloud routines in early childhood classrooms has the potential to impact each of these areas, with well documented research regarding the impact on expressive and receptive language, a precursor to later reading comprehension (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). This longstanding classroom routine is one venue for approaching complex cognitive tasks –such as the development of empathy, in a developmentally appropriate manner (Harris, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2011) that honors the interwoven nature of early literacy.

Empathy Development.

The Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework, created in alignment with the National Education Goals Panel, indicates that pre-school children from three to five years old are developing skills regarding social relationships, self-concept and self-efficacy, self-regulation and emotional and behavioral health (DHHS, ACF, & OHS, 2010). Because of this, social-emotional development is a key domain within the framework that guides instruction and practice in Head Start centers.

Empathy is embedded in the development of early social and emotional skills. Empathy is defined as an affective response resulting from comprehending another's emotional state or apprehension of it and is linked to social and cognitive skills development including their ability to understand emotions and take the perspective of others. As well, it is based on one's self awareness of emotions and feelings which provides the ability to have an awareness of others' feelings and needs. (Taylor et. al, 2013).

Within the Social Emotional Domain, the Head Start Framework includes goals regarding empathy for infants, toddlers and preschoolers. Goal IT-SE6 for Infants and Toddlers states that “children learn to express a range of emotions” and IT-SE7, that “child recognizes and interprets the emotions of others with the support of familiar adults. The preschool goals are stated similarly. Indicators teachers can look for range from the ability, at 36 months, for a toddler to “...show care and concern for others, including comforting others in distress [and] respond...to needs of others” to a 60-month old’s ability to “make...empathic statements to adults or other children [and] offer...support to adults or other children who are distressed (HSELF, p. 26-32).”

Executive functioning, a key component of social competence, has been found to impact literacy development (Blair, Protzco & Ursache, 2011). Executive Functioning is defined as: “the cognitive processes associated with holding information in mind in working memory, inhibiting automatic responses to stimulation, and flexibly shifting attention between distinct but related pieces of information or aspects of a given task” (Blair et. al., 2011, p. 22). This is specifically relevant to children’s abilities to take on and process new information, problem solve, or flexibly shift to accommodate knowledge that conflicts current understandings (Blair et. al., 2011; Blaustein & Kinneburg, 2010). In fact, executive functioning may be a stronger indicator of later literacy success than phonemic awareness, letter knowledge or oral language (Bulotsky-Shearer & Fantuzzo, 2011). Multiple studies (Blair & Razza, 2007; Welsch et. al., 2010; Howse, Caulkins & Anastoupolis, 2003; Raver, 2002 as cited in Blair et. al., 2011) on inhibition, self-regulation and emotion attention have been documented to undergird the “development of self-directed learning and academic achievement”—with which empathy is a part (p. 23).

Teacher-Child Interactions

In the previous sections, I note the impact of executive functions on early literacy outcomes as well as the connection between emotional socialization and empathy. Research has demonstrated the importance of the relationship between teachers and children and particularly the quality of teacher-child interactions in supporting the two parallel processes of executive functioning and literacy (Pianta, 2006). Effective early childhood teachers not only support children's conceptual growth through meaningful activities, but also develop strong relationships with children (Howes & Tsao, 2012). As well, Tong et al. (2012) discovered a correlation between parent-child interactions with the development of empathy in Japanese toddlers...it can be conjectured that this could be true for other caregiver-child interactions as well.

High quality teacher-child relationships have been found to support the development of a range of interconnected early literacy skills. For example, relationships support the development of oral language through conversation as well as the development of the co-regulation of attention, arousal, interest and motivation through emotional experiences. Summarizing the research with regard to the interconnected, yet distinct skills, Pianta states:

Research examining teacher –child relationships and children's literacy outcomes provides fairly clear evidence that literacy skills are improved when children are exposed to adult-child interactions that are characterized by warmth, emotional support, and sensitivity in *combination* with modeling, direct instruction, and feedback—in other words, intentionality. (Pianta, 2006, p. 158)

Pianta (2006) goes on to explain that intentionality is closely linked to improvements in social and academic functioning, based on the recognition that responsive teachers lead to secure attachments, which support regulated relationships and interactions. Children then, are “more

attentive, cooperative, and able to benefit from what the teacher offers them” (p. 158). Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that one of the characteristics embedded in well-researched read aloud routines is the role of intentionality around teacher-child interactions.

Discourse

Embedded in quality teacher-child interactions is the frequency and quality of discourse between teachers and children. Lawrence and Snow (2011) explain the difference between defining oral discourse “as a skill accomplished by a learner, or as a context for learning” (p. 322), preferring it as a context for learning. Extended oral discourse is defined as: “frequency of engagement in cognitively challenging talk during group activities such as book reading or morning circle time” (p. 324). Correlational studies have closely linked frequency and quality of book reading to vocabulary outcomes in preschool. However, Lawrence and Snow (2011) purport that oral discourse development is inclusive of more than vocabulary development; it also includes acquiring the skills necessary to participate in complex, topic focused conversations that require an understanding of not just vocabulary, but grammar and pragmatics (p. 323).

