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Preschool children in book-reading situations with parents: the perspective of personal agency theory

PRESCHOOL CHILDREN IN BOOK-READING SITUATIONS WITH PARENTS: THE PERSPECTIVE OF PERSONAL AGENCY THEORY

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Abstract

This study reports on how parents view their child's contributions to home reading situations. The core of the study concerns characteristics of home reading sessions as routine institutional practices of the family in which parent–child book-reading processes are conducted. The sample consisted of 21 parents who were individually interviewed about their home reading with their preschool age children. The data show that in interactions over textual materials parents and children employ a range of behaviours which, on the child's part, have agentic qualities. Within the data, six fundamental strategies employed by the children were identified: book selection, monitoring reading, commenting, questioning, expanding, and reading-time negotiation. All of these show that children can initiate and perform purposeful actions in order to achieve goals that they value. This testifies to the possession of agency on the part of the child.

Keywords

Preschool child, home literacy, reading, agency, agentic behavior

Introduction

Parents reading to children is a common and frequent activity in families. It has been proven to be beneficial for the growth of the child's language and literacy as well as the development of positive attitudes towards books and written culture in general. Research has shown that families develop and maintain scenarios of behaviors that involve children in reading situations. Such situations are characterized by the time, place, sequence of actions, and chosen written materials such as stories, fairy tales, and encyclopedias. In these situations, it would seem to be the parent who governs the reading process and the interaction with the child. The facts show that this notion is not entirely true. The child is not a passive listener to the parent's reading aloud. She[1] is an active participant who possesses capabilities and has her own intentions to make valuable contributions to reading situations. In this study, we draw heavily on the theory of personal agency to help us to discover and explain children's strategies for participating in book-reading situations with parents.

The concept of agency

The concept of agency is usually connected with the attribute of human (human agency) or—in a narrower sense—personal (personal agency). Personal agency refers to one's capability to originate and direct actions for given purposes (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006). It is one of the key human qualities to act in any environment. However, the notion of agency emphasizes that humans are not merely products of the environment but also actors that affect the environment and make choices and autonomous decisions. The role of the individual in constructing his or her experience of the world is active, in that people are "agents of experiences rather than simply undergoers of experiences" (Bandura, 2001, p. 4). Bandura conceives of agency as "the human capability to exert influence over one's functioning and the course of events by one's actions" (p. 8). To be an agent is to intentionally make things happen through one's actions.

Agentic behavior requires not only cognitive involvement but also motivation to achieve one's goals. The capacity to achieve one's goals implies that a person has emotional qualities which are employed while planning

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[1]   Throughout this text, we shall use female pronouns when referring to a child, though it concerns both genders. This is only a grammatical arrangement which by no means indicates the primacy of girls over boys.

and executing actions. Bandura (1989, 2001) defines four features of human agency: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. Intentionality implies that the person acts purposefully, i.e. not incidentally. Human transactions, of course, involve situational inducements, but they do not operate as determinate forces. Individuals can choose to behave accommodatively or, through the exercise of self-influence, otherwise. An intention is a representation of a future course of action to be performed (Bandura, 2001, p. 6). Forethought is an element of planning actions. It is the process of thinking about and organizing the activities of intention. Self-reactiveness stresses the quality of agency which involves not only the deliberative ability to make choices and action plans but also the ability to shape the courses of actions and motivate and regulate their execution. Self-reflectiveness refers to the capability to reflect upon oneself and the adequacy of one's thoughts and actions. People judge the correctness of their predictive and operative thinking against the outcomes of their actions (Bandura, 2001, p. 10).

The concept of agency has played a key role in theories about children and childhood over the past 20 years. The change in the concept of childhood is so strong that it can be conceived of as a paradigm shift. The notions of childhood that had been claimed to be firm and unthreatened for decades suddenly became obsolete – new views about children and their qualities were developing. This stance has revealed different functioning of children as well as different causes of this functioning.

