

## Supporting Lower SES Mothers' Attempts to Provide Scaffolding for Book Reading

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“READERS are made, not born. No one comes into the world already disposed for or against words in print” (Chambers, 1973, p. 16). Bruner (1975) observed that parent-child exchanges are the focal point for the start of learning; they provide the roots of literacy. Parents who read to their children provide their youngsters with those first models of literacy. Pflaum (1986) suggested that “the interaction with small children over home materials and storybooks is the medium through which notions about literacy are learned” (p. 121). Altwerger, Diehl-Faxon, and Dockstader-Anderson (1985) reported that in read-aloud events between parents and children, “Parents naturally expand, extend and clarify their children’s language, while maintaining the focus of language interactions on meaning” (p. 476). Mahoney and Wilcox (1985) concluded, “If a child comes from a reading family where books are a shared source of pleasure, he or she will have an understanding of the language of the literary world and respond to the use of books in a classroom as a natural expansion of pleasant home experiences” (p. ix). King (1980) also concluded that

in a home where reading is a high-priority activity a child develops certain expectations about print. He comes to know the pleasures that await him between the covers of a book. He hears the language of books, which will differ in varying degrees from the language he hears spoken. He learns to listen to continuous language related by a logical sequence or the unfolding of the plot of a story. He learns that you can find the answers to questions in books. He becomes acquainted with some of the features of books; how to handle them and follow a line of print. He is exposed to visual symbols, both nonverbal in picture reading and verbal in learning to recognize some words and letters. He encounters new words and new uses of words. He learns to appreciate the different effects that are created by sound patterns and rhythms. The exposure to many acceptable models of expressing ideas develops an awareness of different forms of expression and language patterns. Listening to stories provides him with models which consciously or unconsciously he may adopt into his own speech and his imagination may be stirred. In time [the child] develops a mental set toward literacy (p. 47–48).

While it is well documented that storybook reading is an important literacy event, it appears that some “[lower SES] parents are not sufficiently aware of their impact on their child’s reading” (Pflaum, 1986, p. 10). Over the last few years, there has been a proliferation of research on early reading interactions, but one limitation is that almost all of the research focuses on mainstream middle-class parents and children. The few studies on parent-child book reading interactions in low-income families have shown that low SES parents seldom ask questions or elicit words from their children (Heath & Thomas, 1984; Ninio, 1980), do not view their young children as appropriate conversational partners (Heath, 1982a, 1982b), and do not tend to adjust their language to their child’s level of understanding (Snow & Ninio, 1986). Ninio (1980) found that lower SES mothers used significantly fewer object names and action words and asked very few questions. Middle SES mothers, on the other hand, were more adept at using questions that elicited talk from the child. According to Farron (1982), middle SES mothers engaged their children in elaborate verbal dialogues. Snow and Ninio (1986) reported that poor black mothers did not seem to adjust their language to their children’s actions as did more advantaged black parents. Instead, poor mothers repeated their own speech. McCormick and Mason (1986) revealed that lower SES parents did not foster or support acquisition of prereading skills to the same degree as parents at higher SES levels.

The most extensive body of research describing parent-child book reading interactions in lower SES black families is the research reported by Heath and her colleagues (Heath, 1982a, 1982b, 1986; Heath, Branscombe & Thomas, 1985; Heath & Thomas, 1984). Her research has demonstrated that parent-child interaction patterns in Trackton, a lower SES

black community, were different from those found in Roadville, a lower SES white community, and Maintown, a middle SES white and black community. In Trackton, parents did not see young preschoolers as appropriate conversational partners, and occasions in which they engaged these children in sustained talk were rare. Although talk was directed to young children in Trackton, this talk was seldom simplified and children were often expected to understand large spurts of speech. Heath found similar behavior patterns of interaction between a black teenage mother and her preschool child (Heath & Thomas, 1984). This mother seldom asked her preschooler questions such as, "What is this?" or interpreted any of his self-initiated utterances as labels of objects.

Heath found that Trackton children were encouraged to make narratives as conversation, but only after adults opened narrative episodes by questioning children (Heath, 1986). However, before children could answer question(s) posed by the adults in these interactions, either individual adults or adults in dialogue answered the question. According to Heath, "This adult-question-and-answer routine provides preschoolers with the basic components of a narrative, which preschoolers reiterate through performance after the adults have hesitated or fully stopped their question-and-answer routines" (p. 166). She further pointed out that "requests for 'sticking to the story' or telling 'what happened' [are] inappropriate during a telling [of a narrative]. Questions asked about particulars of the story, assessments of how actors played their roles, or 'what would have happened if . . .?' [do] not occur" (p. 168). "Thus, Trackton children learn to use common experiences in their narratives, but they [are] not asked to explain how they [vary] either the genre form or the content from an expected organizational schema or a predicted sequence of events, requests that are made by teachers" (p. 168).

Heath (1983) also found that questions Trackton children heard at home were different from the questions teachers asked at school. As a result, Trackton children had a difficult time responding and/or answering questions asked by teachers at school. Even though Trackton parents accepted children's stories and talked about children's experiences, they were less likely to relate these experiences to books or other literate events.

Despite the fact that research suggests that lower SES mothers and especially most black lower SES mothers have difficulty sharing books with their young children, few investigators have recommended strategies for encouraging those mothers who lack the necessary skills to engage in book reading interactions with their children. Yet there are several models for building successful book reading interactions that can be inferred from the research (Flood, 1977; Resnick et al., 1987; Roser & Martinez, 1985; Shanahan & Hogen, 1983). Even though most of these models are derived from middle SES populations, much can be learned from these parent-child interactions to enhance the literacy development of low SES families.