When considering the variability in children’s language skills in preschool (Vasilyeva & Waterfall, 2011), it is no wonder that children with more developed discourse skills comprehend more from dialogue with both peers and teachers as they use grammar, syntax, pragmatics and existing vocabulary to further their comprehension. This further compounds the vocabulary gap that already exists between children (Harris, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasik, 2011) and highlights the need for the intentional development of extended discourse skills, including but not limited to vocabulary development.

Particular types of teacher talk with intentional, strategic conversation ‘moves’ appear to be consistent across strategies based in oral discourse (Lawrence & Snow, 2011). Lawrence and Snow reviewed some of these key strategies including dialogic reading, (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998); text talk (Beck & McKeown, 2001; 2006), and others. The consistent components that emerged with regard to developing oral discourse skills were: modeling thinking aloud; direct explanations of words and strategies; marking student responses by making specific connections back to the text; and verifying and clarifying student understandings by re-voicing or restating a child’s response, checking in with regard to the child’s intent or meaning, and supporting the child to clarify and expand on their comments (Lawrence & Snow, 2011). Additional components and characteristics recommended by Harris, Golinkoff and Hirsh Pasek (2011) are: frequency of word usage; child-centered interactions; a responsive and interactive approach; and an emphasis on word learning in context (p. 52) with the use of explicit, child friendly definitions (Lawrence & Snow, 2011).

Role of Reading Aloud with Young Children

The practice of reading aloud has been a hallmark of reading instruction in the United States over the past century but has gained momentum both in frequency of use and increased interactions during reading within the past fifty years (Brabham & Lynch-Brown, 2002). Classroom read alouds have been shown to afford several learning benefits. Multiple studies done on variations of read aloud strategies such as repeated readings, interactive readings, shared reading and dialogic reading demonstrate their ability to promote literacy learning for children (Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2011; Trivette & Dunst, 2007; Trivette, Simkus, Dunst & Hamby, 2012; Wasik & Bond, 2001; What Works Clearing House, 2007). Summarizing findings on read alouds, Gunning (2010) suggests: “...Being read to develops children’s vocabulary, expands their

experiential background, makes them aware of the language of books, introduces them to basic concepts of print and how books are read, and provides them with many pleasant associations with books” (Gunning, 2010, p. 127).

The impact of the rituals and routines associated with variations of reading aloud has been observed with both parents and teachers and has been measured to determine a variety of outcomes for students including vocabulary, oral language, print concepts and phonological awareness (Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2011; Evans & Saint-Aubin, 2011; Justice, et. al., 2010; Justice & Piasta, 2011; Lonigan, Shanahan & Cunningham, 2008; McKeown & Beck, 2001; Whiterhurst, et. al, 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). However, great variability exists between read aloud sessions (Lonigan, Shanahan, & Cunningham, 2008), and multiple factors have been found to differently affect student outcomes, including: book selection; adult interaction characteristics, which include child engagement, adult responsiveness, and questioning techniques; characteristics of the reading sessions, including length and number of sessions with each book (Trivette, Simkus, Dunst & Hamby, 2012) and number of children being read to. Cunningham and Zibulsky (2011) organize the variables typically measured in studies of variations of read aloud strategies by “...*quantity* (e.g., frequency and duration) and *quality* (e.g., type of discourse, degree of autonomy afforded to child, and nature of the interaction between adult and child) of the reading experience” (p. 397).

One well known method is dialogic reading (DR), an intervention for guiding shared and interactive small group reading sessions that embed the practice of repeated and interactive readings into the practice (What Works Clearinghouse, 2007). The method involves a flexible process, (remembered by the acronym PEER which stands for *prompt, evaluate, expand and repeat*) to encourage vocabulary and concept development through dialogue. DR has been found

to positively impact oral language and vocabulary development for young children (Whitehurst, Arnold, Epstein, Angell, Smith & Fischel, 1994; Whitehurst, Epstein, Angell, Payne, Crone & Fischel, 1994).

Interestingly, the teacher moves embedded in the dialogic reading method parallel recommendations for facilitating teacher-child interactions. This suggest dialogic reading as an approach to interactive reading, has the potential to enhance and support teachers' instructional practices, by guiding teachers toward positive interactions during whole group shared reading experiences.

Reaffirming this vision for shared reading, Cunningham & Zibulsky (2011) state:

“...we would be remiss not to highlight the fact that the quality of the attachment relationship between the adult and the child interacts with quantitative variables... As we discuss the skills required for reading acquisition, we should not lose sight of the fact that the shared reading experience is valuable not only for its potential to influence learning but also because it can be a vehicle for developing and sustaining interpersonal relationships, creating opportunities for shared discourse, and helping children see reading as an enjoyable and social process” (p. 399). Cunningham and Zibulsky's statement expertly address the interwoven nature of social emotional and literacy learning fostered by quality relationships and dialogue between adults and children. We can use this knowledge to help us hone in on empathy building strategies during read aloud routines.

