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Dialogic Reading and Building Children's Vocabulary

Melissa Boer

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**Abstract**

Parents and teachers have been reading books to kids for many years. In this century, technology has become a big part of our lives and has even started to take the place of books. It is easy to listen to books on-line and many parents think that if their child is looking at books on a technology device that is acceptable because it is still something educational. There is a time and place for technology, but nothing can replace the time a child can sit on your lap and listen to book being read. Children need to be able to touch a book and turn its pages and be able to ask questions about things they hear in books before, during and after the book is read. This paper will explore the benefits of reading with children and not just reading to children. Many different literacy skills can be learned by an adult taking the time to read books with children and allowing time for the child to ask questions about the text and make their own inferences about the book as well.

### Dialogic Reading and Building a Child's Vocabulary

A child's literacy skills begin to develop early on in their lives and a child's first teacher is their parents. Horowitz-Kraus & Hutton states (2015) "As parents are often a child's first and most important teachers, cognitively constructive home environments, especially prior to school entry, provide an essential foundation for emergent literacy" (p. 649-650). Parents have a big responsibility to expose their child to many different literacy skills and may even do so without knowing they are doing it. Pointing out letters on road signs, talking about how the child's name and his or her friend's name starts the same – those are all literacy skills that a child is learning early in life. Goldstein et al (2017) states that "Children who do not develop early literacy skills, especially phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge, prior to kindergarten are at risk for reading difficulties" (p. 89). The years from birth to kindergarten are important years in a child's literacy development, which clearly shows that preschool is an important time to be working on developing literacy skills.

A preschool child is beginning to be able to ask and answer questions about books. They are beginning to be able to re-tell stories and point out problems that may occur to the characters in the book. Involving a preschool age child in the reading of a book will help the child recall many more literacy skills during the reading than if the child is just a passive listener. McGee & Schickedanz (2007) state "The most effective read-alouds are those in which children are actively involved asking and answering questions and making predictions rather than passively listening" (p. 742). When the reader involves the child in the book, rich conversations can occur between adults and children and adults can guide children to view things they may not have noticed on their own.

Dialogic reading is one way to read books with children instead of to children. Dialogic reading involves the teacher preparing questions to discuss before, during and after the read-aloud. The teacher also goes through the book and prepares a list of vocabulary words he or she would like the children to learn from the story. Dialogic reading includes reading the book aloud at least three times to the children focusing on different aspects of the book during each reading. By the third read aloud, the students are taking the lead in telling the story and trying to closely match the language of the text. See Appendix A for an example of a dialogic reading script.

“Children learn most from books when they are actively involved” (Whitehurst, n.d., p. 1). A child can become easily bored when just listening to a story. Dialogic reading is when the adult helps the child become the story teller when looking at a book. Many teachers use PEER – prompt, evaluate, expand and repeat - sequence when practicing dialogic reading with students. The teacher will first prompt the child to say something about the book and then evaluate the child’s response. The teacher will then expand the child’s response by rephrasing and adding information to it and then repeat the prompt to make sure the child has learned from the expansion. (Whitehurst, n.d.) These sequences can and should happen on almost every page. Each time you look at the book with the child, let the child take the lead more and more. Allow the child to take ownership in the book.

Prompting is a very important part of dialogic reading. Allowing a child to talk about a book and expand on their own thoughts about the book allows for even more learning to take place. Whitehurst suggests five different kinds of prompts when using dialogic reading with a child. The first is a completion prompt which allows the child to fill in the word at the end of a sentence because the adult pauses to let the child answer. This works well with rhyming or repetitive books. The second kind of prompt is a recall prompt that allows the child to think

Running Head: DIALOGIC READING BENEFITS

about what happened in the book. Open-ended prompts are when you start phrases with tell me and allow the child to talk about what they notice about the pages in the book. Asking wh- questions is another way to get a child talking about the book. These questions are great for teaching children new vocabulary words. The final prompt is a distancing prompt which allows children to make connections to things they have seen in their own lives. For example, if you are reading about the three Billy goats, you can talk about a bridge that is close to your town and compare it to the bridge in the book (Whitehurst, n.d.).

Reading is important and what a teacher knows about reading is also important. Kindle (2013) states “Individual teachers’ understandings of what constitutes best practice have a profound effect on how a child within a classroom experiences a literacy event such as a read aloud” (p. 175). Teachers need to know what they are doing when they open up a book and read to children. People may view reading to a child something that anyone can do. That is a true statement – everyone can do it! But it is also important that it is done well with many goals and purposes in mind to help the child learn. “Reading aloud is often recommended as the most significant activity for adults to support the emerging literacy skills of young children” (Kindle, 2013, p. 176). Kids need to see adults reading and need to hear them reading. Getting a child interested in a book shows them many skills such as “vocabulary, sound structure, the meaning of print, the structure of stories and language, sustained attention, the pleasure of learning, and on and on” (Whitehurst, n.d., p.2).