For instance, Pflaum (1986) has outlined several literacy exchange settings and listed examples of how discussions with children might occur in these settings. She noted that the examples may serve as a way to model literacy exchanges to parents. A sample of these literacy exchanges and examples are listed below:

| Literacy Exchange                  | Example   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Specific answers to child          | Provide the child with just the information asked for; on occasion, relate it to previous knowledge.              |
| Book experiences                   | Provide the child with daily storybook experiences.   |
| Exchanges during storybook reading | Read through stories and be able to stop and ask questions.   |
| Questions during reading           | Ask the child to name, expand, predict, talk about the setting, discuss concepts, and talk about overall meaning. |
| Talk about print                   | 1. Focus on the significance of print.<br>2. Discuss the print and picture.                                       |
| Talk about words                   | 1. Show words.<br>2. Identify a few words.  |
| Words in stories                   | Point out one or two important words to well-known stories, signs, etc.   |
| Spacing and sequencing             | Point out spaces, sequencing ideas, and word sequences.   |

(pp. 121-122)

The purpose of the present study was to extend research concerning the interactive behavior between lower SES black parent-child dyads during story reading and children's responses to these readings. The present investigation focused on the interactions between five lower SES black mothers and their preschool children during story reading. A major purpose was to describe the five mothers' development of successful book reading behaviors and to provide some explanations as to why some of the mothers had difficulty developing successful behaviors. One mother, Flora, who moved from using few to many effective behaviors, is described in more detail.

## METHODOLOGY

### Background of Book Reading Project

During the fall of 1985, I volunteered to serve as a parent consultant for a local Head Start Center in a rural community located in north Louisiana. I met with families once a month for one-and-a-half hour sessions over a

period of nine months. The Head Start director and I informed the parents that each month I would focus on how they could become better prepared to support their children's education both at the Head Start Center and later in the public school setting. Realizing many of the problems lower SES children have in kindergarten and first grade, I proposed a book reading project and explained to all of the Head Start families that parents need to support their children's reading. Several parents then volunteered for a project that would help them interact with their children during book reading.

### Subjects

Five black lower SES mothers were randomly selected (except for Betty, who was urged by the Head Start director to participate) from a total of eighteen mothers who volunteered to participate in the study. From information gathered in a structured interview with each mother, I found that none of these mothers had previously engaged in book reading interactions with their preschool children. All of the participating mothers were single. Two mothers had finished high school and three had not completed high school.

### Materials

A set of little books, developed by Mason & McCormick (1985), as well as fifteen commercial picture storybooks and ten wordless picture books were used in the book reading sessions. Most of the picture storybooks were pattern books or predictable books. Even though most of these mothers had not read to their young children, nor had their mothers read to them when they were young children, I felt it necessary to include stories that involved characters and concepts that should be familiar to all preschoolers. For Flora, the most capable reader of the five mothers, I included some more difficult texts (e.g., *Jumanji* [Van Allsburg, 1981]; *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* [Aardema, 1975]; *Tom Tit Tot* [Jacobs, 1965]).

### Procedures for Initial Parent-Child Book Reading Session

The book reading sessions were held at the local Head Start Center. The mothers made appointments to meet with me individually. At the initial book reading session, I tried to make the mothers feel comfortable. Then, I instructed the mothers to select a book they thought they could read with little difficulty. Three of the mothers selected *Over in the Meadow* (Keats, 1972), one selected *Great Day for Up* (Dr. Seuss, 1974), and the teenage mother selected *Time for Bed*, one of the little books (Mason & McCormick,

1985). After the mothers had made their selections, I simply asked them to read the book to their preschool child as I observed and videotaped the book reading. I told the mothers I was making the videotapes so we could view them together and discuss ways to improve these book reading interactions. Videotapes of the book reading sessions were collected over a period of eight weeks.

### Description of a Typical Book Reading Session

Before each mother engaged in a book reading interaction with her preschooler, I asked her to tell me what had happened since the last session or what she had done to reinforce what she had learned about book reading. It should be noted here that while I discussed with each mother the previous week's book reading practices and/or attempts, her child was not present. The child usually played with other children in a classroom near the meeting room assigned to me by the Head Start director. After the child was settled and the mother felt relaxed, I began my inquiry into her previous week's book reading practices and/or attempts. These discussions usually lasted from five to ten minutes, and the mothers usually commented that they had attempted to talk more to their child, that they had pointed out words in the environment, discussed TV commercials like Coca-Cola or McDonald's, bought books from the grocery or drug store.

I then provided positive feedback and encouragement for whatever they said they had done or did not do. For example, I would say "Keep up the good work," and "You are on the right track," or "You are making progress, this is how you can do it better." This part of the book reading session was critical for these mothers. They seemed to need constant reinforcement and moral support, especially since they were nervous about being taped each week.

Before bringing the children back to the meeting room, I tried to be sensitive to the mother's feelings about reading and tried to make sure that they felt comfortable and relaxed. Except in the case of Betty, the mothers usually seemed relaxed after our discussions, or what I call my pep talks with them, prior to their book reading interactions with their children. Before the children returned to the room, the mothers selected a book and previewed it. Oftentimes, the mother would ask me to pronounce words or ask for suggestions of how to phrase certain parts of the story. In several instances, we participated in a dialogue similar to a directed reading lesson. I would pronounce words and discuss what they meant, or I would explain something about the story. Then the mother would read the story to her child while I videotaped the session.

The average book reading session lasted from thirty-five to forty-five minutes. At the conclusion of the session, I replayed the videotape so that

the mother and I could analyze the behaviors they had employed. The children returned to a nearby classroom before the replay session, which usually lasted for an additional twenty-five to thirty-five minutes. The mother and I watched the videotape and counted the number of times she asked questions or the number of comments she made before, during, and after reading. I encouraged the mother to increase the frequency of these behaviors.

As a way of organizing my comments and suggestions, I used a checklist similar to the one developed by Resnick et al. (1987) in all of my interactions with the mothers.<sup>1</sup> The checklist allowed us to see progress toward acquiring effective book reading skills. Before I made my comments and suggestions to the mothers I would say, "Tell me what good behaviors you used in this session? What behaviors do you feel you could improve on?" This allowed the mothers to initiate the discussion. Then I would interject my comments and suggestions. I pinpointed at least one behavior that was effective and at least one behavior the mother needed to learn. Some of the effective behavior comments I made to the mothers included statements like, "You allowed your child to hold the book, turn the pages, and explore the book," but most importantly, "You guided your child's attention to the book, maintained physical contact with your child throughout the book reading session, and commented positively about your child's participation."