Suggestions for Building Empathy through Read Alouds

Based on these findings, teachers and practitioners can rest assured that a high quality read aloud session with young children is a vehicle for growing social emotional skills- specifically empathy as well as promoting equity by bridging the language gap. Teachers and

caregivers must make strategic use of their time with children and books. The book a teacher chooses contributes to the building of empathy, but a wide variety of literature can support this teaching with the simple addition of intentional prompting to foster discourse.

For example, many books show character's faces and body language in the illustrations. The following prompts can be used with a multitude of literature to support empathy development: *Look at his/her face. What do you notice? What do you think she/he is feeling? Why do you think they are feeling that way? What makes you think that? Have you ever felt that way?* Only a few days ago I sat with a three-year-old by her mat at the end of rest time and asked these very questions with the book *Olivia* (Falconer, 2000). Although this book may not appear to support the development of empathy, it has several amazing illustrations of facial expressions of Olivia, of her little brother upon being teased and frightened, and of her mother after Olivia replicates a Jackson Pollock painting on the living room wall. The above prompts were wonderful fodder for unfolding a discussion regarding the different perspectives of her family members due to Olivia's shenanigans. Use of these prompts, coupled with sincere listening...repeating and expanding the child's comments, led to an in-depth dialogue that far surpassed a simple rereading of this well-loved story.

Another type of prompt that can be used with any story to help build empathy is *I wonder....* For example: *I wonder what he is thinking, I wonder what that felt like, or I wonder how he felt when that happened?* These prompts offer a way for teachers and caregivers to model reflection without the pressure of a response. Children will naturally want to respond. In the story, *Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes (1991), Chrysanthemum begins to lose her lust for school when children start to tease her about her name. Her teacher, Mrs. Delphinium Twinkle comes to her rescue in the end. Henkes offers many text opportunities coupled with illustrations

to help children identify with Chrysanthemum's plight. One opportunity exists when Chrysanthemum is writing her name in the dirt with her foot. Teachers can prompt: *take a look at her body language...I wonder why Chrysanthemum is dragging her foot like that and why the author writes "Chrysanthemum, Chrysanthemum, Chrysanthemum" three times.*

Children will begin to identify with the characters in the story when prompted to notice the illustration and text with open ended prompts. Teachers are then able to extend children's thinking with distancing questions as recommended in the practice of dialogic reading. Prompts such as: *have you ever been teased by someone?* take the understanding a little deeper for children as they are able to relate their personal experience to the text. We can then support this extension by questioning: *if that happens in our class, what could we do?* and *how can we let our friends know teasing hurts and we don't accept that here?* Distancing questions powerfully connect the experiences of the characters and the children to actions they are able to take...an indicator described earlier in the Head Start Early Learning Framework. For example, in the story, *Hey Little Ant*, by Philip and Hannah Hoose (1998), a child is confronted by a talking ant that insists he shouldn't be squashed based on size. This story can easily be extended to classroom discourse on the size of our friends, how it feels to be smaller than siblings and parents and our personal rights. In a three through five-year-old classroom, this can be translated into a classroom rule regarding treating each other well regardless of who is bigger or older. Distancing prompts support the connection between ones' own emotions and feelings and those of others. These are just a few examples of how teachers and caregivers, through intentional prompting with rich literature, can foster empathy development.

Final Thoughts

I no longer have the pleasure of reading to my son as he is 16 years old and likes to read on his own, however the time we spent together in his early years set the tone for what I focus on in my work with teachers today. He was always the happiest spending time with me or one of his siblings in a moment of shared enjoyment—usually over a book. One of our favorite stories was *The Little Mouse, the Red Ripe Strawberry and the Big Hungry Bear*, by Don and Audrey Wood (1989). We read this over and over! I can still see remember jointly putting hands over our mouths, with an audible intake of breath when we read: “...but little mouse, haven’t you heard about the big hungry bear?” Our eyes would widen and we would tighten our shoulders, shivering in pretend fear...always together to share in the excitement with each other. Later I would say: “hmmm...I wonder why he was so afraid?” To this day, he is still one of the most honest kids I know when it comes to recognizing and understanding others’ emotions—not something we often think of when the word “autism” is discussed. I cannot link our time with books specifically to all of these changes that occurred in his life, but I do believe the emphasis on social emotional skills through many formats made a difference for us all.

My experiences at home and in classrooms, and the literature shared here point to interactive read alouds as a cultural activity that can foster shared dialogue around empathy. The prompts drawn from interactive or dialogic reading and instruction on teacher-child interactions offer a jumping off point for these discussions. Taking the time to value the discourse and listen to children’s comments and thoughts regarding emotional expression also fosters empathy through adult modeling and supported relationships. We would be remiss to underestimate this beloved time in early childhood classrooms or to discount the importance of our dialogue within it.

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