The leading stream in this theoretical movement is the new sociology of childhood (James, 1996; James & Prout, 1990; Uprichard, 2008). The theoreticians in this movement strongly opposed the view of children as something like immature adults. The supposed immature status had been based on contrasting "completeness" and "incompleteness" (Lee, 1998). In this sense, the child is an incomplete being and the aim of education is to enhance her development so that she becomes completed, i.e. obtains mature qualities, in fact the qualities of adults. This theory has a more modern parallel in the notions of becoming and being. The child as being is a completed object, whereas the child as becoming is on the way to being. She is the bearer of her own future (James & Prout, 1990). This issue is the point of departure away from traditional sociology, in which the key aspect is the child's socialization, towards a new paradigm in which children are conceived of as mature in their possession of agency. The new sociology of childhood maintains exactly this position:

> Children must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just passive subjects of social structures and processes. (James & Prout, 1990)

Children are human beings, rather than human "becomings" (Qvortrup, 1994).

This belief about children has especially strong implications in the domain of their learning. Children can take the initiative in learning situations and are involved in ongoing learning events. This belief asserts that children do possess agency: "Viewing children as having agency means viewing children as capable of reflecting upon and making decisions about things that concern them, and recognizing that their actions have consequences" (Mayall, 2010). In the past, children's capacities have been ignored or at least underestimated. Therefore, "children are active in the construction and determination of their own social lives" (Prout & James, 1990, p. 8), rather than passive recipients of adult teaching, protection, and care, objects to be shaped and socialized. Agency is how children express their voice (Smith, 2007).

The new theoretical paradigm emphasizing children's agency and voice has led to some encouraging views of their participation in many areas of their own development. One such area is home literacy, i.e. practices in which a child's emerging literacy is elicited and facilitated. In this article we shall concentrate on one setting where this takes place – home reading.

Home literacy

Home literacy describes the practices and strategies taken by parents and their children while at home that are associated with the children's reading and writing development. Literacy activities which are initiated and organized by parents include parent–child text interactions, playing word games, and other exposures to the written world (reading signs and labels, looking at printed notes, using picture dictionaries, using letter-sound books, etc.). This may be a regular or incidental occurrence.

The parent's primary motivation to organize literacy practices at home may vary. For instance, it may be to teach the child about the world, extend the child's vocabulary, or simply engage the child in picture book observation while the parent needs time for household chores. These practices have a profound impact on the child's literacy development. There is a considerable body of literature presenting evidence on the effects of the home literacy environment on a number of child characteristics. Research has demonstrated that reading to young children can have an effect on their emergent literacy skills (Lonigan, 2004). The benefits to children from engaging in home reading activities include increased interest in reading, a favorable attitude towards written language, letter-sound awareness, and exposure to technical vocabulary. Baker (2013) demonstrated that parents who involved children in home literacy practices had children with better reading, maths, and social-emotional outcomes in preschool.

In a longitudinal study, Hood, Conlon, and Andrews (2008) found a close relationship between preschool home literacy practices and children's literacy and language development. Roberts, Jurgens, and Burchinal (2005) reported that frequent home literacy practices had moderate to high correlations with children's language and literacy outcomes. In that study, the global measure of the home environment's overall responsiveness and support (as measured by a questionnaire) was the strongest predictor of children's language and early literacy skills and contributed over and above specific literacy practice measures in predicting children's early language and literacy development. Neuman (1996) found that regardless of the reading proficiencies of parents (most of whom were Latino-American), children's receptive language and concept of print improved significantly when an intervention program concentrated on improving the home literacy environment was implemented. In addition, Neuman reports that while reading books parents conveyed to children more than just print skills; they communicated their beliefs in literacy and showed literacy practices they considered important.