After I informed the mothers of the effective behaviors I had observed, I would say, "Although you incorporated a number of effective behaviors in this session, there are still a few behaviors that I would like for you to improve on or include in our next session." My comments usually included such suggestions as, "Vary your voice more the next time, make noises and motions in order to make the story more interesting, describe pictures, ask more questions, and comment on the book's content." I would demonstrate these behaviors and read to their children as the mothers watched. As a general rule of thumb, I tried to focus my comments each time on the mothers' progress toward developing their children's knowledge of questions, book reading, print awareness, and oral and written language. In particular, the mothers were encouraged over the eight sessions to ask higher level questions. Initially, they only asked knowledge-level questions. Over the eight-week period the following interactions were suggested:

- using strategies to maintain child's attention
- responding to child's comments
- relating the text to life experiences and life to text experiences
- answering children's questions and relating text to children's own personal experiences

- initiating discussion, recounting parts of a story, sharing personal reactions, and encouraging children to respond similarly

It should be noted that I interacted with the mothers in other settings besides the Head Start Center. I lived in the same community, so I took them to lunch and to the library and even called them on the telephone just to chat. The mothers considered me to be their friend and respected the fact that I was a black researcher interested in helping them better prepare their children for a more successful school experience. From comments made to me by the Head Start director and the five participating mothers, I believe that these personal interactions greatly enhanced my relationship and credibility with the mothers during the book reading sessions.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE FIVE MOTHERS' DEVELOPMENT OF SUCCESSFUL BOOK READING BEHAVIORS

### Initial Book Reading Behaviors of the Five Mothers

Betty, age thirty-one, had a difficult time reading to her four-year-old son. She exhibited the characteristics of a beginning reader herself. She struggled to pronounce every word in the story. Her attention to the text was so intense that she spent little time involving her son in the story. Even though Betty did not talk about the pictures in the book, ask questions about the text, or explain the story to her son, he appeared interested in the story and most especially in the pictures.

Cindy, a teenage mother of two (a son, two years old, and a daughter, three years old) dropped out of school at the age of fourteen. At the time of the taping, Cindy was eighteen years old. She appeared interested in wanting to read to her young daughter but insisted on selecting a book that was "simple, so I can read it." Consequently, she chose *Time for Bed*.<sup>2</sup> Even this book was difficult for her. Cindy appeared embarrassed and constantly looked for me for prompts. For example, Cindy wanted to know whether she should show her child the pictures in the book or not. When I replied "Yes," she began pointing to pictures in the text and talking about them. At one point, Cindy said to her daughter, "The way you climb into bed at home, LaQuiece," relating the experiences in the story to herself and to her daughter's own personal experiences with going to bed.

Janis, age twenty-five, did a fairly good job reading to her young daughter. Even though Janis incorrectly pronounced a few words, she read with expression and was able to use the appropriate voice intonations at the

right times. Her three-year-old daughter was interested in the story, but the mother rarely paused to focus the child's attention on specific sections of the text. At one point she said, "See the picture." However, this comment was made near the end of the story. One of Janis's last comments before ending the story was simply the statement, "End of the story."

Sylvia, age twenty-eight, insisted on involving both her three- and four-year-old sons in the book reading sessions. Neither child was able to fully enjoy the story or pay attention to the text because the mother was constantly moving the book from one child to the other. At one point, the three-year-old boy began pulling on the book and raising up in his chair to see the text. At times Sylvia read with expression, but she had difficulty pronouncing a number of words in the story. She hurriedly read the story and rarely did she focus her language and/or comments on a level appropriate for her two young sons to understand the story.

Even though Flora, age twenty-nine, had not been previously involved in book reading interactions with her four-year-old daughter, she proved to be the most capable of the five mothers at engaging in such interactions. Flora was like a child in a toy store. She appeared amazed and excited, almost as if she were a child enjoying a story for the first time. Flora was so involved in the reading of the story *Great Day for Up*, by Dr. Seuss, that she paid little attention to her daughter. She seemed to be reading the story for her own personal enjoyment. Even though her daughter was sitting beside her and constantly pecking in the book to see what her mother was so excited about, Flora never stopped reading to ask questions or involve her daughter. She did not look at her child during the initial book reading session nor did she pause for her preschooler to respond to the text. She did not provide feedback, label or describe pictures, or relate the story to her and her daughter's personal experiences. Figure 11-1 is a transcript of Flora's initial book reading interaction with her young daughter and Figure 11-2 is a checklist highlighting Flora's initial book reading behavior.

### Reactions of the Mothers to the Book Reading Sessions

The five mothers differed in their reactions to the interactive book reading sessions and conferences. Betty's inability to read aloud with confidence caused her to view the book reading sessions negatively. She exhibited behaviors similar to a remedial student's frustration and eventual rejection and/or dislike of reading. Figure 11-3 is a transcript of a verbal interaction between Betty and me. Betty appeared defensive during the session. It is unfortunate, but not surprising, that after her second session, she began missing her appointments with me and eventually dropped out of the study. Even though the Head Start director, her child's teacher, and I called and encouraged her to continue, she chose not to do so.