## **Hypothesis**

After a preliminary review of literature related to dialogic and interactive reading, it is likely that students will increase their literacy skills – specifically vocabulary skills – because the students will be more involved in the reading of the story and will have to use higher level

Running Head: DIALOGIC READING BENEFITS

thinking skills to comprehend and re-tell the story and even to listen to the story. Therefore, the question is does dialogic reading in a preschool classroom increase a child's vocabulary skills in the time frame of one school year.

### **Variables**

Variables include the children in the preschool classrooms chosen as well as the children's previous literacy and vocabulary knowledge. All preschool students come to school with different background knowledge so it is difficult to measure a child's vocabulary as a group. But knowing that most students are in the same socioeconomic group and are the same age will be a constant for this particular study.

### **Methodology**

#### **Participants**

A private school located in a small town in Iowa enrolls 192 students in preschool through eighth grade coming from 109 families. There are 17 teachers in the building including music, strings, physical education, resource room and Title I teachers. There are six para professionals on staff assisting lower elementary teachers as well as students with special needs. There are five additional staff members including cooks, custodians and secretaries. The school is run by a parent circle consisting of parents who pay tuition to send their children to this private school. Our school provides free and reduced hot lunch meals for students that meet the income guidelines. Kindergarten currently meets three days a week until the second semester, and then they pick up another day to make their attendance four days a week until the end of the school year. The preschool is currently funded by the Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program and had a successful state visit in the spring of 2016 and tuition is free of charge for preschool families.

Running Head: DIALOGIC READING BENEFITS

The preschool class has two sections – a morning section and an afternoon section. The morning section comes from 8:25-11:30 a.m. while the afternoon section meets from 12:20-3:25 p.m.

Busing can be used one way for the preschool child. Parents need to provide transportation for the other way to get to or from school. Preschool meets Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays. The median household income in Sioux County is \$61,627 while 8.3% of Sioux County lives in poverty.

### **Data Collection**

Qualitative data was used to determine the vocabulary of the students in the class. The IGDI tests are administered in a private one on one setting. They are standardized tests. The administrator says exactly what is on the back of the cards and the students respond. Each category for the morning class is out of 225 points possible while the afternoon class is out of 150 points possible. The students are all 4 or 5 years old at the time of testing. The Fall Checkpoint was completed in October. The Winter Checkpoint was completed in January. The Spring Checkpoint was completed in April, all in the same school year.

**Table 1: Morning class IGDI test results**

Morning Class – 15 students	Picture Naming	Which Doesn't Belong	Rhyming	Sound Identification
Fall Checkpoint	139	144	144	117
Winter Checkpoint	160	130	167	135
Spring Checkpoint	176	182	196	163

Picture Naming gain from Fall to Spring is 37 which is 16% gain. Which Doesn't Belong gain from Fall to Spring is 38 which is a 16% gain. Rhyming gain from Fall to Spring is 52 which is a 23% gain. Sound Identification from Fall to Spring is 46 which is a 20% gain.

**Table 2: Afternoon class IGDI test results**

Afternoon Class – 10 students	Picture Naming	Which Doesn't Belong	Rhyming	Sound Identification
Fall Checkpoint	103	86	85	51
Winter Checkpoint	108	118	95	64
Spring Checkpoint	131	128	132	81

Picture Naming gain from Fall to Spring is 28 which is 18%. Which Doesn't Belong gain from Fall to Spring is 42 which is 28% gain. Rhyming gain from Fall to Spring is 47 which is 31% gain. Sound Identification from Fall to Spring is 30 which is 20% gain.

**Table 3: IGDI Test Scores by Student**

Student	Fall Picture Naming	Winter Picture Naming	Spring Picture Naming	Picture Naming Gain	Picture Naming Percentage Gain – Fall to Spring	Picture Naming Percentage Gain – Fall to Winter	Picture Naming Percentage Gain – Winter to Spring
Student A	14	13	14	0	0	-6	6
Student B	10	12	13	3	20	13	7
Student C	9	11	11	2	13	13	0
Student D	6	5	13	7	47	-7	54
Student E	10	8	11	1	6	-14	20
Student F	8	13	11	3	20	34	-14
Student G	9	8	9	0	0	-7	7
Student H	8	10	12	4	27	14	13
Student I	9	12	11	2	13	20	-7
Student J	10	13	15	5	33	20	13
Student K	7	7	8	1	6	0	6
Student L	8	13	10	2	14	34	-20
Student M	13	10	11	-2	-14	-20	6
Student N	10	13	13	3	20	20	0
Student O	8	12	14	6	40	27	13
Student P	6	9	9	3	20	20	0
Student Q	10	12	13	3	20	13	7
Student R	5	9	13	8	54	27	27
Student S	12	11	15	3	20	-7	27
Student T	13	14	15	2	13	6	7
Student U	8	6	12	4	27	-13	40
Student V	13	10	13	0	0	-20	20
Student W	8	10	12	4	27	14	13
Student X	11	11	14	3	20	0	20
Student Y	13	14	15	2	13	6	7

Average gain from fall to spring was 2.76 which is 18.36% gain. Average gain from fall to winter was 1.84 which is 7.48%. Average gain from winter to spring was 2.0 which is 10.88% gain.