In addition to research focused on the impact of home literacy on children, many studies have focused on describing the frequency of literacy events in families. In many families, home reading is part of firmly established routines. In the Netherlands, for instance, Duursma (2014) found that 60% of parents in her sample read daily to their children. This number is higher than, for example, that in the US, where approximately 48% of children between the ages of 0 and 5 are read to by their parents or other family members on daily basis (Russ et al., 2007). In the research in the Netherlands, almost half of children reported home book reading at least once per day and one quarter of them read between 15 and 20 minutes per day. Mothers were the primary readers in 65% of families.

The topic of book-reading practices includes reading books or other printed materials to children while the child is listening and observing the parent's activity connected with the book (e.g. following the lines of text with a finger or pointing to a picture). As the child may interrupt this reading with her own contributions (e.g. asking questions or commenting), this activity is sometimes labelled as shared book reading. Research has found rich interactions between young children and parents in shared book reading, including a range of literacy activities by both parents and children. For instance, Melissa-Halikiopoulou and Natsiopolou (2008) conducted a study based on quantitative observation of parent–child dyads and reported that mothers employed 13 activities in their interactions while reading a book. These activities included attracting the child's attention, explaining names, giving feedback, repeating the child's words, and asking questions to aid information recall. The children, aged 4–5 years, were reported as employing

10 strategies, some of which were identical to the mother's. The authors detected a relationship between the level of the parent's education and the strategies they used. In similar research, Neuman (1989) identified specific verbal cooperative actions by parents and children in reading sessions. Justice, Weber, Ezel, and Bakeman (2002) investigated how preschool children responded to parents' use of verbal print references (e.g. questions, comments, and requests about print) during shared book-reading interactions. The results indicated that children responded at an overall rate of 60% to parental print references but that different levels of child responsiveness occurred as a function of parental utterance type. Parental prompts were significantly more likely to elicit child responses than parental comments were.

While there is an abundance of studies that have investigated book-reading practices and depicted parent–child interactions in shared book reading, we have not found any study that has specifically described the activity of children in book-reading situations from the perspective of the child's agency. Therefore, the present study is intended to fill in the gap by providing an account of the home-reading sessions of parents and children with an emphasis on looking at the child's participation from the perspective of the theory of agency.

Present study

The purpose of the study was to better understand the phenomenon of children's agency in the specific situation of home reading. Home reading involves actions and experiences for the participants that provide ample opportunities to reveal children's agentic behavior. However, the concept of agency (Bandura, 2001) served not only as a component of the research aim but also as a tool for sensitizing the analysis.

One broad research question was addressed: How does the agentic behavior of children manifest in home reading situations? This broad question was supported by two specific questions:

1. How do reading situations in the family occur?
2. What does the child do in home reading situations?

Answers to these questions helped to reconstruct a detailed portrayal of home reading practices as described by parents and acted out jointly with their children in a sample of families living in the Czech Republic.

Methodology

The research method in this investigation was in-depth interviews with parents. We chose parents rather than children for interviews because we wanted to determine how parents view reading situations in which their

children employ agency. We aimed at discovering how they understand situations in which they had to share power with the child engaged in the reading situation. Interviews took place in the participants' homes, and so the researcher had the opportunity to get acquainted with the home environment, which helped in interpreting the interview data. The purpose of the research was explained to the participants prior to the interviews. Oral consent was received about their involvement in the research, and they were promised confidentiality regarding their and their children's identities.

Analysis

The interviews were recorded and the recordings were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were read repeatedly and then segmented into meaningful units which were subsequently open-coded. The codes of individual participants were compared in order to reveal coherence. The codes were then organized so as to display patterns, or topics, which were assigned names. Finally, the topics were elaborated so as to describe a consistent picture of children's behavior during home literacy practices. Notes made during the interviews that described the participants, children, and their homes were used as helpful data which assisted in understanding the reading context in the families.