Figure 11-1 Transcript of a Taped Reading Session, Recorded October 3, 1985

| Flora's reading of the text<br><i>Great Day For Up</i>   | Flora talking about text  | Tamara's responses                |
|--|---|-----------------------------------|
|  | My name is Flora Lee and this is my daughter Tamara. This afternoon I'm going to read <i>Great Day For Up</i> by Dr. Seuss. | Looks at the book cover.          |
| Up! Up!<br>The sun is getting up. Up! Ear number one. Ear number two.<br>The sun gets up. So up with you!<br>Up! Up! Great day, today! Great for up!   |   | Stares.                           |
| Up, heads!<br>Up, whiskers!<br>Tails!<br>You Frogs!<br>You butterflies!  |   | Smiles.                           |
| Up! Up!<br>You! Open up your eyes!<br>You worms!   |   | Peeks over her mother's shoulder. |
| Up!<br>Girls and women!<br>Boys and men!<br>Up, whales!<br>Up, snails!<br>Up, rooster<br>Hen!  |   | Smiles.                           |
| Great day<br>For up feet<br>Lefts and rights.<br>And up! Up! Baseballs!<br>Football! Kites!  |   | Looks startled.                   |
| Great day to sing up on a wire.<br>Up! Voices!<br>Louder! Higher!<br>Up stairs!<br>Up ladders!<br>Up on stilts!<br>Great day for<br>Up Mt. Dill-ma-dilts.<br>Everybody's doing Ups!<br>on bikes . . . and<br>tree . . . buttercups.<br>Up! Up! Waiters!<br>Alligators! |   |                                   |

continued

Figure 11-1 *continued*

| Flora's reading of the text<br><i>Great Day For Up</i>  | Flora talking about text | Tamara's responses  |
|---|--------------------------|---|
| Up, Folks!<br>Up in elevators!<br>Up! Up giraffes!<br>Great day for seals!<br>Great day for up<br>on ferris wheels!<br>[Flora ignores child's<br>comment and continues<br>to read.] |                          | Peeks over Flora's<br>shoulder.                                     |
| Up! Up! Up!<br>Fill up the air.<br>Up, Flags!<br>Balloon!<br>Up! Everywhere.  |                          | "I rode on a ferris wheel<br>before at the fair."                   |
| Wake every person,<br>Pig and pup, till<br>everyone on Earth.<br>Is up!   |                          | Child looks and smiles.   |
| Up! Up! Up!<br>Great day for up!<br>Except for me.<br>Please go away<br>No up.<br>I'm sleeping in today.  |                          | Child looks.  |
|   |                          | Child smiles and asks her<br>mother to let her look at<br>the book. |

While Betty did, in fact, agree to participate in the book reading project, it was not without serious coaching from the Head Start director and her child's teacher. They both felt that John (Betty's son) had severely limited language skills for a four-year-old. After talking with Betty, both the director and teacher felt Betty rarely talked to John. They were not sure if Betty listened or heard what John had to say. For instance, Betty remarked that "John does not have a problem talking; I understand what he is saying." Yet the Head Start director and his teacher did not understand him. Another important point that should be noted here is that the director, the teacher, and I (all black) all had difficulty understanding Betty's speech. This problem may have contributed to her apparent defensive and insecure feelings about her own inability to communicate effectively.

Since I was aware of both Betty's and John's language difficulties, I made a concerted effort to work with Betty and her young son. However, I feel that Betty's resistance in cooperating might have arisen from her resentment of outside pressures to participate. She, in fact, probably had not made up her own mind to participate. Perhaps as Pflaum (1986) notes, Betty was not "sufficiently aware of [her] impact on [her son's] reading"

Figure 11-2 Flora's Initial Book Reading Behavior,  
October 3, 1985

**1. Mother's Body Management**

- Sits opposite child.
- Places child on lap.
- Partially encircles child.
- Completely encircles child.
- Lies alongside child.
- Sits adjacent to child.
- Maintains physical contact.

**2. Mother's Management of Book**

- Previews book.
- Allows child to hold book.
- Allows child to turn pages.
- Permits child to explore book.
- Guides child's attention to book.
- Points to pictures/words.
- Asks child questions.
- Links items in text to child's life.
- Varies voice.
- Emphasizes syllables.
- Acts [makes noises, motions].
- Comments on book's content.
- Refers to reading as joint enterprise.
- Ends reading episode when child loses interest.
- Continues to read after child loses interest.
- Resists child turning pages.
- Becomes absorbed by book and ignores child.

**3. Mother's Language Proficiency**

- Uses multiple word sentences.
- Uses multiple grammatical modes.
- Labels pictures.
- Describes pictures.
- Repeats child's vocalization.
- Corrects child's vocalization.
- Elaborates child's vocalization.
- Gives words to child's vocalization.

**4. Mother's Attention to Affect**

- Pauses for child's response.
- Inspects child's face.
- Praises child.
- Comments positively about child's participation.
- Gives spoken affirmation.
- Makes approving gesture.
- Reprimands child.
- Comments negatively about child's participation.

Source: Adapted from "Mothers Reading to Infants: A New Observational Tool," M.B. Resnick, et al. 1987, *The Reading Teacher*, 40, no. 9, pp. 888-895.

| Questions I asked Betty and comments I made to her about the story <i>Hi, Cat!</i>   | Betty's responses to my questions and comments                    | Betty asking questions     | My responses to Betty's questions   |
|--|---|----------------------------|---|
| Betty, why did you choose the book, <i>Hi, Cat!</i>  | Because I liked the pictures and it was about a little black boy. |                            |   |
| Betty, before you begin reading the story, are there any words you would like for me to pronounce?   | Yes.  |                            |   |
| What words would you like for me to pronounce? Please point them out to me. Betty pointed to the words "reflection," "croaked," "giggled," and "delicious."                                      |   |                            |   |
| Betty I am going to break the words down into syllables and I want you to repeat the word after me. I will pronounce each word very slowly for you, ok? re.flec.tion reflection Repeat after me. | Ok.<br>re.flec.tion<br>reflection                                 |                            |   |
| Do you know what that word means? What?  | Yes<br>It means ...<br>You tell me.                               | What does reflection mean? | It means the production of an image given back by a reflecting surface, such as a mirror.                           |
| Let's go on to the next word croak.ed croaked  |   |                            |   |
| What does croaked mean?  | I don't know.   |                            | Croaked means to speak in a hoarse voice or to make a deep harsh sound almost as if you have a frog in your throat. |
|  | Betty smiles.   |                            |   |