### **PPVT Test – Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. Third Edition**

This is a vocabulary test administered to students during the current school year. Students are 4 or 5 years old. The teacher did not test the students that do not qualify for the statewide universal preschool funding. These are the students that had turned 5 before September 15. Our school does not have a Transitional Kindergarten (TK) program so often students do the preschool program twice before moving on to Kindergarten. The teacher tested 24 students. When tested in January, the average score was 128.6. When tested in April, the average score was 165.2.

### **Data Analysis**

Data has been compiled throughout the entire school year. IGDI tests were administered in October, January and April. The PPVT test was given in January and again in April. Creative Curriculum GOLD was also in place throughout the entire school year. This gives the teacher a running record of how the students are doing in the classroom in many different categories such as social/emotional, physical, language, cognitive, literacy, math, science, social studies and the arts. Teachers track a child's progress throughout the entire year with anecdotal notes and specific standardized tests. Students also filled out a survey about how many words they know and how they learn words and who reads books to them. See Appendix B.

## Results

This research was conducted during a typical school year in a play-based Creative Curriculum preschool classroom with 4 and 5 year old students. The teacher provided an opportunity to hear a book read aloud at least once a day using a dialogic reading approach to reading. The students interacted and learned to tell stories on their own. Through thoughtful questioning and preparedness of the teacher, the students had the opportunity to learn more through a book than if they were just being read to. Teachers used deliberate strategies to pick out books with words that could be used in many different parts of a child's day. For example, the word "aroma" in a book can be learned and talked about and then brought up again during a walk down the school hallways past the kitchen.

Books are available in every center in the classroom and a library center is also available for a large portion of the preschool day. Spontaneous reading to a child in a small group setting or an individual setting occurs whenever a child requests a book – about 30% of the time. Table 4 shows that the morning class had a 16% gain in their picture naming test from the fall to the spring and the afternoon class had an 18% gain in their picture naming test from fall to spring. The total percent gain for both classes from fall to spring is 34%. The preschool students also filled out a self-evaluation (see Appendix B) and that showed us that most students think they know a lot of words and that they learn them from their teachers. They enjoy looking at books and moms and dads read the most books to them.

**Table 4: Percentage Gain by Class**

Picture Naming IGDI test	
Morning class percentage gain	16%
Afternoon class percentage gain	18%
Total percentage gain of both classes.	34%

### **Discussion**

Overall, there was growth in the classes' vocabulary skills throughout the course of the year. Hopefully no matter how the teacher reads or teaches there is some growth in a child's vocabulary throughout the course of a school year, but the research shows that significant growth can occur with a child's vocabulary if intentional reading occurs in a classroom at least once a day. Students in this classroom came into preschool with quite good scores on the IGDI assessment in the fall. This would tell us that reading is done at home with these children and conversations happen regularly in settings outside of school as well. The preschool vocabulary survey – See Appendix B – showed us that many students get read to at home by their moms and dads and older brothers and sisters. That can also be a reason these students scored very well on the vocabulary tests right away in the fall. Children can show significant growth in their vocabulary skills with dialogic reading in place. Whitehurst states “Dialogic reading is just children and adults having a conversation about a book” (n.d., p.2). Talking with children and allowing time for children to respond about the book makes a difference in their education. Take the time and keep reading fun for kids!

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## Appendix A

The Three Billy Goats Gruff

By Bonnie Dobkin

Illustrated by Sibi Vohra

Summary of the Story

There are 3 Billy goats, a small goat, medium goat, and a large goat. They ate all the grass in the valley and didn't have any more to eat. They wanted to cross a bridge to eat more grass but there was a terrible troll under the bridge that would not let them cross. The little and medium size goat crossed the bridge saying that their brother was bigger and was coming soon. The troll let them cross. When the big goat came to the bridge, he knocked the troll off the bridge and the three goats ate all the grass they wanted on the other side of the bridge.

1. Introduce the Story

Read the title of the story, pointing to each word as you read. Have the students repeat the title after you or say it with you as you read the title a second time.

2. Reading the Story for the First Time

The goal of the first reading is to help the students become familiar with the story and key vocabulary. You should move your finger under the words as you read. Ask questions as you go to make sure students are comprehending what you are reading.