Identification of agentic behavior

The critical issue in the analysis was the determination of criteria for identifying children's agentic behavior in participants' descriptions. To make the data plausible, it was important to ascertain which behavior could be considered agentic and which could not. Without clear criteria, it would not be possible to properly analyze the data gathered in interviews. Agency is defined broadly as the quality of a child that enables her to initiate and perform intentional actions in order to achieve goals that she values. In accordance with this definition, agentic behavior is a kind of intentional acting that is directed towards achieving goals of personal importance.

However, defining unambiguous criteria to identify "intentional action" is almost impossible because children's intentions are in part covert. For this reason, in this study we include as agentic behavior such acts which are manifested by a given child, observable, and of personal importance (i.e. directed towards a desired outcome) for the child. In other words, intentional action is behavior which is overt in the parent's description and indicates the purpose and signifies the importance for the child. For instance, a parent's statement that their child understood a story is not considered agentic behavior, whereas the child's question concerning a point within the story is an explicit manifestation of the child's action and is therefore considered as agentic behavior.

We admit that the definition of agency as a purposeful and personally important action by the child might be classified by some researchers as a weak criterion for agency. They might rate it as a "minimal model" (cf. Valentine, 2011). On the other side of the theoretical spectrum, scholars that draw on liberal traditions claim that agentic behavior requires the use of rational thought, or even moral judgement. This might be classified as a strong model. We were unable to apply it in this research for two reasons. First, it is very difficult to behaviorally operationalize a child's rational and moral behavior. Second, we agree that "if children are expected to meet the criteria of rational actors presumed by the liberal ideal, then this can only lead to fruitless tests of competence that most children, especially young children, will fail" (Valentine, 2011). This would categorize children as something like immature adults who do not possess agency at all – a standpoint which is heavily criticized by the new sociology of childhood (James, 1996; James & Prout, 1990; Uprichard, 2008). Thus, even if our conceptualization of agentic behavior may be considered a weak model by some scholars, it is theoretically sound and operationally valid.

Sample

The sample consisted of 21 parents (18 mothers and 3 fathers) who agreed to act as interviewees. All of them had at least one preschool age child. They lived in urban or rural areas in the Moravian region of the Czech Republic. The participants' level of education completion ranged from lower secondary to university, with a predominance of upper secondary. Their professions included businesswomen, a botanist, clerks, a secretary, teachers, a nurse, a pastry-cook, a driver, and a qualified manual worker. Two mothers were housewives and two were on maternity leave at the time of the interview. We refrained from enquiring about the matrimonial status of the interviewed participants. The number of preschool age children in the participants' families was one or two. These children's ages ranged from 2:6 to 6:4 years, with a median of 4. There were 18 girls and 7 boys in the families.

Although there were differences in the families' sociocultural characteristics, they were not large. All families had books and magazines in the home as well as TV sets, computers, and mobile phones. They spoke standard Czech with occasional inclusion of expressions from local dialects by some participants.

The purpose of the research was explained to participants prior to the interviews. Oral consent was received about their involvement in the research and they were promised confidentiality regarding their and their children's identities.

Findings

The findings are structured around the topics that were extracted from the interviews. Extracts from the interviews are provided to document the data interpretation. The presentation starts with a characterization of the reading sessions that were performed in the families. Individual agentic strategies employed by the children will then be described and interpreted. The analysis will culminate in a synthesis of the findings and an indication of other aspects of home literacy research.

Home reading sessions

Parents' home reading with children appeared to have a firm organizational structure, consisting of a parent, a child, a book, an assigned time, and a performed action. We shall refer to this as a home reading session. A home reading session is a complex event in which the parent and child jointly carry out the reading and accompanying behaviors. The session has relatively constant elements and phases which have a ritual-like character. These comprise setting the session's time and stage, book selection, the parent reading aloud, the child observing the reading, the child intervening into the reading, and the termination of the session.