| Betty and comments I made to her about the story <i>Hi, Cat!</i>   | Betty's responses to my questions and comments  | Betty asking questions              | My responses to Betty's questions  |
|--|---|-------------------------------------|--|
| When you get to that word [croaked] you will have to speak in a deep hoarse voice.   | Betty smiles again and says "I don't know whether I can do that or not."<br>I'll try. |                                     |  |
| You can. The next word is gig.gled giggled. What does giggled mean?  | It means to laugh.<br>Betty smiles and says "at least I got one right so far."        |                                     |  |
| Very good, Betty.  |   |                                     |  |
| You are going to be ok. The last word is de.li.cious delicious. What does that word mean?                                      | It means good, tasty ... very good food ...<br>I got another one right.               |                                     |  |
| Good.  |   |                                     |  |
| Yes you did. Betty, are there parts of the story that you would like for me to read for you, before you begin reading to John? | Yes.  |                                     |  |
| What section do you want me to read? Show me.  |   | Would you read this section for me? | Ok.<br>"Why, gran'pa," Peter said. "It's good to see you."<br>"Hello, my children," Archie croaked. "Hi, gran'pa!" Susy giggled. |
| Is there another section you would like for me to read?  | No. I think I'm ready to read.  |                                     |  |
| Ok.  |   |                                     |  |

| Flora's reading of <i>Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears</i> | Flora talking about text  | Tamara's Responses   |
|--|---|--|
|  | Today, Tamara and I are going to talk about the book <i>Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears</i> . She is going to read the story by looking at the pictures. She will talk to me about what's going on in the pictures and answer questions that I will ask her about the pictures.  | Tamara looks at her mother.  |
|  | Tamara can you tell me the name of the book?  | Tamara is frowning and squirming in her seat. She does not answer her mother's question. |
|  | What is the title of the book talking about? Tell me something about the book? You are suppose to be talking to me, ok? Talk to me. Read to me. Tell me about it Tamara, ok?  | Tamara is silent with her head hung down.  |
|  | Now look at the pictures <i>Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears</i> . Tell me again? What's the title of the book? What's the title of the book? [Flora points to the title of the book and slowly says again, <i>Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears</i> .] That's a pretty nice story. Tell me about it. Now you are suppose to talk to me about the story Tamara. Now I want you to tell me about the title of the book, Tamara. (Flora points to the title again.) Say it for me. (Flora says again <i>Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears</i> .) Say that. Ok, let's look at the pictures. Now tell me about the story. | Tamara is silent. When Flora persists, Tamara begins to pout and eventually cry.         |
|  | Tell me about the story. What is that? (Flora asks me to stop the tape for a minute.) Talk to me about the story, Tamara. Come on. I want to hear what you know about this story. Come on.  | Tamara is still silent and refuses to answer.  |
|  |   | Tamara refuses to answer.  |
|  |   | Tamara still remains silent.   |

continued

| Flora's reading of <i>Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears</i> | Flora talking about text  | Tamara's Responses  |
|--|---|---|
|  | You can do that later. Come on.   | Tamara is playing with the bows in her hair.  |
|  | Sit up. Sit up.   | Tamara slumps down in her chair and turns her back to her mother.   |
|  | Tell me about the book. Come on. (Flora is still coaxing Tamara to tell her the title of the book.)   | Tamara remains silent.  |
|  | See you are doing this because you don't want to do it. But you are going to do it.   | Tamara turns around to face Flora while she reprimands her.   |
|  | Tamara, I am losing patience with you. You are beginning to act stubborn and I am not going to put up with it. You are going to read this story. Do you hear me?            | Tamara looks at Flora as if to say "I still won't answer, you just watch me."                               |
|  | Tamara, you are not a baby. You are a big girl. (Flora spansks Tamara.) Did you understand what I said. I am simply not going to put up with this behavior, Tamara          | Tamara cries.   |
|  | Stand up! (Flora shakes and spansks Tamara again.) Did you understand what I said. I'm not putting up with it. Stop it right now. I refuse to let you dictate this session. | Tamara does not say a word. She stands up and receives her spanking. Then she cries, sits down, and stares. |
|  | No!<br>Every time we start a session, you get worse and worse. Now, let's look at the book! Can you tell me about the book?   | Tamara finally looks at the book.   |
|  | I can't hear you. Ok. Tell me about the book.   | "Ok."   |
|  | Can you tell me about the picture? Look at that.  | "Yes."<br>Tamara looks at the picture.  |
|  | Now tell me the name of the book?   | " <i>Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears</i> ."  |
|  | That's the title of it. That's right.   | Child smiles slightly.  |
|  | Now why don't you look at the pictures and tell me the story. Ok?   |   |

continued



| Flora's reading of <i>Why Mosquitoes Buzz In People's Ears</i> | Flora talking about text  | Tamara's Responses  |
|--|---|---|
|  | What happened?<br>Tell me about.<br>Tell me anything you see in the pictures.   | Child is silent.  |
|  | What do you see there?<br>Name the animals in the story? Are you ready to work? | "Mosquitoes."<br>Bows her head in agreement.  |
|  | What is the mosquito doing?<br>Now, name the animals in the story.              | "Buzzing in people's ears."<br>"Iguana, snakes, bird, rabbit, monkey, crow, owl, lion."   |
|  | Very good.<br>What are the animals doing?<br>How does an iguana look?           | "Talking to each other."<br>"Like a snake, lizard."<br>Tamara bows her head in agreement. |
|  | We are going to talk about how each of the animals look, ok?                    |   |

had really worked with Tamara during the past week. She also shared with me that Tamara's teacher and the Head Start director were pleased that she had volunteered to participate in the project. Tamara's teacher had noticed that she rarely talked in class or responded to her questions, and she felt that the book reading project would help Tamara become more responsive. During the past week, Flora felt that she had made progress with Tamara.