### 3. Reading the Story for the Second or Third Time

The goal of the second reading is to build comprehension skills.

Pause at the end of phrases so students can fill in the words they recall from the other readings.

The third reading is to have students participate in conversation about the story. Try doing less reading and encourage students to interact with the story - with prompts.

### 4. Recalling the Story

These questions are designed to build an understanding of the story and help recall important details. After reading the story, ask the recall questions. Continue to ask these questions after every reading.

#### DURING STORY PROMPTS

1. Tell me about the goats on this page. P.3
2. What is a boulder? P.5
3. Nervous means....? P.6
4. Tell me about the land in this picture. What things do you see? P.8-9
5. It says the troll is "hideous, horrible and stinky." By looking at the picture, why do you think they called him those words? P.13
6. What does it mean to leap? P.17
7. What does it mean to tremble? How was the billy goat feeling when he was talking to the troll? P.18
8. What do you think is going to happen when it is the Big billy goat's turn to cross the

bridge? P.26
9. How did the river carry the troll away? P.31
10. What do you think the goats will do now? P.32

### Recall Questions

1. What is the title of the story? How many words are in the title?
2. Who are the main characters?
3. Why did the goats want to cross the bridge?
4. Why was it hard for the goats to cross the bridge?
5. How did the goats solve the problem of getting more food? What was their plan?
6. Did the goats solve their problem? How?

### Vocabulary

Valley
Boulder
Nervous
Meadow
Hideous
Horrible
Leaped
Gulp
Hooves
Bridge



Running Head: DIALOGIC READING BENEFITS

The Grouchy Ladybug

By Eric Carle

### Summary of the Story

The ladybug was grouchy in the morning and didn't want to share the aphids with the friendly ladybug. He asked him if he wanted to fight but then flew away before the fight could happen. He went to many other animals - all of whom were way bigger than him - and asked them to fight. Before they could fight, he flew away until a whale's tail hit him back to the leaf by the friendly ladybug who shared the aphids with him and he accepted.

### Introducing the Story

Read the title and point to the words as you read. Talk about what it means to be grouchy. Ask why they think the ladybug is grouchy.

### First Reading

Point out vocabulary from the vocabulary sheet to draw attention to during this reading.

### Second Reading

Give students opportunities for analytical talk. Ask questions that extend their thinking. Build comprehension skills. Ask questions like why do you think the ladybug always flew away before they had time to fight? Why do you think the other animals always agreed to fight the ladybug?

## Third Reading

Allow students to do most of the “reading”. Pause often and let students fill in the blanks.

## Recalling the Story

Ask the recall questions to help the children recall important details about the story. See how many questions the students can answer on their own after each reading.

DURING STORY PROMPTS
1. Why do you think the ladybug is grouchy?
2. What are aphids? p.2
3. Why did the grouchy ladybug step back and not fight?
4. Tell me about a yellow jacket.
5. Why wouldn't the ladybug fight the stag beetle?
6. What does insist mean?
7. What do you notice about each of the animals the grouchy ladybug wants to fight?
8. Why do you think the whale didn't answer the ladybug?
9. Do you think the whale tried to hit the ladybug?
10. If you were the friendly ladybug would you have let the grouchy ladybug have some of your aphids?
11. Why would the leaf tell the ladybugs thank you for eating the aphids?
TOTAL

Running Head: DIALOGIC READING BENEFITS

The Grouchy Ladybug

Recall Questions

RECALL QUESTIONS
1. What is the title of the story? Who is the author AND illustrator?
2. Who is the story about?
3. What did the ladybugs eat on the leaf?
4. What did the grouchy ladybug want to do to every animal he met?
5. What happened when he asked the animals to fight?
6. How did the grouchy ladybug get back to the leaf?
7. What happened to the grouchy ladybug in the end?
TOTAL

The Grouchy Ladybug

Vocabulary

grouchy
aphids
insist
beak
tusks
flippers
fin
arrived



## Appendix B

## Preschool Vocabulary Survey with Results

1. Do you think you know lots of words?

a. 13 – Smiley faces, 9 - Straight faces, 8 - Sad faces.



2. How do you think you learn new words?

a. 6 – Books, 5 – Parents, 7 – TV – 12 - Teacher



\_ MOM and DAD



TEACHER

3. Do you enjoy looking at books?

a. 18 – Smiley faces, 8 – Straight faces, 4 – Sad faces



Running Head: DIALOGIC READING BENEFITS

4. Who reads the most books to you?

a. 8 – Moms, 9 – Dads, 3 – Grandmas, 5 – Teachers, 5 – Brothers and sisters.

MOM

DAD

GRANDMA

TEACHER

BROTHER/SISTER