All participants organized late evening reading sessions with their children. The evening reading was a family routine and therefore the dominant focus of parents' descriptions in the interviews. After the child was placed in bed, the parent sat beside her, or lay down next to her, and read the text. Parent–child verbal interaction frequently accompanied the reading. The book was preferably placed in a position such that the child could see the pages as the parent was reading them. The child observed any illustrations and the parent's non-verbal behavior (e.g. pointing to a particular place on the page with a finger). In most cases, it was the mother who read; in some families the mother and father alternated. In addition to evening reading, some parents read in the morning, or daytime, such as while travelling on a bus or train or while sitting in a doctor's waiting room. Evening reading was a demanding task for parents as they were tired after the burden of the day's work. The participants humbly admitted that they struggled a great deal in order not to fall asleep while reading to the child.

When asked about their reasons for organizing home reading sessions, almost all participants first stated non-literacy motives: to calm the child and make her sleep. One parent said:

> *Recently, my husband and I made the decision to read every night before putting our kid to sleep. We are still in the testing phase. Before, putting him to sleep was a hard process which completely exhausted us, and he was jumping in bed while we worn-out parents were lying in bed sleeping. [laughter] We made*

up our mind about three weeks ago. We're now testing how it works. Those nights were unbearable, and we needed a change. So we came up with the idea of reading. We pulled out old storybooks which my mother had read to me when I was a kid. And now we read every night without fail. We decide whose turn it will be for the night. Occasionally, our son decides whether it will be his mother or father who will read. What a relief when it's not me! [laughter] (4-year-old)

When asked about other reasons for reading, parents emphasized positive effects on their children's cognitive and affective development. Reading was also considered prevention against TV watching or protection against playing games on a tablet. Some parents, such as the one in the above extract, described a family tradition of bedside reading. Some participants do exactly what their parents had done in reading situations when they were small children, and even use identical books.

Book selection

During book-reading sessions, children employed an array of strategies which were richly described by the parents. The descriptions revealed sophisticated formats and manners that show the children's involvement in reading as well as their efforts to control some aspects of the reading sessions. In personal agency theory, such involvement testifies to a child's execution of agentic behavior.

One significant component of the reading sessions was book selection. Although the parents set the stage for home reading, it was the child who governed the choice of text. In all families, the child decided what would be read in the session. With some exceptions, the child had little influence over the time and place of reading, so she made use of the opportunity to influence the reading content. For most children, the selection criteria were the characters that appeared in the stories, the topic, or the genre (e.g. fairy tale, story, poetry, children's encyclopedia). Preferences varied, although the child's gender seems to have been a strong selection variable:

Basically, my daughters prefer girls as the main characters or books about animals. ... Well, the girls like Pippi because she is a rebel. Also this Frozen, it's a hit everywhere, and the toy shops are full of it. (4- and 6:4-year-old girls)

Tractors are his favourites; he's fallen in love with them. ... He's got a wooden book about tractors, with only pictures of tractors and agricultural machines. He sits down and keeps saying, 'Mum, here's the harvester, the cotton harvester, the grape harvester.' (2:8-year-old boy)

In spite of the fact that the child decided on the book for the reading session, we must bear in mind that the child did not entirely govern the reading topic. The books were purchased by adults, mostly the parents, who made

a choice in their purchases. In addition to positive choices, some children employed negative choices – refusal of a particular book offered by a parent. This was based on likeness or comprehension of the content by the child.

If there were two children in a family, there could be two book choices for a reading session, and so the decision rested on the children's negotiation:

> *Most frequently, they work out a choice. If not, I say I'm selecting the book and that's it. Or sometimes we agree that today it's Klárka who can choose, while tomorrow it's Anička's turn.* (3- and 5-year-olds)

In addition to book selection, children made decisions also regarding the particular story in the book. This proves that they had some knowledge about the book's components. The topic of emergent literacy, which includes the child's knowledge of print components (Clay, 2000), is an important one, but one that exceeds the limits of this study.