The November 4 session began. Flora had high expectations for herself as well as Tamara in this session and things were not turning out the way she had hoped. Flora wanted so much to show me that she had indeed learned some effective book reading behaviors, but Tamara was not cooperating. At first Flora was extremely patient. Her voice tone was not harsh, and she did not display the forcefulness she had in earlier sessions. She smiled, patted Tamara on the shoulder, and she even said "Come on, you can do it, the way we did it at home." "Show me that you are a big girl." Despite Flora's positive coaching, Tamara refused to cooperate. Flora felt embarrassed, let down, betrayed, and even hurt that Tamara was acting this way. She really wanted to do well in this session. Flora felt that she was ready, but failed to recognize that Tamara was not. Flora's patience began to wane and she said, "Tamara, I am losing patience with you. You

### 1. Mother's Body Management

- Sits opposite child.
- Places child on lap.
- Partially encircles child.
- Completely encircles child.
- Lies alongside child.
- Sits adjacent to child.
- Maintains physical contact.

### 2. Mother's Management of Book

- Previews book.
- Allows child to hold book.
- Allows child to turn pages.
- Permits child to explore book.
- Guides child's attention to book.
- Points to pictures/words.
- Asks child questions.
- Links items in text to child's life.
- Varies voice.
- Emphasizes syllables.
- Acts [makes noises, motions].
- Comments on book's content.
- Refers to reading as joint enterprise.
- Ends reading episode when child loses interest.
- Continues to read after child loses interest.
- Resists child turning pages.
- Becomes absorbed by book and ignores child.

### 3. Mother's Language Proficiency

- Uses multiple word sentences.
- Uses multiple grammatical modes.
- Labels pictures.
- Describes pictures.
- Repeats child's vocalization.
- Corrects child's vocalization.
- Elaborates child's vocalization.
- Gives words to child's vocalization.

### 4. Mother's Attention to Affect

- Pauses for child's response.
- Inspects child's face.
- Praises child.
- Comments positively about child's participation.
- Gives spoken affirmation.
- Makes approving gesture.
- Reprimands child.
- Comments negatively about child's participation.

Source: Adapted from "Mothers Reading to Infants: A New Observational Tool," M.B. Resnick, 1987, *The Reading Teacher*, 40, no. 9, pp. 888-895.

are beginning to act stubborn, and I am not going to put up with it. You are going to read this book. Do you hear me?" Then Flora spanked Tamara. Tamara cried, but Flora did not end the session and reprimanded her two more times. Flora was determined that this little four-year-old girl was not going to overpower her. In fact, Tamara had already done so.

Since Flora had informed me in our discussion that she had everything under control, I brought Tamara to the room, turned on the camera, and left Flora and Tamara in the room by themselves. Therefore, I did not become aware of the events that happened between Flora and Tamara until I replayed the videotape and discussed it with Flora. I noticed when Tamara left the room that she was calm, but I could tell she had been crying. Flora was visibly upset with herself as well as Tamara. She said "What can I do? Tamara is so stubborn. I know she knew the answers to the questions that I asked her, but she simply would not answer them. I do not know what I am going to do."

I comforted Flora. I told her, "I know you tried hard and I am proud of you for doing so. By no means do I want you to think that I do not have confidence in your sincerity about the project and your willingness to learn more effective book reading behaviors." Flora felt better, and I then asked if she wanted to engage in a dialogue about this session and she said, "Yes." First, I told Flora that the next time Tamara is unwilling to participate, "Please do not force her to do so, and please try not to spank her." I also told her that she should "end the session if it comes down to having to spank Tamara." We certainly did not want to communicate to Tamara that reading was negative; instead we wanted Tamara to view book reading as a positive experience and something that she should look forward to. Additionally, I told Flora to learn to relax with Tamara and that her sessions with her daughter should be fun not drudgery. Even though this was Flora's most difficult session, she moved from using only one positive behavior (varying her voice) on October 3 to using six positive behaviors in the November 4 session. Flora previewed the book, commented on the book's content, varied her voice, made noises and motions, asked questions, and pointed to pictures/words. In the four sessions that followed, I recognized growth in Flora's development toward acquiring successful book reading behaviors. What was most gratifying was the fact that neither Flora nor Tamara cried again.

Initially, Tamara repeatedly gazed at her mother as if to monitor her mother's reactions to her answers. She used rising intonation in her answers as if asking, "Is this right?" Her responses to locative questions were nonverbal, she simply pointed to a pictured object. Even though Flora asked several questions that were difficult to understand, she did ask several questions that Tamara did, in fact, understand but chose not to answer. Tamara's apparent stubbornness persisted for approximately three

sessions. It was unclear as to why she simply refused to participate verbally in the sessions, and why she responded with hostility when Flora tried to involve her. There may be some plausible explanations for Tamara's initial stubbornness. For example, when Flora used force, it must have frightened Tamara and caused her to resist her mother's attempts to involve her. Tamara's shyness, as noted by her teacher, may have been another reason for her unwillingness to respond in this strange setting. Flora's attempt to force her may have prompted her to withdraw totally from the reading interaction with her mother. There ensued a battle of wills between Flora and Tamara, with Flora attempting to force Tamara to participate and Tamara rebelling against Flora's efforts to coerce her. Perhaps this was Tamara's way of saying, "Mama, I'm not ready yet. Please give me a little more time and try to be more patient with me."

With my support and encouragement, Flora began asking questions, responding more positively to her daughter's answers and comments, looking at her daughter more often during the book reading sessions, relating the story experiences to their personal experiences, and, most importantly, relaxing and enjoying the time that she and her daughter shared in these book reading sessions. From these sessions, both mother and child developed a repertoire of successful strategies. Figure 11-6 is a checklist of the book reading skills Flora developed over the eight-week period.

Over the course of the eight book reading sessions, the frequency of Tamara's gaze monitoring of her mother and questioning tone shown earlier declined significantly. Later, she began to participate in verbal and nonverbal interactions. She learned to be a more active participant in the book reading sessions. Although she never asked questions, she learned to answer questions. In particular, her answers became more specific and focused.

At the beginning of the study, Tamara's book responses resembled those of a two-year-old. Tamara seemed unable (or unwilling) to identify and name actions in pictures or participate in a verbal dialogue with her mother. She tended either to hunch her shoulders or nod her head in response to her mother's questions. She appeared totally despondent and her feelings were depicted in her facial expressions and body language.

Tamara's apparent unwillingness to cooperate might be attributed to the fact that she had not been previously engaged in book reading interactions and now, at age four, her mother was expecting her to participate actively in such interactions. Tamara might not have been ready for such an intensive interaction, and Flora's eagerness to engage Tamara might have overwhelmed her. For example, Flora's initial questions were similar to those used by the parents of mature four-year-olds, and Tamara seemed unable to participate successfully at this level. She remained silent and did not ask or answer any questions. However, Flora's acquisition of successful

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- Allows child to turn pages.
- Permits child to explore book.
- Guides child's attention to book.
- Points to pictures/words.
- Asks child questions.
- Links items in text to child's life.
- Varies voice.
- Emphasizes syllables.
- Acts [makes noises, motions].
- Comments on book's content.
- Refers to reading as joint enterprise.
- Ends reading episode when child loses interest.
- Continues to read after child loses interest.
- Resists child turning pages.
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- Uses multiple word sentences.
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- Describes pictures.
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book reading techniques enabled Tamara to succeed so that she became increasingly able to respond within Flora's maternal scaffolding. Figure 11-7 is a transcript of a successful book reading interaction between Flora and Tamara.

## DISCUSSION

An important question is why Flora was able to acquire these successful book reading behaviors to a degree that the other four mothers were not. First of all, Flora was more willing to change, and she was the best reader of the five mothers. Consequently, over the eight-week period I was able to spend concentrated time helping her gain skills to employ in book reading interactions with her young child. Moreover, Flora came to recognize the importance of reading to her preschooler and assisting in her young daughter's understanding of the text. Dunn (1981) noted the importance of parental motivation and belief in children's achievement. He pointed out that children of parents who felt that it was their job to teach children letter and number skills performed more highly on letter naming and number measures than those whose parents did not view these skills to be their responsibility.

While the other four mothers exhibited interest and motivation and acquired some knowledge about book reading, they did not read fluently themselves. As a result, I spent a significant amount of time not only providing information to them about parent-child book reading but also helping to increase their personal literacy skills so they could read to their children. For Betty, Cindy, Sylvia and Janis, I had to pronounce words and discuss what they meant and explain something about the story before they could successfully engage in a book reading interaction with their young children. My interactions with these four mothers were quite different from my interactions with Flora, who could read all of the books. I had to model for these mothers the type of scaffolding they needed to provide for their children during story reading; Flora could try out techniques by discussing them with me.

I do not want to communicate the message that all lower SES mothers cannot read, but I do want to point out that it is a harsh reality that some lower SES mothers do in fact have difficulty reading. Betty was one of those mothers. Betty's development of successful book reading skills would have taken longer, but I would not write off a mother like Betty. I would recommend picture books or wordless picture books for mothers like Betty. Perhaps, in her efforts to hide from me her inability to read well, Betty chose books she in fact could not read. After all, I asked the mothers to select books that they, themselves, felt they could read. Betty obviously

Figure 11-7 Transcript of a Taped Reading Session,  
Recorded November 20, 1985

| Flora's reading of text <i>Over in the Meadow</i>  | Flora talking about text   | Tamara's responses  |
|--|--|---|
|  | It is important that you talk Tamara. Make sure you respond when I ask you a question.   | The child is looking at her mother as she is telling her that she must talk when she asks her questions.  |
|  | We are going to read a story.<br>The title of the story, Tamara, is <i>Over in the Meadow</i> .<br>Now, as you can see on the front of the book—look at the front and there it is, a meadow. You have plants all around and it is something that is going, that is going to happen in the meadow. Let's look and see.<br>Ok? | The child looks at the cover of the book as her mother is talking. She is smiling, because her mother is smiling.<br><br>Child looks.<br>Child looks again. |
| Over in the Meadow in the sand in the sun lived an old mother turtle. Dig said the mother. I dig said the One. So we dug all day in the sand in the sun. | Look at the turtle. Can't you see the mother turtle?<br>Ok.<br>And her baby turtle? Look at the little turtle.<br>Mama and the turtle they were playing. You see that?<br>Where are the turtles? Do you know where the turtles are? They are digging in what?<br>In the sand.<br>That's right.                               | Child looks.<br>"Yes."<br>Child looks.<br>Child looks again.<br>Child looks.<br><br>"In the sand."  |
| Over in the Meadow where the stream runs blue, lives an old mother fish and little fishes Two.   |  |   |

Figure 11-7 *Continued*

| Flora's reading of text <i>Over in the Meadow</i>  | Flora talking about text  | Tamara's responses   |
|--|---|--|
|  | Look at that!<br>Do you know who that was?<br>Who do you think that was?<br>Fish.<br>Mother Fish and how many baby fishes?<br>Two.<br>Very good listening, ok?<br>I like the way you are listening.   | Child looks.<br>"Fish."<br>"Two."<br>Child nods.<br>Child smiles.  |
| Over in the Meadow in a hole in the tree lived a mother blue bird and her little birdies Three. Sing said the mother. We sing said the Three. So they sang and they were glad in the hole in the tree. | How many little birds were there?<br>How many did I say?<br>There were how many?<br>Count them. Want to count them?<br>How many babies?<br><br>Three baby birds.<br>Very good.<br>And where were they?<br>Where were the babies?<br>In where?<br>Where was the hole?<br>Where was the hole?<br>Where is there?<br>In what?<br>They are living up in a what?<br>A hole in a tree.<br>Ok.<br>Let's go on. | "Four?"<br>Child is silent.<br><br>"One, two . . . One, two, three. Three."<br><br>Child smiles.<br>Child is silent.<br>"In the hole. Hole."<br>"Hole. Right there. Hole."<br>"In the tree."<br>Child smiles.<br>Child waits to go on. |

continued

wanted to impress me. Unlike Cindy, Betty chose difficult books and was unsuccessful, and that may be one of the reasons she felt compelled to drop out of the study. Though I suggested to her that she try easier books and perhaps she would be more successful, she refused to continue.