Monitoring the reading process

During the reading session, the children closely watched the reading progression. They concentrated their attention both on the page and on their parent. The anchoring elements for the children were the pictures that illustrated the content and their parent's finger, which the parent used to keep their place while reading. Parents asked children questions concerning the book's content to check comprehension. At the same time, the children were monitoring whether their parent was paying complete attention to reading – a typical feature of a monitoring strategy. This was because failures in reading progression interrupted the reading session and harmed the child's experience of the book's content.

A parent confessed:

> *And if I happen to fall asleep while reading, Maruška pokes my shoulder saying, 'Mummy, read! Don't sleep!' And if the story is rather long and I suggest finishing it the next day, I don't win. She insists on hearing the end of the story.* (4-year-old)

As each parent usually read the stories multiple times, the child was well acquainted with the topic, characters, and plot. The child could recall the exact wording of the text which made it possible for her to monitor her parent's reading and even substitute the lines. A parent claimed:

> *Before sleep we read in bed. I came to her bed, lie down, and read. Lately, she wants to take over reading and read instead of me. [laughter] She knows some books very well, so when I am reading she fills in the rest of my sentences … literally how it's written in the book.* (3-year-old)

Because parents were tired at the end of the day, children frequently admonished them for not being fully concentrated on reading. This confirms that the children had their own agenda and insisted on following it.

Children demonstrated their involvement in reading through two reading-advancement behaviors, namely turning pages and finger tracking. Children had learned from their parents that turning pages is a necessary component of reading progression. In later phases, children themselves turned the pages instead of the parents when the parent signaled the correct moment. However, there was some monitoring of reading progression by the child herself, mostly based on the pictures that accompanied the stories.

Children employed finger tracking to show their parents the place being read (or which should be read) at the moment. Originally an imitation, this action later became an independent feature of a child's performance in reading sessions, indicating her effort to align with her parent in the reading process. In addition to finger tracking, children made use of finger pointing when devoting attention to a particular place.

A child's finger tracking and finger pointing suggests her endeavor to be an equal partner to the parent in the reading process by keeping track of the content and reading progression. The child displays that she is a collaborator and not merely a listener to the parent's reading aloud.

Commenting

During reading sessions, children vividly perceived the book's content and accompanied it with comments. Commenting must be distinguished from retelling the story (a very frequent activity), which is a recalling process. In contrast, commenting is the child's contribution based on her own observations. There were two sorts of comments – descriptive and evaluative. Some children were vivacious descriptive commentators and even carried out something like running commentary, as the next quotation shows:

> *I was reading but he was, too ... especially for Life on the Farm, because it's all pictures. Simply, the page is all covered in pictures, so he says, 'Mum, look: a mole! Mum, the pheasant is there. A dog is chasing it. And the harvester is there and the man is sitting on the harvester.'* (2:8-year-old)

With descriptive comments, the child demonstrates that she is actively engaged in the reading situation and that she is the adult's partner who can contribute to discussion about the story being read.

Evaluative comments are more advanced than descriptive ones because they contain qualitative ingredients. To evaluate, the child has to compare some quality against a criterion that lies beyond the given story. As one parent said:

> *Lucka's comments make me faint from time to time. Generally, she likes to comment on situations around her. Last time, when we were reading Pippi she said something like, 'That Pippi, what a creature!' Well, what could I say to that? Her remark was fitting.* (4-year-old)

Questioning

In contrast to comments which reveal the child's knowledge about the topic in the book, through questioning the child asks for missing knowledge to be supplied. Children's questioning was a very frequent activity described by parents:

> *As my husband works at home over the weekend, Tom sits at the end of his father's desk, looks at the book, and then disturbs him. My husband reads what Tom wants and, of course, the situation continues with Tom asking about five other things he is interested in that he remembers, so I think that my husband doesn't get much work done at home. [laughter]* (5-year-old)

There were distinct occasions when children posed a question. One such occasion was a child's comprehension failure. This typically occurred if particular vocabulary was unfamiliar. Word explanation was children's most frequent questioning target. This concerned words that were beyond the child's everyday experience – words connected with imagination, mythology, abstract expressions, or technology terminology. Genre-specific words and phrases, such as figurative language, the specific vocabulary of fairy tales, and archaic vocabulary from older literature, were targets of children's questions in cases where the parent failed to observe that the child was struggling with comprehension.