Cindy, like Betty, had some difficulty reading, but she chose to start with the little books developed by Mason and McCormick (1985). Cindy wanted to realize success, and the little books provided her with that opportunity. Cindy was also encouraged by me and the Head Start director to go back to school and get her GED. I feel that Cindy's interaction with her young daughter helped her realize the importance of being literate.

Even though Janis and Sylvia read more easily than Betty and Cindy, they needed my assistance with some words and sought my advice on how to phrase certain parts of stories they selected to read to their children. A significant amount of the time I spent with Janis involved showing her how to increase her verbal interactions with her daughter and ways she could explore books. The time I spent with Sylvia was mostly focused on getting her to slow down and on showing her how to pause, how to ask/answer questions, and how to make comments about the text. Because the time spent during sessions prior to book reading focused so heavily on the mothers' literacy development and an understanding of how they should participate in book reading interactions with their children, it was difficult to see the implementation of these 'new skills' due to the brevity of the study.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although we should develop programs at school to help lower SES children make a smooth transition from home to school, Teale (1987) questioned whether the "classroom storybook reading experience [can] substitute for the more intimate one-to-one (or one-to-two or three) interactions typical of the home" (p. 64). Morrow (1988; 1987) is an advocate of classroom storybook reading for children who come to school not having been read to, but she too recognizes the importance of the home and recommends the need to "continuously inform parents about the importance of reading to their children" (Morrow, 1987, p. 82). I argue that to simply inform parents about the importance of reading to their children is not sufficient. This study suggests that we must go beyond *telling* lower SES parents to help their children with reading. We must show them how to participate in parent-child book reading and support their attempts to do; we must help them become confident readers simultaneously. At the same time, we must not assume that lower SES parents cannot acquire the necessary skills to engage in successful book reading interactions with their children. To

make such an assumption only reinforces the self-fulfilling prophecy that lower SES parents are incapable of helping their children.

One of the most important results of this study was that these five mothers participated in a literacy event they had not been engaged in previously. While I have no way of knowing whether they will continue to read to their children, I do know at least that they were introduced to a new literacy event (sharing books with their children). Even though some of the mothers showed more progress than others, I feel that they all could have acquired more interactive book reading strategies had I had a longer period of time to spend with them.

The growth in Flora's and her young daughter's ability to interact during parent-child book reading raises the question of why children like this preschooler do not quickly master this activity in the school setting. Two factors may account for the difference. First, parent-child communication provides a much more intensive apprenticeship than can be found in the one-to-many interactions in school settings. Even when a child receives individualized attention from a teacher, such contact is not sufficiently frequent or lengthy to achieve the fine-tuning that a parent can give. Morrow (1988) admits that "one-to-one readings in school can be time-consuming" and suggests that "asking aides, volunteers, and other children to read to youngsters could be helpful" (p. 105). While this approach is helpful, it is not sufficient. Research comparing mothers and teachers engaging in the same dyadic task with children has shown that mothers and teachers act differently, the mothers acting to provide maximum assistance for children's success, the teachers working for maximum independence on the part of the children (Edwards, 1988a). In institutional interactions, a child is unlikely to achieve the level of understanding or develop the participation strategies made possible in the parental tutorial.

Due to the limited number of studies in this particular area of emergent literacy, more information is needed about the book reading behaviors of lower income families. Also, we need more information about the potential for encouraging and supporting mothers to engage in book reading interactions with their young children. Teale (1986b) noted that "we are still in a period in which the area of emergent literacy is lacking in coherence," and he warns that "descriptive research of this nature is very labor-intensive, and longitudinal study of storybook reading is even more so" (p. 199). However, additional insights into lower SES home environments and these children's literacy development are essential.

Models like the ones described in this study may work for some parents. Regardless of the strategy selected, the poignant message emerging from this study is that the time has come for teachers to shift from *telling* to *showing* lower SES parents how to read with their children. Presently, I am involved in a year-long research project aimed at showing instead of telling

lower SES mothers (both black and white) how to read effectively with their children. Videotapes developed by kindergarten and first-grade teachers, the parents, themselves, and myself comprise the training materials. I plan to spend school year 1988–89 studying the development and progress of these mothers toward acquiring the necessary skills to interact with their young children effectively during storybook reading (Edwards, 1988b). Even though I feel my approach to answering some critical questions about parent-child book reading in lower SES populations is valid, I recognize that there are a number of other strategies that teachers can employ. Teachers as well as administrators need to select the most appropriate combination of strategies that would best meet the needs of their parent-child population.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>It should be noted here that the Resnick et al. instrument was used in my retrospective analysis of the data and served as an excellent way for me to highlight for the reader specific book reading behaviors each mother had acquired.

<sup>2</sup>The text of *Time for Bed* is as follows: "read a story, brush your teeth, get a hug, climb in bed, nighty-night sleep tight." For each phrase there is a corresponding picture on the page.

*Chapter after chapter has emphasized the importance of the home-school connection. In Edwards' chapter, we saw parents trying to learn more about school expectations. In Chapter 12, we are urged as educators to try to learn more about family and community expectations and literacy sets. We can do this by asking parents to share their children's and their own literacy experiences, by spending time in the communities in which their children live, and by creating literacy opportunities for personal identity and participation in community life—maintaining and strengthening children's connections with their families and communities.*

# Learning from Families: Implications for Educators and Policy

*Denny Taylor*

*Dorothy S. Strickland*

## INTRODUCTION

What makes families work is the irrational involvement of a parent and a child. Some might call this love but it is also commitment. It is the whatever-happens-I-will-love-you that empowers families and enables children to survive. In the research studies (Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Taylor and Strickland, 1986; Taylor, in progress) of *functioning families* (see Hansen, 1981; Schlesinger, 1982) that form the basis for this chapter, irrational involvement, love, and commitment come together as parents create a firm foundation for their children's lives. And yet, it is evident from these long-term studies that love and commitment are not always enough to counter the societal risks that endanger children and jeopardize families. The shifting patterns in social, political, and economic support for families creates an uncertain climate that makes it impossible for some parents and difficult for others to provide healthy environments in which children can grow up to live enjoyable and productive lives.