Another source of questions was plot clarification. Children asked questions which were aimed at peculiarities preventing them from understanding the plot. This concerned the situation, characters, or actions in the story.

A child's questioning during reading sessions demonstrates that she possesses strategies that are meaningful and show a distinct purpose. The child aims at eliciting answers from the adult she needs at a particular point in the reading situation. Therefore, questioning clearly fulfils the criteria for agentic behavior. As concerns cognitive aspects, the questions employed by the children were descriptive, relational, and causal (why-questions). Descriptive questions were the simplest (what is it?), while relational and causal questions were more complex.

Some parents admitted that they disliked their child's questioning:

> *I don't like it because it disturbs me. It interrupts the story and then I have to find the right place to continue. I don't like when he disturbs me. We want him to lie calmly and listen. We don't want him to think about the book because then it takes time until he falls asleep.* (4-year-old)

As can be seen, the parent's agenda was to make the child sleep while the child's agenda was to stay awake and discuss the book that was being read. In this particular instance, the parent won but the child demonstrated her intentions, i.e. made use of her agency.

Expanding

By expanding we mean the practice in reading sessions in which the child went beyond the given story. Expanding is a very broad category which includes such options such as story extension, episode integration, and extrapolation. In expanding the story, the child added new elements to the story which had just been read. These elements concerned some details of the story – the plot, setting, or characters.

Many expansions appeared over the course of the children's discussions with their parents. If the discussion was vivid, it deviated from the topic. One parent suggested:

> *When reading children's novels, Tereza keeps asking why this or that happened. We discuss it all thoroughly. It can't be otherwise with her. [laughter] Occasionally, we've found ourselves discussing an entirely different topic. [laughter]* (5-year-old)

Children were able to integrate two episodes from one story or combine episodes from several stories. In this way, they made use of both newly and previously learned information. Cross-episode integration is a well-known feature of children's narration. Young children have the capacity to integrate episodes from different stories, and this capacity increases with age (Varga & Bauer, 2013; Varga, Stewart, & Bauer, 2016). In this research, the children generated combinations of unrelated episodes with apparent ease, which resulted in surprising new story lines. As a parent commented:

> *He keeps asking questions and also speculates about how it would look if this meteorite fell into our garden and stayed there. It'd make a small hill where flowers would grow.* (5-year-old)

In extra-textual expansions, children used their imagination and fantasy to portray themselves in new but unrealistic situations. The following extract shows a sample of a child's pretending:

> *She styles herself as a princess. She acts out this role because she wants to be a princess one day, and she keeps asking where real princesses live. And when I told her that they live in places like England, she definitely wanted to visit England one day and see a real princess.* (4-year-old)

In sum, expansions of story episodes which brought a range of story manipulations showed the child's cognitive capacity and playfulness, which revealed her power to make a contribution to the book reading, in other words her agentic capacity.

Reading-time negotiation

While commenting, questioning, and expanding are manifestations of a child's cognitive ability, negotiation is a purely social characteristic. One has to negotiate with someone else. Negotiation is a manifestation of power relations, and its aim is to obtain some benefit. This benefit is not given, however, but a result of a negotiation strategy. It is a well-known experience

that preschool age children negotiate over a number of everyday issues such as possession of toys, preference for particular clothes, and choice of food. The reading sessions proved to be a rich area of negotiation. The typical target was extending the duration of the reading session.

There were two purposes that led to a child's negotiations. The first was tied to interest. The child negotiated with her parent to prolong reading time if the book was interesting. She pushed to continue reading until some point in the plot was reached.

The other purpose of negotiation was to postpone bed time for sleep. Protraction was the child's plan to avoid finishing the reading session at the desire of the parent. Two strategies were employed: objecting to the request to sleep and questioning. Objecting involved rejection and arguing. It was never a win-win situation; one party usually lost, as the following quotation documents:

> Sometimes he fell asleep during reading, sometimes not, depending on how tired he was from playing outdoors. We keep saying, 'Three fairy tales at most. After the third – sleep!' Of course, he tries to get me to read a fourth fairy tale. Sometimes he succeeds, sometimes not. (2:6-year-old)

In contrast to expressing disapproval, questioning was a tricky strategy. The child generated a chain of questions, requiring an answer only in order to prolong the reading session, i.e. to stay awake.

> George is quite a chatty child and interested in everything around him, so he keeps asking why's and how's. ... Sometimes, I have the impression that he only keeps asking to stay up longer. (4-year-old)

A child's negotiation strategies demonstrated that she had very distinct reasons to push for her agenda and elicited behavior from which she gained benefits.

Conclusions

In this study, we documented how parents view their child's contribution to home reading, as part of the family's institutional practices in which the child employs and develops her agency. We were able to describe the characteristics of home reading sessions as routine institutional practices within which parent–child book-reading processes are conducted. The data show that interaction between parents and children over textual materials elicits a range of behaviors which on the children's part have agentic qualities. These behaviors confirm the children's subjective wishes, intentions, and actions.

Within the data, six fundamental strategies employed by the child were identified: (1) book selection, (2) monitoring reading, (3) commenting, (4) questioning, (5) expanding, and (6) reading-time negotiation. These strategies

reveal that not only can children make sense of reading for themselves but they also can contribute valuably to the reading session with the parent. In each of the six agentic strategies, the children used either a cooperative or competitive policy, and so acted pragmatically. The use of strategies is selective, i.e. the child applied each as needed. On a particular day, she would use one, several, or none of them. In some reading sessions, for instance, the child employed book selection and reading-time negotiation, while in others she opted for other strategies. In sum, the actions that were discovered in the parents' descriptions of reading sessions represent a repertoire of strategies, not a compulsory list of actions. From this it can be inferred that not all of the actions exhibited by the children during home reading sessions were agentic behaviors. Some of the behaviors were unengaged or passive. Just like adults, children can perform actions that are either agentic or non-agentic.

In the home reading sessions which we investigated, it was the mother rather than the father who played the leading role. Mothers acted in most of the reading sessions and were more interactive than the fathers were. At the risk of being politically incorrect, we offer three explanations for this phenomenon. First, mothers in Czech families have close relationships with their children which are based on female emotionality. Second, mothers usually control the schedule of home activities, which includes home reading. Third, women in Czech families generally read more than men do and take greater personal enjoyment from reading. All of these factors might contribute to the leading position of mothers in home reading sessions, or commonly in children's literacy development.

In the past, large investigations of home literacy concentrated on children's development of reading and writing abilities and proved that parental support, a literacy-rich home environment, and parental cooperation with the school have positive consequences on children's literacy qualities. This study went in a different direction. Rather than reporting on children's cognitive and literacy gains from reading sessions, we elaborated on the agentic aspect of literacy sessions. We recognized children not only as active learners (the typical position of the cognitive learning paradigm) but as subjects that act in social situations in a purposeful way while employing agency and receiving benefits from it.

Methodologically, this study rested on parents' accounts of reading sessions with children. Research could, however, utilize also different methods that could supplement such narration. Observation of interactions in home reading sessions might complement the interview data, thus making the description of reading session practices more comprehensive.

One limitation to this study was the sample. While qualitative investigation does not demand a large sample, it does require more careful selection of participants. As literacy is a socially and culturally sensitive concept, the relevant criteria for selecting participants should be the family's social and cultural characteristics. An investigation that can recruit participants based on such criteria has the potential to collect more specific data.

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